

Pippa.



'Henry's East Ender

Bromley Hall, a former royal love nest and the oldest brick house in London, has been restored. **Jane Barry** reports

IT WAS a love nest for Henry VIII, a Civil War gunpowder factory and, in the 18th and early 19th centuries, a gracious out-of-town residence for a succession of wealthy City merchants. But in 20th century it became first a garage and then a carpet showroom. Bromley Hall, at Bromley-by-Bow, built by monks in the 1490s, is the oldest surviving brick house in London and tells a story of both the history of the East End and of changing architectural fashion.

Now, as part of a facelift for Poplar's riverside, the building has been sensitively restored to

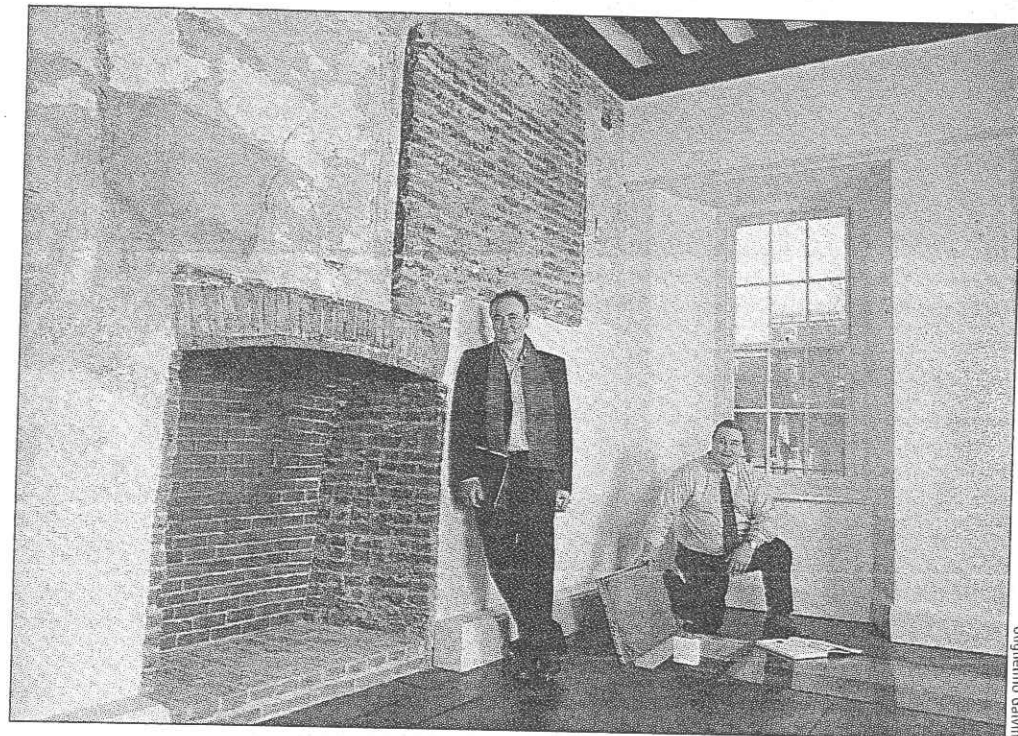
'It was here that Henry entertained his mistress, Bessie Blount'

building work that we found most of the architectural jewels," recalls the firm's project manager, John Hills. "People would get very excited and drag you in to look at things."

Originally built by Holy Trinity Priory, the house was seized by the Crown during the Dissolution of the Monasteries in 1531 and lavishly refurbished by Henry VIII. "It's actually designed around huge tapestries," says the project's conservation architect, Paul Latham. "It was very richly decorated, it really was for parties and entertaining." One guest Henry undoubtedly entertained there was his mistress Bessie Blount (said to be an ancestor of the pop singer James Blunt); Bessie was the daughter of Henry's bodyguard, John Blount.

Traces of the early decoration remain, as do other features, such as the 1490s beams, complete with leather washers for hanging tapestries, and the remains, in the cellar, of an even older house on the site, 12th century Lower Bramberley Manor. Most Tudor detail was concealed when the building was remodelled and given a fashionable Palladian symmetry in the 18th century, while the Victorians made further alterations — the house has had three different roofs and staircases.

But Bromley Hall is not just a barometer of architectural fashion. Henry VIII approached it by water, but during its 18th century refurbishment the house was turned right round, so the façade could face a newly built highway. As well as charting the decline of river transport and the rise of the road, the building's history parallels the changing face of Poplar Riverside as it turned



Architect Paul Latham (left) and project chief John Hills discovered architectural gems throughout the Hall

Guillermo Galvin

reveal the layers of its history. The Grade II* house and neighbouring Poplar Library were bought in 2001 by Leaside Regeneration, a company that specialises in community projects. The house was on English Heritage's Buildings At Risk register and was damaged by damp and dry rot; some of its 16th century floorboards had been tarmacadamed when it was a garage and many of its walls had been lined with cement.

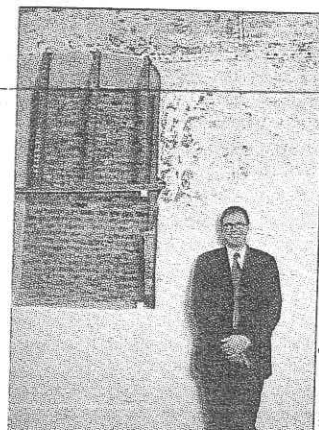
The £1.1 million restoration began a year ago after a lengthy survey by Museum of London archaeologists. Even so, work on the project frequently had to be stopped as fresh historical discoveries were made. "It was during the

from a country banqueting lodge for Tudor nobles to a suburban retreat for rich merchants, and then to a hub of industry — gunpowder was being made at Bromley Hall in the 17th century and by the 19th century the house had become a centre for calico printing.

Today, the highway is a motorway, the A120 (M),

and, although Bromley Hall has been restored, it remains surrounded by industrial decay that blocks all views of the nearby waterways, which is why Bromley Hall's rebirth is as much about regeneration as restoration.

English Heritage worked in close partnership with Leaside and helped fund the project. But much of cost has been met by European and government regeneration cash.



Pictures: Guillermo Galvin

HIDDEN UNDER CONCRETE

ONE of the Bromley Hall restoration's startling discoveries came when a chunk of Fifties cement (from the building's garage days) dropped off a wall in the main hall, revealing a rare Renaissance-style painting of a medieval knight with a longbow.

This fresco is partly overlaid with another of cherubs dating from the late 16th century, while in the hallway, once hidden by plastic damp-proofing, is a black-and-white antique work fresco from around 1606 featuring grotesque beasts.

Leaside's Paul Brickell by some of the wall paintings uncovered at the hall (far left)

THE main hall and hallway will be used as a museum and a space for local schools; modern services have been installed and the rest of the building, complete with historic features, will be let as office space to encourage local employment. The house will be open to the public during this year's Open House Weekend from 16 to 17 September.

Leaside's chief executive, Paul Brickell, is proud of the restoration project but sees it as part of a general improvement of an area that will benefit from being so close to the Olympic sites. His firm will now be involved in providing better access to the nearby River Lea, where the waterside will gain new offices, apartments and leisure facilities. He says: "This is the first phase in rediscovering the waterways as a really nice place to work and live."