

High & Mighty

Could you transform a humble agricultural building into a stylish and desirable country home? WORDS BY BETHAN JOHN



Living in a barn features in many people's dream of the rural idyll, and derelict buildings with permission to be converted for residential use are being snapped up at a staggering rate. However, it is still possible to buy properties in their original state. Whichever option you choose, it is wise to know what to look out for before you begin your search – non-standard properties can make wonderful homes, but can become costly burdens if you don't carry out the necessary research.

Living in a converted barn is extremely popular, as many of us flee towns in search of cleaner air, more spacious homes and views of rolling hills. However, transforming former agricultural buildings for residential purposes is nothing new, and many conversions were undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s. Unfortunately, the manner in which these homes were developed was often a far cry from what would be considered desirable by planning departments and buyers today. Ancient wooden frames were torn out so UPVC windows could be fitted, while inside, lofty open spaces were frequently carved up into a series of pokey rooms, more suitable for a bungalow than a dramatic period structure.

Thankfully, such insensitive modifications are unlikely to curry favour with planning officials today, but stricter rules present their own problems for would-be developers. "One of your biggest hurdles will be to convince the planners that a barn conversion is a good move," says Adrian Parker, chairman of the Royal Town Planning Institute's countryside panel. "Local authorities are under pressure from central government to find new uses for old buildings that will keep the rural economy healthy. Many barns are located

miles from shops, schools and other local amenities, which doesn't make them sustainable," he says. Barns bought without planning permission will be much cheaper than those with, but taking the plunge before all the relevant consents are in place is extremely risky. Submitting a proposal can entail a lot of work and expense, and if it is rejected, you're left with an unwanted derelict building. It is far wiser to ensure permission is in place before you make an offer.

STARTING YOUR SEARCH

Barns that have already undergone conversion can often be sourced in the usual way, by contacting estate agents in your area. If you've set your heart on this kind of building, it is well-worth making sure all the local agents are aware of your requirements so that you'll be the first to hear about any new instructions. Unconverted buildings sometimes come onto the market via estate agents, but they can also be found in other ways. Property auctions can be a fruitful source, but it is vital that you check out the structural state of the building and the likelihood of gaining planning consent before you bid. Once the hammer falls you're committed to the sale, and will be left with a useless building if permission falls through at a later stage. The internet is fast becoming one of the best places to find a barn, and there are a number of useful sites you can try. Details of converted and unconverted buildings offered by private sellers can be found on barnsetc.co.uk, while barnmasters.co.uk also offers comprehensive advice on the whole conversion process.

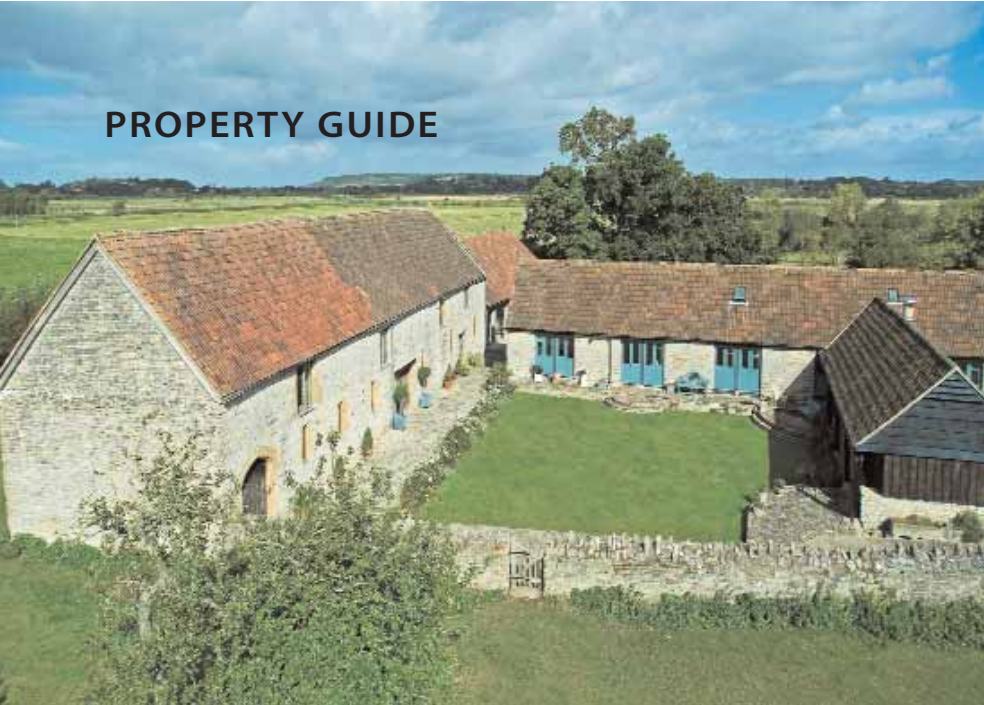
ABOVE LEFT Pimphurst Oast is on the market with Strutt & Parker for £1,250,000: 01227 451 123

ABOVE TOP RIGHT Elmers Barn is on the market with Knight Frank for £995,000: 01483 565 171

ABOVE MIDDLE Frogwell Barn is on the market with Knight Frank for £750,000: 01392 423 111

ABOVE Grove Barn is on the market with Strutt & Parker for £900,000: 01245 258 201

PROPERTY GUIDE



Ed Masters of Barn Masters offers his advice on finding and buying the building of your dreams.

ABOVE The Almonry is on the market with Jackson-Stops & Staff for £1,600,000: 01749 685 220

UNCONVERTED BARNs

These are deemed to be a rarity, but I disagree. Many farmers would rather obtain planning permission for an unused building than let it fall down. Scan the property sections in local newspapers, register on the Barn Masters and local estate agents' websites, and sign up for email alerts from plotfinder.net, Prime Location and Right Move. Also, check your local planning authority website regularly for new permissions.

- When you have found a suitable building, find out whether it is listed. If it is, an officer from the local planning authority will monitor the construction process, and will want to see damaged elements sympathetically replaced.
- It is usually a requirement of the council or Natural England to obtain an owl and bat survey, to see if there are creatures that would be affected by works. I incorporate owl and bat boxes in the fabric of the building to encourage alternative habitats.
- When you are looking to employ a team of builders, go and see work that they have previously completed. Ask those living in their previous conversions about the standard of work, the timing and the budget involved.
- The developer must be sensitive to the fabric of the building. Many barns are made of oak or elm, so the tradesmen employed must be specialist craftsmen with experience of such timbers.
- Be true to the nature of the original building. One of the best ways of achieving a sympathetic restoration is to employ an architect with experience in this field.
- Keeping to a budget when developing a barn is difficult, as there are always going to be hidden costs.

Rural Charm

About 15% of historic barns have now been individually listed, making it far more difficult to gain permission to convert them. Even once this has been granted, you'll face stringent restrictions regarding the materials and techniques you can use when completing the work. However, these rules can work in your favour too, as conversions that use high-quality reclaimed materials and traditional techniques are usually far more desirable long term. It is also the only way to ensure the final result fits the character and construction of the original building. Employing a barn conversion specialist to help with your plans can be a wise investment at this stage, as they will have the experience and contacts to benefit your project. They will also be able to suggest clever solutions, such as ways to divide up the space and get more light into it.

Whether you're looking for a conversion project or a building that has already undergone renovation, it is good to have a basic knowledge of the different types of barns you might come across during your search. Styles and materials vary widely depending on location, as agricultural workers would have used whatever was plentiful in the local area. In the Cotswolds barns are largely made from stone; in Sussex, flint; in East Anglia, clay lump; oak in the Welsh borders and timber weatherboarding in Surrey. The function the building was originally built to serve will also dictate the dimensions and layout of the space. The classic barn was used for threshing, and featured a raised floor where the wheat could be separated from the chaff, and large cart doors for the delivery of grain. This design allowed light in via one large opening and created a through draft necessary for winnowing – not typical characteristics of the perfect family home! Smaller barns were used to house livestock, the Church built enormous tithe barns to store parish taxes, and bank barns were built into the hillside for easy access to an upper floor. Whichever kind of barn you choose, it won't have been designed with the comfort of human inhabitants in mind. This doesn't mean that barns can't make delightful homes, but will mean that a more creative approach will be required when arranging and using the space inside and out. When viewing, try to keep an open mind and be guided by the local style. In addition, ensure your architect and conversion specialist are familiar with the types of building commonly found in your area, as each will require a particular treatment.

CONVERTED BARNs

When you enter a barn you should find, even if it is in a complex of four other buildings, that it is going to be significantly different to the others, as changing farming needs would have required outbuildings for many uses.

- Barns can often be rearranged internally without the need for further planning permission. Walls can be taken down or moved, which means that they do have the flexibility to either stay as they are, or be opened up to create a more open plan living space.
- The use of glass internally can significantly change the feel of a place and, in turn, maximize

- the strengths of borrowed light. Check the structure of the barn you hope to buy: many have a very light middle bay, but a lack of normal sized windows in the other rooms. You may also see some very large open plan areas or gallery floors, that could be sympathetically divided up for more practical use of space.
- One of the biggest grievances with barn conversions is often the lack of storage. As barn roof timbers are generally left exposed, this leaves you without attic space. Assess the building to see all the areas where roomy cupboards can be incorporated.
- A barn can combine character features such as

beautiful timber beams and old limestone walls, with contemporary elements such as wood-burners and under floor heating.

- A barn conversion can be cheaper to run than a traditional home. The use of glass in internal walls can reduce the amount of artificial lighting required and can therefore reduce your electricity bill. Barns offer great flexibility in incorporating the latest eco-friendly services such as rainwater harvesting and ground source heat pumps.
- To find out more about Barn Masters telephone 01986 781 484 or why not visit the website at barnmasters.co.uk?