

FROM FIRM FOUNDATIONS INTO THE FUTURE...

Louise Tomlin takes a look at a recent project by AT Palmer that shows the full breadth of the workforce's talents, skills and amazing attention to detail.



We have featured the specialist heritage building company AT Palmer Ltd previously in this magazine, notably and most recently last year showcasing their fascinating Carriage House restoration project at Chipstead near Sevenoaks. This showed the extent of works needed to make the building usable again, and the lengths to which

AT Palmer Ltd went in carrying out a sensitive conservation project on this listed building. It was a stunning example of their work.

This year sees the company's 75th anniversary, so it seems an opportune moment to celebrate this landmark in their history by looking into how the highly-respected historic building and specialist conservation company came about, their

continuing success, and to highlight a project that has come to fruition this year that illustrates the important work they continue to achieve in the field of historic conservation.

Three quarters of a century ago, a young man had a vision of owning his own business. He discussed this with his wife, as without her help it would have been impossible. She readily agreed to be 'the office', and together they bought a small business in Headcorn with six tradesmen and a dilapidated van. The couple were Arthur and Myra Palmer, and the company became known as AT Palmer (Builders & Contractors) Ltd.

There's been a lot of water under the bridge since Arthur and Myra, the grandparents of current MD Simon Palmer, seized the moment and founded AT Palmer Ltd. From those humble beginnings, this family business has grown into a thriving company, now employing 42 dedicated staff: highly skilled trades people, three contracts managers, two estimators, office administration, company directors and company secretary. They also have an approved list of tried and trusted subcontractors.

AT Palmer Ltd has built up an enviable reputation over the years as one of the most highly regarded historic building conservation and restoration specialists, and has been involved in many prestigious heritage projects. They have accrued an enormous amount of experience working on period properties, resulting in understanding the importance of recognising that restoration is a sensitive process: it entails combining modern construction technology and sustainable building methods with time-honoured crafts and artisanal skills, employing traditional and authentic materials, and most importantly

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remaining sympathetic to the historic fabric of the buildings at the centre of their projects.

This multi-generational family firm has a heritage to be proud of. What began with Arthur's modest ambition to start his own building company grew exponentially and he became a well-respected individual in the building industry, a Fellow of the Institute of Builders in 1959, and a pillar of the community as Mayor of Ashford. Arthur and Myra's son, Marcus, has had a long and notable career in the company and is chairman. His son Simon, the MD, with wife Natasha, the company secretary, now run the business. Until recently the company could boast three generations, and happily that has now increased to four, with Liv, daughter of Simon and Natasha, taking responsibility for the firm's online and social media presence. They all operate from their HQ on Smarden Business Estate.

Always with an eye to ensuring the company keeps up-to-date or even ahead of the curve, they invest in their personnel, recognising the importance of maintaining ongoing training for all staff, including up-to-date health and safety regulations, and training specific to individual roles. And, perhaps most importantly, they are investing in future generations of the workforce by offering apprenticeships, with up to six apprentices training at any one time.





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It's an interesting thought that AT Palmer Ltd quite rightly is invested in and looks to the future to ensure they do all they should to stay up-to-date, whilst so much of their work is focused on the past and authentically maintaining elements of the historic properties they work on. One such example is Pullens Farmhouse near Tonbridge, where the house had suffered a disastrous flood caused by the river that runs through the garden, only five weeks after their clients had moved in.

This beautiful farmhouse set in approximately six acres is thought to be circa 1500, originally a Wealden Hall house of timber construction with plaster infill and a plain tiled roof that has seen many extensions and alterations over the centuries. It has a wealth of period features and is Grade II listed.

A T Palmer Ltd started work in September 2022 and began a full refurbishment to the interior and exterior, including constructing a small rear extension with a link to the original house. The plans were drawn up by award-winning architectural practice John Bullock Design, based in Tunbridge Wells. The build and renovations were led by Kelvin Tooth, the contracts manager, and a team of A T Palmer's skilled staff. As the property had a history of flooding, insurers insisted the original timber suspended floor be replaced throughout the ground floor with special limecrete, a combination of natural lime and lightweight aggregate or sand which is used as an alternative to a conventional concrete slab. It

has insulating properties and offers a breathable moisture-managing surface, ideal for period properties suffering damp issues. Limestone flooring was laid on top of this.

The ground floor of the property is constructed from brick, with a timber-framed upper level. Brickwork repairs were completed using lime mortar, recommended for repairs to historic buildings and in keeping with the original. Timber repairs and plastering were needed where the back corner of the house had fallen away. This was carried out using a mix of lime and traditional plastering.

Worries about further floods were obviously a concern for the owners and it was decided to secure the property from future damage by installing flood defences. Planning permission was sought to install flood gates, flood defence walls and a large bund, whilst works on the house continued.

The small extension with a four-pitched roof was built, designed to fit in with the look of the existing house's brickwork and tiles, and custom-built sash windows and double doors leading out into the newly-created patio area. The windows and doors on the ground floor of the main house have all been renewed with matching bespoke replacements. The kitchen windows were replaced with double doors leading out on to the patio, mirroring those of the extension.

The new addition is connected to the main house with a purpose-built link of brickwork and glazing with a flat lead roof. A large roof





light was installed in the ceiling of the new extension on the side that faces the link. This was supplied by Arc Glazing Ltd; it's an unusual shape and, as you can see from the photos, it creates a dramatic effect, opening up a view to the sky and allowing light in.

Another stunning feature is the custom-made oak porch that's been added to the front of the property, built by A T Palmer Ltd's carpenters with a Kent peg-tiled roof. It creates a wonderful and welcoming first impression, and looks like it's been there for centuries.

The works carried out by this outstanding building company are extensive: new plumbing and rewiring, a beautiful new kitchen,

cloakroom, and utility room, and with the flood defences installed the client's home is now secure and beautifully restored for them to enjoy.

This is just one project that shows the full breadth of the workforce's talents, skills and amazing attention to detail. It is a fitting example to showcase this great Kentish company, A T Palmer Ltd, in their 75th year and to applaud everyone who has been instrumental in their success over the years.

For more info go to:
atpalmer.co.uk

