



A working partnership

A young couple are sympathetically restoring one of Harlaxton's historic houses

Words and photographs: Chris Webb

If you travel a mile south-east from the busy market town of Grantham, famous for its associations with the notable scientist Sir Isaac Newton and latterly Margaret Thatcher, Britain's first woman prime minister, you will find the picturesque village of Harlaxton. It is regarded by many as a pastoral gem in Lincolnshire's rural crown. It is named in the 1086 Domesday Book and every other house is an architectural historian's dream. Indeed one can imagine Niklaus Pevsner spending many an absorbing hour researching and making notes in this historical location. Harlaxton typifies the country living idyll that townies fantasise about whilst stuck in yet another traffic jam.

The present renowned Harlaxton Manor was designed by Anthony Salvin and was built for Gregory Gregory in 1830. However, the owner and architect had many disagreements and William Burn completed much of the interior. In the fifteenth century, the original Elizabethan manor house was purchased by the De Ligne family and it was demolished in 1857 after about seventy years of

neglect by descendant, Gregory Gregory, who not only built the new Manor but remodelled several buildings in the village. One of these is 'The Old Forge' a charming Grade II listed eighteenth-century brick house. It is mentioned in 'The Buildings of England' book by Pevsner as 'brick with ashlar dressings and renewed plain tile roofs, two stone gable stacks with coped square double flues, dentillated eaves.....' he goes on to describe the windows, 'openings have stone surrounds and mullions and leaded glazing under earlier brick flat arches'. The central door has an impressive stone Tudor surround with a small window next to it. Sited on a slightly elevated position, the Old Forge's lovely leaded light windows face towards the fourteenth-century parish church of St Mary and St Peter, and the site of the old Manor which the original forge would have served. To the right of the house is a splendid stone arch with a black wrought-iron gate.

On a bitterly cold day I met the Old Forge's proud new owners Tim Waite and his partner, Claire Astill, a young professional couple, who purchased the house just six months ago and have since begun a major renovation project. I was given a warm welcome from Claire and Tim and an enthusiastic one from their adorable spaniel Jess. My first impressions were ones of light, space and style. Jess adopted her favourite position, curled up on one of the sofas in the immaculately decorated small sitting room as Tim and Claire recounted their story.

Tim explained: "We were living in Nottingham, where Claire works as a purchasing manager, and decided to look for a more rural property. We had spent the last three years renovating and decorating our 1920s' Art Deco house and we weren't really looking for another project. We wanted a bigger house, in a friendly country village but not too remote as Claire and I would need to commute. I work as a sales manager in London so it was essential to have good road and rail links. We looked round several villages but nothing clicked until we visited Harlaxton."

Below: The guest bedroom

Opposite page from top: The Old Forge, Harlaxton; The welcoming dining room





Below from top: Inviting views of the village can be seen from the windows; Claire and Tim's light and airy bedroom; Claire and Tim with Jess



Claire added: "We loved the village and were looking to buy a recently renovated property - hence our interest in The Old Bakehouse which was for sale. The property had featured on a television programme, 'Property Ladder', had been modernised throughout and was ready to receive new occupants without much work. Well, that was the plan until we walked round the village and saw The Old Forge with a 'for sale' sign outside. The house and garden looked at their best in the summer sunshine and we longed to own it as soon as we saw it. The estate agents sent us the details from these we knew it would need updating which meant spending time and money. We are both busy people so there was a lot to consider."

Tim continued: "After much soul searching we returned to the village and discovered the sale board had been taken down and the house was no longer on the market! However that small fact was not going to deter Claire."

After spending weeks searching the internet her tenacity paid off when she found the house up for sale again, with a different agent and the price reduced. The deal was done and Tim and Claire moved to the house in September 2005. Claire said the house felt right for them from day one. They began the renovations almost immediately. Firstly a new oil-fired central heating system was installed to replace the old storage radiators. In the kitchen the dated pine units and old flooring were ripped out. To ensure everything went to plan Claire employed the man who had refitted her kitchen in Nottingham. She took me on a tour of the house starting with the kitchen. This room, the small utility cum cloakroom next door, the small sitting room, main bedroom and upstairs bathroom are all part of the large extension added by the

previous owner in the seventies. Later Tim and Claire showed me some aerial photographs which clearly show the extensive addition to the original building.

The spacious kitchen is now fitted with elegant oak and stainless steel units plus a gleaming double oven and oak panelled flooring. There are windows all round making the room light and airy. One small window to the left overlooks a small paved terrace. A large window above the sink unit looks out onto the attractive garden laid to lawn and terraced. An old red brick chimney, built by the previous owner, is an unusual feature on the far wall. The couple have plans to install a wood-burning stove in it at a later date. The modern round oak table and chairs complete the stylish décor.

Claire said the many windows and high ceilings make the house so light. We went back through the small sitting room, with Jess still asleep on the sofa, to the more formal dining room. A main feature is the unusual pale pink stone fire surround added in the nineteenth century. Claire has chosen pale gold and pink swagged brocade drapes to frame the beautiful leaded light windows. They are edged in stone, as on the exterior but have been painted over. Claire said that many of the original features have been lost but with some expert guidance, the couple want to replace these. The oak floor panelling has been extended from the kitchen to the other downstairs rooms. Tim tells me the dining room floor was black bitumen and the hallway terrazzo tiles.

The centrepiece is a highly polished mahogany table and matching chairs with a delicate black wrought-iron chandelier above. Across the hallway is the main sitting room. This too has an impressive stone fireplace. Claire is awaiting some new furniture so has not yet finished the styling. Being part of the original house with thick walls this room is quite cold. However Tim and Claire are looking forward to using it more in the summer when they can open the French windows which lead out to the garden.

As we went upstairs we discussed the history of the house and village. Tim and Claire are keen to do some research. There is a datestone on the front of the house inscribed "GDG 1794" this relates to George de Ligne Gregory who rebuilt the Old Forge in 1790 - 1820. It was remodelled in 1820-1840 by the then Lord of the Manor, Gregory Gregory. His descendant Mrs Sherwin Gregory still owned most of the parish in 1871 and the greater part of the parish as owned by Thomas Sherwin Pearson-Gregory in 1913. By 1991 the



population had risen from 428 in 1841 to 757. This is in part due to the new buildings that have sprung up between the historic houses but nevertheless blend in. A timbered school was built for the villagers in the 1600s and subsequently an elementary school was rebuilt in 1871. The residents of Harlaxton are obviously proud of their heritage so it is not surprising that this charming place has won the 'best kept village' award for a number of years.

One of the five bedrooms is used as an office by Tim, who Claire assures me spends most of the time looking out of the window at the comings and goings of the local shop and post office just opposite. It is heartening to hear these establishments are still flourishing. The couple's bedroom is in the newer part of the house. It has a high ceiling and is simply but tastefully furnished with a brass bedstead and large pine wardrobes. A pretty pale blue brocade sofa adds colour and a sparkling crystal chandelier hangs over the bed. Again there is a lovely view of the garden from the big window. Across from the landing, the guest bedroom is also furnished with pine. The other bedrooms and bathroom are yet to be renovated and an extra bathroom added later. Claire says Tim has the ideas and she chooses the soft furnishings and finishing touches. It is clearly a partnership that works.

Our final visit is to what was originally a low one-storey building and has been extended to form a huge double garage,

the old forge itself. The previous owner has left some antique implements of the forge's working history on the wall. The roof has large, high wooden trusses and one could envision many possible uses for this old building.

Claire said: "We are using this as a storeroom for now but want to develop it later. When we moved here Tim bought a ride-on mower, that one over there, which is why the lawn is so well mown."

The couple have plans to extend the planting in their attractive, terraced garden. Claire admits neither she nor Tim are experienced gardeners but having inherited such a lovely feature they intend to nurture it. Obviously this hard-working couple's decision to move from the town to the country has been the right one. Despite all the hard work they are managing to take advantage of the surrounding countryside. Jess is especially enjoying lots of walks in the fields nearby. Tim tells me of the different birds that visit the garden, including a hawk whose prey is the local pigeons.

I have been impressed by the amount of work they have achieved in such a short time. As Claire said this is a long-term project and they are skilfully and enthusiastically breathing new life into this historic building by a clever blending of the old and the new. Tim and Claire are adding a new chapter to the story of The Old Forge and I am certain that Gregory Gregory himself would approve.

Below from left: The spacious newly refitted kitchen; The landing

