

DRIVE AND DETERMINATION

Helen and Steve Fairley have built a modern timber-framed home based on Australian house designs.

Story: Louise Parkin Photography: Wayne Vincent



Some self builds seem destined to fail from the outset, and on many occasions Steve and Helen Fairley may have felt that their project was one of them. It was beset with tension, headaches and problems from day one, but Steve's ambition and uncompromising refusal to give in has been rewarded with a light, spacious and airy home that he designed himself.

Steve, Helen and their four children have lived in the same street in West Wittering on the West Sussex coast since 1996, when they moved into Helen's parents' weekend home for seven months while they bought their own home just a few doors away. The bungalow had been in Helen's family since 1977, and had a plot next door that had originally been used to graze horses.

When the bungalow and attached land was put on the market there was surprisingly little interest. The decision to split them into separate lots saw the bungalow sell almost immediately, and Steve and Helen, who is a teacher, decided they would buy the land to build their own home.

Unfortunately family tensions had been riding high for some time because of disputes over inheritance, leading to an enormous rift in the family that has never been resolved. The ensuing row caused Helen's father to pull out of negotiations, leaving the Fairleys tens of thousands of pounds down in legal fees having already undertaken some exploratory work. Fortunately for Steve and Helen, he ultimately decided that the sale should go ahead but the transaction took place through an agent.

Steve, who left a career in finance and is now a driving instructor, says: "We had all but given up and were seriously considering moving to Spain! Eventually it worked out in our favour, even though we paid around £30,000 more than market value for the land, and we agreed an open-ended contract that allowed us to sell our house first. That took two years."

During this turbulent time, they applied for planning permission. Steve decided to design the house himself, despite having no experience. "My brother lives in Australia and we love the houses over there, so it was always going to have an Australian theme," he explains. Using lots of paper and Google SketchUp, he got a design together for a three-



bedroom family home and took it to Scandia Hus who Steve and Helen had used before on an extension project. The design included an integrated heated double garage to house Steve's classic cars, despite having sold them both to help fund the project.

"Helen was not happy about the garage!" he confesses, but Scandia Hus turned his designs into drawings and submitted them to the local planning department. Steve and Helen were quickly informed however that these plans were likely to be rejected because of the siting and scale of the design, and so the application was withdrawn and Steve went back to the drawing board. "I was surprised because there are larger houses between bungalows elsewhere on the street, but we thought it better to design something that would be permitted rather than take on the planners," says Steve.

During the redesign, the Fairleys visited an exhibition at the National Self Build and

Exterior

The timber frame property is rendered to first floor and then clad in weatherboard to roof level, with a slate roof.

IN BRIEF

Location West Wittering, West Sussex
Property Modern timber frame new build
Owners Helen and Steve Fairley
Plot cost £220,000
Spent £260,000
Worth £750,000



"My brother lives in Australia and we love the houses over there, so it was always going to have an Australian theme."

IN DETAIL

Contacts

PROJECT

Excavation and concreting Simon Cobden: 07743 163281

Builder's merchants Covers, Chichester: 01243 785141

Travis Perkins Itchenor: 01243 512823

Thermal floor system Cube6: cube6.co.uk

STRUCTURE

Blockwork Global Scaffolding: 01243 211866

Timber frame suppliers Fleming Homes:

01361 883785, fleminghomes.co.uk

Windows, front and side doors

Rational: 01869 248181, rational.co.uk

Timber frame erection Andrew Blair Joinery:

07808 067210

Roofer Southern Roofing: 07976 618453

Roof slates MS Roofing Supplies: 01243 696006

External blockwork Chris Ide: 07769 708997

Cladding Jason Terry: 07891 443396

Render Gosport Dry Lining: 023 9258 4460

Electrician South Downs Electrical: 07813 942065

Plumbing and heating Marcus Rose: 07976246541

FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

Underfloor heating Robbins Systems: 01424 851111

Ventilation system ADM Systems: 01756 701051

Bathroom and sanitaryware Better Bathrooms:

betterbathrooms.com

Kitchen units Covers: covers.biz

Granite work surfaces County Stone: 01243 544770

Appliances A1 Electrical Chichester: 01243 788562

Carpentry and painting Jason Terry: 07891 443396

Plastering and coving John Wake: 07718 866877

Tiling Fran Keeley: 07909 267102

Decking, turfing and fencing

Inside Outside Properties: 07852 355167

Renovation Centre in Swindon, where they met Hayden Martin, managing director of timber frame specialist Fleming Homes. Some weeks later, Hayden was in the area and so arranged to visit Steve and Helen. They were impressed with his ideas and enthusiasm, and were even more impressed with the price. "Fleming were amazing from start to finish," says Steve, who not only took on the design but also decided to act as project manager. "When I was having a bad day on site and was sounding off at everyone, the team at Fleming would listen and offer solutions, even when the problem was not related to their timber frame. I could not have done it without them."

Progress was made steadily, thanks to the groundworker Simon Cobden whose work was so precise that Building Control barely needed to check it. But more problems were still to come. The main builder was sacked by Helen, who had watched six of his employees on the roof lay three slates in as many hours.

"We were living in a caravan on site at the time, which Helen found very stressful," Steve recalls. "She had been at home all morning watching them achieve very little, and having had so many problems with the builder's bullying attitude, she decided enough was enough. She ordered them all off site, and we then had to go about finding people to get the job finished, which was frustrating."

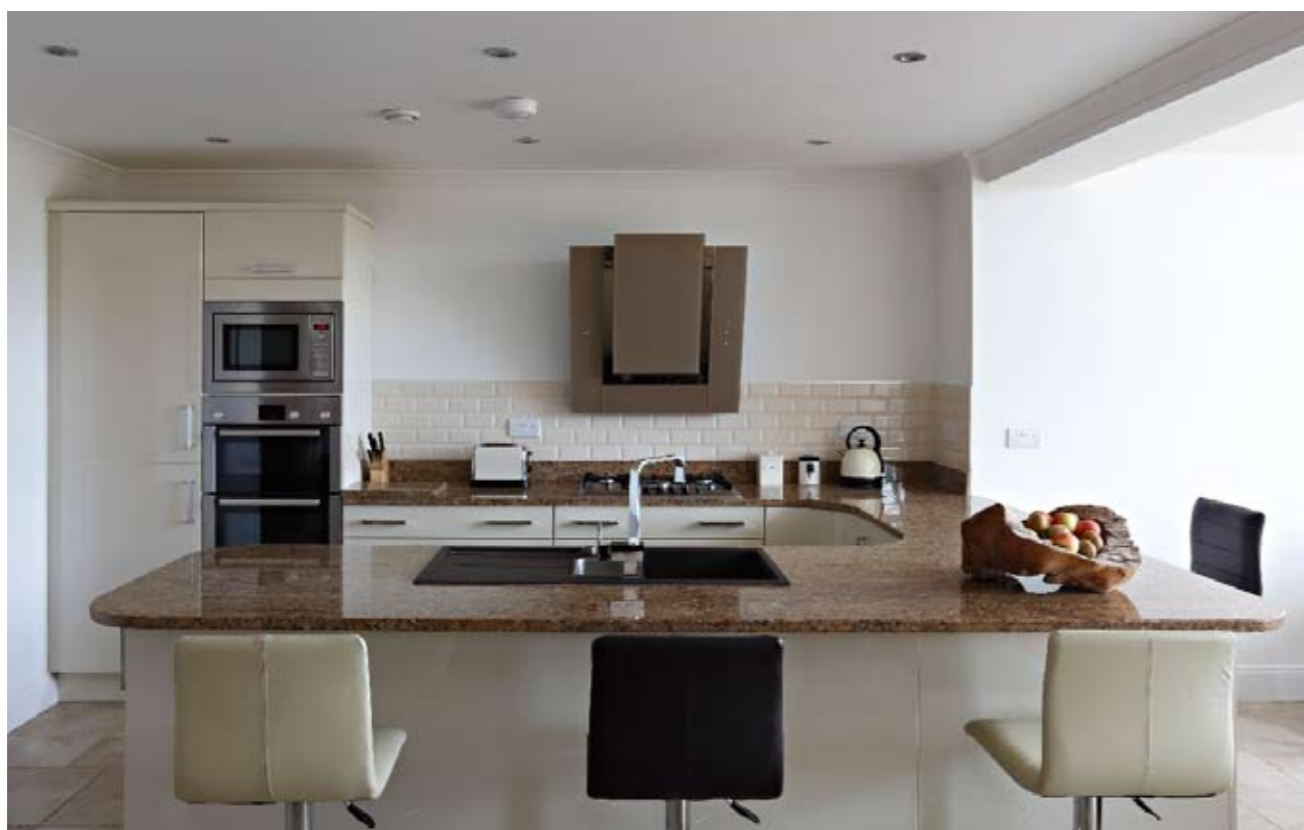
Once the frame was up, the roof slates and blockwork were laid, but there were plenty of problems along the way, many of which were caused by the problem builder. The structural concrete floor required for the Cube6 thermal flooring, had a 12mm slope. Concrete from the pour had also been splashed on the windows, doors and even the ceiling.

Fran Keeley, who was brought in to remedy the problem, proved an asset to the team and also carried out all the tiling. Some block walls were not straight and needed rebuilding, and



Kitchen

Kitchen cabinets were sourced from a local builder's merchant, with an expensive Italian cooker hood and stone flooring laid over underfloor heating.



one was built in the wrong place altogether and had to be knocked down and rebuilt.

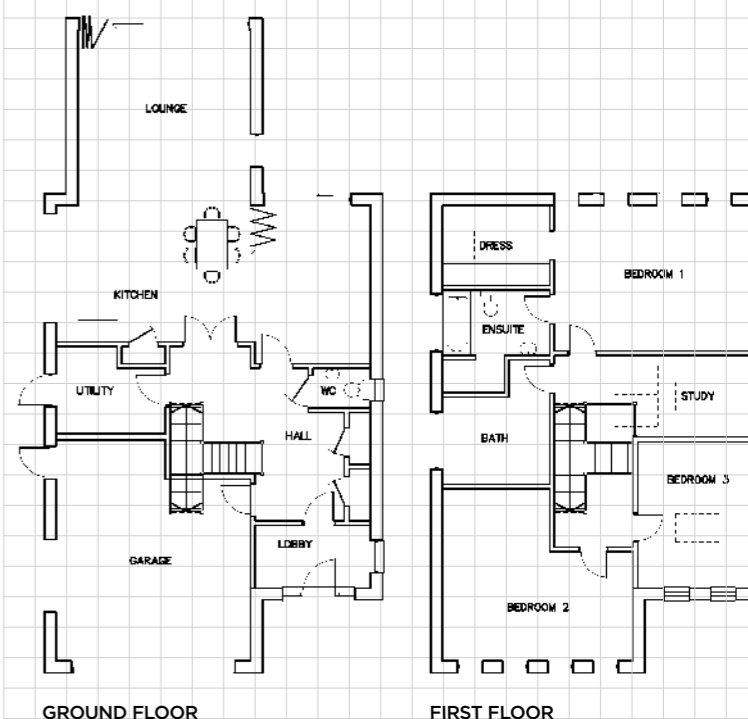
"It was a relief to get him (the builder) off site; he was argumentative and blamed others for his substandard work," says Steve. "It cost us around £5,000 in the end to rectify all of his mistakes, and there were two weeks after he was thrown out where nothing at all happened. That is depressing when you're living in a caravan surrounded by mud!"

The lack of full and proper technical drawings posed some problems, and Steve concedes that were he to build again, he would employ an architect. "We had to make things up as we went along quite a bit. The subcontractors would ask for drawings for certain elements, but they didn't exist, so they had to work it out as best they could. On reflection that wasn't the best way to go about it."

The absence of technical drawings also meant that some aspects of the house have not turned out quite the way Steve had planned. The eaves were meant to overhang much more, but the depth of the external blockwork meant they are much less pronounced – an element of the build he regrets.

He also would have preferred more windows looking out onto the road. "I am a nosy neighbour, and although we have full-height windows upstairs, they are too narrow to get a decent view of the street. This is something I would change if I could," he explains.

FLOORPLAN



Living area

The ground floor is largely open-plan with bifold doors leading out into the garden.



The three-bedroom house has an open-plan lounge/diner/kitchen with bifold doors leading out into the garden, creating the perfect environment for their large family to visit, including their one-year-old granddaughter. A stud wall with sliding door creates a snug, which was installed some time after the rest of the work was finished, though this may come out in the future to create an even larger open-plan space. "We love the open-plan feel of the main living area, so it seems a shame to limit that," says Steve.

Triple-glazed Rationel windows were fitted throughout, but initial plans for renewable technologies changed as money got tight. "Friends who built their own home said to me: 'you can buy a lot of oil and gas for the cost of all this eco mumbo jumbo', so in the end we went with as much insulation as possible, but dropped the solar (panels) and rainwater harvesting system," Steve says.

Halfway up the stairs, the flight splits into two, one leading to the master bedroom, en suite and dressing room, the family bathroom and the galleried landing which acts as a study. The other flight leads to two

"We love the open-plan feel of the main living area."

more bedrooms, one of which is occupied by Max (17), the only one of their children to still live at home.

The family moved in while the builders and joiners were still working on the interior of the house, which grew tiresome for them fairly quickly. "Most of the doors weren't hung by the time we moved in, and rather than install the bathroom and bedroom doors, as you would expect, the kitchen and utility room doors were the first to go on," says Steve incredulously. He also found the tradies' habit of sitting in the living room with a morning cup of tea a little irritating, and everyone was glad when all the work had finished.

"We had builders and decorators working inside from when we moved in on December 23 until the following March."

The sale of their previous home and of Steve's two classic cars provided the funds to buy the land and carry out the build, although they overspent and had to borrow an additional £10,000 from Steve's mum. They have since taken out a small mortgage on their

Upstairs

The first floor comprises three bedrooms, reached via a staircase which splits off at right angles in two quarter turns to access both sides.





completed home, with which they paid back the loan and replaced Steve's beloved cars.

Steve learnt a great deal from the project and despite the problems they encountered, he admits he would enjoy another build, although he is not convinced Helen would be amenable to the idea. One thing's certain though. "We definitely would not live on site," he declares.



My self build EXPERIENCE



What was the high point of the project?

Moving in and getting out of the caravan.

...and the low point?

Having to find new workmen halfway through to try and keep the project moving.

What was your greatest extravagance?

The cooker hood. I thought I had found some extra money and so we stuck our necks out and imported it from Italy, only to find later on that there wasn't quite enough cash to finish the house.

And your best buy?

The internal doors.

What do you like most about your house?

The feeling of light and space, and that since being in the house we have never felt cold nor have we had to adjust the heating controls.

Anything you would do differently?

There will always be bits and pieces that you could change. We would have liked deeper roof overhangs and a road-facing window. We could have done a bit more planning and maybe have used an architect to produce more detailed drawings.

What is your top tip?

Plan, plan, plan!

Bathroom

All sanitaryware was bought from Better Bathrooms, but Steve admits he would spend more on these products if he were to build again.



Outside

The garage makes up the majority of the ground floor façade.

