

Chinese whispers

This Cambridge house is used to flog Far Eastern antiques; its story is equally exotic

ASK THE EXPERTS

The restoration guru

Our family home of 50 years is in urgent need of repair — but, as my partner and I are both retired, funds are short. The house is listed and I've heard I may be entitled to a grant to help with the costs. Is this correct and, if so, how can we apply for it?

KL, Sleaford

Repairs to listed buildings can be expensive, though there are indeed grants and funds available. The amount is dependent on your circumstances and where you live, so check with your local authority to see if it can help. If it can't, English Heritage (www.english-heritage.org.uk) has a National Heritage Protection Plan that can offer grants; in this case, you must meet certain criteria, such as demonstrating a financial need and being unable to obtain funding elsewhere. Once you've been assessed, you will be notified of the support available.

Adam Bell is MD of Restoration Projects; restorationprojects.co.uk

The solicitor

Opposite my bungalow are four semi-detached houses. When the plots were conveyed before the First World War, the documents included a "no business use" stipulation, with a penalty of £20 a month if the rule were breached, payable to the plots' sellers. Breaches do now occur. If the stipulations are still enforceable, to whom are the payments now due?

Maurice Eden-Irving, Northumberland

The restrictive covenants must have been created when one large parcel of land was sold into plots. They are enforceable by the original owner of the large piece of land, who imposed the covenants, or by their successors in title. A successor must prove the benefit of the restrictive covenants passed to them on buying the land, and that they are entitled to enforce them. For the burden of a pre-1926 covenant to bind a subsequent owner, he must have had notice of the covenant.

As the covenants are 100 years old, it may be hard to enforce them, especially if the breach is long-standing and without previous objection. An application to the Lands Tribunal to render the covenants obsolete can be made by the owner(s) of the burdened land. If the restrictive covenants are still enforceable, then the relevant landowner (likely a neighbour of these semis) may have a right to claim the payments.

Donall Murphy is a partner at Russell-Cooke LLP; russell-cooke.co.uk

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BEYOND THE BROCHURE

KAREN ROBINSON



Do you like going shopping in other people's houses? I once went to an Ann Summers party at a terraced house in Clapham (it was a long time ago), and I still snigger at the memory of a C-list celebrity's wife struggling into a red rubber nurse's outfit while pleading with the rest of us not to take photos. Hadn't occurred to us, actually — no offence, love, but you're not that famous, and neither is your husband.

There are classier options on the retail-from-home scene. The arrival of an invitation to peruse an exclusive collection of vintage frocks or artisanal accessories over a glass of wine never fails to bring a warm glow of anticipation for what will inevitably be a serious exercise in wallet-loosening. My mother is always coming home laden with scented candles, jewellery or other unnecessary gewgaws, all because she feels it would be bad manners, having accepted hospitality, not to shell out for something.

Mind you, she's probably had a good dekko round the hostess's house, the opportunity for a close-quarters assessment of other people's homes being a seriously enjoyable part of the domestic retailing scene. Which means Deborah Twist's clients at the events she holds in her home on Trumpington Road, Cambridge, to sell the antiques she imports from China, will get a good look at what is currently the most expensive "city centre" house on the estate agent's books.

"City centre", in this agent's usage, doesn't mean you're cheek by jowl with the ancient colleges and throngs of students at the heart of this venerable seat of learning. Trumpington Road is a wide, busy boulevard heading out — via a large Waitrose — to the M11 and open countryside, but it is lined with some of the city's best schools.

Glimpsed from behind the high walls that gird its corner plot, the Old Mill House, in its carefully landscaped half-acre of garden, certainly invites speculation. When Deborah was growing up in Cambridge, she used to pass the house every day on her way to school, intrigued by the tantalising whiff of scandal it gave off. Back then, it was the home of Louis Stanley, who his stepdaughter later claimed was the illegitimate son of the Liberal prime minister Herbert Asquith and his lover Venetia Stanley.



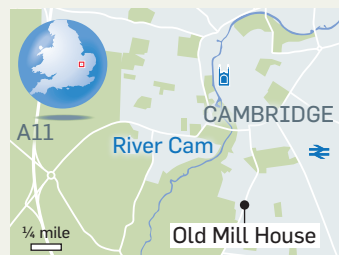
It's always been a party house, but now the revellers buy furniture



Old Mill House, Cambridge, £2.5m

What you get A six-bedroom, three-bathroom house with 5,144 sq ft of living space, set in half an acre of gardens

Who to call Strutt & Parker; 01223 459501, struttandparker.com



Whatever his antecedents, Louis, who was born in 1912, led an exciting life of heiress wives and Formula One motor racing in what "has always been a party house". The locals still tell stories of Grand Prix greats and Pink Floyd raving it up there. Sadly, he lived long enough to turn into a renowned "nasty man", Deborah relates, black-listed by shops and taxi firms for his extravagant rudeness.

Deborah and Peter, both 47, bought the house for £1.5m in 2008 when they moved back to Britain from Tokyo, where he worked in banking. They chose their new home with their daughter's education in mind: Ines is now 10, and happily ensconced in a smart prep school a cycle ride away. Old Mill House had been in the hands of a developer for three years, and the Twists are pleased with his basic work — plumbing, electrics and the kitchen conservatory.

Yet even with Deborah's builder dad on hand to help in both the house and the garden, Peter reckons they spent a stonking £300,000 on "finishing it off". The result is very des res. It has a central courtyard with ancient wisteria and all kinds of groovy lighting for evening festivities. (It's still a party house, apparently.)

They reduced the bedroom count from seven to six and upped the bathrooms to three. They have made the most of original features such as fireplaces, coving and shutters, as well as

an orangery and lovely glass-fronted still-room cupboards off the modern kitchen, which has a huge black Aga.

There's enough living space — 5,144 sq ft — to accommodate a gym, a yoga room, a laundry and a boot room. Peter wants to go back to working in London (he ran a brokerage firm there until the end of last year) and have a flat to stay in during the week; and with only one child, all those bedrooms, stylish though they are, are just not necessary.

At £2.5m, Old Mill House is at the top end of the soaring Cambridge market. Ten thousand new jobs are promised at the expanding Addenbrooke's Hospital, and the new AstraZeneca headquarters is expected to bring 1,600 well-paid science professionals to the town.

Deborah has gone for a modern luxe style in the downstairs rooms, with lots of dramatic grey and black — the perfect setting for the lacquered Chinese cabinets and tables that are the stock in trade of her business, Uma Interiors (uma-interiors.com).

The items blend in perfectly with the couple's own furniture, including a ravishing yellow and gold Fornasetti corner cupboard, and they even leave the price tags on, which can be distracting: I nearly succumbed to a pair of red and black lacquer 19th-century Sichuan stools for £380. A whole lot classier than a rubber nurse's outfit.

If you would like Karen to cast her critical eye over a property you are selling, email btb@sunday-times.co.uk