

Elstow's glory

The birthplace of John Bunyan undergoes a £200,000 facelift — and a new High Street comes alive

ONE OF the most beautiful villages in Bedfordshire is now being restored to its former glory.

Elstow, birthplace of John Bunyan, is now receiving the respect it deserves as architects and builders try to restore many of the old timbered cottages that line the High Street.

Only a year ago the splendid Jacobean buildings were fast deteriorating. Then the former Bedford District Council stepped in and bought 16

cottages from the Whitbread family for £1.

Plans were quickly afoot to give this property bargain of a lifetime a £200,000 facelift. The council decided to restore the cottages to their former state but improve the interiors and make them into 17 separate flats or maisonettes for elderly people.

Architect, Bernard West and his team of workers have been renovating the cottages now for about eight months and slowly but surely the cottages are coming to life once more.

Soon, if John Bunyan

were to return to his birthplace he might think the world's progress had been slight.

A quote from Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress may apply to Elstow soon. "Here I have seen things rare and profitable." For when the work is finished architect Bernard West thinks that Elstow may well become a tourist centre as they pour in to see Bunyan's birthplace.

So Elstow's noted tranquility may be disturbed by thousands of dollar waving Americans anxious to see an example of the old country as it

was with souvenir shops springing up from nowhere selling replicas of John Bunyan's bootlaces.

This would certainly give Elstow a quality that many people have complained it lacks — life. Mrs Una Holmes, who has lived in Elstow for 13 years, thinks Elstow already has some life but agrees that many of the residents prefer the more traditional and quiet existence that they have been used to.

Mrs Holmes is all for the modernisation of the cottages. "At least we are

not getting one of those horrible blocks of flats," she says.

To walk through Elstow High Street when there is not much traffic on the A6 it is possible to appreciate the village's historical value.

It is this facet that has attracted many historians to the village and as the workers uncover more details about residents of the cottages centuries ago, archaeologist John Bailey, of Dunstable, records the facts for posterity.

Elstow High Street will be no museum however and the elderly people will

benefit from a well-lit precinct, a day time club and the protection of a warden living nearby.

As Bernard West and his workers gradually move southwards down the High Street renovating as they go, they have come across many surprises.

Restored to former glory — Elstow High Street with the historic cottages renovated.

"Numbers 175-76 and 184 are 13th perhaps early 14th century, which is rare for Bedfordshire," said Bernard West, whose enthusiasm is one of the striking features of the project.

Many of the finds have already been publicised and are on exhibition in

Moot Hall, Elstow, but since the work is not yet finished perhaps more discoveries are in store?

Bernard West seems pleased with the progress of renovation and also the reaction of residents.

"Many residents thought we were barmy when we started but they seem to

be getting quite fascinated by it all now."

All being well the cottages should be ready by the end of next year and once again they should serve a useful service in the community.

If the cottages could speak perhaps they would utter the words of a man

who probably walked through many of their doors, John Bunyan, who says in Pilgrim's Progress: "O world of wonders (I can say no less) that I should be preserved in that distress. That I have met with here O blessed be, that hand that from it hath delivered me."

