



The house that Ben (re)built

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Photographs: Mark Tovey and Ben O'Neill

Below top to bottom: At one stage it was stripped back to its original wooden beams

Tudor Cottage viewed from above

Opposite page top to bottom: The walls have been replaced but the cottage still has its original low ceilings

A canopy protected the building during the work

The cottage as it was before work started



If you travel from Boston, across the flat reclaimed marshland towards Anton's Gowt, suddenly, by the side of the road, you come across the intriguing little 'Tudor Cottage'. Surrounded by clipped lawns and pollarded trees, this neat and immaculate little house looks almost like an illustration from a children's picture book.

Yet anyone who saw it fifteen years ago probably wouldn't recognise it now. Back then it looked barely habitable, had one cold-water tap running into a deep, enamel sink, two electric lights and downstairs, earthenware tiles laid directly onto a compacted mud floor. Despite this, it was never damp and never smelled musty, said Ben O'Neill, the cottage's owner.

It was originally built in the 1600s and passed into Mr O'Neill's family after the Second World War when it was bought by his grandfather, Charles Ashton, who had an antiques business in Boston's Dolphin Lane. Before that, it had been owned by a Mr Jacklin, the local pig killer who apparently wore a gold earring at a time when it was very unusual for men to wear such jewellery and was something of a frightening figure in the locality. "I gather people were

scared to death of him," said Mr O'Neill.

An early aerial photograph also reveals that at one stage the land around the cottage was used by gipsies to park their caravans. Mr O'Neill's mother was born at the cottage and lived there all her life until her death two years ago.

"She really loved this place and even though she had so few amenities, never wanted to move. On summer days there was nothing she loved more than sitting out in the garden, under the old apple tree, looking out over the fields," said Mr O'Neill.

However, despite his mother's protestations, Mr O'Neill decided the time had come to completely renovate the cottage and began a ten-year project. He moved his mother into a mobile home on the site and set about organising the work.

Because it is a listed building permission had to be sought for every stage of the work although at one stage he was told the condition of the cottage was so bad he would be allowed to demolish it and start again. However, undeterred he carried on.

Originally the cottage was a traditional Lincolnshire 'mud and stud' and may well have housed two families at one time as there were two staircases. Downstairs were two rooms with a central fireplace and two bedrooms upstairs.

The first owners were probably farmers, grazing cattle on the marsh which were brought into the ground floor of the house during winter months. As well as offering the animals protection, this would also help to keep the house warm. The cottage was built before the Witham was straightened and it would have been much closer to the river which, as well as being a source of food, would also have been the most direct link with Boston, two-and-a-half miles away.

Throughout the centuries much of the wattle and daub had been replaced with brickwork and the thatched roof had been replaced with a tiled one. Piecemeal

It has taken ten years to restore a traditional Lincolnshire cottage standing out on the marsh near Boston

repairs had been carried out, in one instance using old wooden advertising boards which have a certain intrinsic value, if not a financial one.

The first stage of the work involved jacking up the roof timbers, erecting a huge canopy over the building and removing all the old brickwork.

"The wood was really hard, you couldn't even drive a nail into it," said Mr O'Neill. "When we were putting it all back together we had to use electric screwdrivers to get the screws in." Another interesting discovery at this stage was the initial 'M' on one side of the roof beams and 'S' on the other.

"The builder told me that when the house was being built they would have cut the pieces beforehand in a workshop and the letter 'M' indicated the side of the building which should face the marsh and the 'S' side was meant to face towards Boston Stump. By doing this they knew which way round to assemble it when they brought it to the site," he explained. They also discovered that the main beam running along the top of the roof had originally been a ship's mast and would therefore be even older than the cottage.

As part of the refurbishment of the cottage, Mr O'Neill wanted to replace the tiled roof with thatch but was told this was not possible as it would not be restoring the building to its original state. However, during the course of the work, they discovered remnants of an earlier thatched roof - the tiles were a later replacement. Having removed the roof, Mr O'Neill searched around for a thatcher but was told by most that there was a year's waiting list. However, the Dodson Brothers from St Ives agreed to come and look at the job and when they realised they had clear access all around the site, agreed to do it straight away. It took a team of seven men twenty-one days to complete the roof. "They worked from first light until it was dark and slept on the cottage floor. At one stage they went off for three days to cut fresh reeds but apart from that they worked solidly on the job," said Mr O'Neill.

The finished cottage has a sitting-room, kitchen and bathroom downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs.

The gardens are extensive and growing as Mr O'Neill buys more land. His grandfather grew neat rows of vegetables but now the house is surrounded by smooth lawns, yew hedges cut into neat geometric shapes and 'lollypop' hollyoak trees. Topiary is one of Mr O'Neill's passions even though it takes him a week to go round all the trees and hedges. He has also recently dug a pond and bought in two fully-

grown willow trees which are currently held in position with guy-ropes to help them withstand the winter winds which whip across the site. His future plans include opening a site for touring caravans - the cottage is already in the walking guides and he is hoping people will want to come along to enjoy the peaceful isolation. And the ten-year conversion has also become something of an attraction in itself. "People kept coming along to see how work was progressing. A lot of them said we'd never get it finished," said Mr O'Neill.

However, he has proved them all wrong and although work on the site is continuing, it has already earned a 'Boston Pride' award and is a most attractive and unusual feature of the landscape.

