

# Butlers in boiler suits

At the heart of every successful restoration is a team of knowledgeable craftsmen who can breathe new life into a building without diminishing its spirit.

Clive Aslet looks at some of the best and most established firms

**W**HATEVER the divided state of society, there's one thing that unites it: everyone has a story about builders. Even the Egyptian pharaohs had their problems over the pyramids—strikes in the 20th Dynasty—and client-builder relations have been a frequent source of anxiety ever since.

This doesn't only reflect the size of the job—quite small works can cast a disproportionate blight over a family's life when they go wrong—but, generally, the bigger the job, the more hair-raising it can be; the complexities introduce a greater potential for error and the householder is likely to have more money at stake. This is particularly the case with work on historic properties, whose challenges may not be apparent on the surface.

What is an owner to do? One client, who has experience in both the commercial and domestic sectors, advises

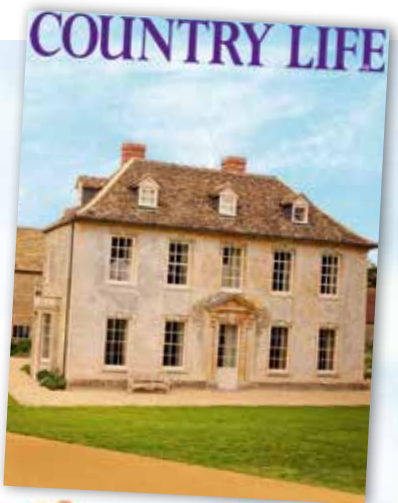
‘Even the Egyptian pharaohs had problems over the pyramids,’

against cutting corners. ‘If you want a quality job done, you're better off getting a recognised builder. On a major house, there's quite a danger that a small builder will go bust on you and that is the ultimate nightmare. You may pay 10% or 20% more on the tender given by an established firm, but you'll get it back in the end.’

For a major extension and repair to his own country house in Dorset, this client chose Mouldings of Salisbury, a family firm begun in 1908. Tim Moulding, great-grandson of the firm's founder, now owns and



*Above:* Traditional craft skills exist alongside state-of-the-art machinery in Symm's workshop. *Right:* Before and after: R. Moulding & Co working on Shanks House—a project that won a Georgian Group restoration award in 2015





runs it with his uncle, Bill Moulding. 'I live and breathe building,' he tells me. 'Country-house work relies on good tradesmen and the control of them. We employ a staff of more than one hundred, which is large in relation to our turnover. Whatever the job, I see it through personally until the client is completely happy, perhaps several years later.'

R. Moulding & Co occupies a place on the proud list of long-established builders whose craftsmanship and dependability have done so much to help the condition of Britain's country houses—and the nerves, and perhaps wallets, of many of their owners. They include Durtnells of Brasted, Kent, not only Britain's oldest builders, established in 1591, but still in the same family.

Symm of Oxford isn't quite as old, but could nevertheless celebrate its bicentenary last year. Taveners of Hampstead, in London, was founded in 1846. This firm, one of the few in the capital still to have a builders' yard, is, like Durtnells, still in family hands, although not all Taveners went into the business—one of the founder Charles Tavener's great-great-grandsons was the composer Sir John Tavener, who died in 2013.

One of Taveners' fans is Tom Croft of Tom Croft Architects. 'To the client, they almost become one of the family,' he says. 'It's like having butlers in boiler suits. They're completely trustworthy and you know they'll be there in 10, 20 or 30 years' time. A normal builder wants to get bigger and bigger, but a family builder is driven by other priorities, not simply maximising profits with a view to selling on.' Mr Croft believes that a good joinery shop is key to the finish of the end result.

His enthusiasm for such firms is echoed by Hugh Petter of ADAM Architecture in Winchester: 'Most of the builders I work with tend to be traditional ones, employing a direct force of skilled workmen. They train young craftsmen through apprenticeships, which shows a commitment to the future.'

He finds that the tender system isn't always the best way of approaching works to an existing house, some of whose challenges may not be readily apparent. 'A good quantity surveyor can ensure that the right price is paid in the end. Meanwhile, the builder can become part of the consultant team,' Mr Petter explains. 'This was certainly



the case at Chettle (in Dorset), which we restored recently; Armstrong [see box next page] added enormous value.'

Like Mr Croft, Mr Petter stresses the benefit of a builder who employs his own men. 'Private clients always change their minds and it's just easier to accommodate these adjustments when the builder can call in his own people as needed. It's easier for tasks to be done in a different sequence.'

Tradesmen who always work together are likely to share a degree of camaraderie not possible among a team that has only just met each other. 'The atmosphere is so much better. When they come to a problem, they work through it.'

Janine Stone is an unusual example of a firm that doesn't just take care

of the building work, but also everything else, from gaining planning permission and initial concepts through to every aspect of the interior design. However, firms of this calibre are not to be found everywhere.

Digby Harris, who continues the practice founded by the late Francis Johnson in East Yorkshire, finds a dearth of them in the north of England, where several well-known names have gone out of business.

'You want a builder who will be there at the beginning and at the end of the defect liability period,' Mr Harris remarks wryly. 'If a contractor goes bust in the middle of a job, it's really difficult. There are costs attached and it makes the job drag on a lot longer, eating into every-

**Symm apprentices learning their trades while working on a country-house project pose proudly on a staircase made in the company's workshops**



**Training young people in the building crafts is vital in maintaining the skills required to repair buildings properly and to create new ones of high quality**

body's time, so one has to be cautious. Unfortunately, not many firms these days have all the trades available in-house—effectively, they're management companies.'

In recent years, Szerelmey, a family business that has specialised in stonework, faience and restoration work since 1855, has acquired a number

of firms from the administrators, such as the Cathedral Works Organisation of Chichester, Fairhurst Ward Abbotts of Dartford in Kent and Anelay Building and Conservation North East and North West, after the firm of William Anelay, which dated from 1747, stopped trading earlier this autumn.

'Don't despair,' advises the Essex-based architect Francis Terry. 'There are advantages to having a modern builder. I would see what they've done on a similar scale. You want one that has a big bank account, but not so big that you're irrelevant. For your project to be between a quarter and a third of their annual turnover would be ideal.'

## Firm foundations

### Boshers, Oxfordshire

An award-winning firm of master builders that is nearly 190 years old. It says that 'at the heart of our success is our commitment to marrying traditional values of craftsmanship, attention to detail, personal service, a sustainable approach and the latest construction methods and project management systems' ([www.boshersltd.com](http://www.boshersltd.com))

### R. W. Armstrong, Hampshire

Provides services for most of south-east England. 'Armstrong has consistently translated our designs into finished work of very high quality,' advises Nigel Anderson of ADAM Architecture ([www.rwarmstrong.co.uk](http://www.rwarmstrong.co.uk))

### R. Durtnell & Sons, Kent

Founded more than 400 years ago,

R. Durtnell & Sons is by far the oldest building contractor in Britain, handed down as a private company, father to son, for 13 generations. It boasts 'an ability to change with the times and a willingness to adopt new technologies' ([www.durtnell.co.uk](http://www.durtnell.co.uk))

### Janine Stone, London SW11

As well as designing and furnishing buildings, the company also has its own in-house construction team that renovates, remodels and constructs buildings to the highest standards. Projects range from listed country houses to new-builds ([www.janinestone.com](http://www.janinestone.com))

### Ken Biggs, Bristol

A local family company that has been going for three generations,

it employs its own workforce of joiners, carpenters, bricklayers, masons, plasterers, plumbers and decorators, in projects of up to £6 million ([www.ken-biggs.co.uk](http://www.ken-biggs.co.uk))

### C. Tavener & Son Ltd, London NW6

Established in 1846, the company is at the pinnacle of the London building trade that works on luxury assignments of every scope and scale, from Belgravia and Holland Park to Paris and Provence ([www.tavenerandson.co.uk](http://www.tavenerandson.co.uk))

### R. Moulding & Co, Wiltshire

A family business employing a large number of craftsmen. As well as having built or restored



many country houses, it is responsible for the works at Stonehenge ([www.rmoulding.co.uk](http://www.rmoulding.co.uk))

### Symm, Oxfordshire

The 200-year-old firm undertakes work all over the south of England, on projects costing up to £30 million ([www.symm.co.uk](http://www.symm.co.uk))

### Walter Lilly, London

Walter Gent Lilly won the freehold to a London builder's yard in a card game in 1924 and set up in the building trade. His business grew to be one of London's leading construction companies. It was sold to the Y. J. Lovell Group in 1955. Among many clients is the Café Royal ([www.walterlilly.co.uk](http://www.walterlilly.co.uk))