OPPOSITE The roomy kitchen-diner just invites a leisurely lunch with its wide table and comfy picnic-style benches from The Apple Orchard BELOW, LEFT That must-have country accessory, the Aga is a reconditioned model from Twyford Cookers; the adjustable lamps are from The French House BELOW, RIGHT Most china in the dresser is by Emma Bridgewater

Third place

In perfect harmony

Experienced renovating duo Jeremy Ward and Alison Jeffers have beaten rats, a sagging roof and botched DIY to create an idyllic rural home in Hertfordshire. Their efforts have not only given them a lovely home but also earned them third place in our Readers' Awards of 2006

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Fact file

Location Preston, Herts
Period Sootfield Green is a Grade II listed, 1800s cottage. Originally a pair of cottages, it features the typical stone walls and farmhouse layout of a working cottage
Size 3 bedrooms
Owners Alison Jeffers is a management consultant. Jeremy Ward is a 'hands on' property developer (jwibc.co.uk)

When Alison Jeffers and Jeremy Ward bought Sootfield Green in Hertfordshire, they were aware that the last owners had used it as a holiday cottage. But what they didn't know was that some non-paying guests had elected to stay behind. 'The place was alive with vermin,' recalls Alison – in fact, the first task facing them was tackling their own plague of rats!

Once the unwelcome hangers-on were evacuated humanely by a professional pest control company, Alison and Jeremy were able to plan the renovation of what is now a delightful rural retreat. The couple had viewed the cottage on a beautiful sunny day, and were instantly captivated. 'We were looking for a rural place with no close neighbours,' recalls Jeremy, 'and Sootfield Green, set among the fields of Hertfordshire, was perfect.' Alison adds, 'We'd renovated Victorian townhouses before, but were both keen to tackle a country cottage.'

For Alison, who travels to London often on business, the cottage's proximity to major 'A' roads was an advantage, but watching chickens roam the garden, you could imagine yourself in the remotest setting. Having said that, while the cottage and its location were ideal, the state of the property would have put less experienced developers off.

'We realised early on that the roof would have to come off – it was pushing the walls out and the building was in danger of collapse,' says Jeremy, but the many skills he'd gained from past renovations meant he could pragmatically dismiss this 'as just as one more thing to do'.

When you're dealing with a listed building, we all know that it's vital not to do anything without permission. ➤

PROPERTY LADDER

1992-1994

3 bedroom semi. Extensive works to alleviate damp. Roof re-tiled, rewired and central heating installed. Renovation cost £25,000

1994

5 bedroom Victorian villa that had been converted to bedsits. Roof re-slated, chimneys rebuilt, rewired, plumbing installed and new fireplaces. Renovation cost £75,000

1995-2002

4 bedroom Victorian house and conversion of coach house into separate dwelling. Reinstatement of period features and layout. Renovation cost £110,000

2002-present

This 3 bedroom cottage. Renovation cost £240,000. 'We have no plans to move on,' says Alison. 'We're just enjoying the home we've created'

In an attempt to trouble-shoot, Alison invited a planning and conservation officer to their cottage to discuss what they could and couldn't do to their Grade II listed home.

Help was on hand, too, from an architect with whom Alison and Jeremy had worked with before. He sat down with them as they planned exactly how they wanted to use the property. 'This is very important with a listed building,' says Alison, 'as it's much harder to make alterations to the plans later.' Her advice to anyone contemplating the renovation of a listed property is to 'spend a lot of time thinking about what you want, and make your application as detailed as possible.'

The couple's proposal included the removal of a poorly-conceived post-war extension, replacing it with a two-storey extension, using materials in keeping with the older building. This would allow Alison and Jeremy to have a large, west-facing rustic kitchen-diner, and a further extension to the east. This thoughtful approach paid off, but it was still eight months before permission was given for work to begin. 'But it was well worth the wait,' says Alison. 'We wanted to do things the right way.'

Now, the heart of the property is the rustic country kitchen. From its practical ceramic tiled floor ('proof against muddy paws!') to the Aga, it embodies the warm and cosy feeling of the whole development. This is no fancy makeover, or brash attempt to modernise out of context; what Alison and Jeremy have done is bring the life back to a proper, functional, rugged working cottage.

Jeremy did most of the work himself, making use of traditional materials, such as lime mortar, for breathability and an authentic finish. He managed to persuade a school friend to help him with the carpentry – 'It's very much how people would have been working in the old days,' says Jeremy, 'so that would have been one "wet" tradesman building walls and plastering, and a chippy making doors, architraves and panelling.'

But Jeremy certainly wasn't shy of using modern materials if they could solve a problem. The couple had ➤

LEFT The sitting room sofa came with the couple from a previous property, bought from Leather Chairs of Bath. The coffee table was an old pine dining table, which Alison cut the legs off and re-stained. Ever resourceful, the couple even used it as a whelping box when one of the dogs gave birth by simply turning it upside down! ABOVE The dining table and chairs were a wedding gift for Alison's grandmother and date from the 1930s. The photos are all of Alison's father, taken over the years. The jug is from Town Garden, and the wood-burning stove from Coalbrookdale

ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT The master bedroom blends an interesting mix of old and new, with the bed bought at auction, while the bedside table came from Wendover Antiques; the cushions and the chaise longue were sympathetic finds at Laura Ashley

OPPOSITE The focal point of the appealing bathroom is the classic Victorian roll-top, bought at auction, and reconditioned. All other sanitaryware was from Victorian Bathrooms. The rustic wooden cupboard, which conceals a large mirror, was picked up from Gila Timur

searched in vain for a thick piece of slate to make the work surface in the kitchen, and in the end a concrete product that could be poured into a wooden frame and dyed was the only practical solution.

Leading off the kitchen is the small dining room, which contains one side of the traditional inglenook fireplace. The dining room also combines old materials with modern conveniences, as the ceiling is made from traditional bound reed, while the tiles hide underfloor heating. Alison has fond memories of 'camping out' in the dining room as building work went on around her. 'We decided to live in the house as we renovated,' she explains. 'We had to keep moving things like the dishwasher into different rooms. My washing machine has been plumbed in all over the house!'

To one side of the inglenook, through a low door, is the cottage's baffle entrance – a doorway which is greeted by a wall so you have to turn left or right to get into the room. Beyond lies the sitting room. This character-packed little room contains more original features than any other room in the property, including an alarmingly bowed beam in the ceiling that is testimony to some botched DIY in the house's past. 'Someone took out a supporting wall upstairs,' says Jeremy, 'and that's why the roof was pushing the walls out.'

The end of the cottage has one of the new extensions, which Alison uses as a study, and also features a pretty, and practical staircase. The landing has a small gallery, which can be opened up to take furniture upstairs – a task that would be very difficult otherwise. The staircase was built by Jeremy's carpenter friend, and sound research ensured that it's in keeping with the period of the property. It's modelled on one from a Victorian charity school in the nearby town of Hitchin.

There are three bedrooms upstairs, all with soul-soothing views of the inspiring countryside and packed with rustic charm, but it's the bathroom that really stands out. Alison and Jeremy ignored the fashion for ➤

Alison's handy tips

Go easy with colour
'Cottages can't take too much colour on the walls as the low ceilings make strong colours dominate too much. I try to add colour by painting the woodwork and adding soft furnishings with small amounts of strong colour to liven it all up.'

Make up plenty of lime
'Mixing your own limewash is easy and cheap, but keep some for touching up later as it's virtually impossible to match the colour several months along.'

RIGHT The welcoming second bedroom no doubt proves popular with the couple's house guests. The neutral bed and bedspread is from John Lewis, while the radiator is from Stelrad, and was painted cream

en suites – which they feel is an unnecessary luxury in a house with no children – concentrating instead on one luxurious place for pampering, and it's a room that invites long, luxurious soaks in its beautiful tub.

The tongue-and-groove panelling that runs throughout the house is painted in an almost tropical dark brown here, but the fittings are pure Victoriana. The roll-top bath was bought from a salvage yard and reconditioned, while the other sanitary fittings were found by Alison trawling internet auction sites. It all comes together in an almost colonial style that seems very much at home in this house.

As we make our way back downstairs via the cottage's second staircase (an original feature that climbs steeply behind a boxed-in panel off the dining room), Jeremy pauses to consider the future plans for Sootfield Green. 'There's just the garden and driveway left now,' he says, 'I've drawn a line under all plans for the house and said, "That's your lot!"'

The cottage still has one more surprise for the visitor. Off the kitchen lies a modern utility room, cleverly angled so there's no intrusion by the collection of white goods, and which opens into a barn space. Here Jeremy has a study where he plays guitar. The 'open to the elements' style has meant that nesting swallows have made a home in the rafters – presumably to catch Jeremy's performances – yet another example of the harmonious and characterful home this couple have built.

GET THE LOOK ➤

On the opposite page we've put together some great ideas inspired by Jeremy and Alison's home