

From wrecks to riches

Turning old stately homes into new, sustainable ones could make sound financial sense, suggests Jane Barry

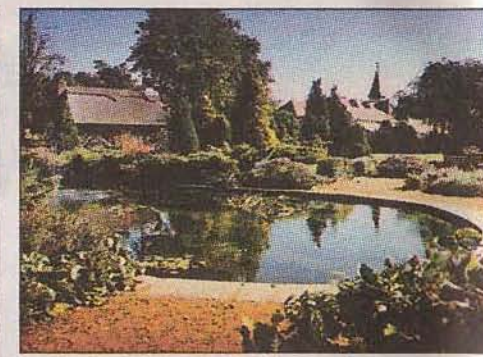
RESTORING heritage buildings is popular, judging by the two million telephone votes received by Restoration, BBC2's recent programme on buildings at risk. However, Liz Forgan, chairwoman of the Heritage Lottery Fund, cautioned enthusiastic viewers: "We've got to find sustainable uses for these buildings. Saving them is not enough."

Arts centres, concert venues and visitor charges were among the suggestions for generating maintenance income for the 30 buildings featured in the programme. Manchester's Victoria Baths, voted the winner of the £3.4 million restoration money, aims to start bringing in cash by getting its Turkish baths up-and-running. But there is another, very effective way of making some historic buildings sustainable: converting them into much-needed homes.

Obviously, this is unthinkable where public access is a must, or if a building is of major historical importance or, as with the mansions in London's parks, if it belongs to the community. Nor is it the answer if it compromises the building.

Berkeley Homes recently pulled out of buying Grade II* listed Finsbury Town Hall in Clerkenwell, after negotiations broke down with English Heritage (EH) over a conversion that included 14 flats. EH was concerned the plans would have an adverse effect on the building's magnificent hall and council chamber. However, if residential conversion is the only way to save a building, conservation bodies tend to be open-minded.

"The best use for a historic building is the use



Langley Park (left and above) in Bromley was restored by specialist developer Barry Morgan. Bromley council paid tribute to his skill in restoring period detail

for which it was intended," says an EH spokeswoman. "But if it's a case of something falling down, we'd rather see it brought back into use than lose it."

Adam Wilkinson, of SAVE Britain's Heritage, agrees: "If housing is the best solution to bring the building back to life, I think it's sensible."

And, while the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) produces a check list of crucial issues to consider, its deputy director, Matthew Slocombe, acknowledges: "It can be done sympathetically, but it needs someone who is prepared to work with the building rather than impose new works on it unthinkingly."

To the rescue

Barry Morgan is a developer who specialises in restoring endangered historic buildings and converting them into flats. He stresses that most of the buildings he has worked on, which include a row of Arts & Crafts villas in Bromley and a Victorian laundry in Wandsworth, are not officially registered as at risk but are, nevertheless, under threat from demolition or collapse.

However, his most recent project, Baldwyns, a Grade II listed Georgian mansion in Bexley that once housed an NHS mental hospital, was on the EH at risk register. Empty since the 1990s, the building had succumbed to damp, dry rot, fire and vandalism. Externally and internally, it was a wreck. "We were able to stand in the cellar and look through the first floor right up to the roof," says Morgan.

His company, Morgan Restoration, acquired Baldwyns for conversion into 14 apartments.

Morgan restored the period exterior and the oval entrance hall and grand staircase using specialist craftsmen to match missing cornices, balustrades and other architectural features.

But where the interior was beyond recall, he took a contemporary approach with chrome and steel, making a virtue of the missing ceilings by turning the ground floor into double- or triple-height galleried loft apartments. "Baldwyns was heavily added to at the end of the 19th century, when it became a mental hospital. It is more honest to make the apartments contemporary and modern. It's part of the evolution."

As Baldwyns is Grade II listed, Morgan worked closely with SAVE and with Dartford Borough council. Dartford conservation officer Tony Phillips is delighted that a solution has been found for the derelict building. "We were open to suggestions and, as it happens, residential use is quite good." And he agrees that modern replacements are appropriate where interior features have vanished, provided they are sensitive to the structure. "We obviously had to make sure the windows and floor levels came together correctly," Phillips says.

The loft-style apartments sold for between £300,000 and £350,000, making the restoration profitable for Morgan. But the Georgian exterior has been preserved and new homes have been created. As part of their leases, apartment owners are committed to maintaining the building.

Peter Martin, head of heritage at Bromley council, worked with Morgan on the 1997 residential conversion of

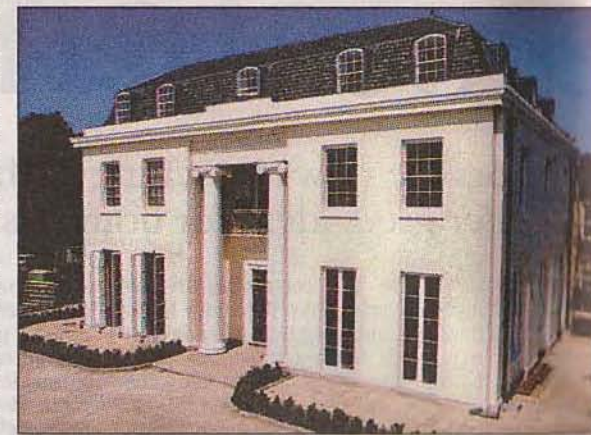
Langley Park's historic buildings and pays tribute to his skill in restoring period detail. Martin feels these redevelopments can succeed, as long as they are carried out by specialists.

He has recently overseen the residential conversion of Grade II listed Bromley Library by another specialist company. Initial concerns that this would destroy its character were ill-founded, he believes. "The integrity of the building has been retained and it looks better than it has done for a long time."

The library has been redundant for 25 years. Converted into homes, it now has a sustainable future. "Housing will pay for anything," says Martin. "It's the highest land value you can get."



Another building that was under threat but has now been restored is Sundridge Avenue in Bromley, which comprises eight red-brick Arts & Crafts mansions



Baldwyns in Bexley was on English Heritage's at risk register until Morgan Restoration converted the building into loft-style apartments that sold for between £300,000 and £350,000