

Overall Winner

WINNER ROB & ALITHEA DAWSON

The Wonder in the Woods

It's the ultimate self-build story. Rob and Alithea Dawson bought a 35-acre woodland site for £10,000 and spent seven years in a mobile home trying to get planning on it. They have eventually built themselves a remarkable home in oak on a DIY basis for just £98,500

Back in 1997, Rob and Alithea Dawson set off on an adventure that proved to be one of the most remarkable, against-the-odds self-build stories in recent history. They have broken almost every 'can't do' rule in self-building to create, by hand, a charming new energy-efficient home out of oak — in the middle of 35 acres they bought as woodland for just £10,000 in the beautiful Powys countryside.

The fact that they spent seven years living on the site in a 25-year-old mobile home — with three young children in tow, one of whom was born there — is just the start. "We were living in Bristol at the time and had a very clear vision that we wanted to build our own home," explains Rob. "We had dreamed of living in the countryside for some time but, in truth, money was always a barrier. We came across the site — it consisted of 35 acres of forestry clear-fell on the Welsh hills, with no prospect of planning permission, no tracks to it and no power, but it had great views and its own Iron Age hill fort — all for £10,000." ▶

A decade-long achievement
Rob and Alithea's new home was two years in the building (they built the vast majority of it themselves) and seven years in the planning. It consists of an oak frame wrapped in a softwood outer frame which is clad in larch

Words: Jason Orme
Photography: Simon Denison





ROB & ALITHEA'S SELF-BUILD
Construction Oak frame
Size 220m²
Dates April '07 – April '09
Build Route DIY
Plot Cost £10,000
Build Cost £98,500
Value on Completion £400,000

Rob and Alithea took a punt and spent the next three years clearing the site, getting rid of the brash and restocking the area with over 35,000 broad-leaves – predominantly hazel – to establish a coppice for future income. “Persuading the planners to let us build was another matter,” explains Alithea. “There was obviously a range of barriers against us simply being able to build here but, from day one of our initial contact with the local planners, they were immensely supportive. They could see that we were committed, that we weren’t in this for a quick profit and to then move on – this would always be our home for life – and so they guided us down the agricultural business route. They gave a temporary five-year planning permission for us to live on the site in a mobile home while we set up an organic woodland pig business, selling our produce at local farmers’ markets.”

So, some eight years after buying the plot, and having already spent five years on site in a mobile home, the family were finally granted outline planning permission, with an agricultural tie but no restrictions on the footprint, to build themselves a fully functioning family home. “Having been around the forest and enjoyed the timber for so long, we became convinced that an oak frame home was the way forward,” says Rob. “And so I had to learn all about that. I went down to spend a week on one of Dan Franklin’s legendary timber framing courses in

Somerset, which gave me a good grounding in the principles of timber frame buildings, and experience and confidence in how to manipulate timber using ancient hand tools.”

With some idea of the basics, Rob and Alithea set about designing the house themselves, using magazines and exhibitions for inspiration and settling on an open plan L-shaped layout with a wonderful vaulted living space upstairs to enjoy the views, and a clever flare to the roof pitch. “We came up with the whole design ourselves and employed a local architect to guide us through the planning process. Once permission had been granted, I came up with a cutting list [the specification for all the timber required] and sent it off to a farm in France and waited for delivery. We got a friend with a digger to dig the footings while we poured the concrete in the meantime, with an archeologist on a watching brief, owing to the history of the site.

It was exciting to see things progressing after so long.”

The lorry-load of oak cost £11,000. “There was a huge satisfaction in doing the vast majority of the work ourselves, but it was really borne out of necessity more than anything else. We would have probably used one of the well-known oak frame suppliers but they were out of our league.” ▶

Above: Natural beauty
 Rob and Alithea’s home is clad in larch, which was sourced from a local estate as logs and milled on site by Rob. The house, self-designed by Rob and Alithea with key drawings produced by a local architect, is based on barn style with a flared eaves detail — common to Colonial-style architecture

Opposite: Budget windows
 The windows consist of 3” air-dried slabs of French oak, which were machined and sent off to a local joiner to be made. They were glazed on site, with the whole job costing around £6,000

“There was a huge satisfaction in doing so much of the work ourselves”



“When it arrived I began the lengthy process of cutting and scribing it all myself, and joining it all together — completely with handmade oak pegs. We shaped all the curved timbers ourselves, following the grain to create some interesting shapes. That took some three months in total. The raising of the frame was a great occasion. I enrolled eight friends to help out — and a crane — and by the end of the day, as nightfall struck, it was up and in place.” Rob learnt so much from the process that he decided to set up his own oak framing company, Castle Ring Oak Frame, to supply oak and build oak frame houses for others.

The oak frame has been clad in another softwood stick-built frame to help with another key priority for Rob and Alithea, namely to create an energy-efficient home. The outer frame has been filled with 200mm of Warmcel (insulation made from recycled newspaper) and sheathed in a 22mm insulative Bitroc board (made from wood fibre and a brilliant insulator). There’s also Tri-iso multi-foil insulation placed above the rafters to create a warm roof. Couple this with a ground-source heat pump and underfloor heating and it’s very much a house of low impact. The water supply is sourced from a spring on site.

“We shaped all the curved timbers ourselves”

The resulting house — completed in April 2009 after two years on site and coming in at £1,500 under the original £100,000 budget — is not just a miracle of conception, but a beautiful home in its own right. It has a distinct barn-like feel and the larch cladding, sourced from a local estate and milled on site, will fade to grey to make this home truly at one with the

1 & 2: Timbers full of character This type of frame is based around beautifully curved sling braces (the long diagonals). The first floor living room enjoys the views and features a woodburning stove from Taltrees Stoves. Some of the infill panels have been left open to the adjoining bedrooms





3 & 4: It's efficient, too The house has pretty impressive eco credentials, packed with Warmcel insulation and underfloor heating powered by a ground-source heat pump. Total energy bills are £600 a year. Floor slates are from Slateability

USEFUL CONTACTS: Larch logs Bernard Dodd: 01547 528910 Timber frame course Dan Franklin of Wooden Ways: 07970 969856 Oak Frederic Madeline: 0033 61800 6154 Sandblaster Lee Jarrett: 07830 305246 Frame and erection Castle Ring Oak Frame: 01547 560231 Warmcel insulation Pen y Coed: 01938 500643 Saw milling Paul Bufton: 07813 469408 Roofer Mid Wales Roofing: 07968 744816 Roof/floor slates Slateability: 01686 628062 Joinery Dave Pearce: 01597 840302 Underfloor heating Thermalfloor Systems: 0845 062 0400 Oak flooring John Boddy: 01423 320214 Woodburner Taltrees Stoves: 01584 781361 Groundworks Stuart Ruell: 07977 593711 Electricians Granville Noel: 07816 786209 Plumbing/heat pump Mike Buckley: 07866 497604 Stone wall Saun Thomas: 01584 890403 Plastering Ian Yates: 01544 232768

woods. Inside, the curved braces of the oak frame give character. It's warm and cosy and very much a family home that anyone would dream of living in. It's a testament to Rob and Alithea's remarkable vision that they have made what must have seemed at times like a fantasy for them, with next to no budget and a bit of woodland, the most perfect reality.

Getting Planning Permission in the Woods

Gaining permission to build a new home anywhere outside of the existing settlement boundaries is practically impossible. Planners are, however, willing in some cases to grant permission for landowners to build a home for themselves as long as it is deemed essential for the support of an established, viable agricultural business and that the owners earn their living solely from agriculture or forestry. While this means that the 'building plot' can be bought at a massively reduced fee, it also limits the end value of the house built upon it. Whilst it is possible, in certain circumstances, to get the tie lifted, the local planning ►





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Warm roofs Tri-iso multi-foil insulation is packed behind the rafters to create warm roofs in the upstairs rooms, which are finished off with boarding

authority will require overwhelming proof that there is no longer any need for agricultural accommodation in the area and all attempts to sell the property at a reasonable market rate have failed. As a result, it can never be seen as a viable route to a cheap plot if the self-builder cannot genuinely commit to earning a living from the land. Even so, in Rob and Alithea's case, their home is still worth some £400,000 even allowing for the tie.

Why it Won

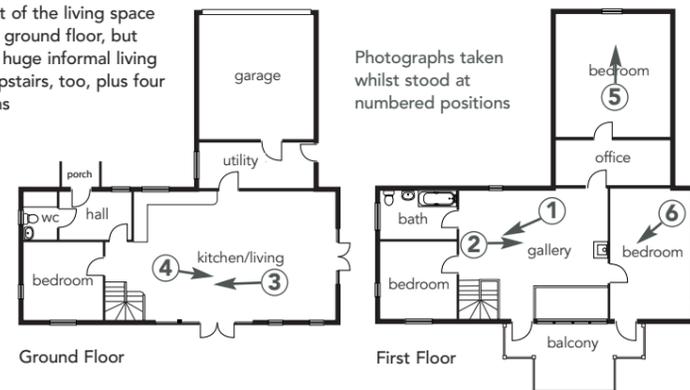
"We can have met few more determined self-builders over the 20-year lifetime of *Homebuilding & Renovating* than Rob and Alithea," comments judge and Editor-in-Chief Michael Holmes. "Their journey shows that it is, after all, possible to start off with practically nothing and end up with a home that is not just a huge financial asset but, more importantly, an absolutely perfect family home.

"Of course, there's no doubt that the time and effort – and not little degree of risk – that Rob and Alithea undertook wouldn't be for everyone. This self-build more than perhaps any other has been both the driver and result of a complete change of lifestyle over the best part of a decade. However few would question that Rob, Alithea and their family haven't benefitted hugely from taking this leap of faith.

"All of the judges felt that this achievement, coupled with the quality of the home, was outstanding." 🏠

Generous Space

The heart of the living space is on the ground floor, but there's a huge informal living gallery upstairs, too, plus four bedrooms



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