

Home Improve

Like Sue and Ian Smith, many of us dream of creating a country home where "you can walk through and feel the light, the space and the openness of it". The retired former Londoners achieved this by turning run-down barns near Salcombe, Devon, into their 590 sq metre Scandi-style home and holiday-let annex.

Barn transformations of this scale have just become easier. To increase rural housing, light-touch rules to convert agricultural buildings into homes were extended in April to structures almost twice as big as before. Instead of a maximum of 450 sq metres for up to three homes, permitted development (PD) rights in England now allow up to five homes totalling 865 sq metres (planningportal.co.uk).

BBH architects' design for the Smiths contrasted original beams and stonework with crisp white walls and acres of sleek aluminium-framed glazing (bbharchitects.co.uk). "It's extremely difficult to get land here on which you can get planning permission to build this sort of thing from scratch," says Sue, 59.

The site-finding app Land Insight has searched planning data countrywide for Home, to map almost 2,600 barns where planners have refused conversions. "These could be real opportunities under the new rules. We have property-developer customers who just look for failed applications," says Jonny Britton, the app's co-founder (landinsight.io/barns).

You can look for a barn on barnsetc.co.uk – created in 2003, when Rhona Marshall wanted to sell the Dumfries barn she and her husband had converted (and they indeed sold via the site) – or renovatealerts.com. Use Zoopla's keyword search, On the Market's farms section or the Land Insight app.

So where are the most promising hunting grounds? South Hams, the Smiths' county, tops the chart with the most refusals: 94, out of 735 barns with applications, while conversions are worth £290 per sq ft on average, according to Land Insight. It is followed by Cornwall (78 refusals) and Horsham, in West Sussex (77).

Yet consent is still not a given. Planners reject about 40% of "prior approval" applications for barns – twice the rate of other types of PD – and some councils, such as East Hertfordshire and Wiltshire, "can be particularly challenging to deal with", warns James Podesta, of the planning consultancy Rural Solutions.



THE BIG BARN THEORY

Getting permission for an agricultural conversion has just got easier. Here's how to make it work, says *Martina Lees*



Jonny Diamond, far left, with his family, at Manor Barn, Wiltshire. He bought the derelict buildings in 1998 and did most of the conversion work himself. It is now on sale for £1.75m (01672 620021, hamptons.co.uk)



You still need full planning consent for listed barns, those in conservation areas or national parks, and for changes such as rebuilding large parts, adding openings or increasing the roof height. Here's how you create a barnstorming conversion.

DON'T CREATE A HOUSE

The biggest mistake when it comes to barns is "trying to make them like a house. The house-ness should always be subservient to the barn-ness," says Thomas Croft, an architect known for his barn conversions – including his own home (thomascroft.com). "Try to make the main entrance through the big barn doors, so you go inside the barn before going inside the house."

Pam and Patrick Watts's grade II listed white barn in Kent had been poorly converted in the 1970s, with lots of two windows and small, dark rooms. "It pretended it was a farmhouse, when we wanted big open rustic spaces," says Pam, now retired. While their daughter, Aimee, 23, was still at school, they asked Croft to redo it. The 2013 renovation was extreme, Croft says. "We demolished everything right back to the primary structural timber frame and started again. Now, every morning, a kingfisher joins us almost in our bedroom, with a wall of sliding doors opening onto a pond full of tadpoles," Pam says. "We could never go back to enclosed space."

At the other extreme, a vast full-height living space can feel very uncossy, Croft adds. Contrasting big or tall spaces with small or low spaces "should be part of the architectural drama".

Church Hill Barn, a grade II listed former model farm on the border of Essex and Suffolk, is the size of a cathedral, yet its five bedrooms, and living and dining areas off the kitchen in the soaring central hall feel homely. David Nossiter Architects used oversized bespoke joinery and pod rooms – all made of plywood – to separate spaces, winning a Sunday Times British Homes Award last year (davidnossiter.com). "Having this much space is such a luxury. You shouldn't fill it; just enjoy it," says its owner, Jeremy Witt, 42, who lived in a caravan on site with his partner, Hannah Smith, 44, while they did much of the £500,000 build themselves. It is now for sale for £1.375m (themodernhouse.com).

You may think that with the building's shell in place you don't need an architect's help to fill it in. Yet to "maximise the opportunities" within the barn's limitations and your budget often takes more skill than designing a new home, says Dean Bove, co-founder of the free architectural matchmaking service architectsrepublic.com.

“A full-height space can feel very uncossy. Contrasting big, tall spaces with small, low spaces should be part of the drama”

"Use an architect who has converted barns before, and visit the barns," says Sandy Mitchell, founder of RedBook, which advises clients on the best team for their building project (redbookagency.com). "See how well – or not – natural light has been introduced, and judge how well the space has been divided up. It takes a really clever architect to produce a great barn conversion."

MAXIMISE OPENINGS

You don't have to use the entire barn. In Norfolk, Emily Erlam and Sean Perkins turned their grade II listed flint piggy into a three-bedroom home in 2015, but left the adjoining tile barn to convert later. "The single-storey house was enough for us to begin with, for our family with two boys," Erlam says. Their open-plan living area is in a new-build section linking the two buildings, with a multitude of glass doors inviting you out to planted courtyards on both sides.

"Our project was all about the garden. We live outside as much as inside," says Erlam, a landscape designer (erlamstudio.com). That sense of connection testifies to the skill of Niall Maxwell's design (ruralofficeforarchitecture.co.uk), as planners tend to keep the number of barn openings low.

They are less interested in restricting size. "It's better to aim for fewer but bigger windows," Croft says. "We did a barn near Canterbury that had only one new window, but it was 40 metres long." Velux's Longlight modular system can work well for this (from £1,700 for two skylights; velux.co.uk).

Light from above can be transformative. Conservation roof lights, which sit flush with the roof and have Victorian-style vertical bars, are discreet, while the Rooflight Company's Neo, with its frameless look, offers a modern alternative (from £780; therooflightcompany.co.uk). Glazed double-height gable ends, in the place of the former main entrance, offer gain planning consent, as they preserve the barn's open look.

"Whatever apertures there were, we replaced with glazing," says Jonny Diamond, 52, an artist, of the light-filled Manor Barn he created for his wife, Susi, 53, and their four children: India, 28, Ruby, 21, Jack, 17, and Blu, 8. The family lived in only two rooms for the first six years after Diamond snapped up the derelict farm buildings, near Marlborough, Wiltshire, in 1998 – doing most of the work himself.

Now a glass atrium connects the open-plan living space under the old barn's soaring trusses with the five bedrooms in what used to be cow sheds. Besides new conservation roof lights, Diamond also fitted knee-high linear windows at the bottom of the passage wall. "We have a lot of art and books, and we wanted a big, open space to display all of that," Diamond says. Now that their two eldest children have left home, they are selling up for £1.75m, with dreams of a smaller project (hamptons.co.uk).

ASSESS STRUCTURE

Because most barns were built cheaply as stores, not homes – except perhaps for cows – it is important to get a full structural survey (£1,200) by

a historic buildings specialist before you buy. Many have wood rot and lack foundations.

One of the main grounds for PD refusals is that barns are not structurally "sound". However, you can repair your barn as general maintenance before you apply, for example by fixing the roof, Podesta says.

Budget for surprises: only when you peel back the building will you know what you've got. Conversions cost from £150 per sq ft; pre-Victorian listed structures can be double that.

At Lynch Farm, in Shaftesbury, Wiltshire, the grade II listed threshing barn was held up by a single telegraph pole, but planners wanted to preserve its wonky shape. An award-winning conversion by Jeremy King Architects in 2015 glued a timber shell to the exterior of the building, like papier-mâché, locking the undulating form into place.

Obtain early quotes from utility suppliers for connecting the barn to mains power, water and drainage, which it likely lacks. This can cost thousands of pounds, sometimes making the project unviable.

And make sure you get an ecology survey early on (£1,000-£1,500). Bats and owls – common in barns – can hold up work for a year, as they can only be studied and moved in certain months.

RETAIN CHARACTER

Insulating a barn without losing character is a big challenge, says Alan Tierney, a historic buildings

consultant (pickettsconservation.co.uk). If the exterior is weatherboarded, you can strip the timber, insulate and re-clad. Otherwise, it's often easiest to insulate walls internally but make a feature of the roof structure, "because that's what makes the barn a barn".

Use natural materials such as lime and wood fibre – not vinyl paint or Portland cement that will trap moisture in the structure, causing damp, rot and mould. "Old buildings manage moisture by absorption and evaporation, rather than by keeping it out, like modern ones do," he adds.

"A lot of projects over-modernise," Tierney says. Some dodgy-looking repairs, made by farmers over the years, are unsafe and have to be fixed properly. "But if they work, try to keep them." At Manor House Stables, near Winchester, Hampshire, AR Design Studio kept the original horse troughs as sink basins, the old horse ties as towel rings and even nails in the walls as coat hooks (ardesignstudio.co.uk).

Don't turn your barn into a "plasterboard box", says Charlie Luxton, spokesperson for the Homebuilding & Renovating Show (homebuildingshow.co.uk). "Be honest about its industrial roots."

At Manor Farm, in Worcestershire, his architectural design firm shielded the bathroom with timber louvres, inspired by slats they found on site, and crafted floorboards on the upper gallery to fit out in random lengths across the double-height living space (charlieluxtondesign.com).

"Listen to the building," Luxton says. "Celebrate what's there; don't make it something that isn't."



Sue Smith's Salcombe conversion, left, includes a holiday let (coastandcountry.co.uk, ref Old Milking Shed). Church Hill Barn, Suffolk, above; Manor Farm Barn, Worcestershire, right

