

# Profile for Heritage Counts 2015

## *Anonymous – Listed Building Owner*

**What are the details of your building (name, location, grade, age, very short history [if known])?**

“Grove House is a Grade II listed Georgian house prominently situated in the Fenland market town of Chatteris. It was built in 1818 as a two storey house on a square footprint and later extended sideways on one side at the back of the house and at the same time the roof jacked and a third storey added in 1886, reported in a book on the history of Chatteris as costing a sum of £500. The house is believed to have been home to members of the Child's family at some point in its history and also connected to family of the name Clarke. The house was gifted to the Chatteris Town Council in 1945 and used for a multitude of purposes: with the top floor being the village's children's Sure Start centre, the middle floor being the Chatteris museum, the ground floor being the town council offices and the Coach house outbuilding being the town internet cafe.”



“In 1996, the building was sold to Isle College for a sum believed to be only £10,000 but on the condition that the building had significant upgrades and much needed repair work, coupled with the introduction of a centre for adult learning in the town. The building was used as such for around 10

years until Isle College merged with the College of West Anglia which already had a much larger campus in the nearby town of March. Consequently, in 2006 Grove House ceased to have a useful purpose and stood empty for almost seven years. This was in part due to the legal covenants introduced as part of the sale to Isle College that restricted the use of the buildings to educational purposes only. With no other educational institutions interested, it sat empty. In 2010, the covenants restricting its use ran out and, after a number of failed attempts to sell the building, an application for change of use to a single residence was granted by the council, and the building was bought by my husband and I in April 2012 for conversion back into its original use as a family home.”

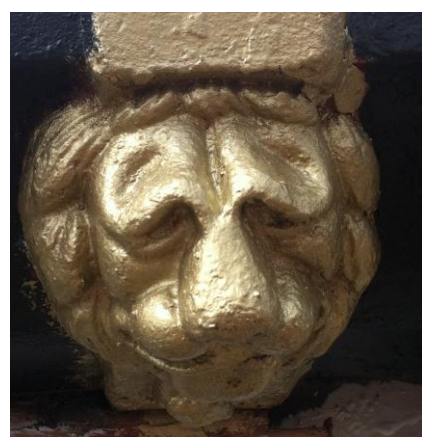
**How long have you lived in/owned the building?**

“The building was bought in April 2012.”

**What do you like/value most about living in a listed building?**

“Our primary criteria for our choice of home was: i) lots of space, ii) within an hour's drive of the city of Cambridge, and iii) a 'fixer-upper' that meant we had a low mortgage value compared to buying a 'ready-to-just-move-in' house.”

“Estimated at 4,500 square feet and with 6 double bedrooms, the house met our space criteria. We had been looking for over three years for something that gave us the freedom of space we wanted at our price point. Cambridge is one of the more expensive towns outside of London to purchase properties and we did not want to live in a modern ‘box’ house. However, whilst Grove House met our tick list for practicalities, what we fell in love with were the period features - the high ceilings, a beautiful moulded ceiling, staircase with curved continuous balustrade, functional shutters, stained glass windows and walled garden. We also love living in a building that has a story – it was just as well that we fell in love with the building because given the scale of the house and it's listed nature it needed new owners that would look past its rotten windows, leaky roof and seemingly endless dirty carpets to see the potential of what it once was and could become again.”



Continuous balustrade staircase and Lion's Head detailing on the guttering.

**Could you provide an example of an experience have you had with undertaking repairs of maintenance work on your building (detailing the work, the process, and who advised you)?**

“Prior to purchasing the house, we received helpful advice from our lawyer, Mark Massucco of Massucco Buttress, who suggested that we contact the conservation officer of Fenland District Council to discuss our plans and then hold a meeting at the house to walk through the plans and find out if the conservation officer had any concerns or comments. The council conservation team were very accommodating and we were able to have a three-way meeting with the conservation office, ourselves as the potential new owners, and also building control who would need to sign off that the conversion met building regulations for a house. This was perfect because we could openly discuss our plans. We also wrote up minutes from the meetings and sent these to all parties and gained written confirmation of the conversation and outcomes. So we were in a good place starting out and were sufficiently confident we could carry out our plans before we committed to buying the building. We used these minutes as the Foundation of our listed building consent and ensured any final details or minor alterations to the plans were always agreed in writing with the required parties.”

“Since buying the house, we have conducted extensive repairs to the external facade of the house, as well as fitting the essential functional requirements for a house, such as a hot water system and bathroom. When we bought the place, we knew the windows needed repainting and the first row of tiles needed repining on the roof. Our deeds told us the house had seen extensive renovations, including a complete rewire and reroof in 1996 and the structural survey stated everything was in generally good order albeit in need of rapid maintenance work.”

“However, over our first winter in the house, whilst we were waiting for spring and better weather for the scaffold to go up, we realised we had bigger issues than we first thought. The joins at the base of three of the four chimney breasts were leaking, the lead roof valley started leaking and water was seeping through the corners of several windows. At this point we had had enough of surveyors that told us everything looked generally ok 'based on non-invasive inspection only'. We wanted concrete answers. That was when a friend of ours recommended her architect called Marilize from 5th Generation Architecture. She was a 'get-up-and-go' hands-on architect with significant building experience and she wasn't afraid to get out her toolkit and lift floor boards, bash off renders or crawl around the roof space to really assess the extent of the issues that our surveyors could only look at on the surface. She was exactly what we needed to advise our works and personally lead the building and tradesmen team that went on to fix the outside of the building.”

“In the end we almost entirely re-felted the roof, replaced all the lead on the roof including in a sizeable valley, re-pointed all four chimneys, adding in air bricks for increased ventilation to the already capped chimneys. We removed all 280 inverted acorns on the soffit and replaced large sections of rotten soffit and fascia before putting back the acorns and thus restoring this core feature to its former glory. All the windows were renovated, replacing only the two that were absolutely necessary with beautiful replica sliding sash wooden windows. We replaced the split back door stone step, replaced the UPVC down pipes with cast iron and fixed the remainder of the cast iron guttering where it was slightly eroded. The external works took nine months in total, but restored the outside of the building to its former splendour.”

“Since then, we have also had some minor structural strengthening work done internally and fixes to the suspended floor substructure. We have further internal works and work to the garden to come over the next 12 months.”



**What would you say are the main barriers or challenges to owning a listed building (in relation to carrying out repairs and maintenance)?**

“I think the biggest challenge to owning a listed building is that you have to want the building for what it is. Listed buildings aren't as easy to amend or extend as a non-listed house and works are often on a longer timeframe to undertake and limited to the summer periods due to traditional building materials and methods. Owning a listed building is not for the impatient owner or someone who 'just has to have' the latest gizmo or fitting.”

“A listed building has a story and a soul and as an owner you need to work out how to respect this and bring out the best in it, whilst also ensuring the house is able to give you what you want.”

“So yes, a listed building comes with more admin hassle, yes it can be more expensive and yes it's more restrictive to develop, but in our view it's been well worth it. We have a house with a history, grandeur and story that no modern house could ever live up to. We've heard that psychologically the more effort you put into something the more you love it. For most people this sentiment will apply to the IKEA furniture they built themselves that they love even more as a result of its slightly wonky shelves or the odd nail that missed its target. For us, the efforts and time spent renovating the house and the people it's involved and stories it has generated have had the same impact. The effort needed to maintain and restore these glorious old buildings is definitely a labour of love.

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