

The crofts that beat the credit crunch

By Bill Gibb

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AS a former financial whizz kid, Sylvia Marshall is used to having a head for figures.

Now she's hoping her sums will add up — on a £1 million crofting collection.

Londoner Sylvia fell in love with the Scottish Highlands on school holidays and continued her love affair when she bought a property at Sand, Laide in Wester Ross.

She had to return south to look after her mum but when she heard that five acres of land that used to have old crofts on them had become available, she couldn't resist.

Having researched the locations of where the four old cottages were, she decided to try



and put them back in just the same place 100 years on.

"Locals who knew an old lady who used to live there as a child were able to give me details and show me photos," Sylvia told The Sunday Post.

"Then what we did was clean up the old stones from the one existing ruin and use those to source as close as possible a match.

"Every stone is hand-cut and it's taken us about three years in total as we've tried to use original materials as much as possible.

"The window sills, for example, are in Caithness slab and have been handmade for us in a typical croft style.

"The roof is slate — we would have liked to put a turf one on but they wouldn't let us."

Sylvia insists that it hasn't just been a labour of love but also a real boost to local business.

"When we started, the credit crunch was biting and everyone was stopping building work but we carried on," explains Sylvia.

"I helped the local firm we used to continue."

Sylvia even got her own hands dirty, helping dig out the trenches for drainage.

As well as a traditional two-chimney exterior, the interiors have been done as traditionally as possible — although with all home comforts.

"We have solid oak distressed flooring so it looks authentic and have kept it largely open-plan," reveals Sylvia.

"You go through to an old farmhouse kitchen with a Belfast sink and with old-fashioned wall lights that look like gaslights.

"Staying in a croft is a romantic notion — until you realise they can be cold, damp and you hit your head.

"What you have here is the romantic image of staying in that environment but it's

actually comfortable!"

Each cottage has two bedrooms, one en suite as well as a family bathroom.

The cottages are being sold freehold and Sylvia is selling them as one lot with a £1 million price tag.

"It could be a group of friends who want to buy together or someone who makes it a lifestyle purchase, living in one and renting out the others for an income," adds Sylvia.

"You're close to Laide with its Post Office, school, store and butchers and you're within striking distance of Poolewe tropical gardens just down the road.

"And you've got white sands and a crystal blue sea on your doorstep."



■ One of the spacious kitchens.

■ Details can be found at cosyhomesonline.com



Wood wonderful wood

WOODEN floors are practical, look fantastic and help to sell homes because they have universal appeal.

If you're lucky enough to have period floorboards in your home, you've got a head start, but if not, installing a wooden floor is easier than ever.

Laminate flooring, which has a picture of wood printed on to the boards, used to be the easiest way to get the look, but laminate isn't as fashionable as it once was.

If you want the real deal, the good news is that other types of wooden flooring are now as easy to install as laminate.

Fitting real wooden flooring used to be tricky, but not any more. Boards that just click and fit together, with no nails, screws or glue required, are widely available. This applies to both engineered wood and solid wood flooring.

Engineered wood has a layer of wood on top of the boards, but it doesn't go all the way through — there's a cheaper middle and bottom layer.

The thickness of the wood varies (usually between 0.6mm and 6mm), so make sure you know how thick it is and how many times, if any, it can be sanded.

A floor that can be sanded a few times is a good investment because it can take more wear and tear.

As lovely as solid wood is — and for some people, nothing else will do — engineered wood can be a



more practical choice (both start from around the same price).

Because engineered wood consists of layers, it has more strength and durability than a solid wood floor. It shouldn't shrink and expand when exposed to moisture and changes in temperature and humidity, unlike a solid wood floor.

Most wooden flooring comes finished, sealed and ready to fit, but you can also get bare wood if you want to stain, wax, varnish or paint it yourself, either conventional floorboards (new, or reclaimed period ones) or, again, boards that click together for easy fitting.

And, of course, there's another benefit of wooden flooring — no more vacuuming carpets!