

And the dogs love it too...

Andy Somers recounts how he and his wife Kate built a barn-style timber-frame home in the Warwickshire countryside, making space to run Kate's business breeding and training gun dogs.

PICTURES: **POTTON**

Our journey started when we got our first dog in 1997. My wife Kate took it for training, getting her first taste of the world of gun dogs, and she was hooked. She bred her first litter in 1999 and now runs a business breeding and training them.

We needed a home that had more land to expand the scope of Kate's business and when in 2010 I took early retirement, funds were available for us to look for a property with the land we needed. The search took three years, but eventually we found a place with six acres just a few miles from where we lived in Warwickshire. The land included a large Victorian house with an annexe, forming part of a rural settlement of five dwellings. We offered what we could afford without a mortgage and eventually this was accepted. We moved in during winter 2013, with snow on the ground.

The main parcel of land was located on the other side of the road from our house, which meant putting all the dogs on leads to take them across for walking and training. The house itself was not best suited to breeding or accommodating a growing number of dogs (average of eight), but the land had three stable blocks which we didn't need and this gave us the idea of seeking planning consent to replace them with a purpose-built house on the main parcel of land.

We got all our neighbours on side, then secured the support of the parish council and our district councillor. Our first attempt was turned down by the planning committee, largely as a result of inaccurate information from the council's agricultural consultant – but we listened carefully to all the comments, made some adjustments, and on the second attempt the planning application was accepted



EXTERIOR

Built on the outskirts of a village boundary, the barn-style home is clad in timber to reflect the stables it replaces. A carport, kennels and integral garage have also been built.



“We were impressed by Potton’s no-pressure advice and the flat fee design process.”

IN BRIEF

PROJECT Timber-frame new build
LOCATION Warwickshire
PLOT COST Part of garden of former property
SPENT £750,000
WORTH Unknown



unanimously, albeit with an agricultural tie that means we can only sell to someone doing what Kate does, or a recognised agricultural activity. That was a ‘gulp’ moment as we had not allowed ourselves to believe we would get consent. Now we had to build a house.

We considered a green oak-framed property, but it would not really have suited the location. When we contacted timber-frame housebuilder Potton we were impressed by the no-pressure advice we received from sales consultant Tom Allen, and by the flat fee design process that produced plans and elevations suitable for a planning application.

The house had to serve as a family home and provide accommodation for dogs, including space for whelping and raising litters of pups. We went through several iterations before settling on the final design. Planning conditions limited us to one-and-a-half storeys and three bedrooms, and we also wanted additional space including a games room for my model railway.

We went to the Potton centre at St Neots and looked at their show homes, but we knew we would need something bespoke. As well as accommodation for the dogs, I wanted an office, a carport and a garage, so I can fiddle with and repair things in the dry. We also chose to have a pond, which was



quite expensive, but we are so pleased we did it because it is teeming with life, it attenuates any flood water and it's also useful for puppy training.

The house is clad in cedar with a stone plinth, and a slate roof. The wooden cladding was chosen to reflect the former stables, and the stone is sourced locally from the same seam as that used in the neighbouring dwellings.

I think Tom was as surprised as we were when we got planning consent. At that point we had the choice

GARDEN
Extensive fencing was required for the dogs, and a pond was dug to regulate flood water as well as provide water training for puppies.

GROUND FLOOR

FIRST FLOOR

FLOORPLAN

The ground floor of the L-shaped home has a spacious kitchen/diner, separate lounge, hallway, utility and two offices. Upstairs in the roof space are three bedrooms, including the master en suite with dressing room and a family bathroom. To compensate for the lack of a loft, a space above the integral garage provides a hobby room.

KITCHEN
Curves have been incorporated into the pale grey and white kitchen cabinets. Oak laminate floor has been laid throughout the ground floor.



STAIRS
A small double-height hallway creates the feeling of space, overlooked by an oak staircase.



Andy's tips for a successful build

1. Unless you are a very confident and experienced selfbuilder, make sure it is clear who has responsibility for sorting any issues, and understand who will be on site at what stages of the project.
2. Prioritise getting things done right over getting things done quickly, and don't move in until all dust-creating activities are completed.
3. Plan as much as you can in advance - every light fitting, every socket, every data and TV cable, every tap, inside and out. You don't want to be thinking about that for the first time when the trades are on site doing the work.
4. Understand the planning process - and get neighbours on side at the outset, and engage with your parish council and district councillor to seek their support.

phase electrical supply cost nearly £9,000, the water connection £5,000, and our water treatment installation about £5,000. This is the premium of rural living.

Unfortunately we got off on the wrong footing, literally, when we discovered that one of the footings was in the wrong place days before the block-and-beam floor was due to be installed. A new footing had to be dug in the correct position, and this was finished just in the nick of time. Then the block-and-beam installation team only completed half the job due to some issues with the plans. They departed with their crane and it was left to the project manager and our groundworkers to install the rest of the block-and-beam floor in time for the timber-frame delivery.

These issues were a low point of the project. However, once the Potton frame arrived and



of running the project ourselves, appointing a project manager or getting Potton to run the whole project. We compromised, choosing the second option and Potton introduced us to someone who had successfully delivered several Potton builds. We had spent all our savings on the house and land and so needed to sell the original house to finance the new build. We sold it for about the same as we had paid for the whole site, so effectively the land was free. We bought a second-hand static caravan and put it on site, and then set about getting services laid on so that we could move in. The services cost far more than expected - the three-

IN DETAIL

PROJECT	Garage doors The Garage Door Centre: thegaragedoorcentre.co.uk
Project management Forge: forgeprojectmanagement.co.uk	Stonework, kennel base Thelo Design: theلودesign.co.uk
STRUCTURE	Kitchen Pure Kitchens: purekitchens.co.uk
Design and timber frame Potton: potton.co.uk	Bathrooms Diamond Interiors: diamondinteriors.net
Frame erection Platform: platform.uk	Pond, ground source loops, water supply Farm Services: farmservicesltd.co.uk
Roofing DMC: dmcroofing.co.uk	Decorating T & S White - Arlesey: 01462 731782
Carpentry Absolute Construction: absolute-construction.co.uk	Tiling JML Tiling: jml-tiling.co.uk
Electrics Abbey: abbeyelectricaltd.com	Kennel block Wooden Workshop: wooden-workshop.co.uk
Renewable heating NuHeat: nu-heat.co.uk	Wood-burner Greyhound Stoves: greyhoundstoves.com
Plumbing, including heating installation Proheat:	Landscaping Tim Parker: timparkerlandscapes.com
FIXTURES & FITTINGS	Front drive Chris Spence: chrisspenceservices.com
Doors, windows Frame Force: frameforce.co.uk	
Awning Samson Awnings: samsonawnings.co.uk	





LIVING ROOM
A small lounge provides a cosy retreat, warmed by a wood-burner.



BEDROOMS
Dormers create space in the upstairs bedrooms while also enhancing visual appeal both inside and out.



“We learned so much on our first self build we almost wish we could start again, but we have no plans to move.”

erection began, progress was rapid and things became much more positive. Postform, the frame erection company, was very efficient and suddenly we were looking at the skeleton of our new house. Trades started to arrive and it became apparent that our project manager had built up a team of people whom he trusted, and who knew each other and were able to work effectively together.

Building a well-insulated house with underfloor heating powered by a ground source heat pump, meant there was plenty of activity. Full ethernet and TV cabling were installed, and the electricians were among the busiest of the trades. I annotated the Potton plans with every light switch, wall socket, ethernet point, TV point, and lights, which avoided having to make decisions on the fly and enabled the electricians to work quickly without having to confirm details with us all the time.

Although the project manager’s proposed budget of about £450,000 included kitchen and bathrooms, it became clear quite early on that these critical areas needed a more in-depth design, especially with sloping ceilings in the bathrooms. We engaged local companies to design and install both.

These amendments were made before the final sign-off for the frame design, which allowed us to spot and rectify some things that would otherwise have compromised these rooms, and also the routing of the wood-burner flue in the snug. It costs nothing to move a window, a ceiling joist, or a roof light when the house is still just a computer drawing. As the project progressed and the bulk of the fabric of the build was complete, we co-ordinated later trades ourselves.

One unexpected issue was the paint colour we had chosen for much of the house. Our selection was based on Dulux sample pots. The true colour was not even close, and when on the walls it was clear that it wasn’t acceptable. Who wants pink walls? With carpets due in a couple of days our decorators pulled out all the stops to apply an alternative colour. That was definitely a Dulux fail. Another issue was that the inspection pit that was excavated in the garage was not watertight, and filled up with water. This had to be lined with a resin.

We specified maintenance-free uPVC doors and windows apart from the large bifold which is aluminium. Downstairs, the floors are tiled in the kitchen and dog areas and oak laminate is laid elsewhere. We chose oak skirting, window sills, doors, door frames, and staircase, which increased the cost but are definitely worth it, adding to the barn style of the home. Upstairs is mainly carpeted.

We moved into our new home in April 2019, eight months after breaking ground. We sold the static caravan, and seeing it disappear down the road was a seminal moment. Much remained to be done, including the landscaping, but we could start to enjoy our new house. With hindsight we would have gone with Potton as the prime contractor.

Our project manager was personable and knowledgeable, and brought in some very good



trades, but when things were not going right we needed someone on site. Our involvement was greater than we anticipated, and managing significant vehicle access without impacting on our neighbours was sometimes quite a challenge.

We added a car port, a large kennel block, a large pond in the main field for gun dog training, significant landscaping, and did not skimp on the quality of fixtures and fittings. The heat pump and solar water heating work well, but with many electrical appliances in the house and the kennel, our annual electricity consumption is some 15,000 kWh. Ground-based solar panels may be added at some point to offset this, although we receive Renewable Heat Incentive payments of £425 a quarter for seven years.

We learned so much on our first self build we almost wish we could start again, but we have no plans to move. The end result has been worth the trials and tribulations, and we consider ourselves very lucky to have been able to build in such a beautiful location. The dogs like it too!

FINAL WORD

The highlight?
Moving in, and getting planning consent.
And the low point?

The times when responsibility for sorting problems seemed vague. Also discovering the footing that was in the wrong place, and the block-and-beam floor installers abandoning the job because they couldn’t follow the drawings.

Your greatest extravagance?
The bathrooms.

And your best buy?
The kitchen. We struck lucky with our kitchen fitter – great quality at a good price.

What do you like most about your house?
The location and views, and how well it works for dog breeding.



Anything you would do differently?

We would probably go with a prime contractor who would be on site at all the critical stages and who would be responsible for the whole build.

What did you enjoy most?

The closing stages when the house was watertight and we could concentrate on fixtures and fittings.

Any future plans?

Installing ground-based solar panels to complement the heat pump and solar thermal water panels.