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SEPTEMBER 19, 2012

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Industrial Arts-and-Crafts

Feeringbury Barn, Essex

The home of Ben Coode-Adams and Freddie Robins

The recent conversion of a magnificent Tudor barn with creatively recycled furnishings confounds all expectations. John Goodall reports

Photographs by Will Pryce







Fig 1 previous pages: Looking down the length of the barn from the kitchen space. To the left is the porch and, in the distance, are the bedrooms separated from the main living space by two relocated silos.
 ← *Fig 2 left: One of the bedrooms at the end of the barn.* → *Fig 3 right: A detail of the kitchen drawers, which are made from offcuts of wood. The handles are Champagne corks*



ESSEX is a county celebrated for its great timber-framed barns, architectural testimony to the agricultural prosperity of the county. Perhaps the most familiar is the medieval group at Cressing Temple, which has become a popular visitor attraction. Yet many historic agricultural buildings in the area suffered an unhappy 20th century. In this respect, the important Tudor barn at Feeringbury is typical of its peers. What lends its story a happy twist is the recent conversion of the building into a modern home. This has been shaped, moreover, to an unusual degree by the interests, enthusiasms and hands of its owners.

Little is known about the history of the barn at Feeringbury, which stands in open countryside north-west of Feering village. It is thought to have been constructed as part of improvements to the manor in the late 16th century, possibly by a member of the Heygate family. As yet, however, no tree-ring dating of the timbers has been done to confirm or disprove this. Its subsequent life as an operating agricultural building is almost completely obscure. Even the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments overlooked the barn in its survey of the village in 1922.

The building takes the form of a single, long range with a steeply pitched roof rising

from relatively low sidewalls. As originally completed, the barn was probably thatched, and its walls would have been faced with boards. Internally, the massive structure of the roof is supported by two lines of wooden posts. In the manner of church arcades, these divide the space lengthwise into a central volume flanked by aisles. Historically, the aisles were partitioned up in places to create storage areas, an arrangement preserved to the present (*Fig 1*).

Centrally placed within each long wall of the building, and facing each other across the interior, are the two entrances to the barn. The larger of these—now the front door (*Fig 5*)—was set in its own cross gable to create a porch to one side. Aligning the entrances across the middle of the building made it possible to drive haywains straight through the barn without having to turn them round. The area between the entrances would also have been used as a winnowing space: by turning over the grain here, the draught would separate the chaff from the wheat.

Over the course of the 20th century, agricultural changes made the barn an anachronism. The building began to be put to new uses and intrusive changes were made to the interior. These included the installation of heavy machinery and the erection within the barn of eight concrete silos for grain and pulses. At the same time,

the barn roof was replaced with corrugated, bitumised felt and its setting was further transformed. The farmyard, which had already been adapted in about 1830, was concreted over and new ancillary buildings were erected around it. In the process, another timber-framed farm building was demolished and the present barn curtailed. Four metal silos for wheat were also placed immediately beside the barn porch.

In 2007, Ben Coode-Adams and Freddie Robins, who had lived for many years in London, decided that they wanted to move to the country and to a larger house. The barn formed part of the farm owned by Mr Coode-Adams's parents and it seemed an obvious contender for conversion. Freddie Robins teaches at the Royal College of Art and has a successful international career as an artist working, in particular, with knitted fabrics. Her husband is also an artist and decided not only to project manage the conversion, but also to do much of the building work himself.

Their selection of architect—Anthony Hudson from Hudson Architects—was done by looking through published examples of other converted barns, and the brief was relatively simple: the creation of a family home for themselves and their daughter with studio and workshop space. Attached to this brief were two complications introduced by the planning and conservation officers overseeing the project. They directed that the deep roof of the barn had to be preserved and could not be cut through with windows. In addition, it was >

→ *Fig 4 facing page: The workshop and studio space. The upper part of the wall separating it from the living area is glazed so the view along the roof remains open*





↑ Fig 5 top: The silo beside the porch will be converted into a guest room. ↑ Fig 6 above: The rear of the barn with its unbroken roof

stipulated that the grand spatial effects of the interior were to be preserved.

These demands initially threatened to make the whole conversion proposal impossible, but, in the end, they proved to be the grit that made the pearl. Hudson Architects devised an ingenious method for natural lighting that was invisible from without. Large translucent panels were laid over the rafters and then concealed by sheets of steel latticed with punched holes. Because of the angle of the roof, the upturned rims of the perforations conceal the holes from the ground (Fig 6). From above, however, the openings let in large amounts of light. The result is a building that looks from the exterior as if it had retained its corrugated roof yet, inside, it is bathed in diffuse light.

The restrictions on internal divisions demanded that the conversion be boldly conceived. A single timber-framed partition wall divides the long interior into two roughly equal sections, but to preserve the main vista along the roof, the upper sections of this wall have not been solidly filled in. Built up on one side of the wall are large book stacks

that face onto the workshop and studio area in one half of the barn (Fig 4). The other half of the building is the house. It comprises an open living space sandwiched between the kitchen (built against the wall) and bedrooms (Fig 2) on two levels at the far end of the barn. Two of the concrete silos have been retained and moved to serve these rooms: one encases a spiral stair up to the first floor, the other two bathrooms. Beneath the poured-concrete floor is a heating system served by a woodchip boiler.

The silos are perhaps the most striking example of a delight in recycling that is everywhere apparent within the building. In the kitchen, the units are faced with off-cut boards and possess Champagne-cork handles (Fig 3); the bedroom cupboards are made of packing cases; and new metal braces have been fabricated from scrap and farmyard junk—further recycling is planned. Conveniently separated from the barn, one of the wheat silos next to the main entrance is to be converted into a guest bedroom. All this work was conceived by Mr Coode-Adams, and much of it was done with his

own hands. The aesthetic choices were all worked out in discussion with his wife.

Recycling material has certainly saved money and makes the building more environmentally friendly, but to represent it in those terms alone would be to reduce it. It also expresses an interest otherwise reflected in the art that fills the building: the delight of the owners in materials of all kinds. The overall result is a building that might accurately be described as a piece of Industrial Arts-and-Crafts. By including recycled materials, the visual disjunction between new and old fabric is effectively overwhelmed. Damaged timbers do not need to be patched up and rugged or imperfect finishes do not need to be covered over; the historic barn as a working building can shine through the modern family home and the whole become a symphony of materials and textures. William Morris would have decried the agricultural changes that spoil this magnificent building and left it bereft of purpose, but, surely, he would have been impressed by the manner and spirit in which it has been brought back to life. ↪