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Bijou mill conversion

SET IN DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK

KITCHEN ISLANDS & BATHROOMS

Modular construction

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In brief

PROJECT Mill conversion
LOCATION Devon
COST £150k
SPENT £250k
VALUE £500k+

EXTERIOR

The original mill structure was secured and the stonework repointed, with new corrugated metal roofing and aluminium doors and windows installed. An ancient stable, purchased with the mill, is used for the children's ponies and an old hay barn for storage.





Over the Lemon River

Converting an old mill into a bijou property within the Dartmoor National Park proved a memorable project for Peter and Kay Prior.

Story: Debbie Jeffery



“I’ve been lucky enough to live on this farm all my life,” says Peter Prior. “Historically, we think that the old stone mill nearby would once have belonged to our farm, but various buildings were sold off over time and our neighbour had rented the mill for more than 50 years. In 2016 we had the opportunity to buy the building, together with six acres of land, some old stables and a hay store, which were all depicted as ruins on Ordnance Survey maps.”

Dartmoor is Devon’s wild heart, and the mill stands on the south-eastern border of the national park, close to the River Lemon. Following a life of labour, the small stone building had rough mud floors and a rotten tin roof. It was covered in ivy and completely overgrown with self-seeded ash trees. “No detailed history could be found in the archives,” says Peter. “Originally, it was powered by a large overshot waterwheel and would have served the small community of miners with flour from locally grown wheat.”

The exact date of the building is therefore unknown, but the structure was probably built in the 1500s and ceased to be a mill in the early 17th century, when it would have been used for agricultural purposes – latterly for storing old machinery and equipment.

“I’d always thought the mill would make a great addition to the family farm, but I didn’t have any definite plans for it at the start – it was just nice to have the extra land,” says Peter, who lives with his wife, Kay, and their children – Charlie, six, and Phoebe, four – in an annexe to the main farmhouse.

PETER & KAY'S TOP TIP...

"Plan everything before you start and don't leave decisions until the last minute. Also, don't forget to budget for finishing touches and furniture."



BEFORE

The old mill was covered in ivy and close to collapse when Peter and Kay bought it in 2016.



GARDEN

A wood-fired hot tub was installed in the pebbled courtyard. Hardy, low-maintenance planting provides year-round colour in the garden.

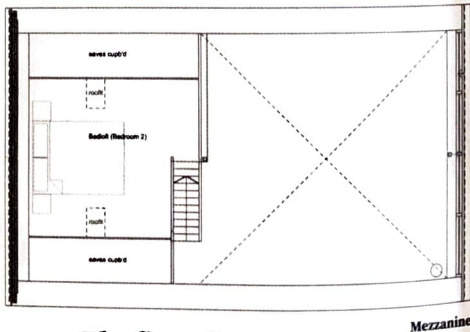
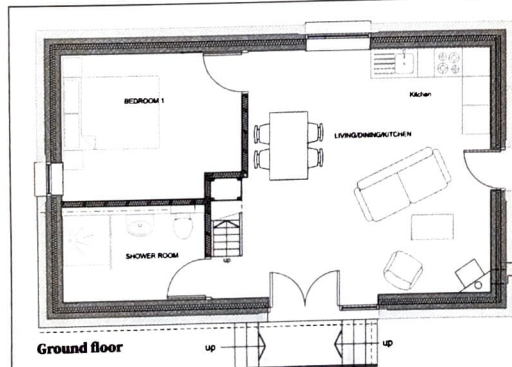
"We mulled over various options for about a year before deciding to convert it into a holiday let."

The couple had been operating a beef farm on the land until two years ago when it became financially impractical and they turned instead to making hay bales. Peter is self-employed in the construction industry as an infrastructure manager for large projects – working alongside Kay, who is a landscape architect.

They were keen to save the old mill and felt that the small building would make an ideal holiday rental property due to its secluded yet accessible setting,

with the moors on the doorstep. Encouraged after talks with some local friends, who also operate a successful holiday rental, they decided to take the plunge, despite having no previous experience.

"I approached Unique Homestays, which offers a portfolio of high-end holiday properties, and in 2017 we sent them pictures of the mill and location," says Peter. "They said it looked absolutely fantastic, which spurred us on, although it was very daunting embarking on the project, especially in the Dartmoor National Park, where planning is never certain."



The floorplan

Accommodation is mainly on the ground floor, with an open-plan kitchen/dining/living room, a bedroom and bathroom. Upstairs, the mezzanine snug is reached by a ladder staircase.

“THERE WERE A FEW TENSE WEEKS AND SOME HEART-STOPPING MOMENTS WHEN WE THOUGHT WE MIGHT NOT GET PLANNING PERMISSION.

Kay and Peter instructed Apse Architecture, a local practice specialising in historic buildings and ecological design, and gave them a brief to capture the industrial history of the building and its former agricultural use, while injecting a modern touch.

Back in 2008, when Peter was 30, he had converted an old barn on the farm as a home, which gave him some useful experience. “My father was an architect and was instrumental in drawing up those plans, with Apse Architecture helping us to win planning permission by liaising with Dartmoor National Park,” says Peter. “We won on appeal because of them, so there was no question that they would be our architects again for the mill. We weren’t allowed to knock down the structure and rebuild it, so everything needed to fit within the original footprint.”

Maximising the space was vital, and originally a mezzanine bedroom was designed, but the Priors then realised that the steep loft ladder would potentially prevent a number of people from accessing this upper room. Instead, the mezzanine has become a TV snug, with a bedroom and bathroom located on the ground floor, together with an open-plan kitchen/dining/sitting area, which has a high sloping ceiling.

“As we’re right beside the mouth of the River Lemon, the site is automatically classed as Flood Zone 3, which meant we needed to raise the floor level by 750mm,” explains Peter. This involved increasing the external wall height to lift the roof, with the new section denoted by a band of untreated larch cladding. “There were a few tense weeks and some heart-stopping moments, when we thought we might not get planning permission, but eventually it was passed.”

Following a tender process, the Priors set about appointing a local building company, Stonewood Construction, to undertake the restoration in a sympathetic way and retain the charm of the old building. Work started in August 2019, with the goal of securing the structure.



LIVING AREA

Matt black fittings and high ceilings clad in lime-washed pine feature in the main living space.

SNUG

The TV snug above the living area is a relaxing space, accessed by a oak ladder staircase.





"Within five years the whole thing would have almost certainly collapsed, had it been left untouched," says Peter. "When we were digging out the courtyard, we found a large lump of granite and an old drive axle from a milling machine, which was fascinating."

A borehole was needed to provide water and an air source heat pump was installed. Everything in the building is fuelled by electricity. The entire mill required underpinning and certain sections needed to be rebuilt, due to ivy growing into the walls, but wherever possible the existing stonework was preserved and repointed using lime mortar.

Powder-coated aluminium windows and doors were installed, with the original door and gable apertures glazed to bring light into the main living space.

"We weren't allowed to put in any new openings, so there's just a little window in the bedroom and none in the bathroom, although we were allowed to install conservation roof lights," explains Peter.

In detail

PROJECT

Architect Apse Architecture:
apse-architecture.com
Builder Stonewood Construction
Services: stonewoodbuild.co.uk
Interior designer Siobhan Hayles
Interiors: siobhanhayles.com
Landscaping Tony Bengier
Landscaping: tonybengier.com

STRUCTURE

Aluminium windows and doors
Aspect Windows: aspect-windows.com
Insulation Celotex: celotex.co.uk
Conservation roof lights
Velux: velux.co.uk

FIXTURES AND FITTINGS
Sofas: sofas.com

Wood-burner Charnwood
C5: charnwood.com
Stove installation stoveinstall.co.uk
Sanitaryware Victorian Plumbing:
victorianplumbing.co.uk;
Plumbstop: plumbstop.co.uk
Kitchen Howdens: howdens.com
Bathroom mirror Rockett St
George: rockettstgeorge.co.uk
Billy bed Cornish Bed Co:
cornishbeds.co.uk
Micro-cement and worktop
Earth Coat: earthcoat.co.uk
Underfloor heating, air source
heat pump SW Dart: swdart.co.uk
Hot tub The Log Company:
thelogcompany.com
Lighting Garden Trading:
gardentrading.co.uk



“
IT HAS CERTAINLY BEEN AN
EXCITING PROJECT AND A YEAR
WE WON'T FORGET IN A HURRY.

The rusting tin roof was replaced with a similar style of corrugated zinc, emphasising the building's agricultural roots, and a covered outdoor area has also been rebuilt in stone and roofed in matching corrugated sheets, making a furnished garden 'room' which is ideal for barbecues. Farm-style metal gates and fencing mark out the boundary, with Peter using a tractor to move most of the materials on site to keep costs down, working with local suppliers wherever possible.

Internally, the earth floors have been replaced by screeded block and beam, with 140mm insulation around underfloor heating pipes, finished with reclaimed engineered oak boards in the living space and bedroom. Micro-cement was used instead of tiles for the floor and walls in the shower area - a product suggested by a local interior designer, Siobhan Hayles, who was employed to spend two days working on some of the details.

"Originally we'd specified oak doors, architrave and skirting but Siobhan advised us to choose white painted timber instead," says Peter, who acted as project manager. "The underside of the roof is clad in pitch pine, which we lightly whitewashed to avoid it looking orange. It's worked even better than we'd hoped."

A local joiner made the oak staircase leading up to the mezzanine snug, and the couple installed a simple grey kitchen in the open-plan space.

"We paid for our wood-burner with a puppy - a good old Devon trade," laughs Peter, whose friend was able to supply and install the stove in exchange for a puppy from the Priors' Labrador litter.

Rather frustratingly, the outbreak of Covid-19 hampered the final stages of the project when the

BEDROOM
The bedroom has a king-sized wrought iron bed. Micro-cement was chosen for the walls and floor in the bathroom.

builders had to down tools and leave the site. "We were probably running three months behind schedule, which meant the work took 11 months to complete," says Peter.

"Once restrictions were lifted, the mill was quickly booked up for the rest of the year, though, which was a relief as we needed to repay the commercial loan we'd taken out. It has certainly been an exciting project and a year we won't forget in a hurry," says Peter with a grin.

Over Lemon River is available for holiday rental with Unique Homestays: uniquehomestays.com; 01637 881183

Final word

What was the high point?

Gaining planning permission from Dartmoor National Park was a huge relief.

...and the low point?

Lockdown happened just a day before the windows were due to go in, which meant boarding up the building for months.

Your best buy?

Our big sofas and other items of furniture, much of which was sourced online.

Biggest extravagance?

The king-sized iron bed was an extravagance, but we'd slept in a similar one at the Watergate Bay Hotel and found it amazing.

