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ON THE DOORSTEP

Royan and Helen Anthony had almost given up trying to find the perfect house, but building an oak frame home in their garden unexpectedly ticked all their boxes

WORDS JANE CRITTENDEN PHOTOS NIKHILESH HAVAL

When Ryan and Helen Anthony's children flew the nest for university, the couple decided it was time to downsize – and spent two years searching for a house in and around their Cheshire village. Staying local was key, as was a house with character, but they couldn't find anywhere that appealed to them both. Then on a weekend away, over dinner, they discovered the answer had been in front of them all along. “We'd bought our home some 25 years before, which had a half-acre paddock that we kept as part of our garden,” says Royan. “We'd never viewed the land as an investment and had turned down offers from developers in the past, as we valued our privacy. Way back, the

previous owners had been refused planning consent to build three bungalows, so the idea to self build hadn't been front of our minds.”

Drawing a blank in their house search and aware that local planning rules had eased a bit over the years, the couple thought it was worth exploring the possibility of building a new home on their own land. Royan was keen for an easy-to-maintain house with character, as was Helen, but she also didn't want to live anywhere that looked too new. With no real design direction, they sought inspiration from magazines and attended self build shows. It was here they were first introduced to oak frame houses.

“Our previous home had once been the main farmhouse in the village and had its roots in the 1750s,” says Royan. “The idea of an oak home spoke to both of us. We loved the character and warmth, which was like nothing we'd seen anywhere else.”

Oak ambitions

The couple began researching oak frame specialists online and having conversations. “One of the first questions I asked was: how much is this going to cost?” says Royan. “Most companies wanted a meeting and I could feel a hard sell coming on, but I didn't want to waste my time getting too far into a project we couldn't afford. Out of the four or five firms I contacted, Welsh Oak Frame was the only one prepared to

be straight, giving us rough figures for a budget, mid-range and luxury house, so we knew from the start that this was feasible.”

In spring 2016, the couple went to Wales to meet company owner, Paul Edmunds, who showed them around his own stylish oak frame property. They found the team friendly and were delighted with the different house designs on offer. Although they agreed that their new home needed to complement and not dominate the old farmhouse, Royan and Helen couldn't settle on a design they liked. Welsh Oak Frame suggested they separately write down what they wanted from their new home and present their ideas back to the team.

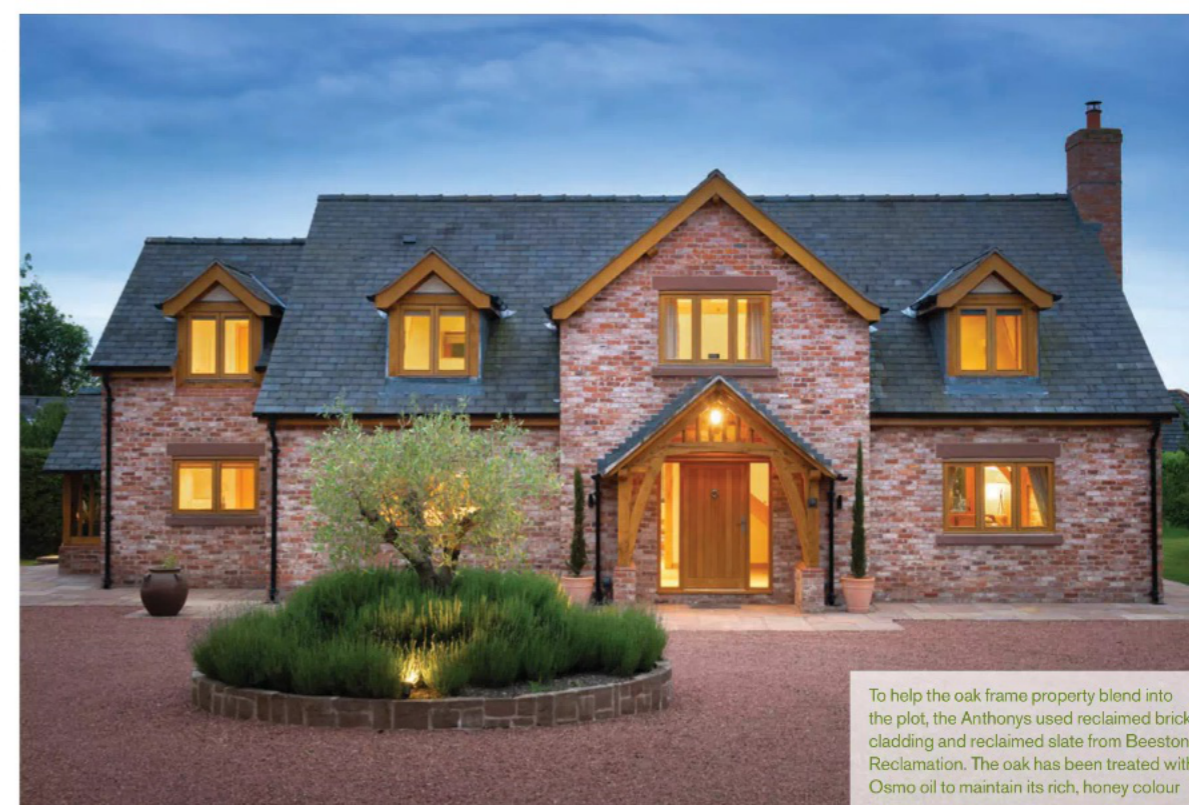
“Remarkably, Paul knew the house for us both, which was one they'd designed and built in Surrey, and that we could go and visit,” says Royan. “The photos and design pressed all the right buttons – we both thought wow, this is meant to be.”

Royan and Helen drove to Surrey and met with the owners, who were happy to give them a tour. A key attraction was the double-storey glass atrium at the back of the property. “We both loved the light, airy feel of the house,” says Royan. “It was also hugely helpful to find out what had worked for the owners and what hadn't. They were generous with their time and kind enough to share the finances of the project with us, too; we can't thank them enough.”

The couple adjusted the design to suit their tastes, settling on a contemporary look with fewer exposed oak beams and more glass. Welsh Oak Frame advised where to place the house on the paddock. “On a site visit they suggested that we angle the building to make the most of the sun at the rear but also have sunshine all day,” says Royan.

Access & planning

One of the couple's concerns was how they'd feel about selling their much-loved family home and who'd be living next door to them. So, when neighbours with a young family expressed an interest in the purchase, they were delighted. The four of them came to an



To help the oak frame property blend into the plot, the Anthonys used reclaimed brick cladding and reclaimed slate from Beeston Reclamation. The oak has been treated with Osmo oil to maintain its rich, honey colour



Above: A glorious double-height atrium is visible from the front entrance and frames the garden

Top right: The large inglenook fireplace is made with the same pink-toned reclaimed bricks used to clad the exterior

Right: The couple didn't want the oak to overpower the interiors, so kept framing minimal for a light contemporary feel. The kitchen was hand built by a local joiner and painted pale grey and paired with white quartz worktops



agreement that if the planning application was successful, the sale would proceed, which helped when it came to making decisions about access and boundaries. "We'd initially thought our new house might share the driveway, but as one of the neighbours is a barrister, he was concerned that legally there could be a problem when we eventually sold up," Royan explains. "Together we worked out where to place the boundaries. While doing this it became clear that the original access should be allocated to the new house and we'd apply for planning to create a new access for our old home."

The matter of whether they'd be given consent to press ahead with their build still weighed heavy; Welsh Oak Frame put Royan and Helen in touch with Les Stephan Planning to handle their application. "They were very positive from the start, which was good, because we'd got quite a long way into the project and were already emotionally invested," says Royan.

The planning application was submitted in July 2016 and, once a sticking point with the brick cladding had been addressed, the couple received approval to proceed. "We' showed a sample of reclaimed brick but the planners wanted us to use a red Cheshire brick, which we really didn't like," Royan explains. "I came back with photos of two or three new buildings, literally 200 yards away, which had used similar products to our choice. Once we'd justified this, the council didn't see it as a problem anymore."

FACT FILE

NAMES Royan & Helen Anthony
OCCUPATIONS Production engineer/ project manager & housewife
LOCATION Cheshire
TYPE OF PROJECT Self build
STYLE Contemporary
CONSTRUCTION METHOD Oak frame
PROJECT ROUTE Oak frame designer & owner project managed
PLOT SIZE 0.5 acres
LAND COST Already owned
HOUSE SIZE 238m²
PROJECT COST £470,000
PROJECT COST PER M² £1,975
BUILDING WORK STARTED March 2017
BUILDING WORK TOOK 15 months
CURRENT VALUE £850,000





Glass balustrades across the bridge landing enable a clear flow of light, giving the upstairs a visual connection with the outdoors



The master bedroom captures views of the garden through double doors and a glass Juliet balcony

WE LEARNED...

WE'RE BOTH PROFICIENT PROJECT MANAGERS

but we had no knowledge of building, so we had to rely on the contractors for their expertise. We were selective with who we employed and once we had that trust we were comfortable with deferring to them. We had over 25 trades and companies involved in our project and only experienced a problem with one.

WE WERE NAIVE ABOUT WHAT DIFFICULTIES might lie ahead and in many ways this helped us to push on, as we just assumed things would work out. If we'd researched the drains, for example, we might have been put off the work involved and decided not to take on the project.

WHEN IT CAME TO MANAGING THE BUDGET we had intended for our quantity surveyor to oversee this. Although his experience was useful at the beginning and his cost plan gave us something to work from, we found it easier to take on project managing the costs with the trades ourselves. In hindsight, using a QS throughout only works if you're completely hands-off, as having two people involved can get confusing.

Experienced team

Royan and Helen weren't newcomers to home projects. Their farmhouse was actually one of two semi-detached houses when they bought it. They later extended and then bought next door, turning the whole building back into one large property.

Royan is a production engineer and project manager in the automotive and aeronautics industry. During the self build, he mostly worked away three days a week and project managed alongside Helen. Together they created a detailed timeline, marking all the major milestones, along with the trades and materials required, to be sure they were well prepared.

The build began in March 2017 with groundworker Neil Harvey doing the groundworks and foundations (and later the driveway



wouldn't be the fall needed for a gravity drain system and an alternative solution had to be found. One option would've been to install a pump, but the more sensible (and less costly) decision was connecting to alternative mains drains. Since the gradient of neighbouring land was more level with the site, Royan wrote to neighbours requesting permission.

"We had a lot of people say no and we only needed one person to say yes," he says. "Fortunately, one neighbour agreed and we were able to seek permission from the water company and progress."

A second problem arose when the couple's groundworker, Neil, started digging and discovered that part of the old house was hooked up to a cesspit in the paddock. "We'd assumed the whole property was connected

and landscaping). Royan says working together was one of his best decisions. "Nothing was too much trouble for Neil," he says. "Although Welsh Oak Frame don't offer a turnkey package, it was never an issue as Neil knew all the local trades. Still, I did my due diligence, getting three quotes each time, but his recommendations were always the best. The trades were used to working with one another, so it was really easy to get the build done. We found that being involved was far more satisfying than going down a turnkey route and saved us thousands of pounds."

Drainage issues

The biggest challenge the couple faced was sorting out the drainage – foul drains and surface water run-off. While preparing drawings for Building Regulations (Part H), measurements showed the ground level of the paddock was lower than the mains. There

to the mains but actually it was only one half of the house from when they were separate dwellings," Royan explains. "We closed off the cesspit and redirected the new pipework."

Raising the frame

After sorting out the drainage problems and laying the foundations, at the beginning of May the oak frame arrived. "Helen had been to see the oak being cut in Welsh Oak Frame's workshop, and sometime after everything arrived on three massive lorries," says Royan. "All the oak was marked and it was put together like a jigsaw, which was a fascinating and exhilarating moment to watch. I remember our builder, Phil, being slightly in awe of the construction and saying he didn't realise how big our home was going to be."

Thanks to the camaraderie between trades the project progressed smoothly, although Royan admits he misread the drawings at one

stage. To prevent air leakage, the oak frame needed to be wrapped in an airtight membrane, which was done before the first fix electrics and plumbing were carried out. "I think we did the work in the wrong order," he says. "I had to walk around the house breaking the membrane to pull the wires through for sockets and light switches and then tape around the breaks to keep the frame airtight."

closer look

Lockdown garden project...

When Royan and Helen moved into their gorgeous new home, their garden didn't yet have any plants or trees. As the country went into lockdown in March 2020, the hard landscaping was coming to an end. To keep themselves busy in those uncertain times, the couple decided to do the garden, studying books on planting and taking trips to garden centres, which were still open. They were rewarded for their efforts last summer when the garden came beautifully into bloom.



Colourful results



TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

Elements	Cost m ²	Cost %	Total cost
Groundworks	£139	7%	£33,000
Foundations	£113	6%	£27,000
Oak frame	£504	26%	£120,000
External walls & windows	£370	19%	£88,000
Roof structure	£130	6%	£31,000
Floors, walls & ceilings	£143	7%	£34,000
Joinery & fittings	£134	7%	£32,000
Plumbing, bathrooms & kitchen	£273	14%	£65,000
Electrics	£96	5%	£23,000
Decorating	£71	3%	£17,000
Grand total			£470,000

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

PLANNING CONSULTANT **Les Stephan Planning** 01743 231040 www.lspltd.co.uk OAK FRAME DESIGN & SUPPLY **Welsh Oak Frame** 01686 688000 www.welshoakframe.com GROUNDWORKS **Neil Harvey** 07974 406623 BUILDER **PC Hughes Construction** 07802 283351 www.pchughes-construction.co.uk ELECTRICS **Paul Nadin** 07711 484918 BRICKLAYER **Will Ellis** 07749169563 PLUMBING **Paul Royce** 07740 643925 DOORS **Cheshire Joinery Services** 01829 741751 www.cheshirejoineryservices.com RECLAIMED BRICKS & SLATE **Beeston Reclamation** 01829 260299 www.beestonreclamation.co.uk STAIRCASE & FLOORING **Custom Precision Joinery** 01244 550444 www.cpjoinery.com WOODBURNER **Michael John Stoves & Greener Heating** 01925 594352 www.michaeljohnstoves.com DECORATOR **Mark Frost** 07747 870699 TILER **Elliot & Stone (Julian Campbell)** 07900 086609 FLOOR TILES **Clay & Rock** 01829 771216 www.clayandrock.co.uk BASIN & BATH **Lusso Stone** 020 3370 4057 www.lussostone.com

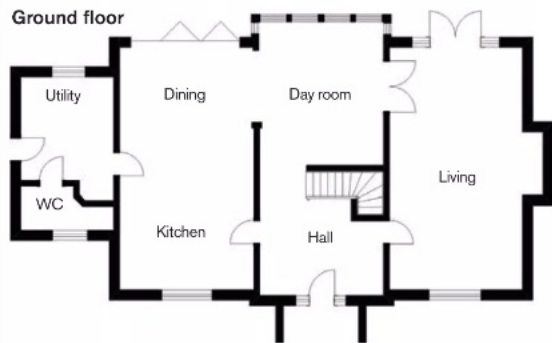


Floor plans

First floor



Ground floor



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House plans re-created using
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