

FACT FILE

NAMES Chris & Christina Hughes**OCCUPATIONS** Company director & housewife. Christina worked in education before & during the build**LOCATION** Kent**TYPE OF BUILD** Self build**STYLE** Barn-style**CONSTRUCTION METHOD**
Timber frame**PROJECT ROUTE**

Potton house design. Chris split management responsibilities between himself and main builder

PLOT SIZE 1.4 acres**LAND COST** £480,000 (incl. services)**BOUGHT** 2015**HOUSE SIZE** 436m²
(incl. 96m² garage)**PROJECT COST** £510,000**PROJECT COST PER M²** £1,170**TOTAL COST** £990,000**VAT RECLAIM** £25,000**BUILDING WORK COMMENCED**

November 2015

BUILDING WORK TOOK

36 weeks

CURRENT VALUE

1,500,000

After dreaming about building their own house for more than 20 years, **Chris and Christina Hughes** have created a spectacular timber frame abode in rural Kent

WORDS AND PHOTOS **KATY DONALDSON**

Barn-style beauty



Chris and Christina Hughes had wanted to build their own home for over 20 years. Their dream of creating a house from scratch began back in 1997 when Chris bought a book by Rosalind Renshaw, who was the editor of *Build It* at the time. Thus began a journey which has now come full circle.

The couple had made several visits to the Potton show centre in St. Neots over the years, as well as attending plenty of shows like *Build It Live* and poring over various magazines. However, they were waiting for the right time – and more importantly, the right plot – to come along. Even though they hadn't secured a plot yet, in autumn 2014, they were in a situation for their self build adventure to begin.

The pair sold their home in Buckinghamshire, put all their belongings into storage and moved into a rental property nearby.

“Mutual support is key. Both Christina and I were passionate about creating a new home”



The large kitchen-diner is filled with natural light thanks to expansive glazing in this space

“We wanted to be in a position to be able to move quickly if and when we found the ideal site,” says Chris.

Spreading the net wide

The pair gave themselves a huge area in which to hunt for a suitable plot but were particularly drawn to the beautiful villages in Kent. In early 2015 they saw a small, old wooden house on a large site. Advertised on Rightmove, the property was situated just outside a picturesque village. It came with the advantage of having planning consent in place for the demolition of the existing dwelling, with a proposal to replace it with a large, Neo-Georgian-style house.

Chris and Christina immediately fell in love with the plot and spent six agonizing months negotiating to purchase it. With no immediate neighbours, yet still within walking distance of the village and all its amenities, the location was particularly special. The site was flat and its perimeter was fringed with mature hedging and trees. It came with a large pond, good access and consent already in place to build a 418m² house. Another advantage was the fact that the dwelling could be positioned right at the centre of the land and be enveloped by garden on all sides.

Blending in

Having secured their dream patch of land, Chris and Christina set about resubmitting a planning application with drawings for a new design put together by Potton. The proposal was for a smaller, barn-style house measuring 325m² that the pair thought would be a better fit with the rural location. Both the council and the locals were



Handleless kitchen units infuse the space with a sleek, stylish appeal

happy with the updated, sympathetic design, so the application sailed through planning with no issues.

Potton offers an eclectic range of house designs, from modern-looking schemes through to those with cottage-style charm. Each can be customised to create a bespoke home for the client – or you can use their bespoke architectural service. Chris and Christina opted for Potton's Wickhambrook model, which is reminiscent of a classic barn, similar to many of the traditional wooden agricultural buildings found across Kent. The pair chose to have the barn element as the central portion of the home, clad with oak from a local sawmill. The wings on either side would be dressed with Audley Antique bricks from TBS and a further single-storey component at the back, finished with render. Careful attention was paid to the appearance of the house from all sides, to ensure it remains in keeping with the rural surroundings.

False start

Chris was determined to be involved throughout the self build project. This meant frequent trips to the site, several times a week,



The dual aspect living room means the couple can make the most of the rural outlook

couple could immediately see the floorplan they'd so carefully planned would work out just as they had hoped.

The layout

The Hugheses wanted a light, airy house with spacious areas designed for sociable living. They were also keen to incorporate smaller zones for privacy and quiet moments. They achieved the former with the expansive vaulted kitchen and galleried hallway, and the latter with a cosy snug situated just off the kitchen. There's also a larger sitting room positioned on the other side of the hall, well away from the busier parts of the house.

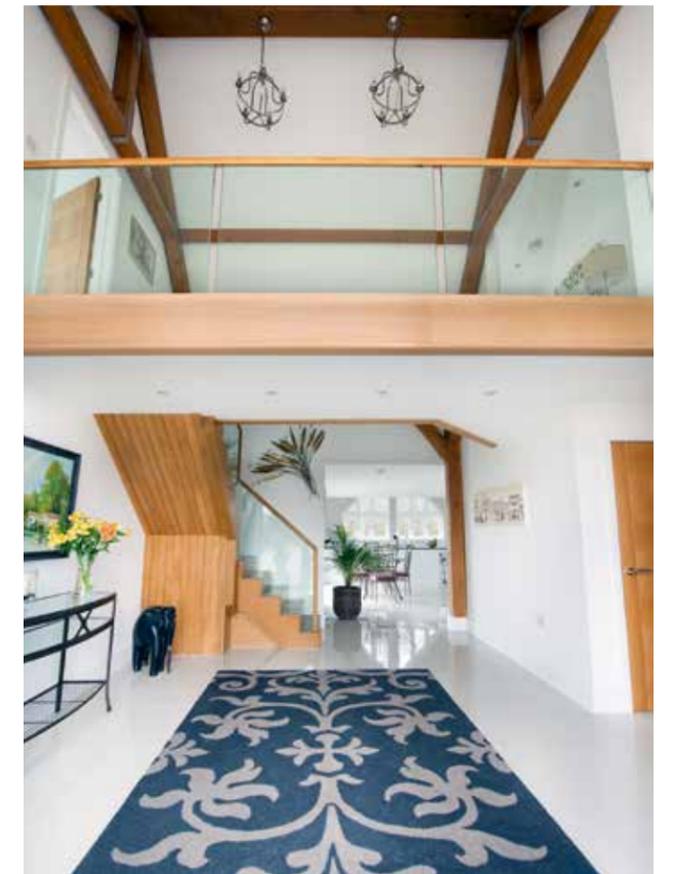
Upstairs, the three main bedrooms are in different wings of the property and all come with ensuite facilities. Chris and Christina have future-proofed their abode by incorporating additional living space, accessed via the kitchen, with a modest sitting room, kitchen

from the couple's rental home in Buckinghamshire. He took on the role of project manager in order to keep the costs down – and his first task was to find a good main contractor for the scheme.

He chose Matt Manwaring, a builder recommended by Potton. Chris handed the responsibility for key tasks over to Matt, starting with the groundworks. Trenches were dug out and the concrete poured to create the footings. However, the team were just about to start laying the beam and block foundations, ready for the timber frame, when they received an email from the planning compliance officer telling them to cease work immediately.

Chris had innocently believed that having full planning consent meant that construction work could begin. But he was unaware that every element of the finished house had to be officially signed off, including the roof tiles and the bricks, before work could get underway. “I spoke to the council, explained my honest mistake, and ate a bit of humble pie,” he says. “I tried to get permission to proceed but the council operates a strict framework, so all construction had to stop.” It took a frustrating 13 weeks to tick every box and have all the conditions discharged before work could begin again.

To add to the couple's woes, when they saw the initial footprint of the house, they were a little disappointed. “It seemed much smaller than we'd anticipated,” says Christina. “We were concerned we'd badly miscalculated.” However, once construction got back on track, things started to improve. When the timber frame was erected, the





Above: The galleried landing overlooking the spacious entrance hall is one of the house's most striking design features. Exposed timber beams are a nod to the agricultural style of the building

WE LEARNED...

ORGANISATION IS KEY. File everything carefully in a well-ordered way, and do it right from the start. You're going to be paying numerous invoices and end up with hundreds of receipts. You need every single one of these to claim the VAT back at the end of the project. You'll ultimately save yourself hours of stress if you're methodical about this.

RESEARCH IS IMPORTANT. There are lots of resources out there, from self build magazines like Build It through to workshops you can attend. Talk to people and visit exhibitions, which are invaluable. You can meet potential suppliers and find out about different building techniques.

EXPENSIVE FITTINGS are not the only means to creating a high-end look and feel to your home. We managed to strike a balance by taking advantage of some more affordable materials and products but using skilled tradesmen who could deliver an excellent finish. Invest in a high quality timber frame and windows, and then economise by choosing a more affordable kitchen.

SELF BUILDING is a team effort. It's important to have a shared goal if you're undertaking this type of project with a partner. It requires stamina and there will always be times when you need their support and enthusiasm.

and second staircase with an upstairs bedroom and bathroom. This has established a wonderful home-away-from-home for guests and may be useful for elderly relatives in the future. Likewise, this part of the house would also work well for grown-up children who want to live at home for a while but want the luxury of a separate zone that is distinct from the main accommodation. There's a sizeable zone off the main hall that Chris uses as his office. It has a shower room directly next to it, which could easily be transformed into a downstairs bedroom in the future, should the need arise.

Outside, there's a substantial garage with rooms above that could be turned into yet more accommodation in the future. The property is surrounded by expansive, flat lawns. Plus, there's a charming pond in one corner that's frequented by mallards and moorhens. It's an idyllic scene, and the couple are delighted to have achieved their dream house in such a picturesque location.

Closing the circle

Before embarking on their self build, the Hugheses had spent years thinking about what kind of home they wanted to create. During this period they did copious amounts of research. "Like anyone travelling down this road, we were hungry for knowledge," says Christina.

In hindsight, the couple realise they made some mistakes, such as underestimating the landscaping costs. However, they accomplished other things exceptionally well and Chris soon realised he was keen to find a way to share his experiences, helping others to create their dream home. So he set about documenting his own journey, from finding the plot and dealing with the planners through to managing the project to completion. The result is a book, *Self Build Insight*, due out this summer. It offers informative and practical advice to help others who are thinking about embarking on a project of their own. "If you know what to expect at each stage of the process you have a better chance of getting things right and minimising the risk



Easy-clean, wood-effect floor tiles from Amtico have been laid in the bathroom to infuse the space with contemporary character

of potentially expensive errors," he says. "While every project is different, I hope the principles in this book are helpful. I am happy for others to learn from my mistakes and successes."

For example, the couple were able to save a significant sum of money by taking on some of the work themselves. "Had we paid a builder for a turnkey scheme where they hand the keys over at the end, we would have expected to pay around £680,000 for the

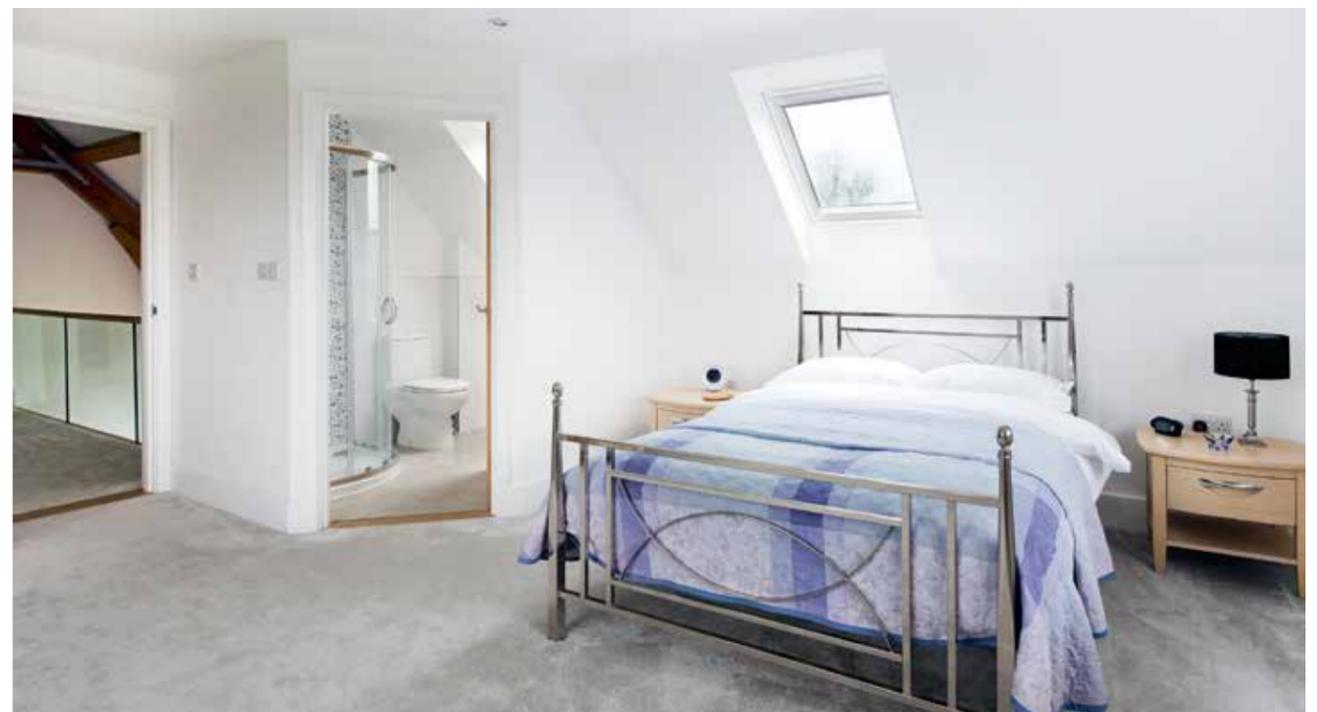


construction phase," he says. "However, we delivered our new home for closer to £510,000 by taking an active role in project management duties and sourcing materials."

The Hugheses were also delighted to be nominated for the annual LABC Building Excellence Awards in 2017 by the building control team. To their surprise, Chris and Christina even became one of the top 10 finalists for this in the South East.

Chris's book is a testament to the fact that it is possible for a couple to have full time jobs and project manage their own scheme. However, they stress that creating a self build home has to be a shared dream. "Mutual support is key," says Chris. "Both Christina and I were passionate about creating a new house 100 miles away from where we were living. For many months I was travelling to Kent two or three times a week, which meant I was often away."

The couple are now happily settled in their new home and have no intention of moving. "It would be very hard to beat this plot and house design," says Christina. "But if we were to do it again we may go for a contemporary style property, perhaps, with a sea view."



closer look

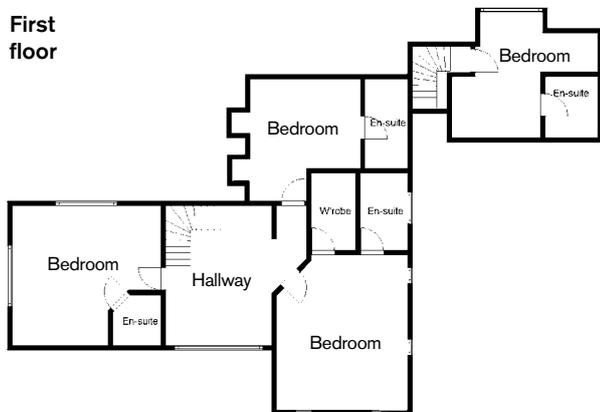
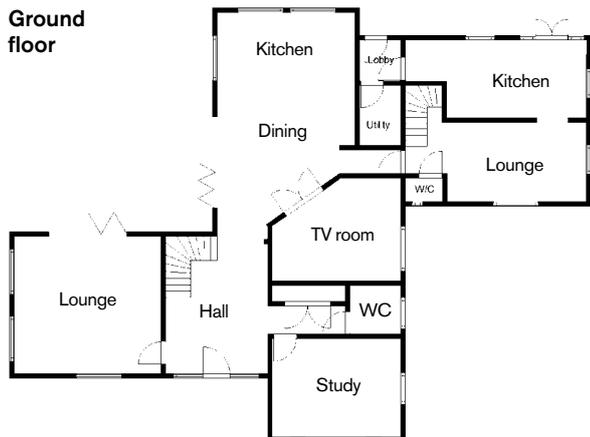
First impressions count...

Space and light were at the top of Chris and Christina's wish list when it came to designing their new home, and nowhere is this more evident than in the entrance area. Upon stepping through the front door, you're greeted by a capacious double-height hallway that is overlooked by a stunning galleried landing. A statement chunky timber staircase winds up to the walkway above, which traverses the space between bedrooms. The clear glass balustrading on either side of the gallery allows sunshine to filter throughout the space. Beams are visible on all sides, enhancing the barn-style feel of the building. The vaulted ceiling adds to the lofty feeling of the space, too. The couple chose materials carefully for this zone and specified glossy white floor tiles in the downstairs hall to bounce the light around.



Double-height hallway

Floor plans



TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

Elements	Cost m ²	Cost %	Total cost
Preliminaries	£16	1%	£7,000
Foundations	£161	14%	£70,000
External walls & windows	£413	35%	£180,000
Roof structure & covering	£161	14%	£70,000
Internal walls	£57	5%	£25,000
Floor, wall & ceiling finishes	£34	3%	£15,000
Joinery & fittings	£69	6%	£30,000
Plumbing & heating (incl. bathroom & kitchen)	£126	11%	£55,000
Electrics	£41	4%	£18,000
Decorating	£23	2%	£10,000
Site clearance	£12	<1%	£5,000
Fees	£23	2%	£10,000
External works	£34	3%	£15,000
Grand total			£510,000

Note: The costs shown here reflect the original prices for materials, labour and services at the time this project was undertaken. As a general guide, inflation in the construction market runs at about 3%-4% per annum.

Useful contacts

TIMBER FRAME Potton 01767 676400 www.potton.co.uk **BUILDER** Matt Manwaring Construction 01892 825061 www.mattmanwaringconstruction.co.uk **BRICKS** TBS 0333 577 8811 www.traditionalbrickandstone.co.uk **ROOF** Rye Roofing 08081 789362 www.ryeroofing.co.uk **WINDOWS** The Window Store 01323 647374 www.windowstoreplastics.co.uk **PLUMBER** Reina Group 01303 248648 www.reinagroup.co.uk **KITCHEN** Magnet Trade 01325 744094 www.magnettrade.co.uk **BATHROOM FLOORING** Amtico 0121 745 0800 www.amtico.com



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