



# A Passion for Architecture

STORY: Carl Burge

*I've always had a passion for architecture, not necessarily grand manor houses or mansions, but simple buildings, outbuildings and follies, vernacular architecture that was quite literally built from whatever materials were at hand.*



In 1996 I moved into a quaint and rather twee 'land workers' cottage, built from a mixture of handmade soft 'Norfolk Red' bricks and local ironstone known as 'Carrstone'. The 'chocolate box' cottage, built in the late 1850's sits comfortably on a corner plot with a delightful tower windmill within eyeshot. During the long summer months with the sun high in the sky, the shadows from the sails would cascade down into the garden creating magical revolving shady areas. This contained parcel of land

would become the ideal 'blank canvas' to get creative.

I'd dreamt of owning a barn or outbuilding, a sanctuary to retreat. Somewhere I could slip on rose tinted glasses, sink down into a worn out old leather chair, read, daydream and snooze! I began looking more closely at local buildings, particularly early Victorian and Edwardian properties, the type you stumble across by accident tucked away down leafy lanes when you get lost on a Sunday drive out!



**LEFT:** The side of the barn, with pillarbox. **BELOW LEFT:** Carl Burge. **ABOVE:** Twenty tons of compressed Carrstone was required for the hogging. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The concrete floor provided an ideal working surface for the building materials. **BELOW:** Getting ready for the Soldier bricks on the rear gable. A total of 1,700 reclaimed Victorian pantiles were required.



With note book in pocket and camera at the ready I would find myself taking deliberate detours to study brickwork in walls, stables, barns and outbuildings. I was drawn to the fact that even though some of these structures were quite crude in design, they all held character and charm. Some of these walls are built from brick, rubble, chalk, flint, carrstone and 'clunch' (hard chalk cut into blocks) It became apparent the bricklayers or land owners could place these materials within their build literally as

they picked them up from the pile, creating an enchanting and aesthetically pleasing structure. It can be seen everywhere, especially in rural villages and hamlets - once you throw away the blinkers of a metric, '90 degree' and mass produced society, this un-perplexed way of building had become evident in tumbled down barns, cow sheds and cart buildings.

A few months after moving into Millray Cottage, a local builder purchased three early Victorian cottages at the top of the

lane. Fortunately for me (not the cottages) he decided to convert and extend them, thus I was in a unique position to purchase all of the handmade pantiles, ridge tiles, pine beams and the key ingredient, bricks!

I hold the deeds to Millray Cottage and a lot of earlier paperwork for the cottages down the lane, some going back to the mid 1830's. Contained within this paperwork is a delightful solicitor's letter dated 1893, stating the gentleman in questions Father had build and owned these cottages along with the ones at the top of the lane. This meant the materials I had rescued should be a close match to the ones in the cottage and should be perfect for what I had in mind!

I drew my barn design on paper, adding period detail to the sides and gables. After discussing and passing my drawing onto a local architect, Building Regulations was applied for and granted. I wanted 'bricked up' windows on both ends of the building, faux steel purlin ties, parapets and 'tumbling in' brickwork on the gables. I restore Red Telephone Boxes and memorabilia for a living and have a few restored kiosks of my own, thus the barn had to be designed to incorporate my rather weighty and tall museum pieces. The ceiling height needed serious thought, as did the floor! I managed to source other materials including an old cellar door, once a back door that had been shortened and a wonderful old date stone off the auction site eBay. I tracked down 12 original sash cord windows complete with the 'wobbly' float glass for a £2! Dave Johnson called to say he was about to chuck out a large wooden workshop door complete with brackets. He owns and operates a

*continues on page 31*

AD



**ABOVE:** A selection of period enamel signs provide an interesting talking point against a backdrop of red telephone boxes. The old water pump came from a local reclamation yard. **BELOW:** Detailing of the gable. **BELOW RIGHT:** Close up of Tumbling In period detail work.



specialist ironworks company and could produce a set of rustic mounts to take the track.

Another friend had an unsafe chimney removed from his roof, a different brick but native to the area. Suffolk Yellow's are similar in size but harder, and range from a dull yellow colour to a dusty salmon pink. It's fairly common to see a pair of Victorian semi's sporting Norfolk Reds one side, and Suffolk Yellows the other! Quite often windows were bricked up in early buildings to avoid 'Window Tax' penalties, again 'yellows' were frequently used.



## REMEMBER WHEN



**ABOVE:** A restored Victorian pillar box, and Georgian phone box compliments the brickwork. Suffolk Yellows were added to create a bricked up window feature. **BELOW:** Carl used PVA wood glue and iron filings to create faux rust staining on the brickwork. **BELOW RIGHT:** Close up of period GPO bellset with modern electronics. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** This early cast iron railway plaque provides a useful statement on the barn door.



Perhaps being a harder brick they could withstand the elements better? I scoured a local reclamation yard for odds and sods, managing to pick up a few old pine braced doors, 'T' hinges and a truck load of broken bricks as I was desperate for 'halves'. A very old carrstone wall was due to be demolished at a local farm and I managed to obtain the lot at a good price. I remember going for a drive one afternoon and came across a chap



pulling down an old Victorian coal shed. I pulled into the side of a farmer's field and went over to ask him what he was doing with the old bricks. 'I've a builder friend who's having them' he said, 'that's a pity' I replied. We chatted for a while, leaving him a business card, 'should the builder not want them', and I went on my way. Two or so months passed, I happened to be out delivering a telephone kiosk one damp and



dreary morning when I decided to take the scenic route which ran past this property. To my amazement the bricks were still there, stacked in a big heap, all 1500 of them! I delivered the kiosk and came racing back to see if he was home. I knocked on the door and was immediately greeted by his wife. To my joy she told me the builder did not want them and her husband just want them out of the way as there killing the lawn! Yours for £5 she said... I could not believe it although I did give them a 'large drink' as a thank you.

Sometimes tiny Carrstone chippings are pushed into lime mortar beds around Carr' and brick walls in the area. I'd asked a very elderly builder whose explanation was its 'garreting' and this 'keeps the Witches away'; no follow up explanation as to how though? Irrelevant of that, I felt I'd better have some just in case! The footings went in and the barn began to rise from the ground. Building something like this was far different to a modern 'uniform' build. I was trying to create a building that not only looked old it looked established! It had to be made with the correct materials and incorporate lime mortar. I could have used modern materials, creating a workshop with the same proportions and saved a fair bit of money, but I adore early architecture, and sometimes with a passion you have to 'go with the heart rather than the wallet'!

Norfolk Red bricks differ in texture and size making 'gauging'difficult. The walls had



**LEFT:** A few of Carl's kiosks in various restoration stages inside the barn. **ABOVE:** Carl originally bought this to sell on but fell in love with it. It's very rare with only 240 examples left. I restored it and it now takes pride of place outside the barn. **BELOW:** The hayloft door complete with telephone box leather strap! **BELOW RIGHT:** Side of the barn with the old cellar door.

to be solid with no cavity, so rocks, rubble and mortar produced the infill. A local retired stone mason spoke about 'Pentney Sharp'. A sharp white sand that's locally quarried, almost certainly the same sand that's gone into the cottage's construction. The internal block work shot up and my dream started becoming a reality.

The first contractors ran into problems quite soon, gaining a 'pig' in the east wall. This is where the brickwork runs out of level and gains an extra course. Trouble is if undetected it will almost certainly show itself somewhere else, usually when the roof is about to go on! Fortunately a couple of neighbours pointed me in the direction of local builders John and John Plowright. These arduous fellows share my passion in period buildings although admitting the special 'Pentney' lime mix was new to them! They were able to correct the 'pig' by using thinner bricks, a few broken quarry tiles, and Carrstone 'garreting'.

If you look at lime mortar courses in period properties you will notice that brickwork and cobbles actually stand proud of the mortar. This is because the soft mortar has eroding through the passage of time. Protruding aggregates become visible where the sand and lime once resided. I love this established patination. This enhanced patina cannot be achieved straight away with a fresh lime mix as it's almost certainly too wet. Strike and brush wet mortar to soon



and you create 'tram lines'. Leave it to long and it crumbles out, causing voids. Get the balance right and it looks great.

As the builders progressed, the project slipped into winter. The cool damp weather meant the mortar was taking longer to dry. I spent many late evenings and early mornings perched up on the scaffold, often sheltering under an umbrella! With leadlight in hand and pointing trowel in the other I was to become a familiar sight to any insomniac neighbour for the next two months! Labour of love perhaps, but going to bed and setting the alarm for silly o'clock became a bit of a bind some nights!

On one occasion I was mulling over how to incorporate bird houses into the building when suddenly the 'penny dropped'! I'd collected old glass bottles and earthenware jars as a child and kept many of them tucked away in boxes at my parent's home. The



stone necks from old Steven's Ink jars would make perfect and somewhat camouflaged entrances to Blue Tit and Great Tit nesting boxes! The builder boys would need to build a small cavity within the wall and place the necks directly above facing slightly down to deflect the rain. Then those lovely old stone foot warmers, now they would make even better next boxes!

I used to kept a pad by the bed and should I have an idea I'd jot it down and throw the idea at the John's the next day, obtaining the nickname Bonky! When the building reached 'wall plate' (to take the roof trusses) I realised that the specified 23 degree roof pitch was going to look too 'fleet' and would not suit the building. I gathered my thoughts, approached the John's for solace and decided to put in for full Planning Permission. This was needed because changing the pitch of the roof meant

## REMEMBER WHEN



the barn was effectively getting taller. You can build to a certain size and height with Building Regulations, but go taller then you need full Planning Permission. Eight weeks later and permission granted and I was able to go for a 35 degree pitch. This would make a considerable improvement to the aesthetics of the build. An increase in roof pitch meant I could have a loft! The 'Attic' trusses put an extra £500 on the job, but when you consider the loft area, the best part of 38 foot by 22 foot, it's worth every penny! Some of the old sash cord windows were built in, two in a pine frame side by side, one in a store room and one over the



**ABOVE LEFT:** My daughter Brianna playing with the digger. **ABOVE:** The builders, left to right: John, 'Pippy', Jordan and James. Pippy received his surprise birthday cake during the building works. **BELOW:** An original Victorian Pillar Box dated 1889.

loft. I designed a hayloft door to the rear of the building, perfect for bulkier or lengthy items. Two old strong but rusty steel girders were built immediately underneath the hayloft door for a future spiral staircase. Parapet gables were added with lead flashing, whilst 'tumbling in' brickwork ran through the 'soldier brick' course along the top of the gable. With 'first fix' electrics and water installed I decided to have the internal walls rendered. Kevin Cartright, a local plasterer

was recommended by the Johns and did a fantastic job. The ceiling was clad with rough sawn boarding, 19 double electric sockets ensured I have power, I did not want a bright yellow alarm box on the gables so I stripped out two period GPO bell boxes and installed a modern system. I applied PVA glue and iron fillings to my 'cast iron effect' guttering and below the faux perlin ties. A bit of damp weather and presto, rust! With a large multifuel stove installed pumping out 14 kws of heat, it's snug in the winter, the solid thick walls keep it cool in the summer.

Overall I'm delighted with my barn. Yes it could have been built on a tighter budget, a typical brick workshop, four walls and a tin clad roof, but where's the heart in that? I can sit back and feel proud of my design and for the achievements of my building buddies. The barn's become quite a talking point as well, five baby Blue Tits fledged this year from one of the nest boxes and the 'chirpy' Sparrow's love it under the old pantiled roof. The building has mellowed, it has a heart and an ambient equilibrium with its surroundings, yet it's only 18 months old!



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