

AS SEEN IN

# PERIOD LIVING

TRADITIONAL HOMES, INTERIORS, GARDENS, ANTIQUES & RENOVATION



## THE GOOD LIFE

Lesley and Steve Baker have skillfully converted two former cottages into one farmhouse and now enjoy their dream of living a partially self-sufficient lifestyle. Their home has not only won Best Conversion in our Readers' Awards 2009, but also Overall Winner – Best Period Renovation

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READERS' HOMES

**OPPOSITE LEFT** I bought this old delivery bicycle from McClellan & Bullfinch auction in Wells, and just propped it by the tree, says Lesley, and it has stayed there ever since. The old bird box is a starter home for a family of blue tits every year

**OPPOSITE BELOW, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT** Apples picked from the orchard, a peak of country living: hens are an important part of the Baker's self-sufficient lifestyle. Steve and Lesley collect their own plums for making jam

**THIS PAGE** The double-height dining area, part of the new extension, has an understated glamour – the chandelier was found at Phillips Auctioneers in Bath. The table and chairs were all sourced on eBay



**W**ithout Steve and Lesley Baker's vision, this idyllic rural home wouldn't have a fraction of the charm it has today. When they bought the property in 2006 it had been converted to two houses from four 'one up, one down' cottages; conservatories had been added to each and an attached extension – with no direct access to either house – had been built as a series of offices. Their plan was to convert this hugely piggybacked collection of buildings into one large farmhouse, putting back the character it would have had some 250 years ago, and adding a little more along the way. The hard work and dedication needed to achieve this enviable transformation won the Baker's home the title of Best Conversion as well as Overall Winner – Best Period Renovation in our Readers' Awards 2009.

'Having spent all our lives living in and around the Bristol and Bath areas we were ready for a change', Lesley says. 'And after watching lots of episodes of the River Cottage series, we decided that perhaps quitting our jobs, moving to the country and creating a partially self-sufficient lifestyle would be rather nice.'

With this project, Steve particularly – as a qualified electrician and experienced builder – would certainly put his skills to good use. He says: 'The cottages were very dated, dark and narrow; there were no windows at the back of the property. Working closely with our architect, the aim was to create one house with lots

*'We decided that creating a partially self-sufficient lifestyle would be nice'*

of natural light and space while retaining or reinstating as many interesting period features as we could.'

'To turn the place into more of a welcoming home', Lesley explains, 'we bought some extra land at the back with the idea of adding an extension that would flood the house with more light'. The Bakers knew it would take time to obtain planning permission, so while they waited for approval they made a start on integrating the extension into the house, transforming it into an enormous kitchen diner.

Lesley says: 'This room was really important: it would become the hub of the house and a haven away from the mess. I also love to cook, and bake, and feeding your workmen always helps smooth things along.'

'I worked on the kitchen pretty much by myself, with Lesley's help', Steve explains. 'I knocked down partition walls and added large picture windows. I created a wet room and office at one end and a pantry at the other. We found reclaimed flooring and sandeled, stained and laid those; then we added units, dressers and an



**ABOVE** Pots and baskets are stacked in the pantry; the hens lay eggs regularly – an honesty box is provided for their sale in the drive

**KEY FACTS**  
 Location Somerset  
 Period Originally a row of four 'one up, one down' cottages built c1750; they were converted into two houses in the 1980s. The current owners have converted the two houses into one large home  
 Size Four bedrooms, three reception rooms  
 Owners Steve, an electrical engineer, and Lesley Baker (left), previously a bookkeeper

wrought-iron furniture was sourced on eBay, as was the rattan furniture which was repaired in Lime White by Farrow & Ball



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**LEFT** The kitchen was transformed from a set of offices into an expansive living space. The table and the large dresser came from the Old Creamery Furniture Company in Hovell and the bespoke benches were made by Ullcombe Joinery in Devon

**BELOW LEFT** The house looks as if it was always intended to be one large farmhouse

**BELOW RIGHT** Flooring was salvaged from an old school and bought on eBay. With a lot of effort the results are inspiring, particularly considering the boards cost just £600



**BUDGET BREAKDOWN**  
 Total cost of renovation: £280,000  
 • Kitchen conversion (materials and appliances): £38,000  
 • Fees (inc architect): £23,000  
 • Demolition and building work: £160,000  
 • Conservatory: £21,000  
 • Four bathrooms (labour and materials): £12,000  
 • Carpets: £5,000  
 • Wooden flooring: £2,500  
 • Paint: £4,000  
 • Electrics and lighting: £3,000  
 • Additional furniture and accessories: £21,500



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**TOP** Lesley chose carpet for the TV room, where comfort and warmth is a must. The sofa came from Sofa Workshop in Bath and

the pretty side table from auctioneers Aldridge of Bath. The door, which is original, leads up to the master bedroom

**ABOVE** Steve restored the fireplace and installed a stove in each of the three reception rooms. The armchair was inherited from Steve's mother

Aga – and lots of cream paint. With comfy sofas it's very homely; we still spend most of our time in here!

Nine months later, with the kitchen finished, and planning consent finally granted, the demolition and reconstruction could begin at last. At the front, down came the 1980s conservatories, and ochre-painted render was removed to reveal beautiful original stonework. In addition, the main front entrance and the doorway into the kitchen were each given smart stone porches, the former with a thatched roof, the latter with a roof of reclaimed tiles.

Meanwhile, to the rear, the back wall was carefully taken down and replaced with a timber and glass conservatory, a new central stairwell and an additional downstairs bathroom. At the same time, this new space was connected to the kitchen by a beautiful double-height dining area. Steve says: 'We've tried to ensure that everything new we've added is in keeping with the older parts of the house.'

With that in mind, when knocking the main house into one and renovating the rooms, Steve and Lesley have restored and retained as many of the period features as possible. 'The doors were a bit small for our new rooms,' says Steve, 'so we've used them for cupboards, cutting them down to size where necessary.' Each sitting room also features a restored stone fireplace; and while carpets and new wooden floors



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**LEFT** Steve laid solid oak flooring from Hackworth Sawmill in the entrance hall. Double doors lead from the entrance hall to a formal sitting room (just seen) at the left side of the house

**BELOW** Steve found an old well hidden underneath one of the 1980s conservatories he built the surrounding stone



wall, and added the pump from Wells Reclamation

**BOTTOM, FROM LEFT** This writing table was found in an antiques shop in Bradford on Avon; Robert, the dummy board in the porch, was painted by Trish Murray at Fombolloy;

Lesley has a keen eye for interesting things like vintage china and quality paintings

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were needed in some areas, one sitting room has the original stone floor. 'We lifted the flagstones up and cleaned them,' says Steve, 'and laid under-floor heating, which I wasn't too sure about, but it's worked a treat.'

While the restored house, vegetable patch and fruit orchards tell of a simple life, Lesley's love of collecting speaks of a different side to the Bakers. She says: 'I like vintage items and glass, period furniture, portraits and chandeliers. I've set up a vintage china hire business and I've sold a few other things, but most of it ends up in the house.' In addition, Lesley has managed to source a lot of materials on eBay, including the flooring in the kitchen and the dining room, and a few pieces of furniture that she's restored and painted.

With Steve's hard work and Lesley's finishing touches, this once sorry-looking property has become a house full of character. It provides a comfortable yet elegant home, incorporating the period and the contemporary and, best of all, it has given Steve and Lesley their dream. Steve says: 'Living here, raising our chickens, picking fruit from the orchard, eating our garden vegetables, that's what makes us happy and this renovation has made it all possible.'

**TOP LEFT** Steve and Lesley's bed is piled with cushions, made by seamstress Jacqui Stacey. 'I like neutral colours,' says Lesley, 'but lots of different textures make it interesting.' The cashmere blanket came from Nina Campbell

**TOP RIGHT** Lesley chose unfussy blinds throughout the house, including these in the guest bedroom

**ABOVE** This bathroom is in the new part of the house downstairs, but has been given character with flooring from Hackworth Sawmill, tongue-and-groove, and an old desk turned into a washstand

**ABOVE LEFT** The chest of drawers came from the Wells Emporium, Antiques and Interiors. It is painted Parma Gray by Farrow & Ball

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