

FAMILY VALUES

Merry and Ben Albright are certainly no strangers when it comes to self-building oak-framed homes, this being their third — but their latest project proved the most challenging yet

Words **Natasha Brinsmead** Photography **Jeremy Phillips**

Site-Specific Design

Merry and Ben were keen that although the house is large at 480m², shouldn't look too big from the outside. To avoid this, the barn-like sections all face into one another across a pretty courtyard. This provides a sense of privacy and gives the garden views that the very open, undeveloped plot was lacking.



The homeowners
Merry and Ben Albright
The project
Oak framed self-build
Build Time October
2015 - Nov 2016
Size 480m²
Plot cost Undisclosed
Build cost £800,000
Value Unknown



"I have lived in the oldest house in this village, and now I live in the newest," says Merry Albright of the stunning new oak-framed home, located in a picture-postcard Herefordshire village, that she and husband Ben, along with their two children, Minerva and Gabriel, now call home.

"We had been living in our second self-build for 10 years and were really happy there," explains Merry. "But we felt we needed more space and a bigger garden — Gabriel is sport mad and we knew that as he got older we would need more outside space."

Merry, whose father is founder of oak frame specialists Border Oak and who works there herself, began to ask local landowners whether they might be interested in selling off any of their land.

Having had no positive responses from her initial enquiries, Merry approached a landowner she had known since childhood to ask whether he might sell them some of his land.

"Initially, he said no," says Merry. "Then just before I went back to ask again, I was made aware of the Revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) — what it meant for us was unbelievable."

Following a revision to the NPPF in 2012 (there have been further updates in 2018), Herefordshire Council had decided to review the settlement boundaries and taken the decision to look more favourably on developments adjacent to existing settlement boundaries.

"Before these changes, there was a blanket ban on any building outside the settlement boundaries," explains Merry. "The NPPF hinted that there was something of a move towards supporting individual self-builds and these changes meant that I began to think that there was potential for this land."

"I went back to the landowner and after

persisting for a while, we came to an option agreement that he would sell it to us if we could get planning permission and on the basis that we would wholly deal with the planning application and pay for everything, including solicitor's fees and surveys — we tried to make it as easy as possible for him."

Merry and Ben went for a pre-application, sending a design into the planning department to gauge their response.

No-one could have predicted the dramatic response that followed once the full application was submitted (SEE PAGE XX). Ben and Merry were the first in the district to use the revised national planning policies and this, combined with some extraordinarily vigorous objections by a group of local residents, meant the planning battle that ensued was both stressful and lengthy — although ultimately successful.

The Design

Merry worked alongside Border Oak architect Darren xxx, as part of a design team, starting with a broad brief based around her wish for a "very big kitchen and pantry".

"We knew we wanted the house to have a high level of sustainability — we wanted whatever we built to be a high-performance building. We told Darren our budget and discussed the importance of natural light and for a courtyard configuration to be central to the design," explains Merry.

"The plot is six acres with no physical object such as trees," says Merry. "We wanted to create a sense of privacy within this open space. We were also keen that even though the house was going to be big, it shouldn't look that way — we didn't want it to look too large and formal."

Settling on a design that resembled a collection of barns, all facing towards a central, ►



New Ideas

Merry was keen that the new house should feature a combination of exciting new materials. Brick, laid in a bond based on the traditional Flemish design, has been used for the entrance section, while elsewhere, oak cladding, treated to prevent curling, has been used vertically for a contemporary feel.

The Veranda

The veranda (OPPOSITE) has echoes of the porch from Merry and Ben's previous two self-builds and adds another element to the façade. The single-storey section of the house (LEFT), with its fully glazed gable end provides the perfect spot for parties and gatherings and has even been used as a yoga studio by Ben's mother.



Dream Kitchen

The large kitchen diner is undoubtedly one of the main highlights of the house. Crafted by a local business who were just setting up, the space features an Everhot cooker, painted units and a limestone floor, all offset by the exposed oak frame. Details such as the internal window to the right of the cooker add to the character of this new space

intimate courtyard, materials and building methods were selected to ensure the house was the best of its type.

“We used and acknowledged skills and construction methods of old,” says Merry. “We wanted to use artisan and vernacular skills in all the details.”

This approach is evident throughout the design, from the traditional Flemish brick bond used to lay the handmade bricks, to the lime mortar and spiralled chimney that echoes the Arts and Crafts houses in the area.

The new house might look simple, but it is anything but. Treated oak cladding, combines with a brick front element and gable ends, while aluminium bifolds and windows lend a contemporary element.

“We looked at a lot of cladding options,” says Merry. “We ruled out stone on budget grounds and decided that vertical cladding would look ‘of its time’ and sit well alongside the extensive glazing.”

Eventually, they opted to experiment with oak cladding that had been given a saline treatment, designed to prevent it from curling as oak cladding can be prone to doing.

“The amount of work that went into making the house look simple was huge,” says Merry. “There is such a lot of glass that the junction detailing was very complicated, but Border Oak have a lot of technical people whose job it is to solve these complications. The team trouble-shooted early on so that no one trade would inherit previous mistakes.”

Internally, the oak frame is part encapsulated, part exposed, and combines a number of various forms of construction, including base-jointed cruck and queen post trusses.

Despite the three distinct ‘barn’ sections, the layout feels open and has a natural flow, with each section of the house visible through the expanses of glass that ensure the house is full of the natural light that Merry so wanted.

“It is a very linear house, and the courtyard creates a sense of intimacy,” says Merry. “With the doors open this becomes another room. We also have generous circulation spaces as I have always liked these types of voids that seem to serve no practical purpose.

“We have this very clever heating system,” adds Merry. “Which is ironic as we actually don’t need the heating on as the house is so efficient! The house is passive solar orientated so that even in winter, it remains at a constant

Ben and Merry's Planning Story

“Initially we submitted a very modern design,” says Merry. “But the planners said we would probably never get permission, completely ignoring the new NPPF.”

Undeterred, Merry and Ben went back with a more traditional design.

“The planning council asked ‘what do you need the house to be?’ so we gave them the design we wanted and they liked it,” says Merry. “In the end, the design we submitted was the house we built.”

“We have asked our neighbours for their thoughts on our planned design,” says Merry. “Some liked it whilst others were incredulous that we wanted to build outside the settlement boundary.”

A group of locals began to argue against the design, primarily citing the flood risk they believed it would pose as the problem.

“They formed a ‘flood lobby group’ and we were receiving 10-15 new objections every day at one point,” says Merry. “As well as ourselves, the landowner we were buying from, the planning officer and even members of the Environmental Agency, began to receive abuse. We asked the EA to carry out an independent flood risk assessment but the objectors were still not happy, so the EA paid for another assessment, at a cost of about £20,000. It showed that the house would not increase the risk of flooding.”

“It was horrendous — protestors would gather with signs and objects were thrown at those involved.”

“By this point the NPPF was starting to be used elsewhere,” says Merry. “It meant we had a case history to use and the planning officer finally recommended it for approval and it was taken to a committee meeting.”

“It was awful,” says Merry. “There were groups of protestors outside, but I stood up and spoke, along with the local council and the objectors — it was discussed for over an hour. Eventually the votes were split equally between approval and refusal. It was not until the next day that we discovered we finally had approval.”

“The worst part was the distress it caused for people. The trick was to look at the positives and the people who were supporting us.”



Open Spaces

The family living space lies to the far end of the kitchen diner, meaning that this open section of the house has become the heart of the home. The open plan layout and plethora of full height glazing means that light flows throughout the house and that each section of the U-shaped building is visible from the others — a design feature that maintains a sense of intimacy despite the large size of the house.

Living Spaces

In addition to the family living room (RIGHT) that is open to the kitchen diner, there is a second, quieter living space (OPPOSITE) set into a single-storey section of the house. The room benefits from soaring exposed ceilings that have been timber clad and painted, and a woodburning stove from Clearview.

temperature of 19 to 21°C.

“We didn’t want a sealed up house. Each door has a ‘partner door’ — when both are open, fresh air can flow right through.

“We put a lot of effort into building a house that doesn’t use much energy. Its also one of very few houses that has been built completely from FSC and PEFC certified timber and made by an FSC and PEFC assessed company, which is unusual.

“There is hopefully an element of fun to the house too — Min is a whizz on roller skates so there is a long circuit around the ground floor and the stairs were designed to be great to surf a mattress on.”

Upstairs are four bedrooms, with the provision for two more in the loft. “We don’t have lots of bedrooms which surprises people — the house is actually quite ‘bottom heavy’, which should be ideal in our old age as its been designed to be divided into a single-storey annex should our needs change — one way to force the children to look after us when we are dodderly!

“It’s a cliché but the house and the plot is so much better than we could have ever imagined — in every way. The attention to detail, the workmanship and craftsmanship, the natural light streaming into the house throughout the day, the way the house is settling into the field and how we get to watch the seasons across wide vistas within the house.

It was emotionally very difficult during the planning stages, so in many ways it still feels unreal to actually live here. We know we are very lucky.” 🏡

Party Ready

The single-storey section that shields the rest of the house from the driveway in the courtyard configuration is the perfect spot for entertaining. To save on costs, plywood has been used for the floor (it cost around £1,000), routed to look like timber boards.





Master Bedroom

In the master bedroom the exposed oak frame and soaring ceiling provide a wealth of character. A dressing room leads off from the room



First Floor Rooms

Ben and Merry's en suite (LEFT) combines modern sanitaryware with reclaimed finds. The guest bedroom (BELOW) sits adjacent to the master suite. It features an internal window (sourced from a local reclamation yard) – a clever and characterful feature, which brings more light to this bedroom.



PROJECT NOTES



The Floorplan

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Suppliers

Architect, quantity surveyor, main contractor, building materials (including oak frame, windows and cladding), oak frame

Border Oak: 01568 708752; borderoak.com

Structural engineer Via Border Oak: 01568 708752

Bespoke glass installed by Roman Glass, Hereford: 01432 272764

Bifold door supplier/manufacturer

Ultraline: ultraline.co.uk

Kitchen supplier/manufacturer Fernio Furniture: ferniofurniture.co.uk

Oven Everhot: everhot.co.uk

Woodburning stove Clearview Stoves: clearviewstoves.com

Bathroom sanitaryware

Whitehall Bathrooms: white-hall.co.uk

Lusso Stone flooring

Whitehall Flooring:

white-hall.co.uk

Lamonby Flooring:

01568 613386

Light switches

Forbes and Lomax: forbesandlomax.com

Paint

Edward Bulmer Paints: edwardbulmerpaint.co.uk