



High **ACHIEVER**

Simon Abdilla completed his new home, doing most of the work himself while still holding down his demanding full-time job as a bank manager. Here he describes the build and reflects on the experience, offering tips for others contemplating doing the same.

STORY SIMON ABDILLA | PHOTOGRAPHY CHRISTOPHER JONES

My wife Gail and I bought our 0.6 acre plot in Exeter in July 2012 after a protracted and challenging purchase. It had been part of a much larger property and someone agreed to buy the main house while we bought the plot. I am no stranger to self build having carried out major renovations to my own homes in the past, though this was my first build from scratch. Our brief to our architect was for a 2,750 sqft low energy house with a triple garage, built in the local vernacular but with a modern twist. We wanted a simple layout that was easy to live in and maintain. It should also have a south-west orientation. Gail wanted a wow factor while I demanded an easy



EXTERIOR AND GARDEN

The three-storey house features extensive glazing and an oak-frame sun room. The main fabric of the building was constructed in York handmade bricks. The bricks' natural creases and irregular shapes justified the additional expense.



Suppliers

PROJECT

Architect ARA architects, Exeter: ara-architecture.co.uk
 Building Materials Jewson: jewson.co.uk
 Ground works D Malins: 07850 757556
 Roofer John Treddaway: 07947 896496
 Electrician Mike Jelley: 07752 110947
 Plumber AH Claydon & Son: 07831 791348

MATERIALS

Bricks York Hand Made: yorkhandmade.co.uk
 Roof tiles Dreadnought Tiles: dreadnought-tiles.co.uk
 Timber frame Weststructure, Cullompton: weststructure.co.uk
 Glazing Aspect windows, Exeter: aspect-windows.com
 Staircase Radford Joinery, Exeter: radford-joinery.co.uk
 Stone Portico/ stonework Thorverton Stone Co: thorvetonstone.co.uk
 Oak frame Oakwrights: oakwrights.co.uk

FIXTURES

Guttering Yeoman Rainguard: rainguard.co.uk
 Bathrooms/tiles Porcelanosa: porcelanosa.co.uk
 Kitchen Aran Kitchens: arankitchens.com supplied by DSL, Truro: dslsouthwest.com
 Granite worktops SCI masonry: scimasonry.co.uk
 Underfloor heating Continental UFH: ufh.co.uk
 Bathstone fireplace Nick Curtis
 Fireplaces: curtisfireplaces.co.uk
 Bifold doors Sunfold Systms: sunfold.com



KITCHEN

Aran Kitchens are the only manufacturer that is known to supply full-height curved doors. The quality of construction and ease of fitting was exceptional.

“When the alarmingly high quotes came in I decided the only way forward was to manage the project myself.”

build. I presented our architect with some back of an envelope sketches showing a crescent-shaped building facing south-west to optimise the view and sun. I was surprised when he came back with my drawings, albeit improved! He had worked some magic creating a Georgian look with some amazing glazing. Gail and I both instantly fell in love with the design.

Planning permissions came through two months later and it was only then that I realised that my first part of the brief (2,750 sqft) was missing – by a long shot! The house came in at 5,400 sqft and with expected budget costs of £1,500-£2,000 per square metre it was clearly unaffordable to us. But we had started a journey and had to continue.

We put the design out to tender for a weather-tight shell with the idea that I would complete the internal works. When the alarmingly high quotes came back, I decided the only way forward was to manage the project myself, acting as infill builder, and sub contracting key trades where required.

I was unfazed by the change of circumstances. Indeed, as a self-confessed control freak, I was excited by the prospect. I was introduced to Daryl Malins, who agreed to do the groundworks and in November 2012 we broke ground after the wettest summer on record. The water level was only a metre below ground while our foundations needed to be 1.5m. This was the start of the nightmare.

I was still working full-time as a bank manager 50 miles away in Launceston. My typical day suddenly extended to arriving on site at 7am to discuss the day's work and returning at 7pm to check progress. Evenings were spent sourcing materials and ordering.

In the circumstances, we opted for trench fill foundations. The combination of sandy clay soil and excess water meant the trenches collapsed on a regular basis and I often found myself standing knee

deep in water manning the pumps in conditions more akin to the Somme. By the time the foundations were poured, our budgeted 30m³ of concrete had blown out to 100m³, with some of the trenches 1.5m wide. By Christmas we were out of the ground preparing for beam and block flooring. A 5,000 litre rainwater harvester was set in the ground to supply all the toilets – a great way to save on water bills.

I chose timber frame construction for its speed of erection and the ease with which first fix could be completed. Darryl introduced me to Pete Doman from Weststructure, a local company specialising in bespoke houses. My seemingly simple house shape was more complex than I had envisaged, with the attic truss roofed garage linked to a timber frame house linked to an oak frame garden room – all at 45 degrees. I hadn't considered the challenges that angles other than 90 degrees cause and how different construction types settle and move differently. Tying them together can be an issue. Also, the large areas of glass could only be constructed as curtain walling and meant the roofs had to be self supporting. Pete allowed me to work with him when he was designing the frame on CAD.

In fact he designed the Oak frame and garage as well, something way out of his brief. Together we resolved all the construction issues.

In January 2013 work started on the garage and by early March it was watertight. I had a fallen out with the roofer who didn't lay the tiles to my satisfaction and we agreed to go our separate ways. Due to budget pressures and my desire to be in control, I could not easily let trades come in to help so I asked Graham, a plasterer who I had used previously on other renovation projects, to help me on weekends. Together we completed all the jobs including fascia and guttering, and all internal work so that by July the garage and rooms above were habitable.





OAK ROOM

The oak room is our favourite feature. We spend most of our evenings enjoying the lovely garden views from this room.



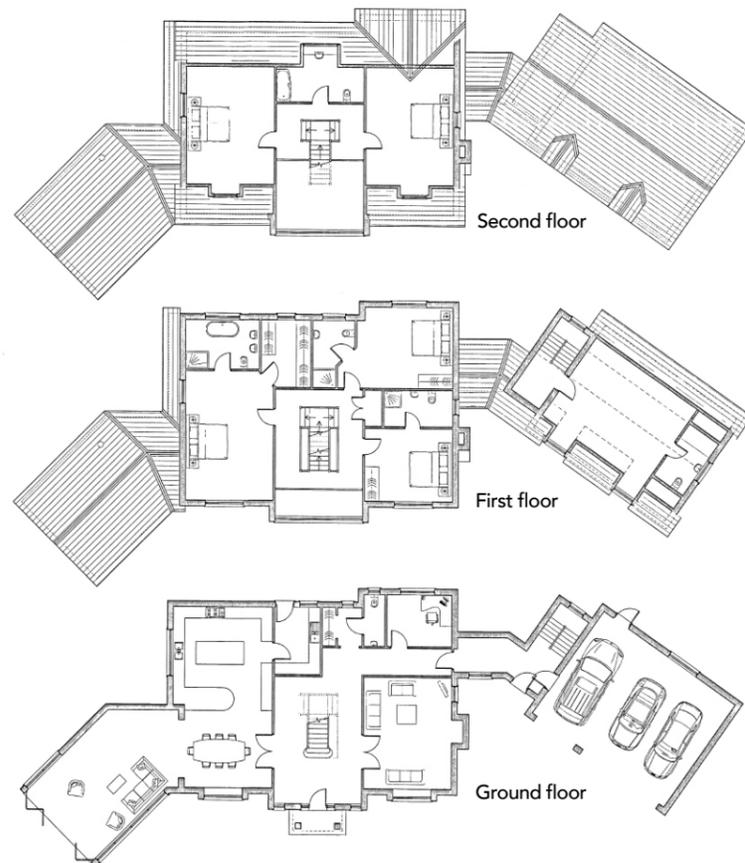
“Oakwrights supplied the green oak frame which took three carpenters two days to erect.”

By June 13 the main house timber frame was erected a couple of weeks behind schedule but in the scheme of things I had enough to be getting on with. The aluminium windows were above our budget as my wife preferred the expensive metallic anthracite finish and a different pebble grey colour for the inside. She made the right choice though. I had chosen Aspect Windows in Exeter to supply the glazing as they had a good reputation for curtain walling. Aspect were brilliant throughout the design and fitting process, working to incredibly tight tolerances on the curtain walling.

John Treddaway, my new roofer, attended to the house as soon as it was erected to keep it water tight, doing a fantastic job as the roof design also proved tricky with its angles and valleys.

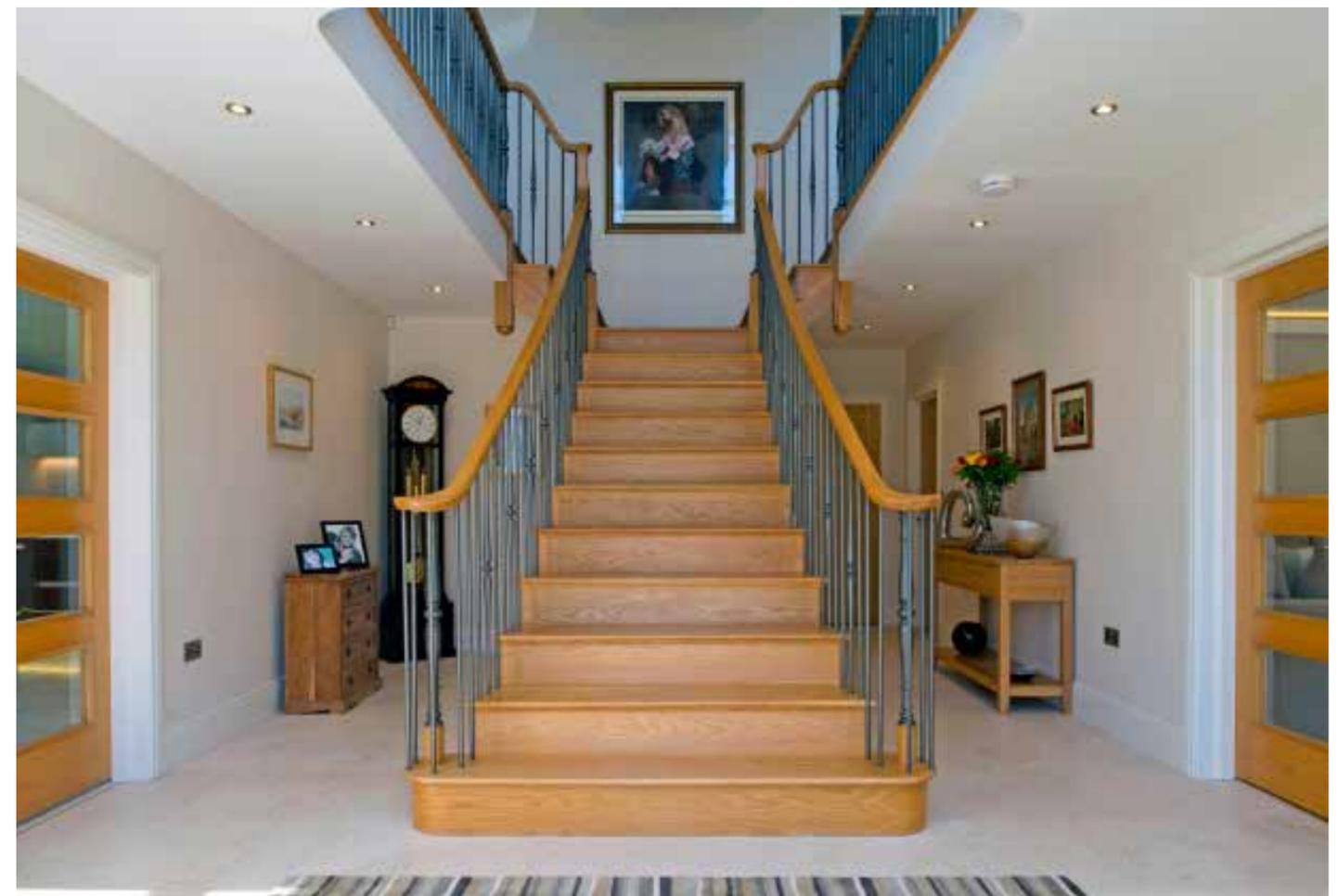
For the garden room, Oakwrights supplied the green oak frame which took three carpenters two days to erect. I have never worked with such heavy objects and my back began to niggle – an ominous sign of things to come. At weekends, Graham and I would load the bricks up onto the scaffold ready for the bricklayers to work on the house the following week. Rather than hiring a forklift, we would throw the bricks up one at a time. With the help of my neighbour farmer, John, we also installed the Bathstone window surrounds and portico.

It was in September that my nagging backache turned into my worst nightmare. A prolapsed a disc



Floorplan

The accommodation is split over three floors, with three en suite bedrooms on the first floor, and two further bedrooms on the top floor. The ground floor features an oak-frame sunroom, dining area, formal lounge and a snug.





led to severe sciatica and I was unable to do anything physical for weeks. Graham was my brawn while I had to be content project managing.

By October the house was watertight. Graham and I had insulated the whole structure using multi-foil over 140mm of fibre insulation. Insulating with fibre is the worst job as no matter how good the face mask, the fibres still make you choke and cough for hours afterwards.

The electrical installation involved miles of electric and data cable but at least it wasn't heavy work and I didn't have to bend down much. My electrician, Mike Jelly, allowed me to cut costs by running all the wiring under his guidance, usually coming to site on a Sunday.

By November my back was a lot better. I had laid the underfloor heating pipes ready for poured screed. Our plumber, Matt Claydon, installed the two gas boilers and ensured the UFH was pressure tested prior to screeding.

Gail and I had fallen in love with an Italian Aran kitchen in a showroom in Truro along with Siemens appliances (again way over budget!). The whole ground floor was to be limestone tile. This was laid by Graham and me by April but this was not easy with my disc problems still evident.

I spent the rest of 2014 installing the four bathrooms, completing the tiling, plumbing and second-fix electrics along with all the joinery, including door linings, architraves, skirting and door hanging.



STAIRS

The central steel and oak staircase is the focal point of the three-storey atrium.



“I would love to do another self build – just not while working full time!”

Our central steel and oak staircase, which is now the focal point of the three-storey atrium, was designed and fitted by a specialist carpenter, Shaun Radford Joinery. I offered to spray every one of the 260 steel spindles to save on costs.

We had hoped to be in by the end of 2014 but only the kitchen area was habitable. At least we had Christmas dinner in the main house but had to camp in the flat above the garage. Early in 2015 I installed the final bathrooms and bedrooms, including the built-in wardrobes, and decorated the house. In March 2015 we moved in.

The SAP air test was passed with flying colours ready for final sign off. Later in spring I finished the gated entrance with a Delabole natural stone wall and brick gate piers. Having watched the bricklayers work earlier in the job, I subsequently constructed all the garden walling myself to a good standard.

To this day I still don't know how I managed to complete our build over 30 months with a full-time job, a prolapsed disc and only a part-time labourer for assistance. And at a cost of under £850 per sqm!

I appreciate I am lucky to have a wife who devoted three years to single-handedly looking after our daughter, the home and me. And I couldn't have done it without the help and support of all my contractors, especially my right hand man, Graham. Louise, my PA at work, also took a huge amount of day job pressure off me.

Great teamwork makes things happen. My dad always said: “hard work never killed anyone” but in this case it was a close thing! I would love to do another self build – just not while working full time.”



BEDROOMS & BATHROOMS

blah
blah

