

Battle of the bulge

What do you do when a 400-year-old wall wants to part company with the rest of your house? Art historian and homeowner **Jane Hill** describes the essential repairs that took place this spring at her historic London cottage. SPAB played a key role...

There is something inexpressibly touching and reassuring about a very old cottage, set in a landscape that has provided shelter to generations of ordinary folk. Imagine then, the consternation this spring, when my home in Highgate, London, the Shepherd's Cottage, developed a fault line, the upper storey of the gable wall demonstrating a firm inclination to travel east, and the chimney stack resolved upon going west.

Peering into the chimney breast revealed a parlous state, the walls (corrupted by aeons of sulphurous fires), were no longer keying into the outer skin. The huge "bulge", hereafter known as "The Battle of the Bulge", was shored up as a matter of urgency by scaffolding constantly adjusted to accommodate its horrifying contours. But this is running ahead. What unfolded was serendipitous in the truest sense of the word.

My first port of call was the SPAB's Technical Advice Line, receiving valuable information from



Shepherd's
Cottage viewed
from the garden

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The 400-year-old cottage in Highgate, north London, is entered via a discreet passageway. **Right:** The ominously bulging wall before repair work

conservation architect David John, followed by the pleasing continuity of a reintroduction to structural engineer Ed Morton of the Morton Partnership, the first expert on the scene, who was a paragon of pro-activity leading to the engagement of trailblazers Triskele Conservation Ltd, founded by structural engineer Conor Meehan, once a SPAB Scholar, now a Guardian steeped in SPAB lore, and one of the few firms specialising in lime building within the M25.

Shock notwithstanding, I embraced the opportunity to conserve a structure and the sanctuary it has provided for some 400 years. What ensued were fascinating, exhilarating days full of anticipation, incident and amusement, addressing what Meehan described as “the growing pains of structural puberty”.

Highgate is built on sand. Which unsung artisans raised this ponderous, four-storey building with no obvious brick bond? What tall tales might they have told? Armed with an enhanced knowledge of construction, Meehan and master bricklayer Paul Slack began unravelling, documenting and interpreting, drawing the wall, making frottage of the chimney pot decorations and accepting the untoward. Raking back the joints to make way for new lime pointing offered up hitherto unseen cracks that had been masked by the harmful cement repairs that had triggered the rigor mortis in what had previously been a living, breathing building.

And so the cottage, aided and abetted by the language of craft – stitching, weaving, knitting, cooking – became anthropomorphised, the wall a



Shepherd's Cottage



Left: Scaffolding in place, 'the battle of the bulge' begins. Below left: The huge bulge is shored up as a matter of urgency by scaffolding constantly adjusted to accommodate its horrifying contours. Below: Exposed inner leaf masonry



Shepherd's Cottage

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Peering into the chimney revealed a parlous state, the walls corrupted by aeons of sulphurous fires

torso with a musculature, ligaments and organs requiring transplants; bandaged in hessian it joined the tribe of Christo's environmental, monument-scaled sculptures.

Seeing the craftsmen in their crows' nest, eye-level with the tree tops, the sun warming their backs (but for a handful of days, lashed by rain and wind, on one of which they hosted the current SPAB Scholars and Fellows), Meehan and Slack a tag team, conducting and orchestrating in open air labour, allied to nature and savouring the tactility of their work, was gratifying. And, continuing the salty analogy, at times, we were all at sea; when the bricks were being cut a Sirocco descended, a positive pampero of red dust as if wafted by a giant beating a rug.

Highgate, historically speaking the parish of Hornsey, Middlesex, was populated by smithies, butchers and inns catering for the cattle drovers descending the old Roman road *en route* to Smithfield. Shepherd's Cottage is the only 17th-century survivor on the Highgate Bowl and relatively unusual in the vexed history of backlands vernacular where small-scale, incremental building developed organically and with considerable charm, though the area became classified as a slum in the 19th century and began to lose common ground, much of it now recorded only through art.

There are no deeds. Its Grade II status is part of a group listing and the cottage, now accessed through a Georgian covered passageway off the



Traditionally, chimney pots were hand-thrown by potters rather than brick or tile makers. Three newly made stamps were commissioned – for Triskele the triple spiral (an ancient Celtic symbol), an oak leaf representing Nottingham-born Paul Slack (pictured left) and a five-petaled flower signifying the Forget-Me-Not – underscored by an inscription.

Below: Paul Slack reinstates the chimney pots



high street, doesn't appear on the 2017 Ordnance Survey map, or the postcode finder, as a separate dwelling from the terraced shops, known as Feary's Row, built bang up against it, purportedly in 1794.

Yet the Bowl, an area of open land, hidden from gaze behind the Northern Heights Ridge along which this London village evolved, has influenced the landscape of the entire region and is of considerable townscape importance, separating as it does Highgate's historic hilltop settlement from the suburban development to the north. Evidence of orchards, hedge boundaries, vestiges of meadow plants (from when it was grazing land) remain and, since the nursery glasshouses fell into disrepair, there now buffers a wood.

Of the original yards (each one its own world, a hive of industry) and bisecting alleys leading into the Bowl, only Townsend Yard – first populated in the 1640s, the date from which

Shepherd's Cottage



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Above: Jane Hill, centre, with structural engineer Conor Meehan and master bricklayer Paul Slack. **Right:** An apparition appeared from hot lime scorch marks at the mixing station. It reminded Conor Meehan of Phil Spector. After a few artistic additions 'Phil Spector's Hot Lime Kitchen' was born

Shepherd's Cottage is said to derive – remains generally accessible and was perhaps the main entrance to the land behind where Sammy Andrews, nursery man, whose adage was “I don't hold with gaiety. You can learn everything you want from nature” grew giant pumpkins, upon which he carved biblical texts. It still has its Victorian folly (with apparent remnants of medieval stone fragments) beneath which I have unearthed archaeology – glints of blue and white stoneware and, excitingly, an 18th-century china pug thought to be from either the Bow or Chelsea porcelain factories. Fortunately the archives housed in the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institution (founded in 1839 and one of the few remaining independent libraries), provide a bulwark against collective loss of historical memory and the incongruous banality of subsequent building on the backlands replacing thatched cottages (deemed hovels), such as that of Jack Foster, the water seller who brought water to the door, mid-19th century, at a halfpenny a pail.

Though Shepherd's Cottage now stands alone, on its original footprint clay pantiles were ubiquitous on yard dwellings as were Long Tom

chimney pots. The current Museum of London display of the expanding city, post-Great Fire of 1666, demonstrates the difficulty of dating 17th- and 18th-century building materials (a standard Imperial-sized brick is given as 1670-1800) and we may never discover the actual date of the cottage's construction.

The cottage was lime built and, for its 21st-century incarnation, fresh mortar, an appropriately alchemical operation, was regularly made. Lime is a “sacrificial” mortar, working with it requires taking continual soundings. An early hot lime mix scorching of the ply bottom of the mix station presented an apparition (apparently American record producer Phil Spector) which sparked its use as an oven. It was discovered that the exothermic reaction (when water is added to lime and sand) releases enough energy to bake eggs – the shells returned to the mortar to contribute to the aggregate – potatoes in their jackets and parcelled fish, and so “Phil Spector's Hot Lime Pop-Up Kitchen” was born. “Not your ordinary builders,” as neighbours commented. Slack is also an orator and the Bowl presented him with a natural auditorium for recitations from DH Lawrence, Monty Python



Above: A meal from the Hot Lime Kitchen. It was discovered that the exothermic reaction (when water is added to lime and sand) releases enough energy to bake eggs, potatoes in their jackets and parcelled fish, and so Phil Spector's Hot Lime Pop Up Kitchen was born

Shepherd's Cottage

and John Cooper Clarke; there was a lot of laughter.

Many of the original bricks were saved and a decision made to execute the repaired area in English Bond, pargetting the flues as the levels went up. And so the rhythm and momentum of bricklaying was achieved, that magical coupling of bricks held in suspense and stability with the soft “fat” of lime mortar; each brick a cell producing a warmth and geometry in a tapestry of complicity with its predecessors.

The preparation was exemplary, as were the aesthetic choices, which sand would best achieve that pale, chalky colour for the mortar, estuary sand or North Devon? What level of aggregate should be returned, after first sieving, for desired texture? Nothing by rote. Red sharp sand, it transpired, produced the satisfactory match.

Every day became a form of rooftop Cluedo (the lead pipe, the rope-gallows scaffolding, the “caution” tape aka boarding up of fire places) and on a clear day legendary views towards the city and Essex. The way of working matched my personal inclinations. This flagship cottage, one room deep, un-extended, over four floors, and occupied by one family, in recent history, long enough not to be significantly altered, meant it has retained the accretions of ages: a slope in the basement where the sheep were kept, the warmth from their bodies heating the living spaces above, lead patches on splintered floorboards, distorting Crown glass, mismatched window stays, bookshelves made in the 1940s from Fyffes banana crates (salvaged from the antiquarian bookseller Fisher and Sperr) and a rope through brass rings (first seen in Eleanor Farjeon’s Hampstead cottage) to haul yourself up a staircase fit for mountain goats.

And so, the cottage revealed its secrets and acquired some more... the milliners’ wooden thread reels under the floorboards, were they lost or concealed? Why was no letter box ever cut into the front door? Might Ambrose the ironmonger have forged the rose-headed nails found in the mortar alongside the broken clay pipe stems?

Alas, one of the glorious chimney pots proved too fragile to be returned and will live out its days in the garden, supporting a variety of locally made flowerpots stamped with the marks of The Cole Pottery of White Hart Lane, Tottenham and G & A Tuck Ltd Potteries, Waltham Abbey, Essex Pottery. Fortunately its companion pot, with the same rouletting decoration and intriguing stamps of a crown alternating with a five-petalled flower, has been reinstated. The Chimney Pot Preservation and Protection Society has foundered and discovering the maker or meaning of our pots is proving elusive though a 17th-century fragment excavated by the Museum of London Archaeology has a similar crown, alternating with the letters RW, which I take to be



Left: The wall at Shepherd's Cottage after repairs, and (below) finished detail

Inset: Master bricklayer Paul Slack – ‘Not your ordinary builder’ as one neighbour commented...

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William III (Monarch 1689-1702).

Traditionally, chimney pots were hand thrown by potters rather than brick or tile makers. We needed a hand-thrown 32” pot in a London red ware and Mick Pinner of West Meon Pottery, maker of pots for Windsor Castle, Kensington Palace and local Hampshire cottages, rose magnificently to the challenge using Wealden Gault clay.

Living in the present demands intense flights of the imagination equal to those evoking the past or envisaging the future. This exercise was never about reproduction but producing something apposite, something beautiful, which reflected the collaborations and commemorated this significant episode. I commissioned three newly made stamps (two of them carved, one wrought), their impresses encircling the pot like bare feet in the sand; for Triskele the triple spiral (an ancient Celtic symbol representing the principles of continuity), an oak leaf personifying Nottinghamshire-born Paul Slack and a five-petalled flower signifying the forget-me-not, was underscored by an inscription in letter press, a

line from Rainer Maria Rilke’s *First Elegy*, meaningful to me. How fitting that a chimney pot, protector of the hearth, sounding post for owls, should become a paean to my home, its crowning glory...I invest it with these things.

Seeing this though from calamitous discovery to endgame has been a rare privilege, based upon an architecture of hope and a shared belief that the building was in the partnership too. Expectations were not only met but exceeded – a testament to the synergy that can be achieved between client and contractor. It is a triumphant result for a resilient old building, and a refreshing of the world. I doff my hat.

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