

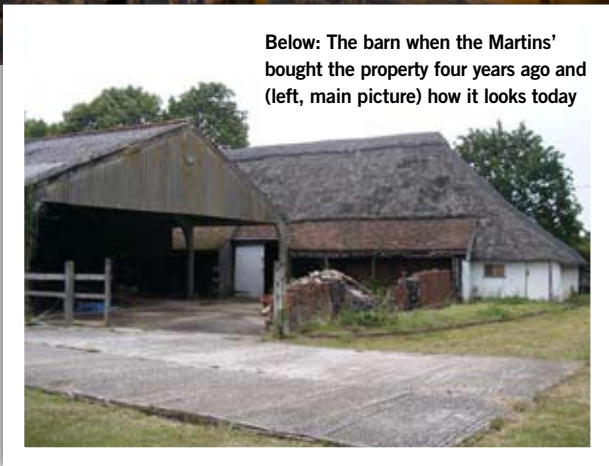
■ England

A real barnstormer





Above: The main room of the thatched barn has its original beams and a dining room table that seats 10. Main photographs by John Miller



Below: The barn when the Martins' bought the property four years ago and (left, main picture) how it looks today

Laura and Steve Martin have pulled off an exceptional conversion project at Biddenden Green Farm. Carinya Sharples travels to Kent to marvel at their grand re-designs

It's not every day that you wake up in a four-poster bed in the turret of an old oast house – unless you're at Biddenden Green Farm (Property reference: PBBY) in Kent that is, where the distinctive curved wall, exposed brickwork and tall, conical ceiling have been given a new lease of life as an unusual rural retreat.

The transformation from hop-drying farm building to impressive barn conversion began when Laura and Steve Martin decided to move away from London with their two children. Following the train line from Orpington, where they lived at the time, they found a quirky house in the Kent village of Smarden.

The only hitch was that the house came as part of a larger package and so the Martin family found themselves taking on a dilapidated 16th-century barn and former oast house to boot. "I wasn't even sure how I'd feel living in the countryside," admits Laura, "but houses speak to me – it's a feeling rather than a logical decision."

Thankfully the gamble has paid off and today, four years on, the renovated barn and oast guest houses of Lewd Lane have a steady stream of visitors, won over

by the combination of tranquil surroundings, homely rooms and quirky, original fixtures.

The couple's determination to keep as many of the original features as possible has proved central to their success. "When you're doing a conversion like this," explains Laura, "you're a custodian. We want to leave our mark without taking away anyone else's."

TREADING CAREFULLY

The Grade-II listing of the Martins' home and the thatched barn (under which the oast also falls) gave the pair another reason to tread especially carefully. Yet with the buildings in such disrepair, this was no easy task. The barn may have been in active use on the farm just 70 years ago, but it was derelict for many years and the wood was starting to decay.

So, as well as enlisting the help of English Heritage, the Martins recruited a specialist timber expert. "He was a great help and keen to preserve as much of the original timber as possible," says Laura. "When he first came to the barn he was like a kid in a toyshop!"

WILLOW HURDLES

Thanks to this motto of "repair not replace", the two buildings are full of fascinating historic insights. In the oak-framed barn, built between 1590 and 1610, the original threshing bays are still in place and Laura points out the faint outlines of several circles, carved into the wood. Far from being accidental scratches, they are old 'witching' or 'ritual' marks, used to protect the superstitious occupants from what the handy visitor's guide calls the 'plague and pestilence of witches'.

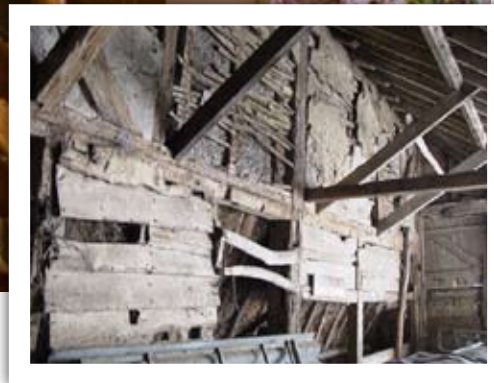
Other elements of the barn's previous existence are less noticeable – and probably just as well since what is now the smart kitchen area was once used to make willow hurdles for sheep fields; while the spacious living area stored hay and the second bedroom was a piggery. Today, the ▶



Above: The kitchen in the thatched barn, formerly used to make willow hurdles for the sheep farm, right



The restored oast house, the first of the Martins' conversion projects



invasion of farmyard life is restricted to a complimentary basket of fresh, free-range eggs from the family's own chickens, while the rooms are filled with sturdy, dark wood furnishings rather than troughs.

TIMELESS DECOR

Designing the interiors and sourcing the furniture was Laura's favourite part of the restoration. "Some pieces came from abroad, the internet, even eBay – but what I loved most of all was going to local antique auctions, like the one in Cranbrook." The resulting blend of original beams and antique furniture with dramatic fittings and cosy sofas works well, creating a feel that's homely yet historic – the four-poster beds, dark wood chests and traditional low ceilings adding a real sense of timelessness.

The barn's spacious living area, sizeable tables, three double rooms (two ensuite), twin room and mezzanine floor (with sofa bed and games) have made it particularly popular among those planning large family get-togethers, friends' holidays and hen parties. And although history is important to the design and mood of both the barn and oast, Laura is aware of the importance of comfort and quality modern conveniences, especially for self-catered accommodation: "Before moving to

Kent, we used to go away on holiday every year to places like this. So we knew the good and bad points and remembered the crucial things to get right, like a shower that doesn't just trickle on your head. Good beds and kitchen equipment are also very important."

DRYING THE HOPS

The Oast House is a smaller, cosier affair, with a living room at the bottom of the curved tower where once a fire would have been lit to dry out the hops above, the smoke escaping through the roof vents. These days, under-floor heating keeps the place toasty. Above, a four-poster bed sits in the rounded main bedroom, and across the sunlit landing are another two further bedrooms. Back downstairs, the walls of the warm kitchen are dotted with old black and white photos of a farmer in front of the working oast, diagrams of the process of hop drying and other sketches of farm life.

Even though the Oast House has only been up and running for two years – and The Thatched Barn open since just last September – Laura and Steve have already had a number of returning guests and welcomed visitors from as far afield as the US, Israel, Germany and Singapore. The

visitors' books in the barn and oast house are full of praise for an "amazing building, lovely homely feel". Even local people don't seem to be able to resist the buildings' allure. "We've had people from Bluebell Hill and Sittingbourne, which are only half an hour away," says Laura, "But then you never explore what's on your own doorstep."

FROGS, DUCKS AND LILY PADS

And there's plenty to explore – most guests take advantage of the many attractions to be found across Kent, whether going on a day trip to Leeds Castle, Canterbury Cathedral or Camber Sands beach, walking the wartime tunnels of Dover Castle or Sissinghurst Castle Gardens, or taking the kids to the Rare Breeds Centre or Kent & East Sussex Steam Railway. And with Paris less than two hours away via Eurostar from nearby Ashford International, it's easy to pop over the Channel for the day to see the sights and stock up on French delicacies.

Though with a pond full of frogs, ducks and picturesque lily pads, the chirpy twitter of blackbirds, sparrows and jackdaws, not to mention the impressive sight of hunting horses chomping on grass in the next field,



The Martins' have retained a lot of the original brickwork in the oast house. Here the curved tower has been made into a master bedroom

Converted?
Here's a range of unique properties from around the country



Greenwood Grange,
Higher Bockhampton, Dorset
Ref: DTJ. Sleeps 8-12



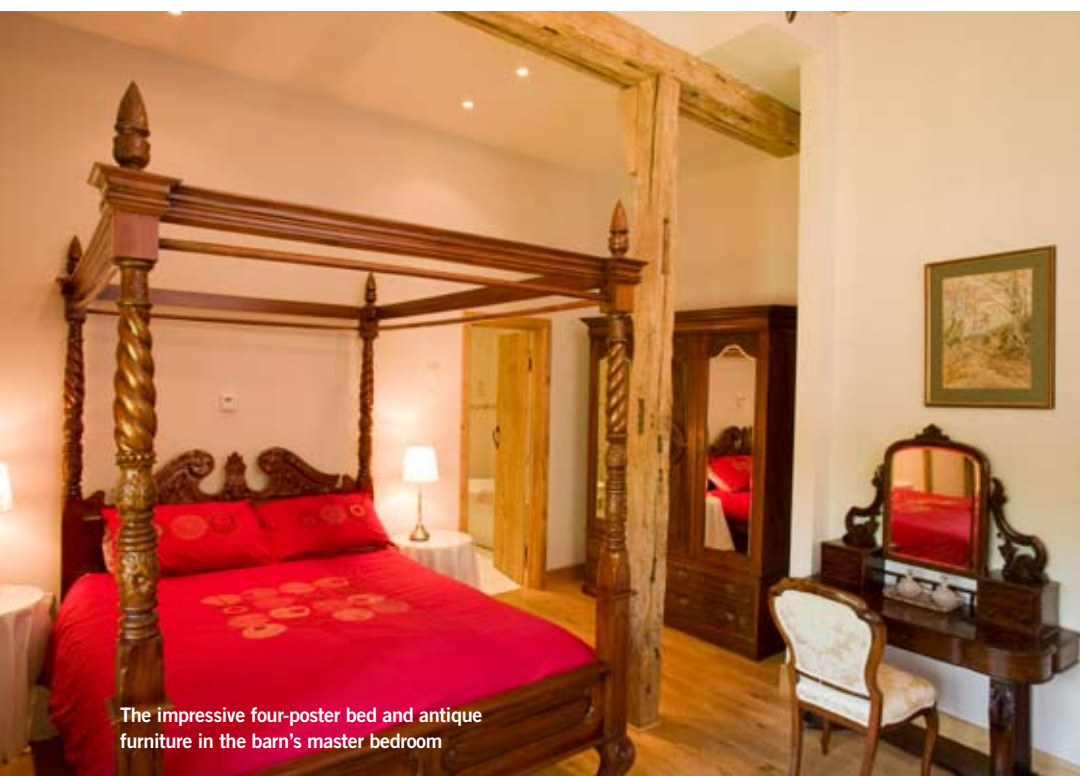
Tom's Barn,
Hampen, Gloucestershire
Ref: NJC. Sleeps 10



Mendennick Barn,
Cornwall
Ref: GJ1. Sleeps 6



Barnacre, Northumbria
Ref: MKH. Sleeps 10-13



The impressive four-poster bed and antique furniture in the barn's master bedroom

some guests don't feel the need to venture far from Biddenden Green Farm. And when the sun is shining, there's nothing better than a stroll through the local fields followed by a hearty lunch at one of Smarden's three welcoming pubs.

So after four busy years – and a lot of

ironing – has Laura been put off life in the countryside? "I wouldn't go back to London for anything!" ■

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