

people

Philippa devotes her life to creating homes and seeking the meaning of life

A quick tour around the derelict barns that Philippa Rees converted demonstrate her ability to handle a big project. And she can also deal with big ideas – which has led her to write a book bringing a new approach to the theory of evolution. Words by **Suzanne Savill**. Pictures by **Fran Stothard**



The cottage on the outskirts of the Somerset town of Bruton was tiny, with just two bedrooms. But it was all Philippa Rees and her husband John could afford as a home for themselves and their four children.

Then something unexpected happened. As Philippa's daughter Juliet, then aged six, practised on her violin, the owner of four ramshackle barns next to the cottage happened to see her through the window and decided to make the family an offer.

"He came to see us and said, 'Wouldn't you rather live in my barns?'" says Philippa, who is originally from South Africa and studied psychology and zoology at Witwatersrand University.

"We were both working as teachers and we told him we simply wouldn't be able to afford to buy the barns off him and then convert them. But he insisted he wanted us to have them and offered them to us for well below what he could have got if he had put them up for sale.

"He waited 18 months until we managed to sell the cottage and get the money together. We could have been gazumped at any time, but he waited. I asked him why he did all that for us, and he said he had heard the sound of a violin playing and looked through the window of the cottage and saw this child who looked like an angel, and decided he would like to offer us the barns."

That was some 30 years ago. Today, following years of work, the barns are now stunning homes. One was converted and then sold to pay for work on the other three, and Philippa and John now live in one while the other two are rented out.

One of barns is called Hedley's Hay, by way of recognition of Hedley Haynes, the man who made it possible for Philippa and her family to own them, and until recently was used as a concert hall for chamber music.

Most of the building work on the barns was carried out by Philippa and John themselves using reclaimed materials, as they could not afford to pay builders or to buy new fittings.

"We arrived with four children, a sledgehammer and a wheelbarrow. I did the building work myself, apart from complicated work like the electrics," says Philippa, who had to master skills including bricklaying, carpentry, stonewalling and drainage.

"It was a freezing winter when we moved in. Sometimes there was more

snow inside the barns than outside. The children had to sleep in two caravans, while John and I slept on the floor of what is now the kitchen.

"Some people have asked me why we didn't try to get the council to house us because of the living conditions, but because I was brought up in South Africa it never occurred to me."

For many people living in such conditions and carrying out extensive building work would have been more than enough to contend with, but Philippa was also grappling with a ground-breaking concept she had developed about evolution, which she calls 'involution'.

Her work on researching and explaining her theory has dominated her life for 40 years and was a contributory factor in the breakdown of her first marriage. It resulted in her moving to the UK from Miami, where she had been living with her first husband and their two daughters – Jessica, now 47, and Rosalind, now 45.

After moving to the West Country she met her second husband, John, who is the father of her younger daughters – Juliet, 37, and Kate, 35.

So how on earth did she cope with years of living in what was, in effect, a massive building site, while researching and writing a different perspective on the widely-accepted Darwinian view of evolution?

"Far from being a distraction, working on the barns and the gardens kept me grounded and enabled me to engage with normal life," Philippa says of the daunting construction project. She managed to compete it while also working on the epic book, which she has just published, called *Involution: An Odyssey – Reconciling Science to God*.

We are sitting in the kitchen of the large former barn which is now her family home, gazing out through huge glazed patio doors onto a cottage-style gravel garden which leads on to an extensive lawn.

Enormous glazed doors are a recurring feature of the downstairs rooms in the barns, which are now filled with light and look very different to the gloomy images in Philippa's album of photographs that show how uninhabitable the barns were before she and John set to work.

"I can't bear the way houses in England just have a front door and a back door. I need to be able to have contact with the outside world," declares Philippa, who has built a



Philippa Rees at home in one of three barns she has renovated in Redlynch, near Bruton, Somerset – along with memories of her life in South Africa



wooden terrace leading from the sitting room which gives the barn a Mediterranean appearance. The European theme is continued with a Provencal-style area in the garden.

However, designing the converted barns and planning the gardens have been merely a sideshow for Philippa, whose primary focus has been her theory of 'involution', which she began exploring in 1970.

This theory goes beyond the widely-accepted Darwinian view of evolution. It attempts to reconcile scientific beliefs with religion by suggesting evolutionary change has been driven by more than accidental mutations, and that man's capacity for contemplative thought and selfless behaviour has also been essential to evolution.

Philippa also rejects the theory that evolutionary change is dictated by DNA, and instead puts forward another view: that encoded within DNA is a collective memory of evolution of all matter, and on that basis discoveries regarded as scientific genius – such as Newton's discovery of gravity and Einstein's theory of relativity – are in fact examples of the recovery of this evolutionary memory.

Philippa explains her concept of involution in the form of an epic poem which combines a debate between Reason and Soul, charting the history of science from pre-human existence, on through the Greek and Roman civilisations, through the Dark Ages, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and into modern times.

"I don't claim to be a scientist, and I would say I am spiritual rather than

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a believer in a particular religion," she says. "I thought that using poetry would be a good way of getting across the idea of involution in a way that could engage the reader."

Already her book has received glowing reviews on Amazon, where one critic described it as "a beautiful, scholarly, challenging and ultimately fascinating work of literature".

It is a different response to that which Philippa received when she initially raised her theory in lectures on saints and scientists at Bristol University in the Seventies.

"I believed it would ignite society because it gave such an alternative view of evolution," says Philippa, who is now aged 74.

"It did receive approval from leading scientists, including Arthur Koestler and the Nobel Prize winner Konrad Lorenz, but I think it was ahead of its time then. Science and God were not mentioned in the same breath."

So now that the barns have been completed, her book has been published and Philippa's theory of involution has been met with acclaim, how does she feel?

"To be honest, I feel utterly lost," she replies. "The book has been on the back burner for so much of my life. Now it is finished I don't know what I'm going to do."

Involution: An Odyssey – Reconciling Science and God, by PA Rees, is published by CollaborArt Books. Price £17.99 hardback and £7.20 Kindle edition. For further information go to www.involution-odyssey.com



The 'cowshed', pictured uppermost, one of three barns Philippa Rees renovated at Redlynch, near Bruton, and the barns, bottom two pictures, as they were in 1981