



Left: The grand cottage-style house is finished with K Rend's Pearl render while oak details around the windows tie in with the oak frame front gable

Below: The house replaces a run-down 1930s house and is on the same footprint with the back garden facing west

STARTING OVER

Julian and Vanessa Gatward bought a run-down 1930s house in Kent with plans to renovate. But the project began to look more viable if they demolished and self built from scratch

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Vanessa and Julian Gatward were renting in Kent with Vanessa's two young children when they began looking for a nearby home project. When they viewed a dilapidated property on a large plot, they liked the secluded spot at the end of a 30m-long drive with an outlook across the North Downs. "We drove up and as the 1930s house came into view, we couldn't see another home around us," says Vanessa. "Architecturally it looked quite ugly, with a 1970s extension and



Roof tiles from Lifestyles were chosen alongside the Flemish Oak brick from Vandersanden and render to give the house more of an aged appearance

rooms that were poorly laid out. The fabric of the building wasn't in good condition, either. When we moved in, our main source of cooking and heating was from lighting the Rayburn stove."

Straightaway, Julian and Vanessa began thinking about how they'd change the property, which also had a run-down double garage and carport. They'd taken on renovations before and Julian had self built an oak frame house. They played around with different design ideas for this project and got an architect involved. "We wanted to rework the existing layout and introduce oak, but this proved to be tricky," says Julian. "We soon realised we couldn't get what we wanted out of the house without spending at least £500,000, and if we could afford that, we'd be better off knocking it down and starting again."

As a second time self builder and a civil engineer, the leap from renovating to self building wasn't too daunting for Julian. "I know through work that when you try and change something that already exists, it nearly always costs more because you don't know what you're going to find," he says. "Building new meant we'd be more certain of the outcome. Although we kept money aside for extras, we didn't know what we might want or need until later down the line."

Planning their oak home

Julian and Vanessa parted ways with their architect in early 2021 and recalibrated with an oak frame house in mind. Vanessa's an environmentalist and the couple both love the look and feel of

natural materials. "I think oak makes the most beautiful of homes, especially with the exposed wood outside," says Vanessa. "Once we decided to build from scratch, I never wanted anything other than to live in an oak frame house."

The couple contacted several oak frame suppliers with a plan to find a specialist to take on the design and build of their new home. They wanted a hybrid oak and softwood frame, but found few companies willing to do this. "Having used it before, I realised you didn't need to have oak everywhere," says Julian. "I remembered Welsh Oak Frame, who I'd met at a Build It Live show, would do a mix of oak and softwood framing. It's more cost effective and we needed that for our budget. Plus, they had some fantastic designs."

Julian and Vanessa took a good look at the designs on Welsh Oak Frame's website. They instantly connected with two houses, including the Hiltons' award-winning house, which was crowned Best Oak Frame at the Build It Awards 2023. "We both really loved

the idea of having a central gable at the front of the house with a beautiful porch, oak railings and dormers above," says Vanessa.

After meeting with Welsh Oak Frame's design team and liking their personal, friendly attitude, the couple asked them to design a house with these features to suit the layout they'd outlined. They wanted a separate double garage with an annexe above, too. "We liked Welsh Oak's portfolio of designs and how they would apply their expertise of oak framing – and particularly hybrid oak framing – into our design," he explains. "Plus, their design services cost less than half of the architect fees we'd paid before."

FACT FILE

NAMES Julian & Vanessa Gatward
OCCUPATIONS Civil engineer & environmental consultant
LOCATION Kent
TYPE OF PROJECT Self build
CONSTRUCTION METHOD Oak frame
PROJECT ROUTE Building contractor; homeowners project managed
PLOT SIZE 0.75 acres
PROPERTY COST £935,000
BOUGHT October 2020
HOUSE SIZE 224m²
PROJECT COST £660,850
PROJECT COST PER M² £2,950
TOTAL COST £1,595,850
BUILDING WORK COMMENCED November 2022
BUILDING WORK TOOK 12 months
CURRENT VALUE £1,800,000





The oak mantel is embedded into the rendered chimney breast with exposed brick detail inside

The team delivered a design with exposed oak in all the main living spaces and softwood in the guest bedroom, study and utility. "We were impressed with their level of detail," says Vanessa. "They went on to hand engrave the name and date of our house in roman numerals in the oak above the window seat and in the front gable. We also both love the triangular window in our bedroom that beautifully captures views of the downs."

Planning application & building a team

After making tweaks to the design, the couple were ready to submit their planning application. They both have some knowledge of planning law through their jobs in the construction industry and were fairly confident their design would be approved. Not only were they sticking to the original footprint, building in oak was sympathetic to the countryside setting. However, for absolute certainty, they took planning advice from Stephen Locke Associates, recommended to them by Welsh Oak Frame. "We didn't mind that Stephen wasn't local to the area as we needed advice about specific design elements rather than whether we could build the house at all," Vanessa explains. "Our main concerns were getting planning to raise the house ridge height by about a metre and for the size of the 110m² garage-annexe."



The application went in during May 2021 and they received planning approval in November, with no issues. Looking for a smooth-running build solution, the couple bought into the idea of using a construction platform where their drawings and specification would be shared with building contractors, who could choose to quote. The platform provider would screen them all and provide project management support during the build



with regular quality control checks. "We liked the idea of getting prices from genuinely interested builders," says Julian. "However, the platform didn't follow through with proper support so it was more of an introductory service. We wouldn't recommend them."

The couple hired a building contractor who'd given them a transparent quote based on the detailed spec they'd put together. "He was easy to deal with, but we soon discovered he wasn't very



Above & left: At Vanessa's request, Welsh Oak Frame designed the window seat nook that looks out over the garden. The couple chose Rencraft to design and build the kitchen as they're local and make everything within ten miles of their house. They liked the quality of the cabinetry, which is painted in Little Greene's French Grey Mid and Hicks Blue



The new home has both a lounge and separate cinema room, which features a panelled wall

good at thinking ahead," says Julian. "Some of his trades were excellent but others needed closely managing by Vanessa and I, which was stressful alongside our jobs and looking after the children, and exactly what we had wanted to avoid doing."

Hitting ground

The project began in June 2022 with the sensible decision to first knock down the old carport and build the garage. This offered the family a 70m² self-contained annexe that they could live in for the

duration of the project. The ancillary building was completed in four months, with the main house demolished later that same year in November. The foundations were dug and laid over the winter and the hybrid oak frame arrived in February 2023.

"The frame went up in three weeks and it was incredible to be able to see the rooms and walk through them," says Vanessa. "The method was quick compared to a masonry build and although we had the opportunity to make last minute changes, we were happy with what we'd created so resisted the temptation."

"We're very glad we took the opportunity to self build because in the end we got everything we wanted in a house, and more"



Left & below: Both the ensuite and main bathroom benefit from underfloor heating conducted through natural limestone tiled floors from Whitehall Flagstones. Both bathrooms are positioned beneath the eaves of dormer windows with enough head height to fit in a shower. Sanitaryware is from Tradsol

WE LEARNED...

SPEAK UP EARLY if you're not happy. We have high standards and learnt not to be afraid to query the quality of the work completed.

UNDERSTANDING THE DRAWINGS really helps with being able to correlate them to the work that's been done. We discussed and challenged our subcontractors as they didn't always look at the details.

CLEARLY SET OUT YOUR EXPECTATIONS of what you want from subcontractors. Generally, we found if we left it to them, they took the easiest path, rather than what was best for our build.

GIVE YOURSELF PLENTY OF TIME to look, compare and contrast paint colours, tiles, lighting and carpets because otherwise the decisions come all at once and there aren't enough weekends to choose everything in a short space of time.

Insulated infill panels were fitted where the oak frame was visible while the softwood parts were clad in brick or blockwork and insulated internally. The builder recommended the aged brick with its mottled colours, but the traditional roof tiles took a little longer to choose. "We must have had about 40 tile samples at one point," says Vanessa. "The only way to make up our mind was to compare them alongside the K Rend swatch colour and brick sample to see which one would work best."

Trades made progress, but the build was not without its challenges. A list of problems began to gather – ordering windows late, incorrect door frame sizes, poor rendering. "It was stressful because we couldn't afford to waste money and it's not easy to tell a trade that their work isn't acceptable," Julian explains. "That said,



relationships got better as the project went on. We stayed firm with what we wanted and the trades were willing to listen."

Dream result

The house was finished in 12 months, ready for the family to move into. The hard and soft landscaping followed the build and began to take shape over the following months, completing in summer 2024.



The spectacular triangular window, suggested by Welsh Oak frame, responded to the couple's wish to be able to sit in bed and look out over the view across the Sevenoaks Escarpment

The couple are delighted with their finished oak home. "Despite the ups and downs to get to this point, Julian and I are very glad we took the opportunity to self build a brand-new house, rather than renovating the 1930s home, because in the end we got everything we wanted, and more," says Vanessa. "Having the oak frame exposed inside the property is wonderful. It has given us a lovely, warm family home – we're all very happy here."

closer look

Renewable energy strategy...

Although the house could have been connected to gas, Julian and Vanessa wanted to use renewable energy solutions. They chose an air source heat pump from Daikin after chatting to the firm at a Build It Live show. They have zoned underfloor heating upstairs, downstairs and in the annexe. Cahill Renewables installed 10 solar photovoltaic panels, which are embedded into the garage roof and connect to a LiFePO4 6.5kW battery. This contributes around 15% of annual energy consumption, including charging the couple's two hybrid cars. "We received a discount of £5,000 from the government for installing the air source heat pump and we sell our surplus solar electricity back to the grid," says Julian. "Our renewable setup has been well worth the investment, considering the volatility in the energy market. We will see payback after about eight years. It also gives us some peace of mind that we're contributing to sustainable energy production."



Solar panels on the annexe

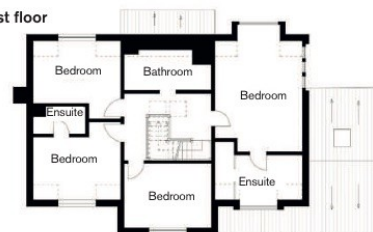


Floor plans

Ground floor



First floor



TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

Elements	Cost m ²	Cost %	Total cost
Demolition	£142	5%	£31,800
Groundworks & foundations	£460	16%	£103,000
Structural frame	£727	25%	£162,850
Roofing	£93	3%	£20,800
Walls & floors	£464	16%	£104,000
Windows & doors	£134	5%	£30,000
Electrics	£124	4%	£27,700
Plumbing	£140	5%	£31,400
Joinery	£194	7%	£43,500
Air source heat pump & solar	£109	4%	£24,400
Kitchen & utility	£266	9%	£59,500
Bathrooms	£98	3%	£21,900
Grand total			£660,850

Note: The costs shown here reflect the original prices for materials, labour and services at the time this project was undertaken. As a general guide, inflation in the construction market runs at about 3%-4% per annum.

Useful contacts

OAK FRAME **Welsh Oak Frame** 01686 688000 www.welshoakframe.com PLANNING CONSULTANT **Stephen Locke Associates** 01952 670106 www.stephenlockeassociates.co.uk AIR SOURCE HEAT PUMP **Daikin** 01932 879271 www.daikin.co.uk SOLAR PV **Cahill Renewables** 01206 646664 www.cahillrenewables.co.uk BRICKS **Vandersanden** 01954 268075 www.vandersanden.com ROOF TILES **Lifestiles** 01787 237057 www.lifestiles.co.uk KITCHEN **Rencraft** 01892 520730 www.rencraft.co.uk BATHROOMS **Tradsol** 01793 486800 www.tradsol.co.uk BATHROOM TILES **Frelands Tiles** 01732 459 765 www.frelands-tiles.co.uk FLOORING **Whitehall Flagstones** 01432 291 055 www.white-hall.co.uk

