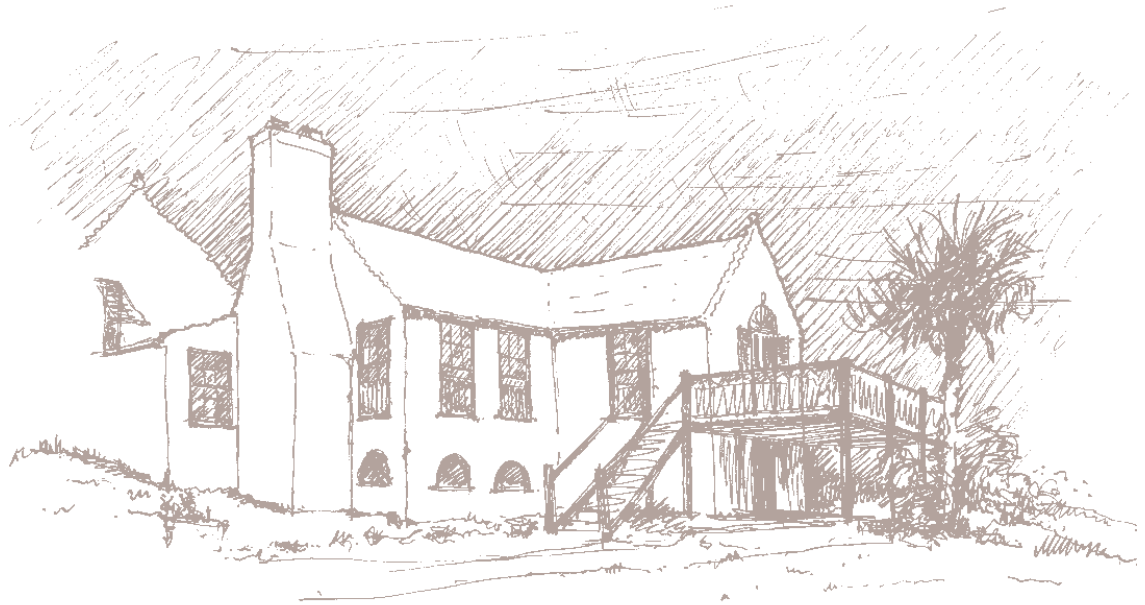


# GETTING STARTED



*“This is Bermuda. Let’s keep it that way!”*

*Hubert Smith, Jr. (1965)*

If you have an old house and want to alter, extend or restore it, this chapter will explain some things you can do before you begin that will make your task easier and much more enjoyable. The following chapters deal with more specific problems, and are organised by building materials. An illustrated glossary at the end of the book will help you with visual identification.

## LOOKING AT A BERMUDIAN HOUSE

Thoroughly examine your property before you start work, and you will learn a great deal more about it than you thought possible. It's really useful to know something about the age of a house, and how it was constructed, because this will help you when making building decisions. A surprising amount of information can be gained just from looking and from thinking about how a house was put together. In a way, the house will speak to you and it will tell you about itself.

When you examine a house, look for indications of the date of the building work. Useful clues that will help you with an approximate date can be found in both large features and in small details. Even such trivial things as burn marks on beams which were caused by candles might be just the piece of information you need to complete the picture of the house's past.

First, ask yourself what style is the house? Is it a mixture of styles? For a visual survey of the history of styles in Bermuda see Chapter 8 of this guide, and look through the books on architecture in Bermuda and abroad, recommended in Chapter 9. Each period of building had its own preferred ways of dealing both with space and with decorative details. Taken together, these are strong indicators of date. However, with smaller properties, building styles from earlier periods sometimes continued to be used after fashions had changed for more affluent buildings. And almost all Bermudian houses, large and small, were added to and changed at some time in their lives.

What materials were used in your building? Does it seem to be made from the traditional materials, stone and cedar wood, discussed in Chapters 4 and 5? Do the structural elements such as rafters, wallplate, joists, and other materials like the roof slate, the floorboards or the mouldings, look old, or are there indications that these have been replaced? Builders took advantage of technological changes and advances in materials when new work was undertaken. The use of handmade nails, for example, can indicate the age range of a building. Square-section cut nails of iron were in use until the end of the 19th century. Wooden dowels or pins, which lasted longer, were used in house joinery well into the 19th century, but in carpentry

work they are more likely to have been supplanted by nails and occasionally screws after about 1820.

An old house may have later alterations. Cedar became less plentiful in the 18th century because of its importance to ship building, so Bermudians gradually began to replace cedar with imported pine and other woods for joists, rafters and beams in their buildings. By the middle of the 19th century pine was used most often for structural elements in heavy construction, though cedar remained in occasional use for smaller buildings until its destruction by blight in the late 1940s; and it was always preferred for slate battens until the introduction of pressure treated pine. If you find that different methods and materials were used in your house, it's a strong indication that it was built in different phases.

Look at the windows. Larger sheets of glass in 2 over 2 lights were not used until the second half of the 19th century. Single hung sash windows with 6 over 6 lights were commonly used before that date, and the glass was thick and crinkly because of the way it was made. The section on windows in Chapter 5 will tell you more.

These are the kinds of issues to be thinking about when you look at the materials used in an old building.

What methods of construction do you find when you look? It is difficult, but not impossible, to tell with our plastered stone houses. First try and see if it was all built at one time, or whether there have been extensions and alterations. Indications that there have been changes can usually be seen from roof extensions. When looking for evidence of the age of a roof, look at the size of the timbers and the way they have been prepared. Each of the tools that a workman used left a distinct mark, a kind of fingerprint. These are also bits of evidence that can be used to help date a house. Were timbers adzed or cut with a straight saw? Can you see the marks of a rotary saw blade? This would indicate much more modern construction. Are some timbers of cedar and others not? Do their dimensions change from, say, 3 x 3 inches to 2 x 6 inches? If they do, it might mean a different builder at a different time in history for that section. Rafters or rafter feet of pine instead of cedar may indicate more recent construction, or they may mean a new roof.

Look at the walls for signs of age. If you look along a wall in a raking light, you might see irregularities in the plasterwork where doors and windows have been moved. Then think of the overall plan and ask yourself why this might have been done. There was always a reason.

Try and make a record of what you see. Write notes and draw sketches of the parts of the house that interest you, or those features that don't yet make any sense. Take as many photos or videos as you can of all the little details. They will document the condition and history of the building at the date of your alterations. Keep them carefully, because your record may be extremely useful to others in the future. They may also be of significance to our history, especially in the case of a small property that is not likely to have many written records. It will help keep alive evidence about the past of the house. History is subject to revisions, and if we destroy the material evidence of the past we will never be able to revise our history with accuracy.

## RESEARCHING YOUR PROJECT

It is easier than you might think to do historical research on an old building. Researching involves finding documents that can confirm or disprove the conclusions of your visual inspection. For example, evidence might be found in deeds of sale. When a house changed hands was a likely time for additions and alterations to have been made. No research into the history of a house would be complete without a routine look into the very useful documents held in the Bermuda Government Archives. A research assistant there will help you find out more about the age of your house, its prior owners and its general history. Information might be found in inventories, wills and conveyances, parish assessments and family papers. The Bermuda National Trust's Historic Buildings Survey, which documents more than 4,000 sites on which there were houses built before 1898, is another invaluable resource. This information can be obtained from them at their headquarters, Waterville in Paget, as can the research notes for the on-going series of books on Bermuda's historic buildings, parish by parish, published by the Trust. The books themselves are listed in the bibliography in Chapter 9.

## THE ROLE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Researching written records is one way of getting more information about an old house. Another interesting way is through archaeology. Archaeology is the study of people through their material remains, and at the very least it is a way to feel a close connection to individuals from the past. You could start by making a surface collection. Try wandering around your property and picking up the little fragments you see lying around - the bits of china and glass, pipe stems, buttons and bones that are lying on the surface of your flowerbeds, for example. They may look insignificant, but it is possible to distinguish bottle glass from window glass, or porcelain from earthenware. Each one can probably be dated either by its style, type or manufacturer, and from this you can establish the date after which these things must have found their way into your garden.

The Bermuda National Trust has an enthusiastic Archaeology Committee whose members will be able to help you with more detailed archaeological procedures. If you think there were out-buildings on your property, or if you believe that your house was built on the foundations of an older building, you might want to investigate further. Based on the information you have, they will help you select a place that is likely to yield information when you do a “dig”, perhaps near the kitchen or where slaves might have lived. A dig is a metre-square or larger test pit, from which you will uncover more information about the history of your property and the way people used it by sifting through layers of soil. The fish scales, bones, pollen and bits of ceramics you recover can tell you what people ate, what they grew in their garden, how well-off they were.

Archaeology is very important. It gives tangible evidence in little things, like buttons and pins, of the past lives of people who were sometimes not able to leave any other traces.

## THE ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT

You may decide to hire an architect to help with your restoration or additions to the old house. The ideal would be one who is trained in architectural conservation. Many others are interested in the buildings of the past as design sources, and there are a number of established firms in Bermuda whose partners have detailed knowledge of the materials and methods of traditional building.

There are also several specialist builders in Bermuda who are interested in traditional methods of construction.

## HELP FROM THE PLANNING DEPARTMENT

The Planning Department and its advisory group, the Historic Buildings Advisory Committee, makes itself available at no charge to help the owners of old houses, in particular of those buildings that have been listed under Section 30 of the Development and Planning Act 1974 for their special architectural and historic interest. The Historic Buildings Advisory Committee will work to help you on a one-to-one basis, respecting both the integrity of your house and the changes you need to make. The Planning Department provides a very useful brochure that explains when planning permission is required in law, and offers further practical guidance to homeowners. Both the Department and the HBAC recommend that owners discuss their proposals for a listed building as early as possible when change or addition is considered, so that the special character of the building, including scale and proportion, can be maintained. Some of the regulations that govern new buildings may actually be waived if the Department thinks that they might adversely affect the character and integrity of an older structure. Owners of old buildings that are not listed but have interesting historical features, and there are many of these, are also urged to take advantage of the free services provided by the trained staff at the Department.

## IF YOU LIVE IN ST. GEORGE'S

Special regulations apply if your property is in the Town of St. George, which is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. All buildings, including boundary walls, in a specially designated area in the centre of the old town, have been protected for more than 50 years by strict legislation against inappropriate alteration and demolition. In the case of a few special buildings singled out as having special historic and architectural merit, all exterior alteration is restricted. At present, change to any and all buildings in the Scheduled Area must be presented to the St. George's Preservation Authority as well as to the Planning Department.

## WHY NOT JUST DEMOLISH?

As anyone who has had the responsibility for the care of an old house can tell you, there will be times you will want to give up, tear it down and build a brand new house. Or, at the very least, sell it and let somebody else deal with the problems.

Why not start from scratch? Because you will never be able to recreate the beauty and the character of a house that already has a history. However, the practicalities are that the care and conservation of an old house involves restoring the fabric of the building and giving the building a new lease on life. This may entail a change in use and could involve making alterations to the structure, adding new services, and installing new fixtures and fittings. It takes a little care to do this in a way that respects the building's past. It is a responsibility that is not for everyone.

If you do decide on the project, bear in mind these few and very simple guiding principles. First of all, everything that possibly can be should be retained and repaired. Roof timbers can be strengthened in place, roof slate can be patched. Old doors, windows and plaster can be mended rather than destroyed. With a little loving care, those floors with their handsome wide boards will be the envy of your friends. They never need to know just how close you came to ripping them up and pouring a concrete floor. Don't let on!

Secondly, if you want the house to look its best, try to make sure that all replacement materials are a close match to the original materials. Replace stone with stone, lime mortar with matching mortar. If you have to make new doors, windows and shutters, match them to existing examples if the examples are original. Use wood for your sash windows and build shutters of similar slat pitch and width. These may seem to be trivial things, but as a very famous architect once said, “God is in the details”. If you cannot use matching materials, refer to later chapters in this book for substitution ideas that will give a similar result.

And remember, there are a number of people and organisations whose business it is to help you. It is their job, and they devote their lives to it. They truly care about our heritage. Chapter 9 will help put you in touch with them.