Even before it made its name as the home of cider-making, Taunton already had a long and interesting history. Originally it was a village with the Saxon name Tone Tun then, in the late 9th century, Alfred the Great made it into one of a network of fortified settlements across his kingdom, called ‘burghs’ (the forerunners to ‘boroughs’) and, in the 11th century, it started its meteoric rise to become a centre of the prosperous wool industry.

In the 12th century St Margaret’s was built as a leper hospital to treat and control the spread of the disease. 900 years on, this Grade II*-listed building – a long, single-storey thatched property made mostly of shillet stone – was bought by Falcon Rural Housing and turned into living accommodation for local people in Taunton.

In the intervening period Glastonbury Abbey acquired the patronage of the hospital and, when leprosy had virtually been eradicated, Abbot Bere rebuilt St Margaret’s as almshouses. These served the community from the 1500s until 1938, when it was converted into offices for the Rural Community Council, along with accommodation for the Somerset Guild of Craftsmen.

In the late 1980s, when the Council and Guild moved elsewhere, St Margaret’s stood empty and, shortly after, its thatched roof was destroyed by fire and the building suffered from vandalism and neglect. In 1999 Falcon Rural Housing and the

HABM finds out how Falcon Rural Housing went about finding a heating solution for a 900-year old Grade II*-listed building in Taunton, which was once a leper hospital and is now split into four units for affordable rent.
Somerset Buildings Preservation Trust purchased St Margaret’s and, with grants from English Heritage, were able to faithfully restore the building, retaining as many of its original materials and features as possible, including its cobbled floor, and returning it to its former Grade II*-listed glory. Falcon Rural Housing bought the property in its entirety upon the completion of the works and the tenants moved in to their new homes in November 2002.

With 285 properties in its portfolio, Falcon was created 29 years ago and is a small housing association which prides itself on providing excellent quality, affordable rented housing and associated services for local people. It usually concentrates on building small numbers of homes in the rural villages of Somerset, rather than in towns – but this project was considered a unique opportunity and it was felt that the housing association just had to get involved.

**Residential conversion**

As part of the restoration process, the building was converted into four units of affordable rented accommodation comprising three two-bedroom homes and a one-bedroom studio. Now Falcon had a property of exceptional historical and architectural value to add to its portfolio, but St Margaret’s would also present its own set of challenges when it came to energy-efficient heating over its lifetime. Not only did the choice of heating have to be right for the property, it had to be right for the residents and landlord too.

**Heating engineer Paul Medlock, managing director of South West Boiler Repairs**

Medlock, a former software consultant and a self-confessed tech enthusiast, needed to recommend to Falcon which boiler should be used as part of this programme. He knew the pros and cons of the majority of brands available in the UK and decided that a relative newcomer to the UK – Dutch manufacturer Intergas – would provide the best value-for-money solution.

**Simple installation and servicing**

“I came across Intergas about six years ago, and liked the look of their boilers purely because they’re so simple – simple to install, simple to service and, when there are only 12 components and four moving parts, there’s less to go wrong too,” said Paul.

Simplicity wasn’t the only reason the company’s HRE Combi Compact appealed to Paul. He had noticed that some of the major brands were now using plastic components instead of brass, and he felt this was a worrying trend and potentially a contributory factor in future boiler breakdowns.

The HRE range, which has no plastic components, was developed by the company’s chief executive, Harry Bosscher, specifically for the Dutch social housing market – which needed a safe and reliable answer to problem-prone Geyser-style boilers that were prevalent
in the 1980s. The result was a unique aluminium two-in-one heat exchanger, which removes the need for a diverter valve, valve motor, hot water plate heat exchanger, air vent or air pressure switch. Unlike standard combi boilers, direct hot water is served by a separate loop within the unit, so if a fault occurs tenants can still get hot water.

These boilers are also said to be ultra-efficient as they condense 100% of the time in heating mode and 95.8% in hot water mode and have virtually no standby losses (<2.00 Watts). According to the manufacturer, they offer a reduction in carbon emissions of 20% and 15% off gas bills over other condensing boilers in the UK. By changing the parameter settings these combis can be converted to heat only, sealed system or open vent and can work with solar heating systems, making them flexible and future-proof too.

Sam Southam, managing director of Falcon Rural Housing, welcomed the installer's decision: “We trust Paul’s judgment 100%, so the choice of boiler wasn’t an issue. What I really appreciated was the small amount of spares that we’d need to keep in stock. In the past getting spares has been a nightmare, but with Intergas these are all neatly presented in a single briefcase. As soon as one has been used, the company provides a replacement, so ‘out-of-stock’ won’t occur.

“This in itself has so many benefits, and they’re not just financial. Residents don’t have to wait for long periods of time should anything go wrong, we have peace of mind that problems can be resolved swiftly and any time not wasted for our residents, and of course us, has its own benefits.”

Easy for residents to use

“In addition we also wanted to ensure that we had a boiler that is simple for our residents to understand and use,” continues Sam. “These days, things are so complicated that it is not easy for any of us to be able to use a boiler in an economical and efficient way which really does save us money. These boilers are straightforward and easy to use, and we like that – and so do our residents. Just the fact that they know how to use them properly and are able to do so due to the simplicity of the controls, means that the residents are saving as much money on heating their homes and hot water with gas than they could with some of the more complicated ‘eco’ forms of heating that are currently on the market.”

While the majority of the retrofits are fairly standard, St Margaret’s – with its listing building status – meant that Medlock has had to investigate flueing alternatives. “The flues to three of the four boilers would need to be installed within voids in the property and these voids were so awkward there would be no way to inspect any joints in the flues. The only solution was to install Intergas’s joint-free flexible concentric liner,” said Medlock.

While St Margaret’s is a straight combi-to-combi swap, other properties in the planned renewal programme involve changing a heat-only boiler and domestic hot water cylinder for a combi. While this might sometimes increase the complexity of the system and its installation, the process is simplified on both counts with the Intergas boiler thanks to the dual-pipework in the heat exchanger, which means there is no need for either a diverter valve inside the boiler or motorised valves in the airing cupboard. For Falcon this will eliminate what is probably the biggest single cause of heating breakdowns, which is good for both landlord and tenant.

It is estimated that the renewals will be completed by April 2015, and then the team will be able to assess the efficacy of these boilers versus their more well-known competitors.

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Sam Southam, managing director of Falcon Rural Housing