



## From piggery to palace

With a little imagination and a significant investment, unloved outbuildings can be given a new lease of life.  
Anna Tyzack investigates

**N**OTHING stirs up the blood of an architect more than a lowly piggery or cart shed. With their simple floorplans, unembellished structures and cavernous roof spaces, these buildings lend themselves perfectly to far more extravagant uses, from party barns and holiday lets to palatial family homes.

'Their humble origins give them a distinct personality,' explains architect Martin Hall ([www.hallbednarczyk.com](http://www.hallbednarczyk.com)), adding that people tend to be bolder when they're working with former agricultural buildings. 'There is more of a willingness to choose raw materials and glass.'

The limits set by planning laws, which encourage use of existing openings and preservation of the original structure, can create a challenge, but, in some ways, make the process quite simple. 'The windows and doors in our barn dictated the internal layout,' notes Katie Priestley, who converted an old dairy in Dorset into a family home.

Indeed, such is the current mood for open-plan living and double-height ceilings that many modern homes are actually modelled on former cow sheds. Danny Lodge, the new family home in West Sussex of architect Matt White ([www.mattarchitecture.com](http://www.mattarchitecture.com)), is a case in point: a 4,300sq ft modern Sussex barn, tacked onto a Grade II-listed Victorian gamekeeper's cottage.

'It's a hard-working family home that combines practicality with charm and personality,' concludes Mr White.

### The stable turned party barn

When Steve and Jules (*left*) Horrell moved to an 18th-century cider barn near Bruton, Somerset, in 2016, they didn't give much thought to the rundown stable block across the courtyard. However, ➤



The Horrells' old stable block is ideal for barbecues in summer and the making of mulled wine by Steve (*above*) in winter

Ed Schofield Photography, Neil White

when it deteriorated further over the winter, they decided to convert it into a party room.

'The barrel-top roof was the only stable part and we were going to lose it if we didn't do something,' says Mrs Horrell, manager of Roth Bar & Grill at Hauser & Wirth in Bruton, Somerset, where her husband is head chef. 'As we're both passionate about entertaining, it made sense to have a party space.'

Planning permission wasn't required, as they weren't adding new walls or windows. 'We could have converted it into a proper house, but we restored it to preserve what was there—we like the way the structure is open-fronted,' Mrs Horrell explains.

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They replaced the oak posts, which had been chewed by numerous Shire horses over the years, and repaired the roof, then installed an outdoor kitchen and fire pit, plus a long dining table.

The Horrells have used their party barn on numerous occasions, including barbecues and New Year's Eve celebrations. 'Once you've decorated it with candles and lit the fire, you can use it in winter as well as summer,' says Mrs Horrell.

It's also a useful sheltered workspace: this autumn, Mrs Horrell has been making blackberry cordial and, at Christmas, Mr Horrell heats vats of mulled wine on the stove.

'We use it to store our tractor and to process everything from our smallholding,' continues Mrs Horrell. 'Even when the rain is hammering on the tin roof, it's a lovely place to be.'



Despite rigid planning restrictions, a shed and dovecote have found a new lease of life



### The cart shed and dovecote turned cottage

When the roof of the 16th-century dovecote at Shelfield House, Warwickshire, collapsed in 2016, owner Lady Kilmaine (*above*) resolved to save the building and convert the adjacent cart shed into a cottage. Her daughter was getting married that summer and the cart shed, which had been used to store wood and her late husband's tractor, would provide extra accommodation for wedding guests. Afterwards, it could be used for long-term lets.

The dovecote was a simple restoration project for architect Simon Marson ([www.mrtarchitects.co.uk](http://www.mrtarchitects.co.uk))—he renovated the old rafters and replaced the roof—but the cart shed was more challenging, due to conditions set out by the Planning Department and Building Control. 'We had to work with existing openings and were unable to use any of the existing structure—insulation had to be placed in timber partitions, which meant building a shell within the building,' he says.

By replacing the wooden end walls with glass, Mr Marson allowed natural light to flood into the building, aided by conservation roof lights. 'The reflective qualities of the glass enhance the historic qualities of the building,' he elaborates.

For the wedding, a family of five stayed in the cart shed, which has since been rented out. The dovecote provided space for three guests and is now used for storage. 'There's no access for birds anymore, but we've made provision for an owl's nest,' says Lady Kilmaine. 'I get such pleasure seeing a beautiful building rather than a ruin.'



### The dairy turned family home

The dairy at Duddle Farm near Dorchester, Dorset, was relocated from another local farm in the early 1900s—you can tell because the beams are numbered—and transformed into calving pens

by Katie Priestley's (*below left*) father in the 1990s. When he diversified into blueberries and forestry, the dairy was left empty.

It wasn't until 2015, when the florist ([www.katiepriestley.com](http://www.katiepriestley.com)) was pregnant with her third child, that Mrs Priestley's parents suggested she and her husband, Matt, transform it into a family home. 'The builders managed to complete the work in seven months, so we could move in before the baby arrived,' she recalls.

This was no mean feat given the scale of the building, which is L-shaped and housed tractors and farm machinery as well as livestock. Accommodation now includes

four bedrooms, an office, a laundry room, a sitting room and a vast double-height kitchen with exposed rafters. 'We've definitely upscaled—we could fit our old cottage and garden into the kitchen alone,' laughs Mrs Priestley. 'We can now have 35 sitting down for Christmas lunch.'

The kitchen is the hub of family life, painted in blues, greys and whites, with sofas, toy cupboards and an enormous dining table, as well as an Aga and kitchen island. ➤

*Right: Abandoned after the farm diversified, the dairy was ripe for conversion. Below: After seven months, it was a family home*



Mitie Pilkington

This opens onto the farmyard, where the children can ride their scooters and bikes and wander into their grandparents' farmhouse.

'I was determined to live in this communal, multi-generational way,' confirms Mrs Priestley. 'It's an intelligent way of using a building that no longer had a use and is a lovely space to live in.'



### The chicken shed turned holiday let

There was nothing particularly eye-catching or historic about Nicholas and Sue (above) Peacock's chicken shed near Trellech in Monmouthshire, which made the challenge of converting it into a four-bedroom holiday home even more enjoyable, reveals architect Martin Hall. 'It was a wreck with a corrugated roof, dirt floor and rotten timber walls,' he explains. 'We've worked with plenty of rural buildings, but this was a bit more of a basket case than usual.'

The planners weren't convinced, either: the application was approved by just one vote. 'They were worried about the impact on the landscape, but, now, everyone can see that it's unharmed,' he continues.

Mr Hall was determined that the design should be playful and prove that you can make a small space feel generous and well-appointed. 'I approached it as you might a luxury yacht,' he says. 'Everything is high-end, yet compact.'

The architect steered away from distressed materials, which could feel nostalgic and themed, and opted instead for raw materials:



**Above: In need of an imaginative eye: the old chicken shed that Nicholas and Sue Peacock have transformed. Below: Now, the shed is a holiday let with the feel of a luxury yacht**

cedar, iron, concrete and walls of glass. The effect is clean, light and modern, but reflects the agricultural roots of the shed.

As it was to be a holiday let ([www.thechickenshedatparkhouse.com](http://www.thechickenshedatparkhouse.com)), the Peacocks opted for a pared-back interior, with a focus on local materials and craftsmanship. 'When you're on holiday, you don't want the clutter of everyday life around you,' believes Mrs Peacock.

Much of the furniture, including the beds, was designed by Barnby Design of nearby Hay-on-Wye ([www.barnbydesign.co.uk](http://www.barnbydesign.co.uk)). There are also handmade Welsh blankets and some colourful Scandinavian pieces. 'The walls are clad in cedar and the floors are polished concrete, but there's no mistaking the building for anything other than a radically repurposed shed,' Mrs Peacock assures me.



### The sheep shed turned weekend hideaway

When designer Christopher Howe (left) was shown a photograph of a rundown sheep shed in a field in Gloucestershire, he tried to persuade his client not to pay too much for it. 'It didn't look special: not the field, not the setting, not the building,' he remembers.

A few weeks later, standing outside it with his client, Robin McDonald, he conceded that it was magical. 'The pictures didn't do it justice. It's in the middle of a wildflower meadow and there was plenty that could be done with the interior,' confirms Mr Howe. 'It took me by surprise.'

Mr McDonald, who bought the shed as a first-anniversary present for his wife, was determined that it feel like a hideaway cabin, rather than a cottage. By maintaining the large barn doors and creating four levels, Mr Howe transformed it into a *bijou* one-bedroom house with a mezzanine bedroom for guests. 'When you open the doors, you can see every room, rather like a doll's house.'

There's a sunken kitchen with a Cotswold-stone floor and an impressive central staircase, leading to the ground-floor sitting room, bedroom and bathroom. 'Theoretically, the staircase is too big for the space, but it divides



**Top: Designer Christopher Howe created a cosy space centred on a striking staircase in this former sheep shed. Above: The McDonalds' hideaway can only be reached on foot**

up the rooms and provides storage space beneath,' explains Mr Howe.

Once the structure was complete—a process that took only 8½ weeks—it became a weekend retreat for the McDonalds, their two young children and dog. 'We get to

hunker down together and we'll never grow out of it—the whole point is that it's a little hideaway,' Mr McDonald smiles.

Meanwhile, Mr Howe has now acquired a disused Baptist chapel in the area to convert into his own hideaway.

