

A REAL PERIOD DRAMA

When your cottage starts to crumble, call in the experts, says Fred Redwood

THATCHED cottages and farmhouses with beams might look romantic, but often require expensive and specialised maintenance. And what happens when they start letting in the rain or creaking more than you can stand?

English Heritage will give broad advice on listed houses, but if you need tailor-made instructions and the builders to go with them, then the Historic Building Advisory Service (HBAS), an internet-based consultancy, could be the answer. All you need is a property built before 1945 and £55 to join up.

Mark Farmer, the proud owner of a cottage in the chocolate-box village of Martin, Hants, had both.

Mark, who works in telecoms, inherited his 16th-century cottage in 1992 but it was in a dire state. While living there with his wife, Angela, and their two children, he has slowly but steadily restored it.

'At one stage someone must have thought it would look good to daub



Cottage industry: Mark Farmer had to get in the professionals to save his 16th-century home

black paint on all the beams and put Artex plastering over every wall,' he says, with a shudder. 'I stripped away those faux rustic features which made the place look like an Eighties pub, filled countless skips with debris and uncovered two fireplaces — one Georgian, the other Victorian. Every piece of restoration revealed a historic detail.'

But last year it seemed as if Mark's work would be all for nothing. In need of a mortgage to complete an extra piece of building work, his lender sent down its surveyor. Bad news: damp was spreading from the main beam of the house and into the

whole timber structure. The house was essentially deemed unsafe and a mortgage was out of the question.

'I was devastated,' says Mark. 'The credit crunch was upon us, so nobody would lend me the money to improve the house unless I could prove it was structurally sound.'

But all was not lost. While surfing the net, he came across the website for HBAS. He paid £55, for which sum he could ask two questions of an expert.

The site's founder, Robert Hill, emailed back, saying that he could not offer sufficiently detailed advice from that distance, but he was

happy to make a personal visit and draw up a detailed report to eliminate the damp and make the house safe again.

Mr Hill produced a step-by-step instruction manual.

He took snaps of every part of the building which needed attention and wrote notes stating what action must be taken and what solutions must be applied to the walls and beams.

The report cost a little over £600 and its contents were closely followed by the team of builders Mr Farmer employed to repair the cottage. Six months later, the

surveyors returned and the mortgage was approved.

'Robert quite simply saved my home,' says Mark. 'And, provided it is looked after properly, it should be good for another 400 years.'

The recession is sure to bring to light more homeowners who, like the Farmers, have problems maintaining older properties.

SOME 8.5 million British homes were built before 1945 and, according to Brian Berry, director of the Federation Of Master Builders, many are not properly looked after now money is scarce. He says: 'People are cutting back on repairs, so they are storing up problems for themselves.'

But how valuable are websites such as HBAS's? The substantial bill presented to the Farmers as a result of a simple emailed question is rather alarming. Why not go straight to a local builder?

'Because houses like this break all the rules,' says Hill, who, as a qualified chartered surveyor with a niche practice, has 40 years' experience of working with historic buildings. 'Their floors slope, there is no damp course and water gets trapped if you use modern building materials.'

'You need to be a specialist to work with ancient buildings. Your home is the biggest investment you will ever make, yet too many people are in danger of ruining their properties because they lack expert advice.'

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