



HOME SWEDE HOME

Sophia and Andrew Wadsworth's new oak-framed Kentish country house has a distinctly Scandinavian feel.

STORY: Eleanor Wilde
PICTURES: Oakwrights



NEW BUILD

The new oak-framed country house stands on a hillside on the outskirts of a pretty Kent village, and is clad in a combination of mellow brickwork and white weatherboarding. The design was influenced by equestrian properties, Kentish barns and Swedish homes. An existing mature oak tree creates an impressive turning circle on the front driveway, with large sun decks to the rear linking the house with the landscaped garden.



“Everyone told us that we’d never find a plot of land to build on, and one estate agent actually laughed when I explained what we were looking for, but that was like a red rag to a bull and just made me even more determined,” recalls Sophia Wadsworth. “Funnily enough it was the very same estate agent who sold us this site in the end.”

Sophia and her husband, Andrew, had left their previous home in 2005, and moved into rented accommodation during what was to be a year-long search to find the perfect piece of land. The couple were looking for a large building plot in a rural position with country views.

The previously cynical estate agent later advertised an open day for a plot which perfectly fitted the Wadsworths’ requirements: an equestrian property, with a two-storey cottage and five and a half

acres of land on a quiet country lane, near the village of Benenden in Kent, complete with planning permission for a replacement dwelling. The icing on the cake was the stunning countryside view surrounding half of the land, and the beautiful ancient woodland on the other.

After two crowded open days there were 18 serious buyers, and the property went to sealed bids. Having stretched themselves to their limit financially the Wadsworths were overjoyed to receive a phone call telling them that it was theirs.

Existing planning permission was for a house which the couple found very ordinary and uninspiring, so they spent the next 12 months attempting to change both the design and size of the property – which was not to prove an easy task. After a shaky start with a local oak framing company and their recommended planning consultant, Andrew and Sophia decided to start again.

The family were homeless, having given notice on their rented property, and had moved in temporarily with Sophia’s mother, making it important to get back on track as quickly as possible.

“We knew that we still wanted to go down the oak frame route, and as Oakwrights has a good reputation I rang them for a chat and explained that we were very frustrated because we had this lovely building plot with no house on it,” says Sophia. “Within the hour we received a call back from one of Oakwrights’ designers, based near us in Kent. A meeting was arranged for later that week, and from then on things started to fall into place.”

As a professional interior designer Sophia had strong ideas about how she wanted her new home to look. “Darren Blackwell, our Oakwrights designer, was very patient and accommodating and really listened to what we wanted to achieve, working closely with us on the design,” says Andrew. “He in turn →



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The single-storey dining room has a pitched roof, inset with rooflights between the oak trusses, which drops natural light onto the long oval table.

liaised with the frame designer to generate plans for a frame that would work with our design, and a 3D visualisation was produced which allowed us to look around the house.”

The existing footprint was not large enough for the family’s needs, and a two-storey house was designed, with an additional single storey L-shaped wing replacing a large stable block on the site which was no longer required. At first Kent council was negative about this plan, and preferred the idea of converting the existing stables as an extension to the main house.

“I attended several meetings with the council, together with our designer, to try to persuade them to allow the demolition of the stables, which would enable us to start

again with a beautiful oak frame to match the rest of the house,” Sophia continues. “Our site stands within an AONB and ‘Kent special landscape’ area, so it was a sensitive planning application, but eventually permission was granted and the overall consensus from the planning committee was that they loved the barn-style design.”

Oakwrights managed the technical aspects of the build, with local companies employed for groundworks, bricklaying, and roofing. All interior finishes were completed by Sophia’s own team of trusted tradesmen, who have worked with her on client projects for a number of years.

“It was a very exciting day when our post and beam oak frame arrived from Herefordshire with the Oakwrights

crew, who were very professional and efficient. The frame went up in four days without a hitch,” says Sophia, who took on the role of project manager for the remainder of the build.

Sophia and Andrew have three children – Teddy, Georgie and Patch – and the family spent 18 months living in three mobile homes on site during the project, which enabled Sophia to keep a close eye on progress and remain up-to-date with every detail. She found caravan life to be far more fun than expected, and a grounding experience.

The two-storey barn style house has a single-storey wing in an equestrian style, similar to the original stable block it replaces. The Wadsworths found it relatively easy to choose cladding materials which would give the house the look →

The open-plan ground floor layout emphasises the panoramic views, and ensures that the kitchen is integrated with the living areas. Hand-built cabinets are topped with honed granite counters, and a traditional black Aga has been installed within a fireplace on the gable wall. An open-plan family room beside the kitchen is comfortably furnished using Swedish-inspired fabrics and shades which complement the warm honey tones of the exposed oak frame. Wooden pegs used to hold the oak frame together have been left untrimmed to emphasise the joinery.





NEW BUILD

they required: white weatherboarding is traditionally used in this area of Kent, and 'Hoskins Farmhouse' bricks were selected for their gentle colouring and weathered texture. Handmade Heritage Traditional Blend plain clay roof tiles have been used on the main house roof, with Brazilian slate for the single-storey element.

"Most of my work commissions have been for traditionally styled period country houses in Kent and Sussex, but building a new larger house for ourselves gave me the opportunity to indulge my own love of Scandinavian style," says Sophia. "This probably stems from my Swedish family roots, and is a wonderfully calm, fresh and uplifting look which we felt would show off the beauty of the oak frame perfectly."

Downstairs the house is completely open plan, with the exception of a cloakroom and boot room. The L-shaped single-storey extension contains the kitchen, family room and dining areas, all of which have large expanses of glazing, with windows and French doors taking in views of the countryside.

A step down into the main two-storey section leads to an open-plan hallway and formal sitting room, with a separate entrance porch opening into this part of the house. Cream limestone flooring has been laid over underfloor heating throughout the ground floor, and a neutral colour pallet for walls, the kitchen and bathrooms creates a light and bright interior, which proved the perfect backdrop for

Scandinavian and French style furniture mixed with a few dark wood antiques.

"The quality of light has been even better than we'd expected, and is a relief after living in dark older houses for so many years," says Andrew. "Building the large wraparound decks extends our indoor space, and when the weather's fine we can open the doors, making a wonderful entertaining area."

The Wadsworths are rightfully proud of their new home, and feel that the oak frame has been a huge part of the success of the house. "Not only is the frame stunning, it also gives the house the character and interest of an older property," Sophia believes. "If it wasn't for the fact that we want to stay here forever we would most definitely build again – the whole experience has been fantastic."

THE BOTTOM LINE

Sophia and Andrew paid £530,000 for the plot and spent £412,000 building their new home, which is currently valued in excess of £1.25m. The oak frame cost £86,126, the architect was £3,500 and the building regulation drawings £4,600, with £30,000 spent on the kitchen, £18,000 on the landscaping and £14,000 on decking.

The vaulted principal bedroom has exposed oak purlins and wind braces, with a fully-glazed gable fitted with broad-bladed window shutters. The open-plan master bathroom has a contemporary stone resin bath and travertine-clad floor and walls. Stairs lead up to the dressing room above. The family bedroom has a half-vaulted ceiling with French doors opening onto a Juliet balcony.





CONTACTS

- Design, oak frame** Oakwrights: www.oakwrights.co.uk
- Project management and interior design**
Sophia Wadsworth Interior Design Ltd: www.sophiawadsworthinteriors.co.uk
- Old Farmhouse Blend bricks** Hoskins Brick Ltd: www.hoskinsbrick.com
- Traditional Blend clay roof tiles** Heritage Clay Tiles: www.heritagetiles.co.uk
- Wood-burner** Jotul: www.jotul.com
- Bathstone mantelpiece** Chesney's: www.chesneys.co.uk
- Pewter coloured ironmongery** Conquest Architectural Ironmongery: www.blackironmongery.co.uk
- Accessories and furniture** Maisie K Cranbrook: www.maisiek.co.uk
- Stair carpet** Avalon Flooring: www.avalonnaturalflooring.co.uk
- Window shutters** Shutter Frontier: www.shutterfrontier.co.uk
- Furniture** Station Antiques, Appledore: www.stationantiques.co.uk

FINAL THOUGHTS

What was the high point of the project?

Finally achieving our long-held dream of building a house, and discovering that the quality of light was even better than we could have hoped was the real high point.



...and the low point?

Trudging through mud to an old shed which contained our washing machine during the build, and it was also inhabited by mice!

What was your greatest extravagance?

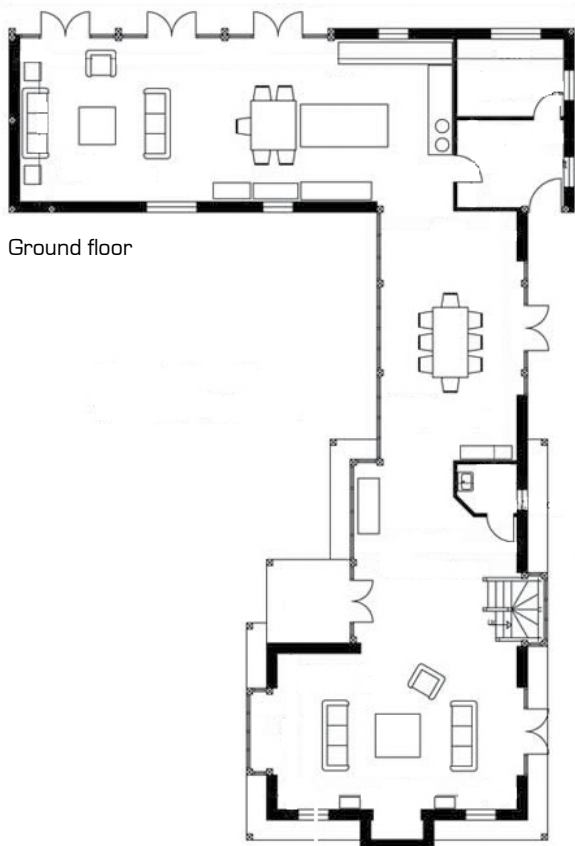
Probably the limestone flooring, although we did shop around for the best possible price.

Did you tackle any DIY?

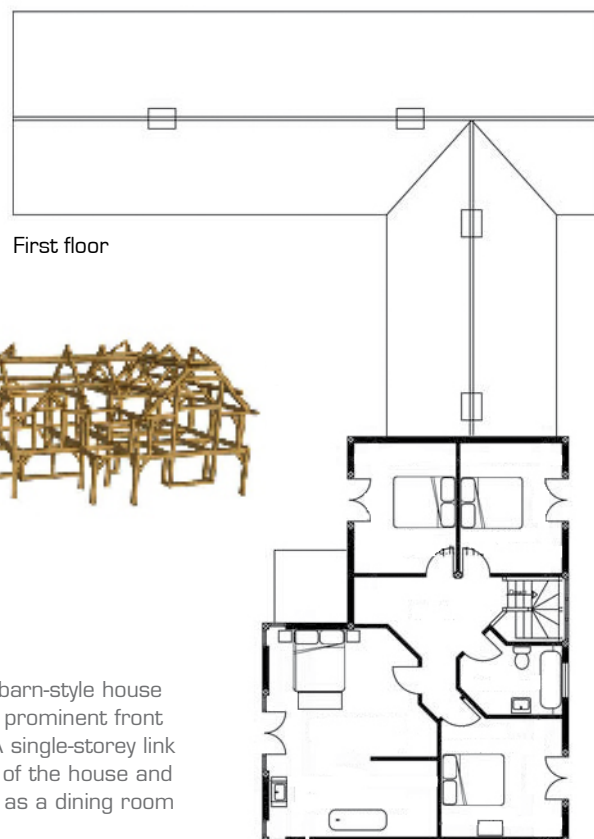
Andrew built raised beds for the kitchen garden using timbers salvaged from the demolished stable block, and we undertook all of the landscaping, including making gravel paths, planting hedging and trees.

Sophia and Andrew's TOP TIPS

Be very clear on what you want from the start and don't change your mind. We were particularly keen to make sure the lighting and power points were well thought out. Sockets have been sunk into the floor with discrete, oak-faced sockets for lamps on the dining room window ledges.



Ground floor



First floor



THE FLOORPLAN

The detached four-bedroom barn-style house measures 178m² and has a prominent front gable with a Juliet balcony. A single-storey link between the main living part of the house and the kitchen/family area acts as a dining room with a glazed roof.