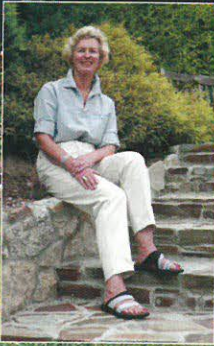


The house is built on the site of a small wooden cottage that Sandra and her husband Dick had lived in for 30 years. The main oak frame cost £60,000, with the additional family room frame adding £18,000 to the budget.

Hillside Hideaway

Building a new oak frame home on a sloping site





Words: Debbie Jeffery
Photography: Nigel Rigden

Sandra Metcalfe and her late husband Dick built a new oak framed house on a perilously steep riverside site using reclaimed materials and bags of ingenuity.

“It was 1969 when my husband Dick and I purchased a small house on a sheer, three-acre site overlooking the river,” says Sandra Metcalfe. “We were in our early twenties, expecting our second child and had very little money, but we borrowed the £6,000 asking price with a view to replacing the dilapidated property in the future. The location was magical, despite the fact that the land was overgrown with brambles, and our children grew up playing in the river and woodland.”

The Metcalfes lived in the wooden house, which was clad in cedar shingles, for 30 years. For much of that time they worked abroad, but always returned to their Cornish hideaway for several months of the

year, gradually taming the surrounding land. Although the property is situated close to a small hamlet, it is completely private, perched on a steeply sloping site which drops down to a tributary below.

“The house had a lovely feel to it, but was fairly small, with just two rooms downstairs,” Sandra continues. “We used to bring up our own water using a wind-driven watermill, and if the wind didn’t blow for a while, we didn’t have any water and would send our boys down to wash in the river!”

Five years ago, the couple decided to realise their dream of demolishing the wooden house and rebuilding on the site. They employed an architect to draw up plans, but were not completely comfortable



Vivid blue hand-painted kitchen units with black granite worktops complement the terracotta floor tiles in the kitchen and pantry

Hillside Hideaway



“I feel extremely proud that we managed to complete the house against all the odds.”

An open plan living and dining room is located on the first floor, overlooking the river below.

with his designs. “I saw a television programme featuring some oak framed houses designed by the architect Roderick James, and was smitten,” says Sandra. She and Dick contacted Roderick and visited some of his houses in person. “We just knew that an oak house would sit perfectly on our site, which is shaded by a huge oak tree.”

The couple worked with project architect Mike Hope, of Roderick James LLP, to design a house suitable for their remarkable site with living rooms on the first floor to make the most of the views and three bedrooms on the ground floor, which is partially dug into the hillside. The reverse level design is more than double the size of the original building. Although the first floor is oak framed, the ground floor is constructed using insulated cavity walls of blockwork clad in reclaimed granite.

Access to the site was a major problem and bringing a caravan down the driveway was perilous. “It was a strange day when we eventually moved into the static

caravan and demolished our home of 30 years,” Sandra remarks. “We stored some furniture in our wooden barn, and Dick converted an existing Nissen hut on the site into a kitchen and office, using materials taken from the demolished house. The previous owners had also lived in the hut while they built the wooden house, but the husband had died of a heart attack before the new house was finished. We could never have imagined how history would repeat itself.”

In addition to managing the various subcontractors, Sandra and Dick undertook as much of the physical building work as possible, with Dick keeping strict diaries of their progress. As a retired pilot, he was able to work full time on the build.

“We hired a JCB and undertook the groundworks ourselves,” Sandra recalls. “It was a huge task, because we were digging into solid granite. Delays resulted from trying out numerous pieces of machinery, but eventually the only option was to blast the site with dynamite. Luckily, we were able to save money by dumping the spoils on our own land to create terraces. Everything had to be carried by hand – it was too awkward even to use wheelbarrows.”

A conversation in the pub with other locals had led to Dick employing a carpenter and stonemason, who both proved indispensable throughout the project. They were the main two subcontractors, with Dick acting as a labourer and purchasing the materials. Reclaimed items have been used wherever possible. Granite blocks and lintels were supplied by a local farmer and sourced in reclamation yards; the old Delabole roof slates were all cleaned by Dick prior to fixing, and the pine floorboards in the study, lounge and dining room were reclaimed from a building in London and prepared by a sawmill.

“The house can be seen from the river, and we wanted it to literally melt into the plot and really complement these beautiful surroundings,” says Sandra. “By using old materials we were able to achieve an instantly aged, mellow appearance – although it didn’t actually save us any money in the long term. It was more about buying things which would add character, such as the blackened nail holes in the old floorboards, which I love. Even the gutters are made from wood and lined with lead, with copper downpipes from Scandinavia.”

The Metcalfes dedicated themselves to their building project but, tragically, Dick was never to see the work completed. He died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 59, part way through the build, leaving Sandra to cope with her bereavement and complete the project with the help of her youngest son, Ashley. At first, she could barely bring herself to walk down into the ground floor bedrooms.

Building on a Slope

Building on a sloping site almost always means additional build costs, but often leads to interesting design solutions. The main options are to ‘cut and fill’ to create a level site to build off, or to cut into the slope and create a semi-basement level. Another less common alternative is to build out from the slope on posts. For more information see *H&R* August '04: *Solutions for Sloping Sites*.



A granite hearth stands beneath the beam and block floor, and a contemporary wood stove is in the living room.



"Some of my last memories of Dick were working down there," says Sandra. "Even when he felt unwell, he would not give up, and I decided that I had to finish the house as we had planned for over 30 years. I wanted our grandchildren to learn to row on the river."

Glass had been fitted into the windows, the walls were being plastered and the couple had been about to put in the radon gas barrier prior to laying the underfloor heating. "I've always been very energetic and love gardening, so the hard labour didn't bother me," Sandra explains. "I had to choose many of the fixtures and fittings, and take over Dick's role as project manager, as well as tackling jobs such as applying three coats of fire retardant and two coats of paint to the boards cladding the ceilings."

The family's time spent living abroad had strongly influenced their choices. In addition to balconies and open plan living spaces, they have incorporated a wet room-style tiled bathroom – an idea they first experienced in Malaysia.

One of the most striking features is the main staircase. "From downstairs, it looks like the struts of an umbrella," Sandra remarks. It all adds to the impression of living in a tree house, perched high above the surrounding countryside. From upstairs the river appears to flow right up to the house, and the rooms look out over treetops.

"There are certain drawbacks to such a design," Sandra admits. "With so much glass, there's nowhere to hang pictures and fewer walls for accommodating furniture. Overall, however, it has turned out beautifully, and I feel extremely proud that we managed to complete the house against all the odds." ■

Fact File

NAME: Sandra Metcalfe

PROFESSION: Homemaker

AREA: Cornwall

HOUSE TYPE: Three bedroom house

HOUSE SIZE: 200m²

BUILD ROUTE: Subcontractors and DIY

CONSTRUCTION: Oak frame first floor

on granite-clad blockwork ground floor

FINANCE: Private

BUILD TIME: Jan '00 – Dec '02

LAND COST: £450,000
(estimated value)

BUILD COST: £300,000

TOTAL COST: £750,000

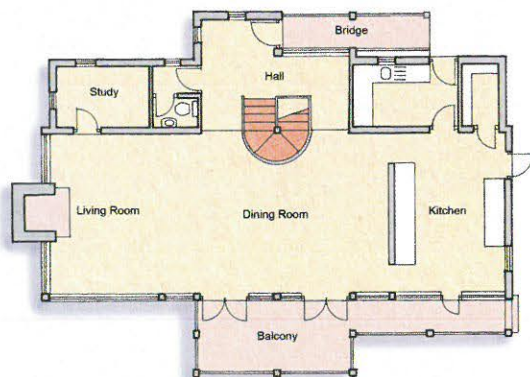
HOUSE VALUE: £1,000,000

COST/m²: £1,500

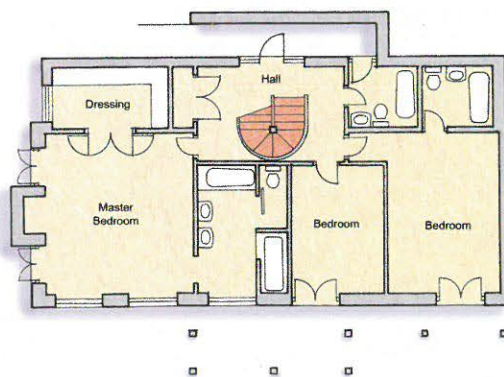
**25%
COST
SAVING**

USEFUL CONTACTS: **Architect** – Roderick James Architects LLP: 01803 722474; **Frame and stairs** – Carpenter Oak Ltd: 01803 732900; **Glass** – The Window Glass Company (Bristol) Ltd: 0117 977 9292; **Carpenter** – Steve Harvey: 01209 211411; **Roofer** – Ben Verry: 01326 561161; **Stove** – Wendron Woodstoves: 01326 572878; **Granite hearth** – Frederick Wearne & Sons: 01326 572794; **Door furniture** – Clayton Munroe: 01803 865700; **Ventilation and heat recovery system** – Villavent Ltd: 01993 778481; **External doors** – Devoran Joinery: 01872 863376; **Oak doors and kitchen units** – Paul Acton: 01326 314068; **Nero granite** – Morgan Masonry: 01872 870092; **Range cooker** – Lacanche: 01202 733011; **Underfloor heating** – Nu-Heat: 01404 549770; **Paints** – Farrow & Ball: 01202 876141

FLOORPLAN: The reverse level design ensures the main living and dining areas enjoy far reaching views, with a south-facing balcony. On the ground floor there are three bedrooms and three bathrooms, two of which are en suite.



First Floor



Ground Floor