

Question time at Home & Dry event 29 September 2006.

(Questions were asked about the four properties visited, all in the Mourne Homesteads programme, during this event entitled *How to Restore Traditional Buildings*)

Why did the MHT Mourne Homesteads scheme select buildings which were in reasonably good order?

One of the selection criteria for buildings to be included in the Homesteads project was that all essential features of a dwelling remained largely intact. These included the roof, the chimneys, the windows and doors. Also the building had to be structurally sound. However all the buildings had to be vacant and all were seriously dilapidated, mostly without services, bathrooms or fitted kitchens. Some were even more basic.

This is a conservation-led scheme, rather than a restoration project, i.e. it seeks to conserve as much original fabric as possible. One speaker made the point that it is often easier to work with buildings which are in worse condition. This is because the retention of original fabric is time-consuming for the contractor.

In addition, the Housing Executive was only prepared to fund the improvement of buildings which displayed the characteristics of a dwelling house, so the buildings needed to be substantially sound.

Is it possible to just use lime throughout and create a breathing wall rather than seal the interior using Newlath?

Not all people understand the full implications of living with a traditionally constructed building. There has to be partnership. Your life style must be managed to reflect the strengths and weaknesses of this building form, otherwise serious problems can be created. The most prevalent is the damp laden micro climates resulting from modern quick response living - cooking, showering and bathing as well as the washing of clothes.

With this in mind and because the project team did not know at the outset who would be living in these buildings, it was decided to take a belt and braces approach and to use Newlath and to instal the Drimaster ventilation system.

If you adopt the right lifestyle and embrace frequent and generous ventilation into your routine you can safely rely on fewer precautions, but you would be wise never to do without subsoil drainage (french drains). Ground drainage patterns and precautions can be seriously upset or damaged when excavation for later extensions or when laying new underground services, so beware.

What is the cost per foot of renovating versus building anew?

It was agreed that it was generally cheaper to demolish and build a new house rather than restore an existing traditional dwelling. This is partly due to the fact that VAT is payable on repairs to a dwelling but not on new build. It is also true that traditional materials such as lime mortar and natural stone (including slate) are more expensive. Costs can also increase because builders are nervous about the inevitable unknowns an existing building, especially one in bad repair, can harbour. Despite this fact, when the architects for the conservation of the Dyan Mill cottages, featured in *Traditional Buildings in Ireland Home Owners Handbook*, costed conservation versus new build to the same specification, conservation was cheaper. The importance of using a professional with conservation expertise when restoring your building should be stressed.

Another speaker pointed out that much of the cost is dependent on the level of specification. Reclaimed materials can be expensive.

The imposition of VAT on repairs and maintenance but not on new build serves as a financial disincentive to repair historic properties and needs to be addressed. The Chairman mentioned a letter to the Times of 16 September with reference to the BBC Two *Restoration Village* programme. It pointed out that in total the 21 projects featured in the programmes need more than £23million to restore their buildings - £4million of which could be payable in VAT on the building costs. The letter continued 'levying 17.5 per cent on repairs and maintenance, but nothing on new build, creates a bizarre system that rewards those who destroy our environment, our culture and our community resources'.

While it may be financially more expensive to re-use, the true cost to the environment (the carbon footprint) should be taken into account when weighing up the benefits of re-use versus demolition and rebuild. The embodied energy in a building should be considered. English Heritage in *Heritage Counts 2003* explained how 'the total energy that has already been used in the construction of a typical Victorian terrace is equivalent to the amount of energy (in fuel terms) that could drive a

car five times round the earth, or half the distance from the earth to the moon'. For more information see What's my style/ Contemporary 1950 – Present / Housing and the Environment in www.homeanddry.info <<http://www.homeanddry.info/>>

Conservation does tend to be a little more costly than new build and for MHT the adopted selection criteria have not led to the most economic solutions. High cost elements have included curtilage works to outbuildings and boundaries. Also the remoteness of some sites has run up expensive connection charges to public utilities. Where there are unknowns, conventional contracting procedures can encourage relatively high pricing.