



HISTORIC ALLURE

Seven years ago the threshing and livestock barns at Kestle Barton farmstead in Cornwall were about to fall down, when a dynamic new owner rescued them and made them whole again, discovers **Caroline Wheeler**



Back in the 1920s and 1930s the novelist Daphne du Maurier often tramped across the countryside around Helford in Cornwall and was inspired by what she saw. In the hamlet of Kestle, for example, the footpath led through the barnyard of a 16th-century stone farmhouse known as Kestle Barton – ‘barton’ means ‘important farm’ in old English – and into the fields beyond. It is highly likely that the fictional ‘Navron House’, mentioned in the opening pages of *Frenchman’s Creek*, was influenced by this very farmstead.

For centuries locals and visitors alike have loved the Barton, none more so than Helford resident Karen Townshend who had watched it slide into dilapidation over the years. When half the farmhouse, its barns and 50 acres of pasture and woodland came up for sale in 2004 she decided to buy it. She had ambitious plans to safeguard its future under the guidance of her sister Alison Bunning, an experienced conservation architect.

‘Karen just knew she wanted to rescue Kestle, the barns in particular. The completeness of their



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT The barns at Kestle Barton were in a state of disrepair before Karen Townshend bought them in 2004; the garden has been landscaped and is filled with sculptures; rare scantle slate roofs – where the slates diminish in size the further up the roof they go – were on the point of falling down; repairing the roofs was a considerable undertaking, carried out by Mid Cornwall Roofing; the slates are triple lapped to ensure weatherproofing; one of the new cob walls built by local experts Clayworks



cob and stone structure makes them rare examples of Cornish vernacular architecture. But they were on the point of falling down with holes in the roof, rotten floors and damp rising up the cob walls,' recalls Alison.

Time for reinvention

The Grade II listed barns, constructed in a cranked, 'S' shaped range, consisted of a threshing barn, a livestock barn, a cart shed, a wagon house and a hen house. In her mind's eye Karen could see the agricultural buildings turned into an art gallery, an apartment for an artist in residence and two holiday cottages to make the farm viable again.

Before any plans were drawn up Alison commissioned a detailed building survey by the council's Historic Environment Service. 'When there is that much decay it is a fine line between conserving and over-restoring, so you need to build up a historically accurate picture,' she explains.

Eric Berry, an expert on Cornish vernacular architecture, led the survey team and spent

several days on site and many weeks in archives to work out the origins and progression of Kestle Barton. The threshing barn at the core of the range was found to date to the early 18th century, and extended in the 1800s. 'The survey revealed that in the late 19th century the owners did work on all the barns and gave them a "look",' says Alison.

Granite stone quoins had been added, plus shutters for the wall openings and rare 'hit and miss' doors, with moveable ventilation slats in the upper half. All the woodwork was painted a blue-grey shade that wouldn't look out of place on a modern day heritage colour paint chart. 'Eric thinks Kestle was probably spruced up as a model farm, a popular idea in the Victorian era,' explains Alison.

The survey also threw up other notable discoveries, such as pieces of very old stonework – sections from window mullions and doorways – incorporated into the barn walls, which confirmed Alison's suspicion that the present Kestle farmhouse had replaced a grander mansion from which materials were recycled.

Community awareness

Permission to carry out some emergency repairs to the roof and collapsing cob walls was granted by the council in 2006 and 2007, but planning consent and listed buildings consent took two years to come through. 'It was crucial to get the local community onside,' says Alison. 'The footpath is so famous and local people had admired the property for years and felt a kind of ownership, so we had to work very carefully before submitting plans.'

To this end they held an open evening to show how the barns would be adapted to become an art gallery and residential apartments. 'We didn't want to subdivide the buildings too much but to retain the size and scale of the internal spaces, and to retain as much of the historic fabric as possible,' explains Alison.

The building work began in September 2008, and KPK Builders were awarded the 18-month contract. One of the first major tasks was the re-roofing of the scantle slate roof by Mid Cornwall Roofing. 'The slates are laid tightly in diminishing ►

Conversion project



‘The barns were on the point of falling down with holes in the roof, rotten floors and damp rising up the cob walls’

courses,’ says Alison, ‘each course decreasing in one inch increments. The slates are triple lapped, which makes the roof watertight. It’s a clever and economical way of using up small pieces of slate.’

It was a laborious process as the existing slates were removed first, then matched up with the new Delabole slates and re-hung together, with a few small gaps left for bats and swallows to enter and exit. To make the roof extra energy efficient, sheep’s wool insulation was laid above the rafters.

To stop damp creeping up the two-foot thick cob walls, a build up of soil around the external envelope was dug away and French drains installed. Cob and plaster specialists, Clayworks, run by Adam Weismann and Katy Bryce, carried out repairs and rebuilt walls. To make new cob they dug a clay pit on site and mixed in local straw plus aggregates from Dean Quarry five miles away.

Clayworks were busy inside too, creating fine clay plasters finished with beeswax and linseed oil to give a pottery glaze feel to walls, and using the Moroccan Tadelakt lime plaster technique, waterproofed by adding savon noir, for the bathrooms. The warm, earthy results go beautifully with Kestle Barton’s contemporary scheme featuring reclaimed oak staircase treads, walnut doors and granite worktops.

Costing around £1.5m, the conversion has not come cheap, but to Karen and Alison it has been worth every penny. ‘We’ve found a new economic use for the barns that will secure their future,’ says Alison. And like Daphne du Maurier all those years ago, walkers can still come upon it by chance. ↪



ESSENTIAL CONTACTS

VISIT KESTLE BARTON

● **Kestle Barton gallery and gardens** are open from Tuesday to Sunday, 10.30am to 5pm, until 30 October; Manaccan, Helston, Cornwall TR12 6HU (01326 231811; kestlebarton.co.uk). The main exhibition this summer is a display of mobiles by artist Peter Fluck.

● To book accommodation at the Kestle cottages – Kestle Mowhay, Kestle Howthere and Kestle Avallen – contact **Classic Cottages** (01326 555555; classic.co.uk).

CORNISH BUILDING SPECIALISTS

● **KPK Builders & Developers**, Burncoose Nurseries, Gwennap (01209 860472).

● **Clayworks**, Constantine (01326 341339; clay-works.com).

● **Mid Cornwall Roofing**, Penryn (01326 372302; midcornwallroofingpenryn.co.uk).

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The new Kestle Barton art gallery shows the work of local artists throughout the summer; the barns are rare survivors of the Cornish vernacular style; the snug sitting room of Kestle Mowhay – Alison and Karen purposefully opted for a contemporary finish to the interior decoration