

Who lives here

Home Owners John and Maureen Semple and their dog Bonnie

Project Rear extension, new conservatory and overhaul of decoration

Timescales Four months

Location County Down

Budget £47,000

Timescales

Design Drawings	July
Planning & Tendering	August
Construction & Fit Out	Sept-Nov
Completion	1st week Dec

“We Downsized & Upgraded!”

This 19th Century gardener’s cottage does not only epitomise the traditions of a bygone era, but thanks to a sympathetic renovation, it’s now a home to John and Maureen Semple...

For some couples, retirement is a time to relax and enjoy the hard earned fruits of your working years. However, for Maureen and John Semple, it earmarked the start of something more adventurous – downsizing to a new location and embarking on a renovation project which would provide them with their perfect home!

In one week during July 2009, they sold their three storey, six bedroom home of 23 years and purchased a traditional styled stone cottage, which was built in 1868 as servant living quarters for the adjoining ‘big house’. What impressed the couple most about the cottage were its deep recessed windows, solid stone walls and rustic brick facade. The low ceilings and

beautiful walled garden added to the charm of the building, while the breathtaking views over Belfast Lough captured the prestige of the location. Although the size would be more manageable for them in retirement, they did have some concerns about the actual

living space, which was intimate and one third the size they were used to!

“We instantly fell in love with the cottage, but I think the icing on the cake was talking to architect, Paul McAlister,” explains Maureen. “Before the previous owners sold the property they had seriously considered adding an extension for more space – and had already asked Paul to draw up plans. He showed us how those drawings could be amended to reflect our needs without affecting the look or character of the property. His proposals included adding a traditional style conservatory as an informal living room, extending the current lounge and guest bedroom and updating the

shower room for the master bedroom. We also wanted the garage to be extended and enclosed so we could use it for storage.” The new extension was designed to mirror the existing wing of the property and provide a symmetrical profile at the rear, while the traditional style conservatory was designed to fit sympathetically between the two wings. This opened up the garden and made it accessible from each of the key living spaces on the ground floor. As a consequence, the bathroom window needed to be relocated; but this was carried out discreetly without reducing natural light to the bathroom or affecting its stunning view of Belfast Lough. Work started on the cottage almost

MAIN: The rear of the property presents perfect symmetry following a two storey extension to the left side

immediately because the drawings didn’t need to be drawn from scratch and the Planning Department had no issues with the plans proposed. The project was tendered by the architect to three contractors and Raymond Fegan from D7 Property Services was appointed. “As we had no real experience of renovation on this scale, we were very much reliant on the contractor to fulfil the architect’s specifications,” explained John. “Whilst Raymond’s quote was the cheapest, we have to say we weren’t entirely influenced by price. His references were excellent and included the renovation of a stone barn in Portadown, which we felt complemented our project well.”

With older properties, you aren’t always sure what you will encounter when you start to renovate them; so appointing an experienced architect and builder is half the battle. “On →



this project, the biggest surprise was the depth of foundations," says John. "The builders dug 12 foot before they actually reached hard ground to build the extension! No one could have foreseen that and unfortunately, the implication was a higher than budgeted bill for the first stage."

The property has a number of traditional features which Maureen and John were keen to retain, including an open log fire, timber sash windows, panelled internal doors, stone tiles and timber parquet flooring. "We didn't want to use uPVC or any modern

Above: The kitchen looks bigger and brighter following a fresh application of neutral tones on the walls.

finishes that would compromise the character of the building," says Maureen. "It was important that the conservatory was timber-framed and any new windows, doors and flooring complemented materials already existing in the cottage," she adds. "Luckily, we didn't need to address insulation, ventilation or draught-proofing because they had already been upgraded by the previous owners a few years ago, so that saved us a lot of time and money."

Although the internal layout of the cottage was attractive, the décor seemed to mask a lot of its natural beauty. So the couple decided to strip the interior of its primary colours and

apply a fresh neutral palette throughout the cottage to enhance light and space. The impact is most noticeable in the kitchen where the stone floor tiles and solid wood kitchen appear rejuvenated following the decorative overhaul – the walls were repainted, the wall tiles replaced and the curtains removed in favour of traditional style shutters, which are very in vogue at the minute. The stone floor was also repolished to enhance its natural beauty. Even Maureen's choice of accessories, such as the chandelier, candelabras and farmhouse chair, add a sense of nostalgia.

Maureen's attention to detail is evident →

Architect's Brief

- Add an extension to increase the size of the lounge and spare bedroom above
- Add fitted wardrobes to the guest bedroom;
- Renovate en suite in the master bedroom;
- Add a conservatory/sunroom as an informal 'living' space;
- Complete change of décor;
- Extend and enclose the garage for storage;
- Landscape the garden and plant out beds.

Right: The Master bedroom is a luxurious retreat and includes an improved shower room



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throughout the cottage, right down to curtains on windows and knobs on doors. "I love reading home magazines and take a lot of inspiration from them. However, the look I have gone for here blends old and new, with many ideas recycled from our old house because they fitted. For example, the Indian slate flooring in the conservatory and the exotic bird wallpaper in the guest bedroom were all copied across. In fact, the curtains hanging in the lounge and guest bedroom were actually taken from the old house and shortened to fit the new windows."

Above: The traditional timber conservatory sits elegantly in the centre of the cottage.
Above right: Simplicity is beauty itself and the bathroom does not disappoint in this regard. Lombardia FarFalla wallpaper by Nina Campbell around £40 per roll.

Moving house can be stressful, so thoughtful 'recycling' like this can help you achieve instant familiarity. Apart from using the move as an excuse to declutter 23 years of junk, Maureen and John reacquainted themselves with treasured possessions, such as John's traditional oak desk, which they won't forget being carried up the narrow staircase to the study; the Baby Grand Piano, which now takes pride of place in the newly extended lounge; and their Grandfather clock, which provides a sense of old fashioned elegance in the hallway. Even their much loved birch tree was



dug up and transferred to the new garden. The couple weren't entirely opposed to modern technology and had considered installing Underfloor Heating in the conservatory, until the architect explained the space wasn't big enough to make it cost-effective. They instead retained the traditional Rayburn stove (with incorporated boiler), and fitted radiators in the new space, much to Maureen's disappointment. Adequate heat distribution is a required stipulation by Building Control, so rather than not fit any radiators, Maureen decided to reduce some in size so they didn't dominate the rooms. This was done discreetly without compromising room comfort. Also the energy saving glass with self-cleaning coating in the conservatory helps maximise solar gain during the day, while the naturally low ceilings help retain heat. "We thought the conservatory would be an occasional room when we designed it, but it's actually the room we, ourselves, use most often," explains Maureen. "The natural light makes it perfect for reading - and because it's centrally located, we also have the best view of the garden, which visitors now instantly see when they walk through the front door!" Although the couple were lucky enough to have inherited the design drawings from the previous owners, it has been their own endeavours that have revived the cottage. The view from the front is certainly deceptive and does not allude to the bright, spacious living space that now welcomes you beyond. Rich sumptuous carpet flows from the entrance, invoking a sense of luxury as you enter each room. The once dark bathroom has been transformed into a romantic retreat with captivating butterfly wallpaper, traditional wood panelling and a Victorian free-standing bath, painted in a soft period blue, gracing a newly laid stone floor. The Master bedroom is now fairytale-like, with subtle creams, golds and pinks providing a soothing backdrop for a restful night's sleep,



while the improved shower room provides a modern luxury convenience. The guest bedroom has now doubled in size with newly fitted wardrobes from Starplan providing enhanced storage space. The room no longer feels cramped because of its low ceilings. In fact, they have become a positive feature of the room, in the same way as the cast iron fireplace and French doors, which now allow you to fully appreciate the views of Belfast Lough. The lounge below has also doubled in size as a result of the extension and enjoys a dual aspect, which makes it bright and airy. The general décor is classically styled, befitting a formal 'Sitting room' in a property of this period. All walls in the house are adorned with art and family portraits, while period-style accessories have been painstakingly sourced to add the finishing touches. Examples include internal door knobs, light fittings and lamps, the dragonfly door bell, slate nameplate and of course the many personal accessories which Maureen and John carried over from the old house. Raymond also spent a considerable amount of time sourcing a match for the Canadian oak flooring in the hallway, cutting it to size and machining new tongue and grooves into the boards so it matched the existing pre-finished boards. Outside, the Old English style garden transcends you in time, with the original

ARCHITECT'S COMMENT

"John and Maureen were keen to capture the character and charm of the old Mews house, and at the same time meet their own aspirations for living space. 'Attention to detail' were watchwords from the start because the property is located in a Conservation Area and had many period details which we knew would be given extra scrutiny by the Planning Department. We were fortunate to choose a builder who has a good eye for historical detail and was able to interpret the drawings and aspirations of the client in a thoughtful way."
Paul McAlister.



potting shed door still present in one corner of the garden. At the other end is a 'suntrap' patio, decked in dark timber with matching stained furniture and pots of blooms. A mature white Cherry Blossom tree hangs majestically over the garden, while newly planted shrubs and flowers define the old boundary wall and make a feature of the original water pump. Although the external facade of the cottage is traditional in appearance and all windows and doors are framed in authentic stone surrounds and quoins, the French doors have helped foster the garden as an extended 'living' space, which in many ways reflects a modern trend. From the lounge, you can walk directly toward the patio; from the guest bedroom, you can stand out over the garden and drink in the views of Belfast Lough; and from the kitchen you have convenient access for dining alfresco. The entire project was completed within four months and on budget thanks to a committed team. John and Maureen even got stuck in towards the end, pulling up the old carpets so they could get the decorative finishes completed before Christmas. "The last month was a bit hectic so we practically lived in the kitchen away from all the activity," remembers John. "On one day I recall 10 tradesmen working inside the house, tiling floors, fitting wardrobes, connecting sanitary ware and painting. It was quite something!" John and Maureen paid tribute to Raymond Fegan and his team at D7, whose quality of work was of the highest standard and who were very accommodating and helpful throughout the project.

Above: The main lounge has been extended at the rear, providing the space needed to accommodate the couple's Baby Grand Piano.
Above left: Guest bedroom - Summer Palace wallpaper from Laura Ashley, £13.50 per roll

Leaving the old house did signify a major life change for the couple simply because they had lived there so long and had many family memories. However, as Maureen points out, "it's surprising how quickly you can create a home when you have all your things around you." The couple have simply named their property "The Cottage" and placed a traditional slate name plate at the front door to commemorate this. ■

SourceBook

- Architect** Paul McAlister Architects, Co Armagh, (028) 3835 5111, www.pmcarchitects.com
 - Contractor** D7 Property Services, Banbridge, UK 07883 020065, www.d7-ps.com
 - Windows & Conservatory** Declan Stewart Joinery, Banbridge, (028) 4066 2113
 - Carpet** McCracken Flooring, Balloo Link, Bangor, (028) 9127 3057, www.mccrackenflooring.co.uk
 - Window Shutters** Fraser Nolan, www.frasernolan.co.uk
 - Floor Tiles** Ceramica, Bangor, (028) 9127 1227
 - Landscape Gardening** Richard Bell
 - Photography** Derek Robinson, www.derekrobinsonphotography.com
- Dialling Code: From ROI to UK replace '0' with 0044 and to NI replace (028) with 048; From NI to ROI replace (0) with 00353.*

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