

PLAIN SAILING

Roy and Gill Dance completed a successful self build in West Sussex, on time and on budget, despite Roy being abroad for long periods as the skipper of a luxury yacht.

Story: **Ross Stokes** | Photography: **Steve Hughes**



[In brief]

Project

New build

Location West Wittering

Paid £500,000 for plot with existing house

Spent £721,000

Worth £1.4m+



“The whole job was beautifully executed, on time and with never a cross word between us.”



“We took the old – but very valid – advice and bought the worst house in the best neighbourhood,” says Gill Dance, explaining the reason for buying an unappealing and unloved house on a private estate built in the 1950s in the attractive village of West Wittering on the Sussex coast. “We knew and liked the street, as we had a friend living a few houses along.”

Gill and her husband, Roy, had intended to renovate the property, which had been largely neglected for the best part of 25 years by its elderly owner since the death of his wife. “His remedy for the cold, damp draughts was to go on long winter cruises until the UK weather improved in the spring,” she laughs. “The house had the carbon footprint of a small town.”

The couple knew that it was going to be a substantial project which would involve remodelling and extending the existing floorplan to include a new kitchen and bathrooms, along with rewiring and upgrading the

heating system which consisted of an ancient oil-fired Aga, a coal fire, and gas central heating.

Despite a few ominous-looking cracks in the exterior walls, and obvious damp in the main bedroom, the house was deemed structurally sound by a surveyor, so the couple made a successful offer of £500,000 for the property which sits on an 800-sqm plot, surrounded by traditional-style homes, of varying designs, though none is contemporary.

To help them plan the major refurbishment, the couple employed a project manager, and spent the next two years working with him on a scheme which would cost the best part of £300,000, and leave little remaining of the original house. “Eventually our project manager confessed what we’d always suspected from day one – that it made sense to demolish and build new,” says Roy. “Nothing else made financial sense, given the zero-VAT rating on new builds which of course doesn’t apply to renovations.”

The couple duly disposed of the services of their project manager and embarked on a plan to demolish the existing property and start from scratch.

Exterior

The exterior of the timber-frame home features Cape Cod cladding made from slow-growing Lodge Pole Pine, imported from Canada, pre-coated with a painted finish guaranteed for 15 years. Roy and Gill ‘hate cement fibre board with a passion’, along with uPVC windows. Porous Resin Bound has been used on the drive which allows rainwater to soak through it.

Roy's tip on planning

To successfully secure planning consent the applicant needs to understand a bit about the principles of planning law. It isn't an emotional issue but many applicants think (wrongly) that it is – or they make it emotional. Do your homework, learn the rules and how to play the game. It's not about how people feel about what you are doing, it's about the rules and planning law. There is plenty of free advice available online.

"We decided we couldn't waste a load more cash going down blind alleys with an architect or project manager, so we decided to trust our own judgment but still get some expert assistance," explains Roy.

The couple turned to timber-frame housebuilder Potton, a company they were familiar with and knew had a reputation for quality. They visited the company's show home centre in St Neots, and over the following 12 months developed a design based on one from the company's extensive portfolio. "Potton were supportive and endlessly patient – we never felt pressured," says Roy, who unusually for a Potton client, decided to tackle the planning application himself.

As a captain employed on luxury yachts around the world, Roy is often abroad, and during long periods away in Florida he spent his spare time reading up about planning, including how to write a Design and Access Statement, on the planning portal website. "I'd watched the process with our (successful) planning application for the curtailed renovation scheme, did some homework and picked up some tips," he says (see panel).

Roy already knew that the planners would not approve a contemporary design, as the plot borders a Conservation Area. The couple also liked the clapboard houses of New England, which they thought would sit well with the vernacular. Roy's well-researched approach paid off, and approval for the new house was granted at the first attempt. "The only glitch was a surprise requirement for bat and reptile surveys to be carried out," says Roy, who was able to negotiate against the latter requirement. "Thankfully no evidence of bats was found, and our planning consent was granted within the council's eight weeks turn-around time. We were over the moon."

To try to keep everyone on side, and to avoid any potential disputes, Roy and Gill consulted their neighbours and showed them their plans. They also



Living area

The entrance hall opens into a light and airy ground-floor space, divided by 'sliding stacking' glazed partition doors. A rack-mounted audio system serves the whole house and garden, and also contains three satellite TV decoders. The interiors throughout are furnished in calming grey tones.





The WOW factor

The open-plan ground floor has a light contemporary feel and a great kitchen for entertaining. The Sunfold glass room divider features sliding stacking doors. "The installers said they'd never put them in a house before - only in offices - but we love the minimal glass panels which add to the modern feel," says Gill.

sought the approval of the management company responsible for the estate's common areas, roads and verges. Gill had already been invited onto the company's board, which proved to be helpful later during the build itself, as any complaints about the works tended to be made to the company. Gill could keep in touch with these and deal with them promptly.





Siting a double garage at the front of the property was another potential issue, which Roy had addressed in his planning application. He had learned that planning had been refused for another front garden garage 200m further down the street. This decision had been later overturned on appeal. "I quoted this case in my Design and Access Statement, having read that planners are unlikely to fight the same battle twice at appeal," says Roy.

With Potton supplying and erecting the timber frame, including some of the insulation, Roy and Gill engaged West Sussex Carpentry and Building as the main contractors. The company had carried out a major refurbishment of a nearby house, and the Dances had been impressed with the tidy and well-organised site. Roy later consulted the owners who were glowing in their appraisal of the work.

Kitchen

Large format porcelain tiles have been laid over underfloor heating throughout the ground floor, with radiators on the first floor. The contemporary-style painted kitchen was supplied by Sylvarna of Chichester. Sunfold bifold doors open onto a same-level garden terrace.

Roy put the job out to tender, knowing that they would probably use WSC&B, providing their price was reasonable. This had been based on Roy's own detailed specification comprising 22 sections dealing with all aspects of the build. "We were presented with a fully costed bill which amounted to more than 100 pages. WSC&B weren't the cheapest but they were definitely the most professional and that gave us confidence."

Work started on site in June 2014, and Roy found himself working in the US during most of the build. He was kept up to date on progress with photographs and reports emailed each morning by the site foreman, Jamie McGregor. "He was absolutely superb," says Roy.

Meanwhile, Gill, who was living in a rented property close by, would also visit the site daily to ensure everything was going to plan. "We had a

Roy's tip on budgeting & finance

The whole project was very accurately costed in great detail. At my request, the bill of quantities was annexed to the build contract, working on a fixed price. Because it was properly prepared the contractor was happy to do this. Where there were changes to the spec, we worked on a table of pluses and minuses and sorted the balance at the end.

We used our own savings and a bespoke self-build mortgage from Handelsbanken, Chichester. The bank took a keen interest in our project and insisted on their own appointed valuers and surveyors monitoring the build. This gave everyone confidence that the build was on track throughout. I would highly recommend Handelsbanken because, if you have a local branch, you speak face-to-face on a first-name basis. You sit opposite with your plans and costings and it is up to you to convince them that your project makes sound financial sense.





very close relationship with the main contractor and I'm sure this avoided an awful lot of potential confusion and misunderstandings along the way. We never had a cross word," says Roy.

Apart from a few dramatic moments at the start of the project, when the original house virtually fell down when the roof was removed due to the weak mortar in the walls, the build itself proved relatively uneventful.

One of the most striking features of the design is the distinctive chimney which dominates the L-shaped front facade. Potton had left this detail largely up to the main contractors, but an architectural conservationist at Lambs Bricks at Billingshurst convinced Roy and Gill that this was an opportunity not to be missed, and it needed to be something interesting. They were shown a photograph of a chimney in Wimbledon which could work with their own home. Lambs produced the lay-up plans for the brick courses, with WSC&B's main bricklayer carrying out the work.

The house was completed in February, 2015, though it was a year before there was enough money to finance the extensive landscaping scheme. The garden, by award-winning designer David Loy, features 200 sqm of silver granite paved patios, and a timber archway leading to a garden studio, built to complement the main house. The front drive is finished in Resin Bound, which Roy describes as expensive but well worth the money.

Now the garden is complete, Roy and Gill can sit on their patio and enjoy and admire their finished home. But as lovely as it is, they have not ruled out the possibility of another self build in the future.

"We'd make the utility and plant rooms bigger, maybe incorporating a basement," says Roy. "And Gill would need a much larger dressing room with a bigger shoe rack," he laughs. "From a design point of view, we would do something more contemporary, if the planners looked likely to allow it."

Lounge

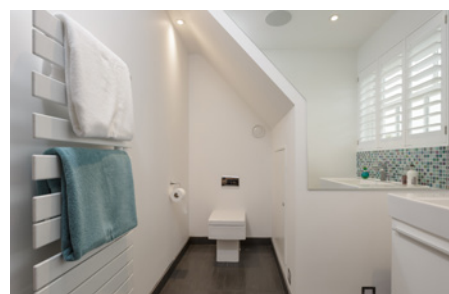
The lounge is square to provide favourable acoustics for the home cinema system. Contemporary furnishings in grey tones were sourced from Thru The Looking Glass.





Bathrooms and bedrooms

The spacious main bedroom has an en suite bathroom and dressing room. There are three further bedrooms, all with fitted wardrobes by Neatsmith of London. Two of the bedrooms have en suites, and all are fitted with electric underfloor heating. There are five bathrooms in all.



[Contacts]

PROJECT

Timber frame supplier Potton: potton.co.uk

Main contractors: West Sussex Carpentry & Building: wscb.co.uk

Mortgage Handelsbanken, Chichester: handelsbanken.co.uk

STRUCTURE

Handmade bricks Lambs Bricks of Billingshurst: lambsbricks.com

Lightweight Cape Cod cladding Vincent Timber: vincenttimber.co.uk

FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

Box sash windows in painted engineered timber and oak-clad front door Bereco: bereco.co.uk

Marine coated bifold doors and internal sliding/stacking doors Sunfold: sunfold.com

Kitchen Sylvarna of Chichester: sylvarna.co.uk

Lounge furnishings, cinema sound system and whole house Nuvo audio system Thru The

Looking Glass: thruthelookingglass.co.uk

Back to the wall bath, WC and basin unit Duravit: duravit.co.uk

Showers Matki: matki.co.uk

Dressing room fitted furniture Neatsmith of London: neatsmith.co.uk

Heating and rainwater harvesting Will O'Brien Plumbing and Heating Ltd: wobrien-plumbing.co.uk

Garden landscaping David Loy, Your Garden Design: yourgardendesign.co.uk

Garden Studio Tom Reynolds, New City Joinery: newcityjoinery.co.uk



Green credentials

- The house is highly insulated with 160mm Kingspan PIR boards fitted to the floors, walls and parts of the roof. Blown insulation to a depth of 440mm has been applied in the flat first-floor ceilings, achieving a U-value of 0.15.
- The house is fitted with an integrated heating and hot water system with thermal solar panel array, high efficiency condensing gas boiler, and wood-burning boiler stove, all feeding a 450-litre thermal store.
- A rainwater harvesting system for toilet flushing and watering the garden is connected to a 5,000-litre tank buried under the rear garden.
- The front drive is made from Resin Bound which allows water to drain without the risk of flooding.

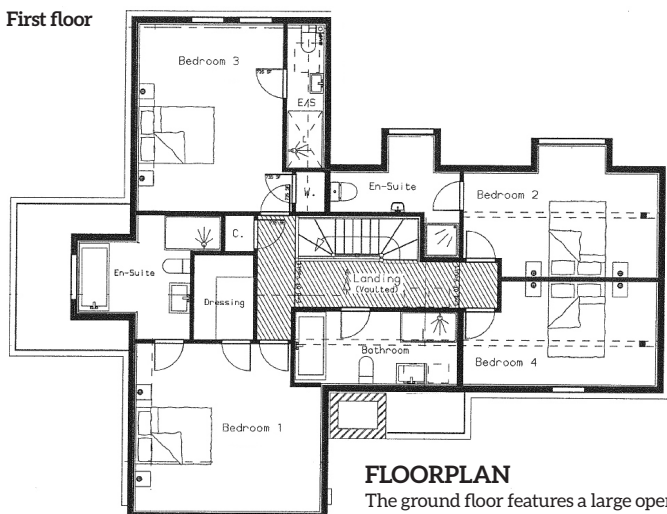


Garden

Bifold doors open onto a large rear terrace and garden, by award-winning designer David Loy. A timber archway leads down to a garden studio, which complements the style of the main house. The single garage and car port at the front of the house has a loft above for storage.



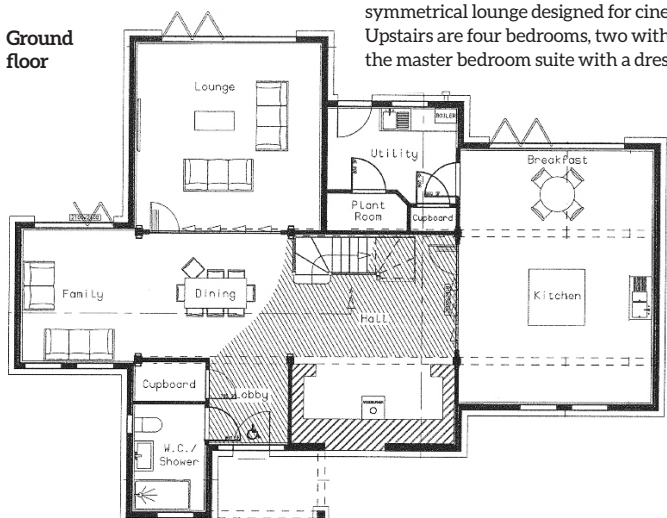
First floor



FLOORPLAN

The ground floor features a large open-plan living area, with a good-sized kitchen/breakfast room and symmetrical lounge designed for cinema acoustics. Upstairs are four bedrooms, two with en suites, and the master bedroom suite with a dressing room.

Ground floor



[The final word]

What was the high point?

The first day of the build when the old house was razed to the ground, and the last day when we stood in our new kitchen with our builders and shared a bottle of champagne.



And the low point?

I was a bit miffed when Building Control asked for linear slotted drains outside the three sets of bifold doors on the rear elevation. This was a costly addition no one had anticipated but I could see the sense in it. We were also required to treat the northern elevation timber cladding with fire retardant for reasons we never really understood.

What did you enjoy most about the experience?

All the research, going to the self-build shows, working with the amazing people at Potton, and writing the specification myself.

Your greatest extravagance?

The Resin Bound driveway. It's a lovely smooth surface which looks attractive and the rain drains straight through it. It has attracted a lot of inquiries and positive comments.

And your best buy?

We did a great deal of product research and in general specified every material and product for the build. We never went for the cheapest and always chose better products than a regular developer would use.

What do you like most about your new home?

The light airy feel of open-plan living throughout the ground floor, the low fuel bills from our amazing integrated heating and hot water system, and sitting in the garden with a glass of wine in the summer.

Any future plans?

Ha. We've already started. We didn't make the most of the master en suite so we're about to do some re-modelling incorporating a free-standing contemporary slipper bath.