



A 16th-century chimney stack once central to the house was left at one end after a fire. How should the building be restored?



Alison Edwards, assistant listed buildings caseworker at the Council for British Archaeology, presents examples from the council's files

62. Spring Grange, Wood End, Hertfordshire



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Whether to reconstruct historic buildings can be a complex question. In some cases, sensitively restoring a lost staircase in its original location or rebuilding partition walls which have been removed can be positive; these can help us to understand how buildings were designed and used by former inhabitants. However, any reconstruction must avoid pastiche, which imagines an ideal building from that historic period and alters the existing material to fit with our speculative modern idea of how it "should" have been. When buildings have layers upon layers of historic alterations made through generations of use, stripping out anything which isn't characteristic of the date of its earliest construction is rather like an archaeological dig bulldozing straight through modern and medieval layers to get straight to the Iron Age. We lose clues about the changing lifestyles and tastes of people through time.

Sometimes, however, reconstructing parts of a historic building is not just desirable, but necessary to ensure its survival, especially after neglect or

damage. At Spring Grange, in east Hertfordshire, there is a grade 2 listed timber-framed farmhouse with medieval origins, which is now dilapidated and much in need of conservation. A fire did considerable damage in 1947, destroying the eastern end of what was a three-bay house adapted from a medieval hall house. In response, an external wall was erected to make the remaining two bays weatherproof, but in the process, a central inglenook fireplace was walled in and original internal doorways to the eastern bay were blocked up. The house was left with an asymmetric feel, with its large 16th-century stack of four chimneys left awkwardly poised at one end, not centrally where it would heat the whole house. In recent years, the house has been left vacant, and the historic structure is at risk of complete disintegration without investment.

A proposal has been submitted to restore the historic fabric and reconstruct the lost eastern bay on its original foundations, as well as adding a single-storey modern extension to the rear. The Council for British

Archaeology is delighted to see that the owner is investing in restoring and repairing the historic fabric, making the building suitable for domestic use for another few hundred years!

Our main question was how the eastern bay should be designed to show that it is a new chapter in the house's history. Restoring the building's original proportions will return an aesthetic balance, but it is impossible to fully recreate what was there before, especially when evidence for the design of the original bay lost in the 1940s is sparse. Once the eastern bay has been roofed with reclaimed clay tiles and the walls have the locally characteristic weatherboarding applied, it will become difficult to tell externally where the restored historic house ends and the new build begins. We have recommended that a differentiation is made in the design of the eastern extension so that the house's story of survival after fire is still a legible part of its future.

For more details of this case visit <https://casework.jcnas.org.uk/app/175262> ■