

CASE STUDY

A COUNTRY SAGA

When they finally moved into their grand timber-framed home in the heart of the Hampshire countryside, it was the end of a long road for the Curnow-Fords. Roseanne Field reports

RIGHT

The driveway leading up to the house and garage/office block, where the bungalow once sat



A winding, narrow lane leads to Peter and Debbie Curnow-Ford's home in the small village of Bramshott, Hampshire. The five-bedroom Potton house – which measures 374 m² internally – has a traditional style which fits perfectly with its rural location and despite its substantial size, sits comfortably in the 2.6 acre plot.

As you might expect, finding the ideal location for such a substantial house was no mean feat. "It took us over a year to find this project," recalls Debbie. The idea of building their own house had been in the couple's minds for some years – they first considered it back in the late 1990s. "We saw a piece of land, but the economics were not quite right," says Peter.

In the end, they took on a major renovation project on one of two 1780s Grade II listed gate lodges. However, 10 years later they were left with virtually no choice but to sell it. The owners of the new build property at the other end of the drive which the lodges were on had decided they wanted to purchase both lodges as well and made Peter and Debbie an offer they "seriously couldn't refuse," says Debbie.

This force of circumstance led the couple back to the search for their ideal home. "Every property we went to view, we came away with a list of alterations, extensions and modifications that would have cost in excess of a couple of hundred thousand pounds," Debbie explains. "We were dragging this poor builder around, and in the end he said 'with the money you're looking to spend why don't you just build your own house?'"

TAKE TWO

Naturally they were apprehensive, given that the last time they considered self-build, the "wheels

One of the main attractions of the site was that it came with existing planning permission to do an extension to the 1950s bungalow that occupied it

fell off". Nevertheless they began looking for projects and Debbie made contact with a 'reverse estate agent' who helps people find suitable properties. He was already searching in the area for another client so couldn't officially help them, but had a property of his own that he was looking to put on the market that he thought would suit what they wanted to do. "It was just fortuitous we ended up with this," Debbie says.

One of the main attractions of the site was that it came with existing planning permission to do an extension to the 1950s bungalow that occupied it. The bungalow was an added bonus for Debbie in particular, who had agreed to do a self-build on the condition that she "didn't have to live in a caravan!" However, Peter and Debbie were less than impressed by the existing plans, but looking back discovered almost everyone who had owned it in the last 15 years had put in a planning application – one of which was for a new build.

It was at this point they called in Potton – specifically Sean Adams, who at the time worked as planning and self build consultant for the company. He covered the south east, taking existing Potton plans and designs and adapting them to suit clients' requirements. They used one of these unbuilt designs as a starting point, making four months of changes before pressure from their buyer and their own concerns over losing the plot forced them to decide to go for it, "on the basis we were fairly confident we could get what we want," explains Peter.

They acquired the site in January 2011, did a

LOW POINT

Peter Curnow-Ford: Knowing we had planning and not being able to find a builder



HIGH POINT

Peter: Watching the timber frame go up
Debbie: Seeing the bungalow being crushed.
I hated that bungalow!



ABOVE LEFT

The family kitchen/breakfast room at the back of the house was the key element driving the design

LEFT

The master bedroom and its ensuite

pre-application in February to make sure everything would be OK, before submitting the final application in May and getting approval in August. "It wasn't too drawn out, but there were a couple of make or break moments," Peter says.

They had taken the plans round to show neighbours before submitting the application, and no-one had any issues – or so they thought. Once the application was in, one neighbour objected because the office above the garage would overlook her swimming pool. Peter jokes: "We did point out that there are no windows facing their property!" Nevertheless, the fact an objection had been submitted – even though it was dismissed – meant they were assigned a new case officer who had to start going through the plans from scratch.

They then realised there was a problem around how the planners were measuring their dimensions. "We were trying to tell them everyone in the housebuilding industry measures internal dimensions, but they were doing the external ones," explains Peter. Taking these measurements put their property over East Hants District Council's maximum of 400 m². "We had two choices, we either put in a change or stick to our guns, wait for it to be refused and know that

we would win on appeal," says Peter. "But that would have added 12 months to the timeframe plus meant additional costs."

They submitted a revision, separating the gym and garage/office block from the main house – both were originally to be attached, but in hindsight this "actually looks a lot better," says Peter.

AN UNEXPECTED HALT

After gaining approval, they undertook all the usual necessary surveys before beginning the hunt for builder in September 2011. What they didn't anticipate was that this would take a year, and they weren't ready to start work until November 2012. "The challenge we had was we weren't local to this area," says Debbie.

The builder they had taken round with them previously was based too far away, while others fell through for various reasons – one upped the price when they were ready to proceed, and another was reluctant to let Debbie and Peter have any involvement from a project management point of view.

Eventually they found someone and began work in what Peter describes as "an extremely wet winter." The bungalow sat right at the front of the plot so they had to completely dig out the



LEFT
The more formal living room is at the front of the house

FACING PAGE
The master bedroom looks out over the garden and features a Juliet balcony



area where the new house would sit. "We had to take all the topsoil off, store it at the back and take all the muck away – truck loads of it," Peter says. "It was so wet we had an 18 tonne digger here that was sinking."

Despite Mother Nature's best attempts and a slight delay while they waited for a concrete pump, they managed to get the beam and block foundations finished by January 2013. In February the timber frame was put up by Potton, who supplied all the materials and crew for the job and completed it within two months.

By April 2013 they were ready to start on the roof, exterior work and first fix, which went on longer than they anticipated and took them to September. "We bumped into a bunch of things," explains Peter. "We had to stop doing the rendering for three weeks because it's self-coloured and you've got a small window in terms of the temperature you can do that in."

Peter and Debbie took longer deciding on the right heating and hot water system. They visited several self-build trade shows before eventually deciding on underfloor heating upstairs and down. They also wanted to make sure they had enough hot water to supply the home's four bathrooms. They looked at various systems including ground source but the capital cost was too high, given that they also found gas down the road and therefore brought that up to the site. Explaining the system they eventually decided on, Peter says: "We've got a 500 litre tank in two parts – low temperature at the bottom, high at the top. Low does the underfloor heating, and high does the hot water." The tank has various inputs: Peter and Debbie have connected solar thermal – which Peter says is "brilliant" – and the gas boiler. It

also has the potential for solid fuel.

The process of installing the underfloor heating also caused some issues. The way Potton build means the first floor system has to be installed from underneath, but Peter recalls that the plumbers initially objected, saying they "don't do work above their head". He says it took about two or three months to get a 'yes' from them.

HYBRID DESIGN

Peter and Debbie's house was somewhat of a hybrid of three Potton homes which, say the couple, has consequently led Potton to offer a greater range of bespoke house designs. "The through-room – the family/kitchen/breakfast/utility room at the back of the house, was the initial driver behind the design," says Debbie.

The house had been designed to follow a 'heritage' template, which meant having structural timber posts in all the rooms – something they weren't keen on. Sean looked over the plans and said they could use the construction from another design but keep the 'heritage' design's style, leaving them with just two structural posts in the kitchen area and a beam that they wanted to keep. "It's almost a SIPs design," Peter explains. "We've got the timber frame, all the insulation but none of the compromise."

They also borrowed a feature from a barn that Potton were working on which Sean took them to see, installing a semi-vaulted ceiling in the master bedroom as opposed to a full A-frame, which they were reluctant to include in case their cats would use it as a climbing frame! Peter also found it useful to visit the barn as it allowed him to "see the construction methods and understand how all the services are run".



The house is rendered, over blockwork downstairs – which also features a false brick plinth – and upstairs over stainless steel lath. “We wanted a render because it’s Hampshire country style,” says Peter.

The house boasts a total of five bedrooms, three of which include ensembles – although the loft has been “prepped” should future owners wish to convert it to create a sixth and seventh bedroom and add another bathroom. The master bedroom, which features a south facing Juliet balcony, sits within its own suite which includes an ensuite with his and hers sinks plus a walk-in wardrobe, and a separate staircase that leads down into the family room.

Downstairs, guests are welcomed into a large double-height entrance with the stairs at the back leading up to a partially-galleried landing.

To the left are the formal dining and living rooms, while to the right the hallway leads to a small reading room and through to the kitchen/living family area.

Before making the big decisions, Peter and Debbie took their plans to a few local estate agents and asked for advice on what to include and where to hold back on spending, and where to splash out. “It was quite specific,” says Debbie. “An English oak painted kitchen and German or Italian sanitaryware, all white. No one can be offended by white!”

Deciding on a kitchen took six months and involved several companies, despite their relative flexibility on the style. “The only thing I insisted on was all the corners were rounded,” says Debbie. Sticking with the Hampshire country theme, they tried to source as many



products as they could locally, and the grey 'leathered' granite worktops came from "10 miles down the road." They used the same tiles throughout the kitchen/family area and hall, running alternating glazed and matt finish ones in the kitchen/family area, creating a checkerboard effect.

As part of fulfilling their planning consent they had to install 10 per cent renewables, and 75 per cent of the lighting had to be LED or equivalent. They have a smart lighting system installed throughout the house. "The technology was easy to get," says Peter. "Getting somebody to programme it was a lot harder!" They also installed up/down lighters outside which are computer-controlled so that they switch on automatically based on when the sun sets.

The back garden is on two levels, and the couple enlisted the help of a landscape designer to help with basic ideas, although they did all the planting themselves.

THE FINAL OBSTACLE

With the first fix work completed around September 2013, second fix began in October and was completed by March 2014, with Peter and Debbie moving into the house in April. However, unfortunately their journey didn't end there. "The builders were contracted to dismantle the bungalow," explains Debbie. "They'd started off great, but by this time, they were doing more property development so we'd find the sub-contractors were being dragged off to do that. So the bungalow stood outside the front door until

the following year."

Eventually Debbie managed to convince a hard landscaping firm to dismantle the building and then do the driveway. They removed the sanitaryware and windows, before pushing the roof through and the walls in, leaving a pile of rubble. "Instead of lorry-loading all that away, they crushed it and made it the foundation for the drive," Debbie explains. "We recycled the bungalow as far as we could." They also reinstalled its woodburner in the living room.

Challenges Peter and Debbie experienced throughout the project included adhering to Building Regs – "a continuous sticking point", and the fact that some of the trades "leave you despairing!" But despite the odd frustration, the couple have visions for their next project – and it's quite a contrast. "It would be glass, steel and concrete," says Debbie. It would also be smaller – they admit they want to downsize within the next 10 years. "People often ask why we built such a big house," Debbie says. "The plot lent itself to a family house – it was built as our home, but it was also built as an investment." ■

LEFT

The gym building sits adjacent to the house's carefully landscaped garden

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ARCHITECT/DESIGNER/ TIMBER FRAME

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