



## Using 40's Wood. 1540's, That Is.

By JULIE MICHAELS

**B**UYING an old English barn seemed like a good idea at the time. Richard and Stephanie Stern wanted to add a great room onto their too-small summer cottage in the Berkshires. They had met an architect through friends, who showed them homes he had designed using dismantled and reassembled 16th-century barns hauled across the Atlantic from England.

"I was transfixed," Mr. Stern said, recalling that fateful meeting four years ago. "These were beautiful buildings made from gnarled oak with hand-hewn beams. If we were going to build a room, I thought, why not do something unusual and wonderful to the eye?"

There was only one barn left, they were told, because the British government had recently banned the export of historic buildings. It was said to be a hay barn, built circa 1540, from Yalding, Kent. It was stored in a warehouse on Long Island. And it could be theirs for \$60,000.

The couple bought it without hesitation, sight unseen. "One of the stupidest things I've ever done," said Mr. Stern, chuckling at his own innocence. Four years after purchasing the English "barn" — in fact, just a pile of beams — Mr. Stern can laugh without wincing.

Reconstructed as a three-story dining room-living room and crisscrossed with ancient beams, it now stands — the room Mr. Stern imagined when he wrote that hefty check. But getting there has not been easy.

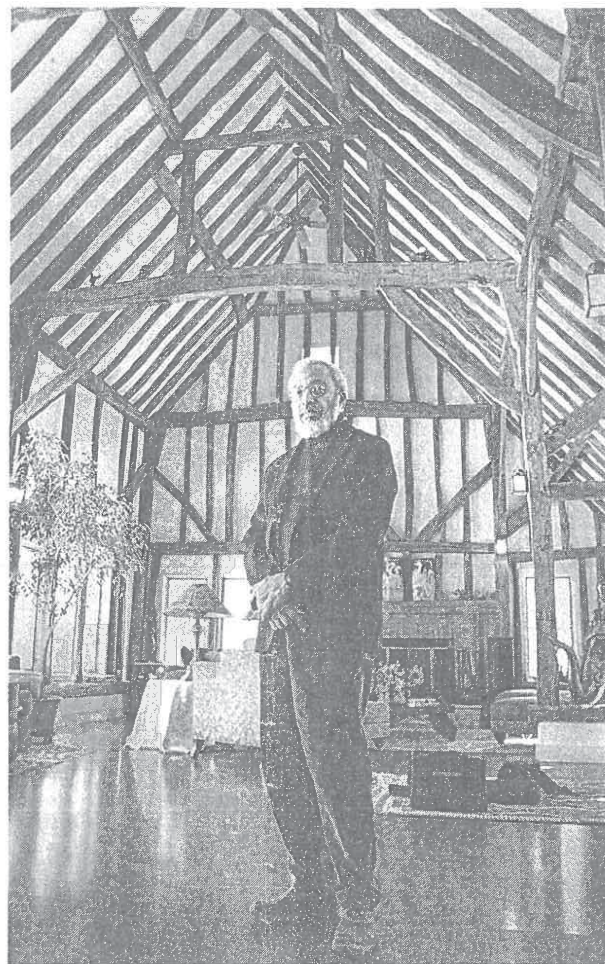
The Sterns bought their cottage, a 1957 ranch sheathed in rough timber siding, in 1974, shortly after they married and began careers as jour-

nalists. The two-bedroom, two-bath room house was fronted by a homely two-car garage. But the Sterns loved the place, which sits on the grounds of an old estate. They had mountain views and could see deer grazing in the fields below. In 1988, they added a second floor to the house. It was a budget job that barely allowed two more bedrooms and two more baths. "We had plenty of room for guests," Ms. Stern said, "but nowhere to entertain them. The living room was tiny, we ate on a narrow, enclosed porch, and the kitchen was pitiful."

Improvements were put on hold while Ms. Stern changed careers. She attended business school and, together with her husband, started a company that specializes in investor relations and corporate communications. It has been very successful. With 20 employees, the former journalists have become enthusiastic capitalists. "Us, of all people," Mr. Stern said. "I mean, we had a peace sign on our wedding cake."

They bought an additional three and a half acres next to their house and prepared to add the wing. The trouble started when they bought the barn and put their architect's plans out to bid. "Contractors said the blueprints weren't sufficiently detailed," Ms. Stern said. "No one was willing to give us an estimate."

Feeling they had been snookered into buying a bunch of old beams that couldn't be pieced together, they fired the architect and went looking for someone who could build their dream room. They found the right guy, John James, just down the road in Sheffield, Mass. A Harvard-trained architect and former professor at the Columbia University School of Architecture, Mr. James had his own design firm in New York City before relocating to the Berkshires in 1986.



Photographs by Chris Ramirez for The New York Times

When the Sterns brought him their problem in the summer of 1997, he was flabbergasted. "Sixty-thousand dollars for a pile of wood they'd never seen?" he said. "For \$20,000, I could pick up the phone today and find you an American barn, and that includes delivery and assembly on your foundation."

Still, Mr. James admitted, there is beauty in old beams. "The English didn't have the abundance of wood that was later available in the American colonies," he said. "Their barns were made from whatever scrap hardwoods they could find, mostly oak — old masts, twisted beams that a colonial builder would have reject-

ed. As a result, some of the pieces are almost sculptural." Mr. James acknowledges that the Sterns paid \$40,000 extra to buy a barn so old, Shakespeare could have slept in it.

Initially reluctant to join the misbegotten project, Mr. James was nonetheless intrigued. He suggested he and Ms. Stern visit the barn where it was being stored, on Long Island. They found it outdoors, not inside as they had been told. With a drawing in hand that showed positions for the numbered pieces, Mr. James examined the pile. Some pieces were missing and others had no numbers, but Mr. James announced that the job could be done.



### OLD ENGLISH

Richard and Stephanie Stern, left, had a pile of barn beams. The architect, John James, center, figured out how to use them. The living room addition is at right in the outdoor picture.

## From shaky timbers, a great room grew.

There were more challenges ahead. Because the Sterns' property was on a hillside, the barn foundation had to be dug into a slope. The old garage had to be dismantled to make way for a new kitchen. So Mr. James proposed turning the new basement into a garage — one that could hold four cars and Mr. Stern's collection of motorcycles.

Insulation was another problem. The posts and beams of the barn would be exposed inside the house, so insulation would have to be applied on the outside. With newer barns, Mr. James had used prefabricated panels on the exterior to enclose the insulation. But he was worried that they might be too heavy for the old structure. To be safe, he reinforced the roof and created a frame around the old timber.

The greatest challenge, Mr. James said, was figuring out how to attach a huge building to a little ranch house without making it look like "a whale attached to a sardine." Initial plans had linked the two directly. Mr. James decided to add an intermediate piece — a silo shape — that would hold the stairs. There was also space for a loft and a fifth bedroom over the kitchen.

Mr. Stern particularly loves the loft, which gives him a grand view of his timbers. Since the barn's windows face north, Mr. James added two south-facing dormers to bring light into the room. Outside, the dormers break up the vast expanse of roof; inside they illuminate the beams, which pass in front of the dormers.

Now it was time to decorate.

An old friend, the designer Patricia Hart McMillan, suggested they paint the plasterboard walls of the barn a pale yellow-green to complement the oak beams. Ms. McMillan, who wrote "Home Decorating for Dummies," had two goals, she said: providing comfort and saving money. "They'd already spent so much on the building," she said.

So Ms. McMillan went bargain-hunting. She found kitchen cabinets at Home Depot and bought rugs at a discount. Ten dining room chairs were \$600 at a tag sale.

At an Asian import store in Great Barrington, Ms. McMillan found a round, marble-top dining table that seats 12 and the top of an ox cart that she converted into a coffee table.

The Sterns are delighted with the results. "Better than I ever imagined," said Mr. Stern, who feels "like we dodged a bullet."

The final cost, he said, was \$600,000, including furnishings.

Some might argue that the Sterns could have bought a new house and quite a bit of land for that kind of money. But that is not the point. The Sterns have their 16th-century barn, and they love it.