

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Simon and Karen Lewis' bid to transform an ageing bungalow evolved into a larger project to build their dream home in the Surrey Hills

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THE LEWIS FILE

NAMES Simon & Karen Lewis
OCCUPATIONS Ex-investment management professional and business advisor & healthcare quality specialist

LOCATION Dorking, Surrey

TYPE OF BUILD Self build

STYLE Contemporary country

CONSTRUCTION METHOD
Oak frame

PLOT SIZE One acre

LAND COST £710,000

BOUGHT 2008

HOUSE SIZE 282m² (inc 44m² garage)

PROJECT COST £400,000

PROJECT COST PER M² £1,418

TOTAL COST £1,110,000

VAT RECLAIM £20,505

BUILDING WORK COMMENCED
April 2009

BUILDING WORK TOOK
21 months

CURRENT VALUE
£1.5 million

Simon and Karen Lewis have always nurtured a fascination with property, design and architecture. The couple were happy living in their beautiful, grade II listed home in the Surrey countryside – until they spotted a bungalow for sale in their ideal rural location nearby, on a site that enjoyed spectacular views. “We lived just five miles away, but when we stumbled across this opportunity we saw that it had so much potential, and we started to dream about the kind of dwelling that we might be able to achieve by taking on a major project,” says Simon.

Much of the property's allure stemmed from the fact that it was positioned on a picturesque, one-acre site nestled between three villages in an area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB). However, the land itself was very overgrown and the dormer bungalow that stood on it didn't fit with Simon and Karen's vision. Nonetheless, they fell in love with the location and the opportunities it offered. They also saw the property's potential to benefit from stunning views of the North Downs, even though a neighbour's row of 12m-high conifer trees currently blocked the fabulous vistas.



A log-burner from Euroheat provides a stylish focal point in the vaulted living room



Changing direction

The couple put their original listed property on the market and soon received an offer. Just six months later, in February 2008, they moved into their new home. Almost as soon as the bungalow was theirs they came up with ideas to extend and improve it to better suit their tastes and requirements, but the proposed project quickly turned out to be significantly more complicated than they'd expected.

"Our first and biggest mistake was to employ and place our trust in a recommended architect who had previously worked in the local council's planning department," says Simon. "He encouraged us to submit a totally inappropriate application, advising us that there was



The roof is adorned with handmade clay tiles, supplied by Sahtas, to achieve an authentic, classic country look

"We learned that it's possible to harness an interest in property, design and DIY, coupled with passion and commitment, to succeed in creating a beautiful home"



A navy blue AGA range cooker complements the kitchen's traditional country feel

no need to discuss it with the council first. However, the design was totally outside planning policy and it was therefore immediately rejected. We felt we had no choice but to end our relationship with him and take control of the scheme ourselves."

After this shaky start, the couple met with the local planning department to glean a fuller understanding of the restrictions involved when building in an AONB. They quickly realised that they would only be able to develop a house that suited their needs whilst also keeping the council happy by knocking the bungalow down and rebuilding from scratch. Simon and Karen soon began planning what their dream home would look like, and they both loved the idea of constructing a modern, oak frame abode. After visiting a number of self build exhibitions, they decided to hire oak frame specialists, Oakwrights, to design and create the structure.

A full-time job

Simon decided to manage the project himself, which he soon learnt was a full-time occupation thanks to all the research and organisation duties involved. Karen also helped out, with friends and family often pitching in as well – particularly when it came to shopping around for quotes before hiring professionals.

After sourcing four different estimates for the groundworks, the couple chose Surrey Excavations for the job. Finally, 14 months after moving in, the original bungalow was demolished and Simon and Karen moved into a static caravan on-site as work got underway. Things began smoothly, but there were still some minor setbacks along the way. "We had a slight hiccup early on, as it turned out we should have got the National House Building Council (NHBC) warranty inspector to sign off some second phase pre-foundation footings work. Unfortunately, this meant there were a few delays because he didn't see the floor void before the base was laid," says

Simon. "However, we managed to satisfy their queries and proceed. This was a good example of us learning on the job."

Building a future

The house was to be a characterful green oak post and beam structure, with a mix of brickwork – carefully selected to appear as though it had been reclaimed – oak weatherboarding and handmade clay roof tiles for the external finishes. "The Oakwrights team was an absolute delight to work with from start to finish," says Simon. "From delivery through to a complete, erected frame, you have the skeleton of your house up in about four days."

The couple worked with Oakwrights' in-house architectural design team to draw up the plans. Not wanting to get tripped up by any red tape when it came to Building Regulations, they also hired BBS Building Control for additional guidance. However, the project was still signed off by the local authority's building control officer rather than one of the company's approved inspectors.

The only issue they faced at the early stages was with the delivery of the frame. As it transpired, the single track lane leading to the plot was too narrow for the huge haulage lorry. Luckily this was quickly sorted out by using a smaller transfer vehicle to access the plot.

With the frame erected, bricklaying, roofing and first fix carpentry got underway. However, poor weather soon slowed progress down considerably. Unfortunately for Simon and Karen, it just happened to be the worst winter in 40 years and there were many delays on site due to heavy snowfall. "The poor conditions even forced us out of our static caravan, which was frozen solid," says Karen. "We planned to stay with some close friends who lived locally for a couple of days, but this ended up turning into two weeks."

Although they took on a large portion of the work themselves, Simon and Karen discovered that the overall outlay for the build still

WE LEARNED...

PLAN YOUR LANDSCAPING in advance. If we were to do a self build again we would consider this aspect in greater detail before starting work on site, so factors like the movement of earth could be more effectively organised.

RESEARCH IS KEY and we utilised magazines like *Build It*, visited relevant shows and read books on house design, planning and Building Regulations.

COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR PLANNING OFFICER. Although the local department's interpretation of policy may sometimes be difficult to understand or predict, our recommendation would always be to meet and discuss your scheme with the planners.

CO-ORDINATING TRADES can be tricky for first timers. A key lesson we learnt is that tradespeople are mostly focused on their own tasks rather than the overall scheme. Without a detailed plan and oversight, there is a risk that their work can infringe on that of other professionals.

Below: The striking beams have been crafted using green oak – unseasoned wood that is still easy to work



escalated dramatically. The original budget was £300,000, but they ended up spending £400,000. One reason for this was because they opted for an oak frame structure (the additional expense of which is usually reflected in the finished value of a project) after mapping out their initial spending plan. They faced increased costs for the wall and roof insulation, as well as the extra landscaping required to fit a ground source heat pump. The couple also specified a larger rainwater harvesting system than originally planned.



The couple wanted to keep the decor neutral to make the characterful oak frame the focus

Going green

Simon and Karen wanted their home to be as energy efficient as possible, so they packed in plenty of insulation to boost the property's thermal credentials. They were also keen to incorporate some renewable technologies, and chose to install a ground source heat pump (GSHP) to power the underfloor heating (UFH). While both setups were supplied by Ice Energy, the couple decided to fit as much of the tech as possible independently.

Simon and Karen also specified a mechanical ventilation and heat recovery (MVHR) system. However, installing it themselves proved to be very tricky as the ducting needed to be laid in straight lines, and they couldn't cut holes in the oak beams to achieve this. As a result, a lot of extra work was required to get it into place.



In a bid to make the property as efficient as possible, the couple also opted for a rainwater harvesting system. All rainfall from the roof is directed into a 6,000L tank, which supplies the toilet cisterns, washing machine and outdoor taps. It is also used to water the fruit and vegetable patch Simon and Karen have planted.

Despite learning on the job, the couple stress the effort was all worth it in the end. "The GSHP and UFH are an absolute delight to live with, as we have constant hot water and an even temperature across the whole house, within a radiator-free environment," says Simon. "The MVHR is probably not as efficient as it could be due to the ducting complications, but having vented air throughout the dwelling is very pleasant. It also means we didn't need to worry about installing any window vents." An attractive Euroheat log-burning stove in the lounge complements the overall heating setup.

A look inside

The ground floor of the house has a bright, spacious feel thanks in large part to the high, arched ceiling in the lounge. This flows through into an expansive open-plan kitchen diner, which also doubles up as a pleasant family room. Upstairs, there is a vaulted hall and landing area providing access to the master bedroom, which leads to a dressing room and ensuite. There's a small amount of loft storage as the ceiling height here is low, since the house is a one-and-a-half storey dwelling to satisfy planning conditions, which were based on the elevation of the bungalow that originally occupied the site.

Simon and Karen have kept the overall decor fairly subtle so the striking oak frame remains the main focus. "We weren't attracted to gimmicks in construction or materials, because in our view these often prioritise design over substance," says Simon. "We wanted to try and create a classic yet contemporary look, working with the natural character of the exposed oak structure."



A walk-in wardrobe provides plenty of space to stash away clothes and shoes



Beautiful surroundings

Looking back at their self build experience, one of the biggest lessons the couple took away was that they should have considered the exterior landscaping before construction work began on site. The task turned out to be a much greater challenge than originally anticipated, partly because moving earth was more difficult so late in the process.

Karen had previously given Simon the gift of a garden landscaping training course for his birthday, so he wanted to put his skills to good use by doing the work himself. He planned and designed an elevated path to the front and rear of the house and laid an Indian sandstone walkway with brick walls that matched the property. Simon also constructed part of the patio and decking and fitted the outside electrics and lighting. He chose to employ professionals to lay bricks for some of the retaining walls, patio and drive, as his daughter's wedding was on the horizon and they planned to host a garden party at the new house.

One element the couple are particularly pleased with is that they finally convinced their neighbour (who actually no longer lived at her property) to cut down the huge row of trees that had been concealing their spectacular view of the North Downs. "The best investment in terms of both time and money was to negotiate with the individual's representative to arrange for a tree surgeon to remove the specimens that obscured the magnificent outlook," says Simon. "It's now a daily delight for us to behold!"

Simon and Karen finally left their static caravan to move into their new home in November 2010, as soon as the heating system was completed. While the build wasn't finished at this point, the couple

closer look

Space & light...

Making clever use of space is important in an open-plan home. Simon and Karen created a Harry Potter-style cupboard under the stairs to house their dog's toys and store extra wine. They also invested in a space-saving fridge from the Corner Fridge Company, and while this wasn't the cheapest option it sits far more comfortably in its environment than a conventional appliance. It can house anything that a larder or fridge might hold because it features an air-conditioning system that cools the unit without the moisture associated with a normal refrigerator. Opting for glazed bifolds instead of solid doors between the kitchen-diner and living room has maintained the open-plan feel – whilst allowing the two zones to be partitioned off as and when required.



Internal bifolds

were able to continue work on the project whilst living there. The majority of the house was ready by April 2011 and the scheme was signed off by NHBC for warranty purposes in December that year.

So, after residing in a caravan for 18 months – during one of the coldest winters in half a century – was it all worth it? Simon admits that at times it was difficult to sustain the project's momentum. "Our temporary living quarters also had to serve as a place for Karen to work from," he says Simon. "But we learned that it's possible to harness an interest in property, design and DIY, coupled with passion and commitment, to succeed in creating a beautiful, individual home we can enjoy for years to come."

£ TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

Elements	Cost m ²	Cost %	Total cost
Preliminaries (planning, caravan, storage, insurance, services etc)	£89	6%	£25,000
Foundations	£106	7%	£30,000
Scaffolding	£18	1%	£5,000
General building materials	£18	1%	£5,000
Oak frame	£190	13%	£53,500
Bricks (materials & labour)	£78	6%	£22,000
Roof (tiles, fittings & labour)	£92	7%	£26,000
Timber (stud walls and weatherboarding materials)	£106	8%	£30,000
Windows, doors & ironmongery	£149	11%	£42,000
Carpentry (first fix)	£66	5%	£18,500
Joinery & fittings	£14	1%	£4,000
Insulation	£32	2%	£9,000
Flooring	£44	3%	£12,500
Plumbing (materials, fittings & labour)	£52	4%	£14,500
Electrics (materials & labour)	£41	3%	£11,500
Plastering (materials & labour)	£44	3%	£12,500
Heating (inc. fireplace, log burner, GSHP & UFH)	£51	4%	£14,500
Rainwater goods (harvesting system/guttering)	£23	2%	£6,500
Mechanical ventilation & heat recovery system	£9	<1%	£2,500
Decorating	£5	<1%	£1,500
Kitchen/utility (units, AGA, corner fridge)	£83	6%	£23,500
Wardrobe	£3	<1%	£1,000
Garage	£34	2%	£9,500
External works (landscaping, paving, driveway, gates)	£71	5%	£20,000
Grand total			£400,000



Floor plans



House plans re-created using Build It 3D Home Designer software. www.buildit.co.uk/3dsoftware

Useful contacts



DESIGN & OAK FRAME **Oakwrights** 01432 353353 www.oakwrights.co.uk
 BUILDING REGULATIONS **BBS Building Control** 01892 891282 www.bbsbuildingcontrol.co.uk **GROUNDWORKS Surrey Excavations** 01372 456839
SCAFFOLDING Gemini Riteway Scaffolding 01403 255102
 WEATHERBOARDING **EW Timber** 01730 816941 www.englishwoodlandstimmer.co.uk **UK Oak** 01536 267107 www.uk-oak.co.uk **BRICKS Hoskins** 01954 268075 www.hoskinsbrick.com **BRICKLAYERS Southern Area Brickwork** 07960 959310 www.southernareabrickwork.co.uk **ROOF TILES Sahtas** 01908 311411 www.sahtas.co.uk **GUTTERING Yeoman Rainguard** 0113 279 5854 www.rainguard.co.uk **RAINWATER HARVESTING RainWater Harvesting** 0800 074 7234 www.rainwaterharvesting.co.uk **WINDOWS, DOORS & STAIRS Chittleburgh Joinery** 01482 624080 www.chittleburgh.co.uk **INSULATION SIG Insulation** www.siginulation.co.uk **HEATING & VENTILATION SYSTEMS Ice Energy** 0808 145 2340 www.iceenergy.co.uk **Nuaire** 029 2085 8200 www.nuaire.co.uk **LOGBURNING STOVE Euroheat** 01885 491100 www.euroheat.co.uk **BUILDER'S MERCHANTS Chandlers** www.chandlersbs.co.uk **Travis Perkins** www.travisperkins.co.uk **Pennyhill Timber** 01483 486739 www.pennyhilltimber.co.uk **PLUMBING MERCHANTS City Plumbing** www.cityplumbing.co.uk **B&P Superstore** 020 8684 7007 www.bpsuperstore.co.uk **SANITARYWARE Roca** www.uk.roca.com **Pura** 01892 611240 www.purabathrooms.com **ELECTRICS QVS Direct** 0800 197 6565 www.qvsdirect.com **Hamilton** 01747 860088 www.hamilton-litestat.com **Eglo** www.eglo.com **OAK SANDBLASTING Farrow Eco Systems** 0151 342 4454 www.farrowecosystems.co.uk **IRONMONGERY Handles4Doors** 01252 786510 www.handles4doors.co.uk **Clayton Munroe** 01803 865700 www.claytonmunroe.com **TRAVERTINE FLOOR & WALL TILES Marblemosaics** 01273 891144 www.marble-mosaics.com **FLOORING & SKIRTING Oak Floors Online** 0800 043 3073 www.oakfloorsonline.co.uk **OAK VENEER FOR WARDROBES Lawcris** 0113 2177 177 www.lawcris.co.uk **KITCHEN UNITS Handmade Kitchens** 01202 475515 www.handmadekitchens-direct.co.uk **UTILITY UNITS DIY Kitchens** 01977 608 418 www.diy-kitchens.com **KITCHEN GRANITE Granite Worktop Solutions** 07730 598764 www.graniteworktopolutions.co.uk **CORNER FRIDGE Corner Fridge Company** 03333 702547 www.cornerfridge.com **COOKER AGA** 0845 712 5207 www.agaliving.com **PAVING Stone Traders** 01483 472521 www.stone-traders.co.uk **GARAGE Just Oak** 01223 969336 www.just-oak.co.uk **GATES & GARAGE DOORS Lincswoodline** 01724 865 151 **STRUCTURAL WARRANTY NHBC** 0344 633 1000 www.nhbc.co.uk