

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

WHEN IT COMES TO CREATING THE PERFECT COUNTRY HOUSE,
IS IT BETTER TO RENOVATE AN EXISTING PROPERTY OR BUILD A NEW
ONE? WE ASKED TWO EXPERTS WITH HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE

Words *Ruth Corbett*

THERE'S A GREAT debate taking place in the countryside. Is it better to renovate a country house or build a new one? At first glance, it's a straightforward choice between modern finance and ancient history. New-build properties are VAT free, while renovation work is charged at 17.5 per cent. So, for the same floor space, it's often cheaper to build than renovate.

But refurbishing a property brings other, less tangible benefits. Renovation can be very environmentally friendly, as well as ensuring that England's most historic buildings aren't lost forever.

James Perkins is a firm believer in restoration. Back in 2004, the property entrepreneur bought Aynhoe Park, which is on the Oxfordshire/Northamptonshire borders. This 17th century property had been redeveloped as retirement flats many years previously, but James has now transformed it back into a grand country house and family home.

RESTORATION

Crispin Holborow, head of Savills Country department in London, advises...

THE LISTING

The listing is all-important. Grade I means you'll be renovating it back to its original status. Grade II* means that elements of the house are sacrosanct and you'll need to embrace them. With Grade II you should be able to make changes as long as they're in keeping.

DON'T MISS ANYTHING

Know what you're getting. Problems with underground utilities such as drains can easily be missed in your survey, as can dry rot. Consider using a rot hound – like a truffle hound – if you're concerned.

CHECK THE CEILING PRICE

Find somewhere that's worth the time, effort and money. Savills can advise you about the top prices reached in the area and whether changes will add value.

"I think it's great that people can afford to live in these houses once again," he says. "I wanted to create something that was special, traditional and grand, to really celebrate everything Britain is famed for in architecture."

James knows what it takes to do a renovation on this scale. In 2000, he decided to buy Dowdeswell Court in Gloucestershire for £1.6 million, and then spent £2 million on a rolling restoration programme before selling it for more than £4.5 million in 2006.

"I've been doing this for many years," he says. "What's important is to be realistic about the timescale. In property development you want to restore as fast as possible in order to sell. In this instance, the property is actually my home, so it'll never be finished!"

Aynhoe Park has been remodelled and altered throughout its life, first by baroque master Thomas Archer in the 1700s and then by Regency genius Sir John Soane



BRIEFING
Aynhoe Park
Oxfordshire/Northamptonshire

This 17th century country house, embellished by Sir John Soane and built around a courtyard, is now a private family home. The park was laid out by Capability Brown.

