

HOMES OAK FRAME SELF-BUILD

A Home from Home

Building an oak frame home helped Michael Walker and wife Katie fulfil a dream of returning to the rural village in which he grew up

Words: **Eleanor Price** Photography: **Simon Maxwell**



Front Elevation

The oak frame home was designed and erected by Border Oak, with all external brick and timber cladding provided as part of the package. The new build is located in the garden of Michael's parents' house and Michael left his job to manage the final elements of the project



PROJECT NOTES

Project: Oak frame self-build

Location: Worcestershire

Dates: March 2012 - March 2013

Size: 130m²

Land cost: £30,000

Build cost: £200,000 (£1,538/m²)

Value: Around £350,000

The Daily Telegraph
**HOMEBUILDING
& RENOVATING**
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THE QUICK READ

➤ Michael and Katie Walker have built an oak frame home on a plot carved from Michael's parents' garden. Border Oak crafted and erected the oak frame, and finished the build to watertight stage; Michael took over from this point

➤ By taking on the project management, tasks such as sanding and finishing the oak frame, and bartering on material costs, the couple estimate that they saved £50,000 on the build cost

➤ The couple recommend a healthy contingency fund — their fund was quickly swallowed up by unexpected groundwork costs

For Michael Walker, the dream was always to move back to the place where he grew up, to a sleepy village in the heart of the Worcestershire countryside. But there was just one snag — finding a property that he could afford to buy was an issue.

After living close to Worcester city centre with his partner Katie, but increasingly desperate to escape to the country, Michael was inspired to build his own home after watching an episode of *Build, Buy, Restore* (presented by *Homebuilding & Renovating*'s Michael Holmes). "The couple on the program were in exactly the same situation as us: they wanted to live in the countryside but couldn't afford to buy a house," says Michael. "They even looked at a plot just up the road from ours." And with that, the dye was cast. ➤





Fortunately for Michael, his parents still live in the family home where he and his siblings were raised — and that same house just happened to have a rather large back garden. “After many discussions, we were given the go-ahead to use part of the garden to build a new home,” he says.

An Oak Frame Build

“Ever since the idea of self-building entered my mind, I knew that I wanted to build a timber frame house, which suited the traditional village setting,” continues Michael. Fortunately, his job as a graphic designer meant that he was able to sketch out a rudimentary design, which he then took to Border Oak in Herefordshire, who specialise in green oak frame houses. “The team were great,” says Michael, “they were really flexible and were happy to just make the house watertight, rather than do the whole build, which was important for us as we needed to be able to do a lot of the work ourselves in order to remain within budget.”

With the design finalised, it was submitted to the planning department and also needed to pass the local parish council’s strict guidelines. The house proved popular with all parties and work started on site in March 2012.

Once the footings were in place, Border Oak erected the oak frame and completed all of the external work, installing SIPs (structural insulated panels) and then exterior cladding around the frame, and adding the roof. From this point it was up to the Walkers to push the build along. Michael acted as project manager, taking on the task of booking the various contractors needed to install services on site and to plan and organise the first and second fix work. ➡➡

Above & Left: Kitchen/Diner

The green oak frame aside, timber plays a big role in the interiors of this new home. Engineered wood flooring, oak veneered internal doors and oak worktops (the latter were both sourced from Howdens) feature in the kitchen. Michael specified the flooring and worktops unfinished in order to finish them with the same matt finish Osmo Polyx oil used for the interior oak frame — this gives continuity to all the timber. (Teak oil was used for the exterior oak). A lime green Smeg fridge freezer and pendant lights from the Electric Centre bring a bold splash of colour to this room

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He also set himself the somewhat arduous job of sanding and then acid treating the oak. “Getting the frame finished was the longest process of the build. Every section needed to be sanded, treated and stained, which felt like it took forever. By the end of it I had gone through four electric sanders because they just kept burning out.” It was all worth it though — Michael believes that by doing so much of the work himself, around £50,000 was shaved off the total build cost.

“I actually made the decision to leave my job for the last six months of the build. This was because it meant that I could do more work on the house, saving on labour costs,” he says. “At one point our budget was starting to dwindle and we wanted to make sure we could finish the build to the level that we wanted. It did take over our lives though — we were on site every night and weekend, but it was definitely worth it in the end.”

Ensuring the wood’s colour continuity became a real labour of love for Michael, too. The engineered oak flooring and oak kitchen worktops were specified untreated so that they could be stained to match the frame. “I know it sounds obsessive, but I wanted everything to be perfectly finished. Building your own home is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, so it had to be right.”

The Importance of a Contingency Fund

As soon as the couple hit ground, they hit an unexpected expense — the builders realised that the footings needed to be dug down a metre further than planned. The added time and resources hadn’t been accounted for in the original budget and quickly ate into Michael and Katie’s precious contingency fund. ➡

Exposing the Oak Frame

“This project illustrates the use of oak framing only where it benefits — downstairs the frame is minimal, functional and considered,” says Border Oak’s Merry Albright. “The biggest impact upstairs comes from allowing the oak frame to do what it does best by articulating the full vaulted height, giving the bedroom volume, architectural interest and an element of surprise.”

Right: Master Bedroom

The vaulted ceiling makes for an impressive master bedroom, which also features an en suite (tucked beneath the roof of the weatherboarded section of the house). Two further bedrooms on the first floor share the family bathroom, where the exposed oak frame also makes an impressive appearance







Inglenook Fireplace

"The inglenook fireplace is both a practical and visually pleasing addition. Setting it on the exterior wall gives the perception of a little more width to the room – the inglenook is almost a metre deep – and ensures the stove (and the necessary circulation space) doesn't encroach into the room," says Border Oak's Merry Albright



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“The major piece of advice I would offer to anyone is to be sure that you have a good contingency in place before you build. We had already set some money aside and that wasn’t enough, as so much money went into the ground before the first brick had even been laid,” advises Michael. “Luckily we were able to borrow a bit extra, but you really do need a buffer.”

“Another area that cost more than expected was the driveway and lowering the pavement. As we had to use the council’s contractors, we couldn’t get lots of quotes so it ended up costing us around £4,000 all-in-all — far higher than we had anticipated, but it had to be done. Coupled with the extra money needed for the footings at the start of the build, if we hadn’t had some spare money, we wouldn’t have been able to finish everything to the standard that we have.”

Small Design Changes Make a Big Impact

The couple tweaked the original design during the build. Instead of a window in the kitchen, they opened the space up with French doors, making the most of the stunning countryside scenery beyond. “The kitchen is probably my favourite room,” says Katie. “We always end up gathering around the island to chat when friends come over and we’re so pleased that we chose the French doors.”

After visiting another oak frame home nearby, Katie also made the rather expensive decision to take the master bedroom ceiling right up to the rafters, exposing the beautiful frame. This involved adding extra insulation between the rafters and preparing and finishing the exposed oak frame, but the vaulted ceiling turned out to be a good decision — the room is now light and airy, with the additional height giving the illusion of extra space.

Another space-saving solution was installing underfloor heating throughout the property — doing away with the need for wall-cluttering radiators. With the whole village off-mains gas, Michael and Katie opted for an air-source heat pump, which powers the underfloor heating system throughout. There is also a woodburning stove in the living room that is so effective it warms the whole house.

All of the space in the house has been meticulously planned out, with each room providing a comfortable living space for the couple. A large utility room just off the kitchen houses all of the necessary appliances, as well as a walk-in shower room — ideal for when guests come to stay — and a further entrance. This room sits within the weatherboarded section of the build; it appears to be an ‘extension’, as if the cottage has evolved and been added to over time.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Michael has been firmly bitten by the building bug and has set his sights on adding a garage next to the house. “I loved building the house, so I’m excited to make a start on the garage. We’re also in the process of submitting the plans for a conservatory, which will give us even more space,” he says. “We don’t plan on moving any time soon, but if we did we would certainly consider building again. It’s all about having the confidence to self-build in the first place, but we would recommend it to anyone.” **H**

SEE MORE ON THIS HOME ONLINE

➡ **Watch HB&R’s interview with Michael and Katie**

Visit homebuildingawards.co.uk/pea-cottage



Far left: Living Room

French doors make the most of the countryside views, but also lend to the traditional cottage aesthetic of the living room (FAR LEFT); the opening will also allow a conservatory to be added with some ease in the future. A large inglenook-style fireplace emulates the cottage feel and is home to a woodburning stove. Elsewhere, the large hall (TOP LEFT) is light-filled thanks for a strategically placed window above the oak staircase; the oak engineered flooring continues on the first floor in the family bathroom (TOP FAR LEFT)



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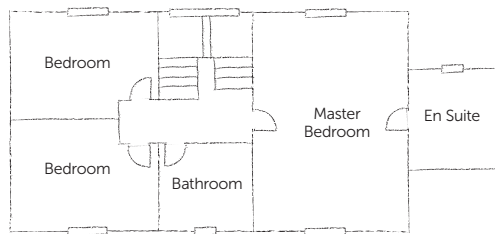
The Project



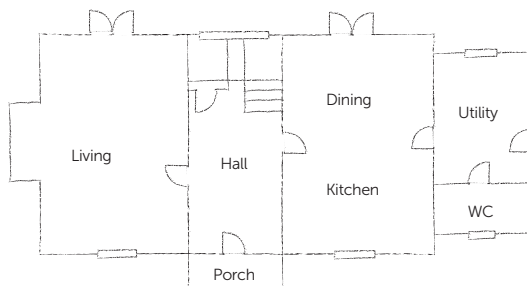
Michael & Katie Walker
Homeowners

THE HOMEOWNERS' VIEW

Having looked at other layouts, we decided we wanted a grand entrance to include a large oak staircase, and a centrally placed kitchen was also important to us — this is the heart of the house. In addition, we wanted a large utility area and a decent-sized en suite (this is directly above the utility), so having the weatherboarded section was a must.



FIRST FLOOR



GROUND FLOOR



Merry Albright
Border Oak

THE OAK FRAME COMPANY'S VIEW

When building to a restricted footprint there are various 'tricks' that can help maximise the sense of space, and Michael and Katie's house is an excellent example of this. For example, the floorplan is deliberately simple — based around a central hall (with staircase and storage) which is generous enough to be welcoming and practical. Either side are two double-aspect main rooms — a kitchen and sitting room — which are proportional (which makes the space feel larger). You can also see from one end of the cottage to the other, which gives the impression of length and 'journey'. Outside, the distinctive, over-scaled oak porch is both attractive and practical; it's big enough for storing wellies and logs but also adds to 'reception' space.

Adjacent to the kitchen is an independent weatherboarded section (without any oak frame), which works incredibly hard for the small footprint. It is typically where you would locate all the essentials such as the boiler, fuse box, washing machine etc. — household necessities that would really spoil the appearance of the main rooms.

PROJECT TIMELINE

Mar 12 Footings dug
Apr 12 Brickwork completed
May 12 Oak frame erected
Jun - Jul 12 Roof completed; first fix electrics and plumbing
Aug - Sep 12 Build stops as couple marry
Oct - Nov 12 Preparation and acid treating the oak frame
Dec 12 - Jan 13 Second fix, including kitchen and bathrooms
Feb 13 Final decoration
Mar 13 Moved into the completed house

COST BREAKDOWN

House built to watertight stage, including oak frame and footings	£139,000
Driveway, entrance and additional footings	£10,000
Sewage treatment plant	£2,000
Air-source heat pump and underfloor heating	£14,000
Electrics and plumbing	£10,000
Kitchen and utility	£10,000
Bathroom, en suite and ground floor shower room	£5,000
Guttering and drainage	£2,000
Oak flooring and carpets	£4,000
Decorating and tool hire	£4,000
Total	£200,000

SUPPLIERS

Build to watertight stage, including oak frame supply and erection

Border Oak borderoak.com

Sanitaryware Bathstore... bathstore.com

Oak veneered interior doors and worktops Howdens..... howdens.com

Engineered wood flooring

Green Apple Flooring 0800 002 9525

Worcester Bosch air-source heat pump

BoilerCare (Worcester)..... 01905 621717

Underfloor heating supply

JG Speedfit johnquest.com/speedfit

Bio-Pure Sewage Treatment Plant

We Build It Ltd..... webuildit-ltd.co.uk