

# The Colonial mansion that Dominic Baldwin rebuilt

(much to the annoyance of his wife)



Main picture - Moss Wood, the restored Colonial mansion in Toff Inset - Dominic and his wife Kate, who have agreed to disagree

Moss Wood is not your average mansion property even in Seven Sisters Lane, Toff - the delivery man's idea of hell where massive electronic gates opening up onto winding drives leading to hots of frim substance are commonplace. The colonial style, balconied facade for one would at first sight seem better suited to the set of "Gone With The Wind" - and there are similarities to that epic drama that have been played out at Moss Wood in recent years. It is then a one off.

And so for that matter is the man of the house, Dominic Baldwin whose love affair with the building, which started even before he bought it, knows no bounds.

It was fatal attraction then at first sight when the boss of leading financial advisers Xenium spotted Moss Wood up for auction in a local estate agent Mellor Braggins' window.

If it can be said that a prospective buyer of a

property can become a stalker then that's what happened to Dominic Baldwin. How else can you explain the actions of a man who diverted his morning run to Seven Sisters Lane where he would take a breather by sitting on the wall of Moss Wood - or climbing over and sitting on the lawn - simply to stare at the object of his infatuation? And that was before the auction.

He had to have it but the other love of his life his then fiancée now wife and mother of his child, and soon to be mother of another - corporate lawyer Kate did not share his passion for the then old and sadly neglected pile set in acres of overgrown and unloved land.

And she still doesn't.

On the evening prior to the auction, she telephoned him to say one thing: "Don't do it!" But his ardour was too strong.

Nothing but nothing was going to stop him



going to the auction.

Not the fact that he has never been to one (and had to take a friend with him to explain what he needed to do). Nor was he fazed by the fact that he turned up in his work

overalls in a clipped out Citron and found himself amongst an array of potential bidders who looked at least as if he himself got rough, they wouldn't be the ones to get going.

Yet the competition for Moss Wood could have been greater with the turn out down because the auction took place two to three weeks after September 11.

Finally, it came down to Dominic and one charming lady who turned out to be his new next door neighbour and readily forgave him for pipping her at the property post.

The bid was with his rival at £450,000, then with a nod of his head it was Dominic's at £500,000 with his friend of 20 years telling him he had never seen him look as white as a sheet before.

The most surprising thing of all about his successful trip to the auction was that he didn't have enough money in the bank at the time to afford the 10% deposit required on the £500,000 price tag - even though he was forced to write a cheque out for £50,000 at the time.

"I had to call my bank and tell them I had just written a cheque out for £50,000 when I had only got £5,000 in at the time," he recalls. "Then I asked them not to bounce it and told them I would work out what to do." Naturally there would be no further story to tell if the banks had been in the same state of mind as they are today.

However Dominic lived up to his word, sold his own house his St. John's Avenue in Knutsford in three days and had all the necessary finance in place before the bank had any time or need to put the squeeze on him.

But there again the bank was aware that



Dominic already had a successful track record in property - he had previously been involved in building 18 houses in the Lakes, three barn conversions and the refurbishment of Flats in London.

But what had he bought against the wishes of his bride to be?

Moss Wood was built in 1934 for an oddball Canadian bachelor who had been a tea planter in East Africa. That probably accounts for the property being "upside down" in that the main living space was upstairs while the bottom floor was originally for servants.

Know one knows who the builder was but the initials WMB are carved into the wall above where the wood burner stood.

No one knows what happened to the Canadian but a local couple - Belle and Eric - subsequently bought it and made it their home for 50 years.

Eric died when he was 80 but Belle lived on alone in the house for a further 16 years, finally leaving it to go to a home at the age of 96. The story goes that as she was driven out, she never even looked back at her home and died some two weeks later.

Like many houses inhabited by old people living on their own, Moss Wood had fallen into sad neglect - the state in which Dominic first found it. But, despite this, Dominic could see the potential for as a wonderful home.

But not without rather a large amount of money being lavished on it. And while Dominic Baldwin can be described as a wealthy man, he falls far short of being described as rich beyond the dreams of avarice.

He also had other things on his mind at the time - the man being his impending wedding, in itself a major source of

expenditure.

So Dominic and his new bride duly enjoyed a farfarte wedding at Toth Church, followed by a spectacular reception in a marquee in the grounds of Moss Wood.

Then a still reluctant Kate moved into the house where she was forced to endure the first three years without any real heating and certainly no double glazing.

Nor was it just the heating that obviously left Kate longing for a nice little place in Knutsford. For Moss Wood - her new home - took on most of the aspects of a building site for the next few years.

Teams of Polish plumbers, joiners and electricians came and went over a period of 14 months either living in Moss Wood itself, temporary accommodation in the garden or in a house that Dominic rented for them.

And, when he was not putting in long hours at work dispensing high level financial advice to his growing affluent client list, Dominic was up at the crack of dawn and working very late into the evening in his role of developer/builder.

A perfectionist - "hang on, this is half an inch out" - there was no real plan except in Dominic's head and this changed constantly.

Where he had got the workmen to knock a hole for a new window in the morning, he gave the orders to block it up again that night because it "wasn't quite right". Nor did they just build a wall, they laid a few rows of bricks for Dominic to get the feel of whether it would look right there - and be completed - or not, and get pulled down.

Obviously such things as building regulations proved to be a pain at times - but Dominic isn't the type of man to be easily deterred by bureaucracy.

When officials put their foot down to his requirements for open plan on the ground floor - they wanted doors in the middle - Dominic, like Baldwin in Black Adder,



The new interiors, including top - the massive kitchen, the focal point of the house Above - the former living area as it was before restoration



came up with a cunning plan. The underlying issue apparently was the risk of fire. Dominic got round this by installing a full sprinkler system, so sprinkler heads are dotted round the house, the only real risk being a potential for flooding.

Moss Wood has been transformed – the only thing that didn't happen was to knock down the outside walls.

The interior now is straight out of a glossy magazine spread – a huge kitchen dominating the ground floor, a panoramic window overlooking the private lake that was once a waterlogged field.

And there is no more shivering inside Moss Wood – the geothermal heating system extracts heat from the ground and circulates it around the house. It is so efficient that for every 10p of electricity, it gives 50p of energy back.

The system also offers the added benefit of cleaning the air, so Kate – who is an asthmatic – can keep the windows closed and the offending pollen out.

In all, Dominic and Kate have spent in the region of £250,000 to bring Moss Wood up to the condition it is in today. And not a penny has been wasted thanks to the hands-on approach enjoyed by Dominic. Quoted between £80,000 and £90,000 to rebuild the balcony by a firm, Dominic effectively did it himself by hand, using old methods for less than a quarter of the price.

"When you've got oodles and oodles of

money it doesn't matter, but we had a limited budget," says Dominic. And while he was striving for perfection inside the house, Dominic hadn't forgotten the seven acres of overgrown and neglected land that surrounded it. (see separate article).

Moss Wood today stands as living testimony to one man's passion and one woman's enduring tolerance. After all Kate Baldwin still doesn't like the dream home her husband created for her.

Yet she should have recognised his calling for "doing things up" from the time she first met him. After all their two dates involved a visit to a building site and an old mill he was doing up.

Kate, however, has never made a secret of her preference to live in a town house in Knutsford with a small garden rather than Moss Wood – a situation that has caused more than its fair share of disagreements over the years. Whilst there may have been a few cross words, the couple have agreed to disagree on the subject.

Moss Wood then may have been the scene of unresolved equities such as those that took place in the colonial plantation house in "Come With The Wind". Yet, the relationship of Dominic and Kate remains sufficiently strong that there is little or no chance that Dominic will ever use the final rebar of Rishi Butler. "Frankly my dear, I don't give a dam..."



## Seven acres of neglected garden?

### No problem for Peter and Dominic

faced with an overgrown and sadly neglected garden, most house purchasers either get their sleeves rolled up or – if they don't know where to start – call in someone who does.

When the wilderness outside covers seven acres including impenetrable woodland and glades, paved paths that have disappeared under vegetation and a waterlogged field, you do both.

As a wealth management specialist, Dominic Baldwin is used to putting together teams of topflight experts to sort out his client's needs, so when it came to his grounds, naturally he went to the best.

And he found it in Peter Lofthouse.

A big man with rosy cheeks whose road plate size hands have rarely been away from a spade since he was at school, Peter is your archetypal head gardener, the kind of man you just know will get it sorted.

The day he started work at Moss Wood, Dominic Baldwin recalls he had only just turned his back on Peter and half the shrubbery outside had gone. He didn't hang about and that's what Dominic likes.

But perfectionist as he is, Dominic Baldwin hadn't just hired any gardener – he had picked a craftsman from the top team of just 12 that tends Tatton Park, the main responsible for visitor attractions such as the Rose Garden and Charlotte's Garden. At this year's Royal Horticultural Show at Tatton, Peter helped carry off the Gold Medal for the "Cave Garden" that sheltered rotating "hermits" who had been hired for the occasion.

Gardening has always been Peter's life since his farmer father refused to let him follow in his footsteps. Living all his life in an estate cottage in Chelwood – the same cottage in which his great grandfather lived – he has known little else.

On leaving school, he went straight to work as an apprentice gardener and was forced to endure backbreaking work during the first six months in all weathers without respite. At the end of that, the next time it rained, the elderly gardener for whom he worked suggested they go into his hut for a cup of tea to escape the downpour – and Peter knew he had passed the induction test.

And what does he do in his spare time? He can be found in his own garden growing gooseberries. Gooseberry growing for those who don't know is very big in Cheshire with numerous, highly competitive shows. And Peter Lofthouse's gooseberries are well known, having carried off many of the top prizes over the years.

The heaviest gooseberry he has produced to date – and winning is all down to weight – was bursting out of its hairy skin at 34.63 pennyweight, when the world record is just 39.19.

After seven years at Moss Wood, Peter Lofthouse is not just the head gardener, he's a friend of the family having been invited to Dominic and Kate's wedding and being known to be partial to Kate's home made cakes. Whereas caring for the grounds of Moss Wood is akin to painting the Forth Bridge – you are never finished – it is getting there.

You can now stroll along the crazy paving paths – the original ones had to be dug up and 40 tons of hardcore imported before they went down again – and enjoy the Asa glade in the woods or lock over the lake where the waterlogged field once was. But it remains a job that Dominic and Peter discuss in detail



Above - Peter Lofthouse in the Asa glade. Main picture - the waterlogged field that has been converted into the lake

at each stage before mainly Peter gets his way and Dominic and other part times end up doing the labouring tasks.

For although Dominic Baldwin is the boss, he is first and foremost a team builder, and each member of that team is given his or her head in their respective fields of expertise.

"Whether it is at Moss Wood or Xanthum, my job is to bring together the expertise to make it work – and Peter makes it work here", insists Dominic.

And when it comes to gardening, Dominic Baldwin readily admits that experience on his previous postage stamp sized garden in Knutsford isn't exactly what is required at Moss Wood.

Nor is he looking for any form of instant gratification. He is just happy that the new hedge Peter has planted will be two meters high when he is 50 – some eight years away.

The ongoing results are what make Dominic and Kate Baldwin happy – currently a vast, lamed equine, where the children of friends can enjoy adventures that most of their peers will never experience in our concerned society, where you'll find almost all other things a duck called Billy who tried to climb on my knee... but that's another story.

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