



The happily-ever-after house

As the register office for Newbury for more than half a century, Peake House (right) was the scene of many marriage ceremonies. For one of the couples plighting their troth there, though, the building was to take on a much greater significance. Little did they know at the time, but the house was to have a happy ending of its own, becoming their dream home (above). Margaret McDonnell tells the story



Not many people can claim that hundreds of couples have tied the knot in their living room, or that their house was, for decades, a vital destination for thousands of West Berkshire residents.

Peake House closed its doors as a register office in November 2006 but, almost 10 years later, Clare and Jason Sheffield still regularly find people on their doorstep looking to register a newborn baby.

However, while many people in Newbury will have passed through its doors for a wedding or to register a birth or death, only a select few will have seen it since it was restored to its original use as a four-bedroom private home.

The detached property on Newtown Road started life as a private home called Winton House in 1897. It was bought by the then Berkshire County Council in 1949 and named after Harold Peake, who was chairman of the Berkshire County Council elementary

education sub-committee and the county libraries committee, and is best remembered as honorary curator of Newbury's museum, a position he held for nearly four decades.

The house is now owned by Clare Sheffield, a designer who runs S&T Design, her husband Jason and their two young daughters. Until they moved in four years ago, they lived just yards away from the property, never realising that one day it would become their dream home.

An award-winning designer, Clare has worked with Crabtree & Evelyn, Fortnum and Mason and is the creative brains behind the branding of the Sainsbury's Basics range. As she works from home, she needed a calm, light-filled space as her studio, but this also had to fit in with a family living area in a flexible and open-plan layout.

However, converting the property into an elegant, contemporary house was not without its challenges. Having spent decades as council offices, there was a

maze of rooms, suspended polystyrene ceilings, a thick vault door and woodchip wallpaper to contend with. Not to mention the fact that the original staircase had been mercilessly hacked in half and an ugly 1970s fire screen added across the top.

To achieve the results they wanted, the couple worked with friend and neighbour Kate Cooper, who handily also happened to be an award-winning architect with Absolute Architecture, specialising in residential properties. Kate understood the family's needs and how to look beyond the faded carpets and plasterboards to achieve the balance needed to retain the house's character while ensuring it worked for the Sheffields as a domestic family space. Indeed, it was Kate who had found the property for the couple. "I had a good feel of what they were looking for, so this house was actually only the third property we looked at. When the site

put up for sale by West Berkshire Council, various uses were suggested, including a GP or dentist surgery, a vet's practice or a school.

Plans were even submitted to convert it into two blocks of flats with no parking, but we knew it would be perfect as a family home as there was no need to extend; it just needed someone to see its potential and to make better use of the space."

Clare was immediately struck by the amount of natural light and the feeling of calm, and fell in love with the property. In fact, the couple were so keen to start work that they stopped off on the way home from hospital after the birth of baby Harriette (now aged three) just before they took possession of the keys to have one final look before they moved in.

The former façade with its mesh of creepers has been replaced with a fresh heritage grey exterior, and the room that hosted thousands of marriage ceremonies is now their living room.


The reception area and back office have been opened up and now form a dream kitchen with windows overlooking the child-friendly garden, which was previously the office car park.

Kate added: "There was a balance in that you have to decide how far to go to reinstate the original features and proportions, while understanding the flexible layouts and open plan way people live now."

The very room where Kate herself had been interviewed at Peake House, prior to her own marriage, was converted into a spacious child's bedroom, which had its fireplace reinstated, and the neighbouring family bathroom is unrecognisable from its former use as a staff kitchenette and toilets.

As Clare says: "It took tremendous skill from Kate. The back of the house is essentially a flat roof with an extension added on by the council in the 1980s and originally felt like a rabbit warren with toilets and interview rooms everywhere. She had to think about how to use this space and integrate it without it feeling like a bolt-on.

"Kate understood our brief perfectly and wasn't afraid to do things that might be considered unconventional, such as opening up a room off one of the bedrooms into the landing to make it expansive and full of light.

"It was so much more than just turning the building into a beautiful architectural space – Kate was interested in how we live and function." 



The kitchen before (right) and after (above) its redesign. Left, the landing before and after. Below, the master bedroom and (inset) the office as it was. Bottom, Kate (left) and Clare. "It took tremendous skill," says Clare



Sites to see
 ■ www.absolute-architecture.co.uk/
 ■ www.sandtdesign.co.uk