



DIARY OF A SELF-BUILD

1: Foundations

We follow the progress of Lee Manning and Mike Ellis as they build their own home

Lee Manning is well placed to build his own house – he is Financial Director of Carpenter Oak Ltd, near Totnes. He is also a trained chef and a fully qualified pilot. Oh, yes and an accountant... at 33! A quirky, gutsy character, brim-full with enthusiasm, Lee is also a tireless and thorough researcher with a keen eye for a 'deal'.

His partner, Mike Ellis, is a trained military nurse and teacher, who currently owns and runs community care company Platinum Plus Healthcare. Mike is happy to defer to Lee when it comes to building and finance. Jake the chocolate lab and Alfie the Springer complete the team.

How is it you come to be building your own home?

I started checking out the Rightmove website every day at our 10.30 coffee break, for building sites or derelict houses to knock down. This became an addiction and went on for years! Then one day in February there it was... a pretty ¼-acre site for £120k in Kingsteignton. It had been on the market for six months with 12 offers, all of which had fallen through. The price must now have dropped into my bracket. By pure chance we had hit both the market and this plot at the right moment. Serendipity indeed!

How did you secure it?

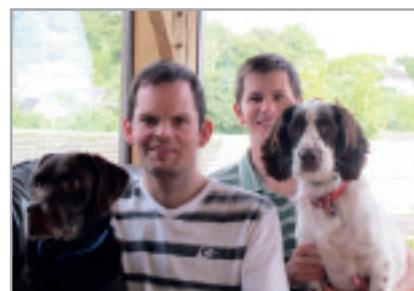
I dashed round to see the site – perfect! Grabbed the phone and contacted mortgage providers to get an immediate agreement in principal for a self-build mortgage – no problem there! Put in an offer of £100k! Two days later we had a final agreed price of £110k and to secure this I offered a £1,000 non-refundable deposit plus any expenses they incurred should we pull out – and we agreed on a 3-month completion date.

Plain sailing?

I now needed to persuade a rather anxious Mike that, of course, we could afford it. Then I set about attending to planning and visiting the neighbours! We had been told that the existing planning design was not a popular solution with the immediate neighbours, so armed with my objectives for a new design, I listened to their objections. All our subsequent drawings and final plans took these into account – building relationships is a key element to a successful build.

What next?

As we didn't like the original house plan either, this was the moment to meet our architect, Mike Hope, who heads the architectural partnership Roderick James



Architects LLP, based in Totnes. So I took my sketch of a three-bay traditional barn house, an economical solution but falling a bit short of my dream. "Lovely design, Lee, but aren't you missing an opportunity here?" said Mike, whose buzzword of the moment is 'eco pragmatism'. Mike is one of those rare and clever architects who exude charisma and tremendous enthusiasm for cutting-edge design. He convinced me it should be a contemporary timber frame structure, which was dramatic but also efficient in form to maximise internal space and light.

Planning was received on 5 August and the foundations are now laid. □

SHONA MORLEY

Follow the build, and ask questions on Lee's blog at timberframehouse.eu. Next time we look at costs, materials, systems and more. carpenteroak.com; rjarchitects.co.uk



DIARY OF A SELF-BUILD

2: Raising the roof

We track the progress of Lee Manning and Mike Ellis as they build their own home...

Lee, how's the build going?

To be honest, this stage has been very stressful and exhausting, with setbacks and seemingly insurmountable problems, but finally things came good and excellent news came our way!

What was the first setback?

The government! The solar energy photovoltaic (PV) feed-in tariff debacle which I will expand on later, but as my financial plans were based on this advantage we were now forced to bring the whole project forward by three weeks. Thankfully Carpenter Oak put four extra carpenters on to the job to rush it along. The frame went up without a hitch over two days, three weeks ahead of schedule.

Frame-raising is a breath-taking experience and I wanted to be part of the adventure, so I rolled up my sleeves and donned a hard hat. The oak frame is an entirely internal structure. All roofing, glazing insulation and cladding are laid over the frame, and for this we are using a SIPS insulation system.

What are SIPS?

Structural Insulated Panels (SIPS) are a prefabricated construction system which provide insulation. Cost-effective, energy-efficient and flexible. In two weeks you can be watertight and warm. Our stress levels were raised once again due to a miscommunication and late delivery, putting us behind schedule. All credit to SIPS Industries that they pulled

out the stops to turn it around, and the last section of roof was fixed into place and covered in a green felt breathable membrane on schedule by 3 December. But by now we were tantalisingly close to the PV deadline of 12 December.

You mentioned feed-in tariffs. What was the problem?

Out of the blue at the end of November, the Government announced that the generous feed-in tariff cut-off date would be brought forward from April 2012 to 12 December 2011. This sent thousands of building projects (and the solar industry itself) into disarray. For us it seemed impossible to be able to build a house plus a roof on which to fit PV panels, which in turn would be connected to the electric grid, all in 5 weeks...

We had slumped to our lowest point when, with four days to spare, the solar panels arrived - but they were too big for our roof! The new panels arrived a few days later and so, thanks to all our suppliers and Western Power, we did achieve the near-impossible with a hair-raising four hours to spare!

What builder are you using?

Palm Construction, based in Torquay, completed our ground works and have proved to be efficient, professional, polite and tidy. We are now more than happy for them to complete the internal works and external render.

How is the all-important budget going?



Well, we were down £4K after having to build a second retaining wall on the insistence of the farmer whose field sits above the site. We have so far recouped half of this expense by making changes to the landscaping. On the positive side, however, the weather was perfect and the rain held off until the building was watertight.

But the best news of all (and here the government have redeemed themselves), they have given the go-ahead for the Kingskerswell by-pass which has been in discussion since 1951! This is a major project linking Newton Abbot to Torquay with a dual carriageway thereby alleviating our chronic local traffic jams. □

Lee Manning is Financial Director of Carpenter Oak Ltd

SHONA MORLEY





DIARY OF A SELF-BUILD

3: The eco-conscious decisions

We track the progress of Lee Manning and Mike Ellis as they build their own home...

Lee, in the March issue you talked about the mad scramble to get PVs on your roof in time. Has it all been worth it?

Well, the government had to renege on its attempt to bring forward the generous feed-in tariff cut-off date, so all those headaches were generated for nought. However, in terms of electricity generation, we are far exceeding the rough annual estimate of £700 pay-back and have received our first quarter's cheque for £448 already, so the whole exercise has definitely been worth it! Our house to take maximum advantage of the sun in both the direction it faces and the optimum 35 degree angle of the roof.

You describe the house as 'eco', was it hard to evaluate what to choose?

Yes! Deciding which eco-technologies are worthwhile you have to first wade through a minefield of 'eco-bling' claims and 'greenwash' – and I am a technogeek! I like to bear in mind my trusted architect Mike Hope's buzzword 'eco-pragmatic', which I translate as: at every stage consider the ecological question against the cost and ultimate enjoyment of the investment.

Can you give us an example?

Preferring beautiful, sustainable, solid wood flooring we have instead opted for the cheaper, less eco, laminate flooring downstairs, and to offset that eco-horror, upstairs we have chosen a doggie-proof carpet, partly made of corn and using an environmentally conscious production. This comes with a 100% stain-free guarantee. We watched Mohawk's demo video at Birmingham Zoo where a 2,800 pound Rhino stomps, paces and poos on the carpet, which is then magically restored to its former glory with a little elbow grease and water. We are trying to achieve as close to Passivhaus standard as possible.

Can you expand?

It's a term originating in Germany which roughly defines how to reach thermal



comfort without the need of a traditional heating system, achieved through the heating and cooling of fresh air mass. We have installed a Danish micro air source heat pump. There are two pumps – one for hot water and the other to operate the heat recovery system which works to heat in winter and cool in summer maintaining a constant temperature within. Described as the 'fit and forget' technology, it lowers your fuel bills and carbon emissions. And it is very cheap to run. Two solar thermal panels on the south hip adds more heat to the water, and when you add triple glazing from Devonshire Windows, then we are edging very close to the coveted Passivhaus standard.

What about lighting? I am rather sceptical about low voltage lighting!

Perhaps the most overlooked 'green' saving in your home is lighting. Clearly a big advantage when building from new is to have a personally designed lighting scheme. LEDs are much warmer these days and nearer their high voltage equivalent in quality. We will have 110 lights, which if all on at the same time will

use less than 300 kw hours.

So, Lee this self-build seems all too easy – there must have been a setback or two?

Well, OK, we did have one disaster which held us up a month or so. The layers of external render, some days after application, developed a strange undulated appearance, and on closer inspection we also discovered alarming-looking cracks! Clearly the render and wire mesh would all have to be removed and re-applied, but who or what was responsible... the design, the SIPs, the render mix, the application? Who would pay and whose head would roll? After several days of a circular 'not guilty' argument, I called in an independent expert and several weeks later the guilty verdict fell on the 'sun'. Hardly credible in a Devon spring but simply a case of drying too fast!

My other annoyance is the plant room with its chaotic morass of wiring, plugs and cables. How to plaster and where to put our utility appliances may seem minor to others, but to us it was a sizeable headache! Perhaps the by-product of our noble 'green' efforts – let's call it 'greenwaste'.

Every eco-conscious individual needs an extravagance. What is yours?

OK, I have fed my techno-weakness with the purchase of a super Samsung TV with face, voice and gesture recognition – to be financed by Mike's overtime efforts! But we feel this has been offset by our choice of eco-mobile, our new Nissan electric car, which when plugged into our personally generated electricity will cost less than 2p per mile! Well, that's the theory, and we need to go carefully as there is only one 'filling' station in the SW within range!

Lee and Mike are moving in during August and they'd like to invite anyone with a self-build timber-frame project interested in a visit to give Lee a call at Carpenter Oak Ltd on 01803 732900.

SHONA MORLEY