

How to use new planning rules to do up a rural wreck

Savvy buyers are setting up home in spruced-up cowsheds and piggeries, says *Ruth Bloomfield*

The only hint to the agricultural former life of Carol and Peter Barefoot's home is a light fitting that has been built out of a converted milking machine.

Once an unprepossessing, postwar breeze-block building with an asbestos roof, where Carol's mother used to milk her herd of Jersey cows, the dairy is now a newly clad 2,400 sq ft energy-efficient property that will cut their bills and is entirely wheelchair accessible, which means it is future-proofed as the couple age. It is also far more comfortable and practical than their former digs, a grade II listed, early 18th-century home near Cirencester in the Cotswolds.

"It had something like 25 rooms, and we were spending £10,000 a year on heating oil," says Peter, a retired chartered surveyor.

But the couple, both 68, didn't want to leave their village community, and so the redundant building storing dusty tractors provided the answer.

They sold the manor house and spent more than £600,000 converting the former milking parlour, redesigned by Levitate



Peter and Carol Barefoot converted a former milking parlour
ADRIAN SHERRATT

architects.

They had a miserable time trying to secure planning permission, despite the ugliness of the dairy they were proposing to convert. "It took us about five years," says Peter. "Despite that, the whole exercise was very, very painful," he says. "It took £50,000-worth of surveys and fees to achieve planning consent."

The government has been actively encouraging the repurposing of unloved old farm buildings as rural housing for several years, and

the pandemic has given it an extra kick-start.

In 2013 the government began encouraging agricultural-to-residential conversions with a series of incremental, and convoluted, changes to permitted development rights. In many cases the use of agricultural buildings can now be changed automatically without going through the planning system, although consent will still be needed for changes to the building.

The outflow of urbanites looking for dream country



homes have realised there are simply not enough rural bolt holes to go around. If they really want one they might have to build it themselves.

The result is that even the tattiest and most ramshackle of old barns — not to mention stables, piggeries, workshops and outbuildings — have become unlikely property prizes.

“When something comes up we get so much interest — they go absolutely nuts and they achieve big premiums,” says Philip Hoare, head of rural agency in central England for Savills.

Last spring, for example, Hoare oversaw the sale of Fatlands Farm, just north of Oxford. The 160-acre holding was split into five lots including one consisting of an old threshing barn, cow byre, and other outbuildings, on around ten acres.

“We had 125 viewings in three weeks, got 37 bids, and it sold for 27 per cent above the guide price,” he says. “They see the advantage of farm buildings as offering them the flexibility to create what they want rather than wait for it to come on to the market.

“There are a lot of people who are looking for a *Grand Designs* project, and they see them as a big wide open space, a completely blank canvas,” Hoare says. “Old barns and the like really capture people’s imaginations.”

Farmers, meanwhile, are fully aware of the value of their old, empty buildings and

THE PRICE OF A NEW BARN CONVERSION

Across the home counties a new build or recently refurbished barn conversion will sell for between £400 and £600 per sq ft on average. Elsewhere, prices range from about £250-£350 per sq ft.

Wiltshire £415 per sq ft
North £298 per sq ft
Devon £258 per sq ft
Buckinghamshire £349 per sq ft
Northamptonshire £288 per sq ft
Suffolk £252 per sq ft
Norfolk £272 per sq ft

Hampshire £616 per sq ft
Kent £321 per sq ft
Yorkshire £363 per sq ft
Berkshire £498 per sq ft
Oxfordshire £557 per sq ft

The average cost of carrying out a barn conversion is £1,350 per sq m — although this will vary depending on the specification of the build and the state of the building. Underpinning costs around £3,500 to £3,800 per sq m, repointing stone is £25 to £30 per sq m.

Source: Knight Frank

are under increasing pressure to make the most of their properties. From this year the Basic Payment Scheme, their main source of government grant funding, is being reduced.

“A lot of them will really feel the squeeze,” says Andrew Chandler, a partner at Carter Jonas and head of its farms and estate sales department in the southeast. “If you have a knackered barn with permission to convert, and five acres, it is a very hot property.”

Those with the funds and the will could convert their buildings themselves. But the profits from selling off a barn or two can also be substantial.

Price varies by location, of course, and buildings are worth substantially more if planning permission is already in place and if land is being

sold along with the barn.

Slightly counterintuitively, however, while its setting and views need to be idyllic, the barn itself needn’t be a thing of beauty to sell well.

“There are two markets. Some people only want the quintessential Cotswold stone barn with the tiled roof,” Clive Hopkins, head of farms and estates at Knight Frank, says. “They are buying the character and the footprint. At the other end of the scale, you get people who want to create a contemporary feature, which planners do enjoy because they don’t want to fill the countryside with neo-Georgian houses.”

Hoare estimates that in his patch, South Northamptonshire, redundant farm buildings sell at between £110 and £140 per sq ft, which works out at around £250,000





for a 2,000 sq ft space.

In the Cotswolds Hopkins says a traditional barn with planning permission in place and an acre or two would cost “north of £1 million”.

Then there is the cost of the build. This will clearly depend

on the size and specification of the project, but as a rule of thumb Chandler says buyers should budget around £250 per sq ft. Despite this, he thinks a conversion project can be a decent investment, since finished projects are

worth around £450 per sq ft.

“Because of the pandemic, the demand for rural properties is flying, and the self-build market is also brilliant,” he says. “People are no longer scared of a project.” ■

