

# The spirit of Christmas past

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**We all enjoy a traditional Christmas but how many of us would go this far? Odstone Hall took five gruelling years to restore to its Elizabethan splendour. Caroline McGhie reports on homeowners who make history – whatever the cost**

The table is set for a Christmas feast, the house is decorated to perfection, the whole family is gathered beneath one roof. What moment could be more special for property owners who have dedicated their waking hours to breathing life back into a house which was in danger of losing its soul? This is the dining room of Odstone Hall in Warwickshire, and tomorrow Sean and Jo Woodward will be acutely aware of the significance of the moment.



*The dining room of Odstone Hall in Warwickshire*

It is also perhaps here, in this very room, that a former owner, John Bradshaw, president at the trial of Charles I, dined after signing the warrant for the king's execution in 1649, an act which interrupted centuries of unbroken rule by the monarchy and ushered in 11 years of republicanism. The timbers in the wall to the left of the dining room certainly pre-date that era since they have all the hallmarks of the Elizabethan period, though the house was extended in the 18th century and has a later Georgian façade. All of it has been tenderly restored by Sean and Jo.

There is an experience that increasing numbers of people are thirsting for. Historic buildings are the new seducers of the age. All over the country buyers are risking their wealth and their reputations in runaway love affairs with neglected manors, churches, cottages and barns, which they want to save from dereliction. The intensity of their struggle, combined with the desire to create a lasting legacy, draws them in and changes their lives.

For it seems that, as a nation, we are increasingly mesmerised by the past. Latest figures from the History Matters campaign (run by the key heritage bodies) show that around seven out of 10 adults visited a historic site in the last year; 400,000 volunteers devoted their free time to them, and 9,000 hours of television about old buildings pulled in two billion viewer hours. Some home restorers have been inspired

by the BBC series Restoration, presented by Griff Rhys Jones, which gripped millions of viewers with its hunt to find the most deserving architectural waifs and strays.

Each rescue becomes a perilous adventure for the new owners as they often find themselves enduring great hardship, living and sleeping among the drills and cement mixers, while the work is being done.

Sean and Jo bought Odstone Hall, a Grade II listed country house, brimming with original features, seven years ago. "The front pediment had collapsed, there were hardly any top windows and water was coming into a lot of the rooms," says Sean.

They were hooked. They sold their 1930s home, moved into two dry bedrooms, one for themselves and one for their two girls Amy and Florence, then aged five and seven (they are now 13 and 15), who cheerfully agreed to wear wellies with their nightdresses until the place was watertight. "There were times when we had rain gushing in, buckets all over the top floor, plastic sheeting over the roof, and I thought - what have we taken on," says Sean. He and Jo were builders' merchants; they knew the business and they did much of the work themselves. It took five years and they, like others, struggled with the wonderland of planning officialdom. "We wanted to change the modern windows back to sash windows. So the council made us get drawings done and planning consent for this, whereas if we had replaced like for like and kept them modern, we wouldn't have needed consent at all," says Jo.

Meanwhile, the costs rocketed. "We spent four times what we thought," says Sean. "We had all the problems you would expect with a house 500 years old - it has a Georgian façade but some of the interiors are Elizabethan." They rewired, they re-plumbed, they emulsified the walls and worked through room by room, then redecorated in earnest and lavishly. They are now selling it, with its nine bedrooms, swimming pool, tennis court and stabling through Knight Frank (0121 200 2220) for £1.95 million.