



MOUNTAIN HIDEAWAY

Henry John has spent several years physically rebuilding the secluded 15th-century Herefordshire retreat which as a child he helped to renovate with his father.

Story: **Debbie Jeffery** | Photography: **UHS**

[In brief]

The historic stone cottage is situated on the edge of the Brecon Beacons, the highest mountain range in southern Britain. Henry's father planted 1,500 trees on the site, and Henry recently purchased an additional 10 acres of land on which to plant his own woodland.



“The family history and happy memories, along with the remoteness of the valley and the beauty of the building materials, gave me the impetus to carry on when things got tough.”



Henry John has fond memories of childhood holidays spent at his father's rural home, which he helped to restore and extend. The farm cottage, barn and ruined outbuildings date back to the 15th century, and various phases of renovation and redesign have taken place since the family took on the property in the 1960s.

Located in a Herefordshire valley formed by the Hatterrall Ridge and the Black Hill, and accessed by a mountain road, the unique geography makes the beautiful Olchon Valley something of a hidden secret where weather can prove quite extreme.

From one side the house, named Charity, resembles a humble farm cottage. From the rear it appears to be a group of farm buildings, while at the front the lateral shape and large windows create the impression of a modernist house, although the stone roof and walls help to bed it into the landscape.

"My father, Ben, bought the derelict cottage for £1,000 back in 1967," says Henry. "The roof was caving in, there was an outdoor privy and the house was overrun with nettles. It was tiny, and he converted a lean-to stable at one end, where our children's bedroom was accessed by a ladder through a trapdoor. We heated bath water in metal buckets over a fire and it was all very basic."

The modest cottage stood on a working farm and was surrounded by other derelict buildings, with an adjacent hay barn where Henry and his brother used to play. In 1989 Ben purchased these buildings from the farmer and set about joining them to the cottage to create a 500-sqm home.

"Dad fell in love with the medieval quality of the stone and oak, and left them exposed wherever he could," Henry continues. "He joined the buildings with a new modernist annexe, built using reclaimed materials, and the whole project took 15 years to



Exterior

Dating back to the 15th century, Charity's scattering of tumbledown farm buildings lay untouched for decades. The mammoth renovation project was finally completed in July 2016.

complete. As boys, my brother and I would be set to work measuring and filing reclaimed Welsh stone for the roof and generally helping out."

After his father died Henry couldn't bear the thought of the house being sold, and offered to purchase the property from his brothers and sisters, spending the next three-and-a-half years preserving and rebuilding the structure.

"There were just two toilets, positioned next door to one another, the cottage was very dark and the rest of the house was freezing," he recalls. "Access to the courtyard was restricted and floor levels meant that windows didn't frame the amazing views."





“Old, beautifully crafted objects – whether slipware pottery or handmade wooden spoons – have always been at Charity.”

Henry, an artist, gave up his life, home and work in London to camp out in the property in order to virtually rebuild the entire house. His girlfriend remained living in London and would visit regularly.

“I used a CAD computer program to design the layout, move walls, change levels and add bathrooms. With so much work to complete I had no choice but to become a full-time builder,” he says.

“In the initial stages I discussed my scheme in some detail with a close friend who’s an architect. However, I have put in new windows and then decided later to take them out in order to make larger openings.



Kitchen

The kitchen was relocated and the floor level lowered, with existing flagstones numbered, carefully lifted and re-laid over underfloor heating. Henry built the oak cabinets, and created a new window above the counter.





Ground floor



First floor

[Contacts]

PROJECT

Architect Ed Carter, Serlian Projects: serlian.com
Surveyor/CAD drawings for Building Regulations
 NJ Rouse: njrouse.co.uk
Building Control HCD Group: hcdgroup.co.uk

STRUCTURE

Oil for oak beams Osmo: osmouk.com
Oak windows and doors Advance Joinery Hereford:
advancejoinery.co.uk
Conservation roof lights The Rooflight Company:
therooflightcompany.co.uk
Lime paint Cornish Lime: cornishlime.co.uk
Surfapore C damp-proofing spray for external stonework
 Ty-Mawr: lime.org.uk

FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

Wood-burner Charnwood: charnwood.com
Cinema projector Projectorpoint: projectorpoint.co.uk
Cinema audio Bowers and Wilkins: bowers-wilkins.co.uk
Lighting Original BTC Lighting: originalbtc.com
Range cooker Bertazzoni: bertazzoni.com
Utopia white ceramic wall tiles B&Q: diy.com
Small sinks Baileys Home: baileyshome.com
Welsh wool blankets The Great English Outdoors: greatenglish.co.uk
Swirl taps and shower mixer Screwfix: screwfix.com
Stone floor sealer Liberon: liberon.co.uk

← FLOORPLAN

The existing cottage, barn and connecting extension retain the same footprint, but the internal layout has been rationalised and opened up to create a better flow around the central courtyard. A new kitchen now connects directly to the sitting room in the cottage, the barn is a sitting/dining space, and each of the five bedrooms has its own bathroom.

Charity is available for holiday rentals through
 Unique Home Stays: uniquehomestays.com.



"It's an expensive and time-consuming way of doing things, but a little pain, some dust and hard work is a small sacrifice that you soon forget when you're enjoying a new view."

Henry wanted to retain the style and footprint of the existing buildings, which remain unlisted, but determined to bring them up to date with modern heating and wiring systems and a few high-tech luxuries.

His background as a trained painter, coupled with the practical skills originally taught by his father and honed on a previous small renovation project, enabled Henry to tackle almost every element of the work himself.

"At first I employed a team of five Polish trades, who didn't speak any English, lived on site and worked alongside me," says Henry, who worked 12-hour days and initially slept in the old larder surrounded by rubble.

"For me the family history and happy memories, together with the remoteness of the valley and the beauty of the building materials, gave me the impetus to carry on when things got tough."

Five months into the project, when the house was still a virtual shell, all but one of the trades left the site and the remaining builder, a talented electrician, continued for a further two years. Henry spent time researching building topics online - watching 'how-to' videos on topics such as installing sanitaryware and tiling walls.

A great deal of money went into hidden but essential tasks, such as damp-proofing and underpinning the older elements of the building. Parts of the structure have been demolished and rebuilt using reclaimed stone from the site, which was generated by enlarging window openings and taking down walls. Only the existing stone roof remained relatively untouched.

Two of the most arduous tasks involved lowering the kitchen floor by hand and reducing the level of the courtyard to improve access and create a sunken

Sitting room

Lowering the kitchen floor connected it to the adjacent beamed sitting room in the old cottage, with its ancient open fireplace. Henry rebuilt and raised the fireplace, installing a metal liner by climbing up inside the chimney to prevent smoke from leaking through the stonework.

retreat sheltered by a new wall. This meant excavating through a concrete slab, removing tons of spoil and re-routing newly exposed pipework and drainage.

A new long picture window above the kitchen counter opens up the former snooker room to light and far-reaching views, and oak-framed double glazing and insulation make the property warm and comfortable throughout. Ben had used the stone barn as a bedroom, and the soaring oak-framed space was damp and freezing cold. Henry retained the double-height volume, installed double glazing and inserted roof lights to create a large, comfortable living/dining space finished in several coats of a lime-based paint.

Underfloor heating, radiators and a wood-burning stove were installed, and rusty farm tools found on site have been used to decorate the walls.

"Old, beautifully crafted objects - whether slipware





[Top tip]

"Pay out for a decent plumber, because otherwise you may need to dig up floors to find leaks, as I did!"

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pottery or handmade wooden spoons – have always been at Charity,” Henry says. “Dad was a designer with a firm in London and was often found whittling his latest creation, and since my redesign I’ve introduced some classic modern furniture and lighting.”

Oak is still the main material. The kitchen is crafted from it and so are all the beams and windows. However, the most important element of the interior design involved making a number of shelves with unusual rounded brackets, which feature throughout the house and are useful for displaying books, family paintings and plates.

Attending auctions to furnish the house led Henry

Barn

The oak-framed former barn has been converted into a comfortable living space complete with a wood-burning stove. Rustic tools found on site decorate the walls and the room also serves as a home cinema.





Bedrooms

The main bedroom is located under an oak A-frame. At the gable end another bedroom features an open-plan bath behind the bed.

Garden

A central courtyard has a sunken hot tub, stone barbecue station and fire pit.



[The final word]

What was the high point of the project?

Knocking through walls and opening up windows to create a better flow, more light and views from the house were instantly rewarding.

...and the low point?

The work was exhausting, dusty and relentless, stretching over several years. Even bringing a water supply to the house involved locating the spring, installing a 10,000-litre tank and trenching pipework over acres of fields. Nothing was straightforward, but completing so much of the work myself saved thousands of pounds, and was my only real option.

Your best buy?

I made the kitchen and some of



the furniture myself, including tables and 20 chairs.

...and the biggest extravagance?

Luxuries such as the sauna, the surround-sound home cinema, and the dual-fuel range cooker which has a teppanyaki griddle.

“I feel privileged to have been involved in restoring such a historic building.”

to purchase some eye-catching pieces, such as a green velvet chaise longue, but he also made much of the furniture himself, including the oak kitchen cabinets and portable dining table. Ten dining chairs and a further 10 chairs for the courtyard were inspired by Enzo Mari's functional furniture design from his 1960s collection.

“My main intention has been to try to keep the soul of the house, and I was mindful of that throughout, as well as being influenced by my father's tastes,” says Henry. “The house has evolved through trial and error, and is very much in my blood, so I feel privileged to have been involved in restoring such a historic building. I think Dad would be amazed, and hopefully proud of what's been achieved.”