

# The developer who wants to keep it real

Barry Morgan believes in quality rather than quantity. His development company specialises in restoration and uses local skilled craftsmen who are encouraged to contribute creative ideas. He talks to **CHERYL MARKOSKY**

**W**ith a severe shortage of skilled craftsmen currently in the building industry, many developers are struggling to find enough capable people to carry out a decent day's work. One development in Painswick, Gloucestershire has even been put on hold until they find craftsmen accomplished enough to do the tasks required and finish the job properly.

Barry Morgan, head of niche developer Morgan Restoration, agrees it is a problem. He seems to have solved his dilemma by leaving London and moving down to Kent. Here he has formed a coterie of experienced workers who can cut the mustard, or even the hardwood. The key is not to venture out of bounds. "We don't travel very far and stay close to our labour source. It has taken time to pull this crew together."

Morgan has built up a crew of regular sub-contractors he can rely on. "They work on a quite regular basis, but are not fulltime employees," he explains. "They are a bit older and think for themselves. I just went to the 70th birthday party of an excellent bricklayer and carpenter."

Employees are encouraged to get involved in decision-making and they contribute many creative ideas. They like having their say, says Morgan, and adding to the overall design of the properties Morgan Restoration either restores or produces from scratch. "There is something good about all working together, taking what

is essentially a pile of poo and creating something for life out of it." Such attention to the job at hand is denied many of the larger house builders, who need to keep shareholders sweet and therefore end up churning out identikit boxes to order. Morgan admits: "We almost always succumb to temptation to do more and add extras. But I guess we are fortunate at the high end, where we can sell at a premium."

Morgan is right to be proud of his small, but select portfolio of endeavours. The Commission for the Built Environment (Cabe), which trumpets good design in buildings that will still be standing after more than a few decades, would most likely applaud Morgan's efforts at coming up with historic regeneration that is well thought-out, stylish and long-lasting. The general public are becoming more sophisticated and caring of what happens to old buildings round them too. Research conducted for English Heritage by Mori shows that 84 per cent of Londoners agree heritage plays an important role in urban regeneration, with seven out of 10 regarding derelict buildings as a serious social problem.

Morgan's successful regeneration schemes include the restoration of 19th-century buildings on the Langley Court Estate in Beckenham, including the chapel and dairy formerly owned by Glaxo Wellcome; the Anglo American Laundry in Wandsworth; Fawe Park Mews, new-build luxury two-storey apartments and a loft style bungalow in Putney; 15 Sundridge Av-

enue, a conversion of a Victorian mansion into eight apartments and two penthouses; and Morgan's *pièce de resistance* – Grade-II listed Regency Baldwyns Mansion Villa, once part of the former Bexley Hospital in south-east London. His latest project will be 15 new-build flats in a contemporary building in Swanley.

To practise what he preaches, Morgan says he always lives in what he builds. The last three homes he has shared with his wife and three children, now aged 20, 17 and 12, have all been Morgan Restoration schemes. Their current house is a carefully converted building at Eglantine Farm in Horton Kirby, Kent. "We ended up with a group of farm buildings," Morgan explains. "After totally restoring them, we sold two units and then decided we'd move into the last one." He adds that he gets a buzz out of having friends round to see his handiwork. "I get that glow of satisfaction. I like getting old pictures out, so they can see what I have done."

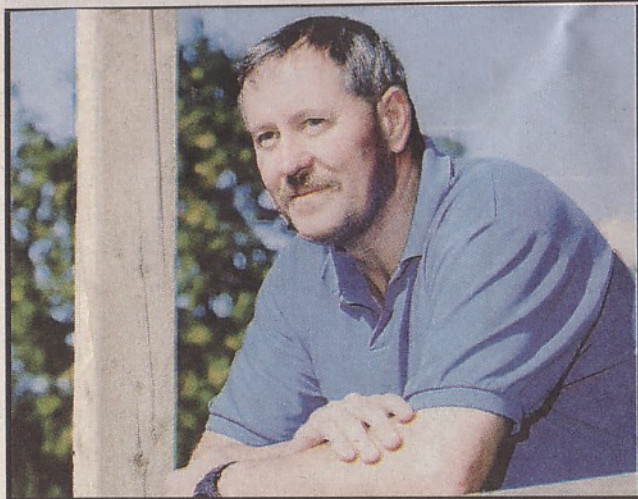
Eglantine Farm is an attractive property by almost any standards. The large, beamed country kitchen/dining room looks like an advertisement from a glossy magazine. The main bathroom is more contemporary, with a rounded curve of glass bricks, a fabulous sturdy steel pole with round glass shelves to hold toiletries and towels, and a funky glass wash basin and stainless-steel-rimmed mirror.

So why can't more developers match such standards? Morgan believes the mistake many of the larger companies make





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is to bring everything down to a common denominator. "It's doll's house stuff," he says. "They try to replace the past with modern materials because it is cheaper. Rather than produce things by hand, they are in fibreglass and are just screwed on. It is just pathetic."

The current planning system – the bane of many a developer's life – doesn't help either. Morgan recounts how he gave a good architect the remit to come up with something exciting in Beckenham that would not compromise on materials. "I won't tell you anything else," he told the architect. "You just do it." But some local planning officials wondered whether it would be better to replace the original light industrial units with a small row of Victorian style cottages "to blend in". Morgan is currently appealing.

Given a choice, what would he like to tackle next? He says he fancies a large Satanic mill – "but we don't have them down south". Failing that, an old church or school; something that would give him the opportunity to do something with double or triple-height spaces. His adage is simple: "Don't build down to a price, build up to a spec." If only all developers would adopt such a philosophy, then Britain would be a better place to live.

**From ancient to modern: Barry Morgan (above), who lives in Eglantine Farm (opposite page), a property he restored himself. Right: a triple-height apartment at Baldwyns in Bexley, south-east London**



*One penthouse priced at £625,000 remains at 15 Sundridge Avenue. Morgan Restoration, 01322 866800 or [www.morganrestoration.co.uk](http://www.morganrestoration.co.uk)*