

METRO Property



BREAKING THE MOULD

Zandra Rhodes
shared her home
with a giant fungus

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A little house IN THE country

The shabby shack that's now a romantic retreat

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One hut, an island and buckets of good ideas

Oliver Stallwood discovers how an old apple store became a wonderful romantic retreat

MOST house hunters look at eight homes before they find the right one. But when Mouse Martin decided she wanted to make an investment in property, she just looked out the window.

At the house opposite, specifically, which was derelict at the time. The tiny building, on the River Churn in the Saxon village of South Cerney, seemed like an unlikely way to make money, which is probably why it remained unused for 20 years.

Originally built in 1750, the kooky building sat all on its own on tiny triangular Filly Island, and wasn't even a house until it was modernised in 1970.

It began life as a storage space for a cart that was used by a mill upstream, before serving as an apple store for the village orchard.

Later it became a play den for

children as well as sheltering a retired Morris Minor. It had been lived in until 1995 after which it fell into disrepair.

'I always saw it from my house and fell in love with it,' says Martin. 'I knew it was special for two reasons: its age, and the fact that it is not Grade II listed. Although I had to get planning permission, it meant I could renovate it to the

standard I wanted. Not only is it an island and situated in the heart of the quintessential Cotswold countryside, but it is a unique little house, that was once just a tiny shed.'

Martin paid a not inconsiderable £175,000 to buy and fix it up, but then the Cotswolds is never going to be cheap. National Housing Federation research last year found that the south-central England region was the second least affordable rural area, with houses costing 19 times the area's wages.

It is, however, one of England's



PHOTOS: UNIQUE HOME STAYS, UNIQUEHOMESTAYS.COM

Cupboard love: Mouse put the chic into shabby with her wonderful country kitchen



Homely: The airy, light lounge. Inset above: The fire-bucket lampshades

favourite tourist destinations, so Martin figured she could make money renting out the property that would give her a healthy return.

The house itself had cost just £40,000, but it was little more than a roof and four walls. The rest had gone towards renovating it – including a dry stone wall that cost £10,000.

Everything had to be re-modernised, with new plumbing and electrics throughout. Old joists and frame work that was taken out during the renovation was reused elsewhere in the house, and all materials were locally sourced. A new porch was built from reclaimed oak and the roof is old Cotswold tiles.

The reclamation theme continued indoors: the old larder door is now the bedroom door, the wonderful old ball-footed bath was found in a bush – it now sits resplendent in the luxurious bathroom – and the re-enamelled sinks came from the dump, as did the reupholstered sofa. Doors, originally from an old barn, have been cut down and used for the fronts of the kitchen doors, while an old front door is now a sliding one between the bedroom and bathroom.

'Everything found me,' says Martin, who refers to the look as 'shabby, vintage chic'. 'Some local people had a big barn full of things they didn't want. I didn't have a plan, so I went down there and had a look through and everything just came together.'

This compulsion to recycle has lent the house an almost DIY austerity air befitting of its mid-century vibe. This is a place you come to escape the trappings of modern life and to appreciate simplicity. What surprises



Idyllic: Mouse Martin, left, created her wonderful country retreat, from a dilapidated hut, below



is the lack of interior design gimmickry – this is honest materials, fine detailing and a stunning result. Hobbit village meets mid-century urban cool – and it works. The corrugated iron is a killer touch, riffing perfectly with the untreated scaffolding planks that make the kitchen worktop.

The ceiling lights are created from old fire buckets. The lamps have been made from old beams and some of the curtains are recycled from Hungarian grain sacks. Two French cafe chairs slide

under a kitchen table made from an old mangle.

In the end, the return for one of the Cotswold's most romantic getaways, with its own island and bridge for ultimate privacy, made it all worthwhile. It is now rented out on uniquehomestays.com for £745 for a long weekend or £995 for a week.

So, is the idea to make some money and sell it on to invest further? No way, says Martin. 'It's my pension plan – it's nice to know I have a steady income. Then when I'm 70 I'll probably go and live in it myself.'