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HOW TO AVOID MAKING SOWS EARS FROM SILK PURSES

The Historic Building Advisory Service is here to help



There is a perception that working with old buildings is as easy as working with modern ones: that the only real difference between the two is that old ones are not as straight or as even as new ones.

Why worry, when it comes to converting an old barn to a house or doing a makeover on a little early Victorian terrace, all that matters is that the marketing people know an approximate age for the sales particulars and there are a couple of timbers left exposed along with some stripped brickwork. All too often, a conversion or restoration scheme starts by stripping out everything that looks a bit old or decrepit because it is considered to be cheaper to re-do it all from basics. This even extends to entire roof structures being taken off and put into the skip or solid walls being demolished and rebuilt because they do not comply with current building regulations. What results from this is a tremendous loss of historic fabric and character, an enlarged carbon footprint caused by replacing new carbon products for the old and, above all, a tremendous increase in building costs. It can even mean that many good sales opportunities are missed by over restoring or otherwise destroying the character that most people, given the chance, would love to buy.

Much of the problem comes from a lack of understanding of what is being worked on. This extends from what materials were originally used where and why, through

to the architectural styles and the forms of construction. A further complication is the small regional or even local variation of material use that produces the subtle distinguishing features that differentiates Edinburgh from Eastbourne and Truro from Tyneside. When it comes to legislation from building regulations to listed planning consent there is an even greater lack of knowledge and understanding of working with historic fabric and structures.

At the core of this is the major change in construction materials and techniques that has come about in the 50 – 60 years following the Second World War and displaced the practice and form of construction that had been used for the last seven or eight hundred years or so. However, the skills and expertise to provide the necessary assistance to carry out work on historic properties in the most effective way are still available; the new national database of skills and expertise: <http://www.historicbuilding.co.uk/databases.asp> is being established by the Historic Building Advisory Service (HBAS) to help build the connections between those who have the knowledge and those who need it and are looking for help.

What marks this out from many other web sites or trade directories is that HBAS does not just take the word of the applicant about how good they are, they actually follow-up on the references that need to be provided. Then, providing the people supplying the references agree, the responses will be included on the database, which in turn can be accessed by visiting the site and completing an enquiry form.

Contractors, craftsmen, materials suppliers and consultants of all types who can show that they have experience in working with historic buildings and structures are being encouraged to sign-up with the database. It will be an invaluable resource that will assist the general public as well as the professional developer when working with historic buildings and sites. In this way many of the problems encountered when working with archaic construction and vernacular building methods and materials can be avoided and the historic fabric and character preserved, in addition to cost savings and improved sales potential.

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Historic buildings require experience and sensitivity