

# An oasis in OAK

When **Andrew and Jan Holden** found a Sussex smallholding full of potential, it was incentive enough to spend their retirement fund on building a superb oak-frame home on the plot

WORDS SUZANNE WEBSTER PHOTOS JEREMY PHILLIPS



**A**ndrew and Jan Holden had renovated many properties over the years, but had always dreamed of building a house from scratch. "As we live in the south east, we thought that the odds of finding a suitable plot would be the same as winning the lottery," says Andrew. However, as luck would have it, they stumbled upon a great opportunity – a 10-acre smallholding that included a semi-derelict bungalow together with a collection of rundown greenhouses.

The place had been empty for the past five years so it was overrun with brambles and other invasive plants. However, as soon as the couple saw the location they fell in love with it. "We are seasoned renovators, so we know that the golden rule is never to fall in love with a project until you know all the background information," says Andrew. "But we couldn't help it – the plot was just full of possibilities. We had just finished renovating a 16th-century grade II listed chocolate box cottage, and initially wanted to have a rest – but the opportunity was too good to pass up."

Having confirmed the purchase of the site, the couple started thinking about what to create in the place of the bungalow. Their build budget of £400,000 was financed through savings – before they'd bought the plot, the money was originally earmarked as Andrew's retirement fund. The couple loved the idea of building an oak frame house that had a traditional overall aesthetic, but that also included modern features. They researched several timber frame companies, eventually contracting Hereford-based Border Oak to come up with an off-the-peg design.

## Planning tales

As the existing property was a small bungalow, the size of its potential replacement proved a point of contention with their local planning department. The plot was situated outside the boundaries of the village, and very close to the edge of a National Park, so special regulations applied. "Getting a property of the scale we wanted wasn't too difficult in the end, but because we were demolishing the bungalow, we lost our permitted development rights," says Andrew.

## THE HOLDEN FILE

**NAMES** Andrew & Jan Holden

**OCCUPATIONS** Managing director & housewife

**LOCATION** West Sussex

**TYPE OF BUILD** New build

**STYLE** Tudor

**CONSTRUCTION METHOD**

Oak frame

**PLOT SIZE** 10 acres

**LAND COST** £710,000

**BOUGHT** 2009

**HOUSE SIZE** 310m<sup>2</sup> (3,337ft<sup>2</sup>)

**BUILD COST** £427,000

**COST PER M<sup>2</sup>** £1,377 (£128 per ft<sup>2</sup>)

**TOTAL COST** £1,137,000

**VAT RECLAIM** £25,000

**BUILDING WORK COMMENCED** March 2011

**BUILDING WORK TOOK** 12 months

**CURRENT VALUE** £1,500,000

Below: Andrew and Jan thought that the odds of finding land in the south east were slim, until they came across the 10-acre plot they now call home





**Left:** The Holdens have echoed the colours of the house's blonde oak frame and black windows in their decorating scheme, including the stone floor, which works brilliantly with the underfloor heating

"This meant we had to apply separately for everything else we wanted, such as the garden shed, pool, garages and stables. To date we've put in six applications, which was costly and time-consuming."

Andrew took on the mantle of project manager and got the whole family involved in the scheme, including the labouring, carpentry and decorating. "As we have renovated before, we know a lot of good local trades, so getting labour was easy," he says. "We didn't use a main contractor and organised everything ourselves. Our trades were great to work with and we only had a few minor problems."

All utilities were already on site, so only had to be upgraded, but the foundations proved to be rather difficult due to the heavy clay earth. "The soil conditions were terrible," says Andrew. "We used strip foundations, which were the more cost-effective option, but were very close to having to use piles – which would have cost a fortune."

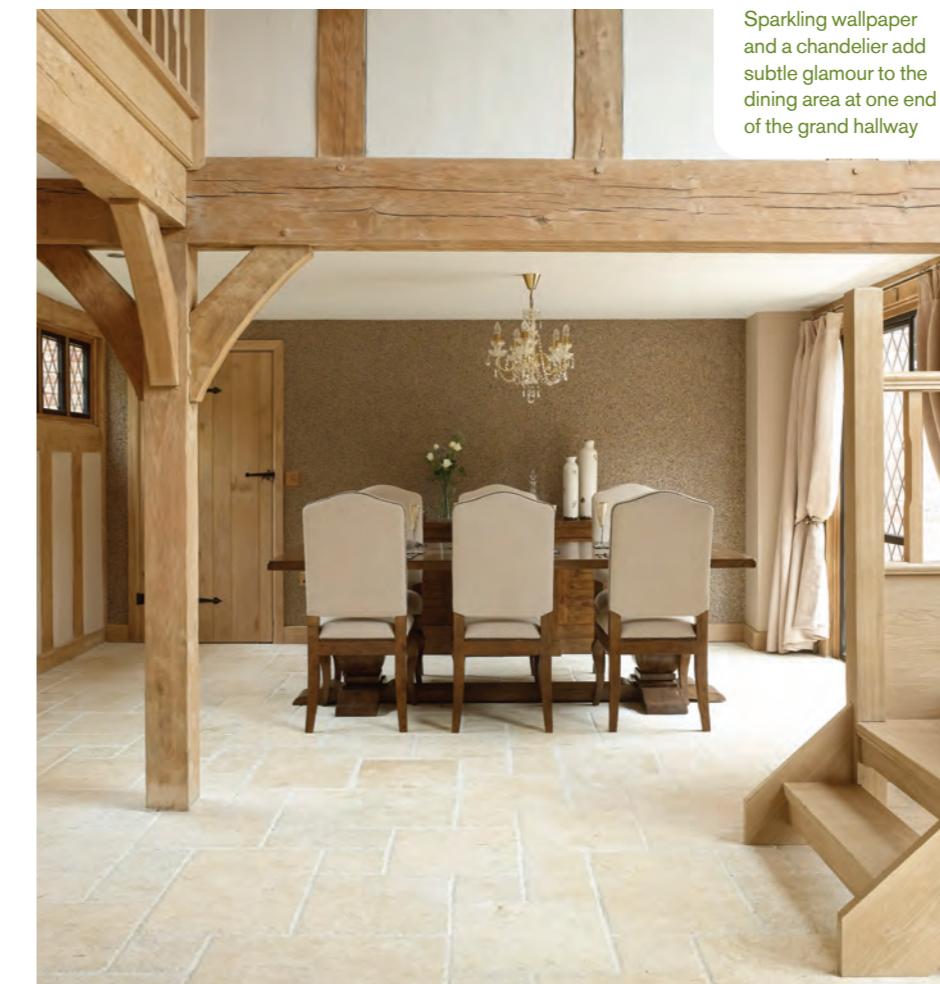
#### House to home

Downstairs, the main spaces are the kitchen, hallway with dining zone and lounge. "This suits our needs perfectly as we don't use a separate dining room often enough to warrant it, and with laptop and tablet technology, who needs an office?" says Andrew. However, there is certainly no lack of leisure space – the couple built a separate 60m<sup>2</sup> structure next to their swimming pool, which incorporates Andrew's den, a gym and shower room.

Upstairs the Holdens have four bedrooms, a shower room and a bathroom. "We went for underfloor heating (UFH) downstairs, but



The central staircase is framed by double-height glazing, making it an equally dramatic feature from the outside



Sparkling wallpaper and a chandelier add subtle glamour to the dining area at one end of the grand hallway

**WE LEARNED...**

**EVEN THOUGH** Border Oak was only contracted to supply and erect the frame and infill panels, the people there were fantastic throughout the entire process. The firm gave us lots of advice and technical help and is still extremely helpful if we have any questions or problems.

**NATURAL GAS** wasn't available here, but we were determined to find an alternative to an oil tank. After investigating the possibilities of a biomass boiler (a little too labour-intensive at our age) and a ground source heat pump (we worked out that we'd have to live to 104 for full payback) we thought that an air source heat pump was the best option. It really has worked out fantastically well; the same system also heats our pool in the summer and really has exceeded our expectations.

**GET RECOMMENDATIONS** for local tradesmen. We had a great team who knew the area well, which made everything work together seamlessly.

**PROJECT MANAGEMENT** is not easy, especially when you already have a full-time job. Luckily I work for my own company and could free up a couple of hours during the day to be on site. Chasing around buying materials (at the right price!) is also time-consuming.

decided to fit radiators upstairs," says Jan. "We preferred the comfort of a carpet and were also concerned that with the open plan layout downstairs it might get too warm upstairs. As it's turned out we have most of the radiators turned off, even in winter, as the house is so toasty."

#### Generating energy

To be as eco-friendly as possible, the Holdens have a NIBE air source heat pump, which feeds the UFH and the domestic hot water and also heats the pool. On the stable block roof, they also have an array of 16 solar photovoltaic (PV) panels. "We try to run all our utilities during the day to consume as much of our site-generated electricity as possible. We've also installed low energy LED light bulbs throughout the property," says Andrew.

The couple decided not to put in a utility room, opting instead for the American idea of putting a washing machine and tumble-dryer upstairs. "We have a product that's extremely efficient and only uses 20% of the electricity a regular dryer takes," says Jan. "In the kitchen we have fitted a Quooker hot water tap, but other than that we didn't go for too many gadgets and gizmos."

One of Jan's favourite features is the sparkling mica wallpaper, used as a feature

wall in the dining hall. "Everyone who comes in wants to feel it. It gives a stunning effect and was surprisingly straightforward for us to hang ourselves," says Jan. "The crystal chandelier was the one real indulgence – we all need a little bling in our lives! I am told the best way to clean it is to spray it with a solution of washing-up liquid and water and leave it to drip-dry overnight."

#### Family input

"The best part of the self build process has been the result – the creation of a gorgeous property that looks as if has been sitting in its environment forever," says Jan. "Many people, some of them builders, think that it's actually an old house that we've refurbished, which is the ultimate accolade."

"The process utilised all the family, who all had some input into it; this kept arguments at a very shallow level, such as what colour or brand to go for," she adds.

"The worst point is that the build seemed to go on for an eternity and we were so impatient to get in and enjoy the fruits of our labour," says Andrew. "Although the self build process is hard, the end results make it more than worthwhile."

Having created their perfect house, the couple don't seem too tempted to repeat the winning formula elsewhere. "Why would we



want to build again when we have this amazing home?" says Andrew. "However, never say never. If we did it again we might be swayed by the turnkey option and hand the whole build over to Border Oak. If we'd had done that this time, I may have kept a little more of my hair – but it wouldn't be as satisfying."

#### closer look

## Heritage windows...

The Holdens were very specific about the way they wanted their windows to look: instead of Tudor-style frames entirely made from oak, they were after more of an Arts & Crafts appearance, with thin-profile Crittall-style metal frames and leaded lights. Finding a modern, A-rated equivalent of this style proved tricky. "There are dozens about, but all with a large profile, which would look completely wrong" says Andrew. So after much searching they found a company called Duration Windows in Canvey Island, which was able to achieve what they wanted. "We then made our own oak sub-frames on site and fitted the windows," says Andrew. "The whole thing was rather a gamble, but we're overjoyed with the finish and look it gives us."



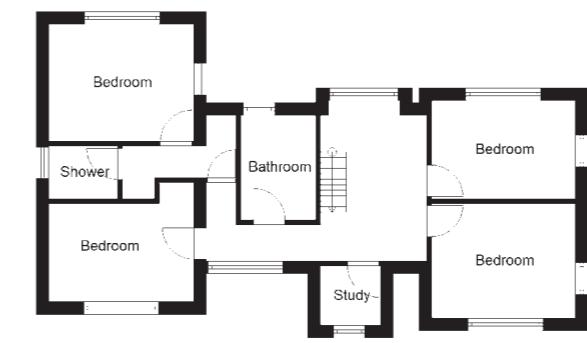
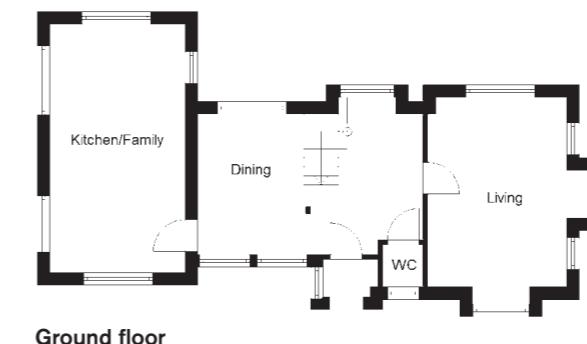
Thin-profile frames

## TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

Elements	Cost m <sup>2</sup>	Cost %	Total cost
Preliminaries	£6	<1%	£2,000
Foundations	£52	4%	£16,000
External walls & windows	£565	41%	£175,000
Roof	£81	6%	£25,000
Internal walls	£16	1%	£5,000
Floor wall & ceiling finishes	£29	2%	£9,000
Joinery & fittings	£68	5%	£21,000
Plumbing, heating, kitchen & bathroom	£145	11%	£45,000
Electrics	£32	2%	£10,000
Decorating	£6	<1%	£2,000
External works (inc barn, stable block, pool & pool house)	£365	26%	£113,000
Fees	£13	1%	£4,000
<b>Grand total</b>			<b>£427,000</b>



### Floor plans



House plans re-created using ARCON 3D Home Design Software. [www.3darchitect.co.uk](http://www.3darchitect.co.uk)  
Tel: 01252 267788 Email: [arconsales@eleco.com](mailto:arconsales@eleco.com)

### Useful contacts



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**North Star Energy** 0845 680 0881 [www.northstarenergy.co.uk](http://www.northstarenergy.co.uk)  
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WINDOWS **Duration Windows** 01268 681612 [www.duration.co.uk](http://www.duration.co.uk)  
ROOF TILES **Heritage Clay Tiles** 01474 560278 [www.heritatetiles.co.uk](http://www.heritatetiles.co.uk)