

# WHERE OLD MEETS NEW

*This magnificent oak-framed house is exactly what the Aytons dreamed of for their teenagers, but building it caused more than a few problems*

## Type of house

Four-bedroom  
Tudor manor house

**Location** Haslemere, Surrey

**Purchase price** £380,000

**Money spent** £650,000

**What it's worth now**  
£1.65 million

**W**hen Debbie Ayton, 46, and husband Nick, 47, an IT consultant, built a sustainable home, they needed space for their children, Maxwell, 20, Arnold, 17, Obediah, 15, and Darcy, 10, and a recording studio. They had a major task on their hands, which grew when they decided to project manage the build themselves, as Debbie describes

## Why did you decide to build your own home?

'We wanted to move to Haslemere because of the schools, but refused to spend the going rate of £1.5m on a five-bedroom property. The family is also very musical so we wanted a recording studio. Maxwell is in a band with Queen's producer and they're due to release an album and go on tour this year.'

## Tell us how you found the land

'We trawled the area for a couple of years until we found the perfect plot in 2004. It's on top of a hill and

surrounded by forest. While it's relatively remote – we only have one adjacent neighbour – we chose it because it's so easy to get to the station, which has lines to London, Gatwick and also out to the coast.

'When we found the plot, which is around half an acre in size, it was quite overgrown, and there was also a 1200 sq ft 1960s bungalow on it, as well as a number of small outbuildings.'

## What was important when designing your home?

'With four sons into sport and music, the focus for us wasn't about making a profit but about designing a home we could live in. We have a constant flow of band members and other visitors, so we needed room to entertain them all, as well as space to put them up when they stay at weekends.

'The main kitchen was designed with lots of space and worksurfaces for preparing food, and we also have a second kitchen in the basement. We wanted an open-plan first floor, making it easy to clear up after a dinner party, while the basement had to house a cinema room, walk-in wardrobes and a wet room for when the boys come in after playing sport.'

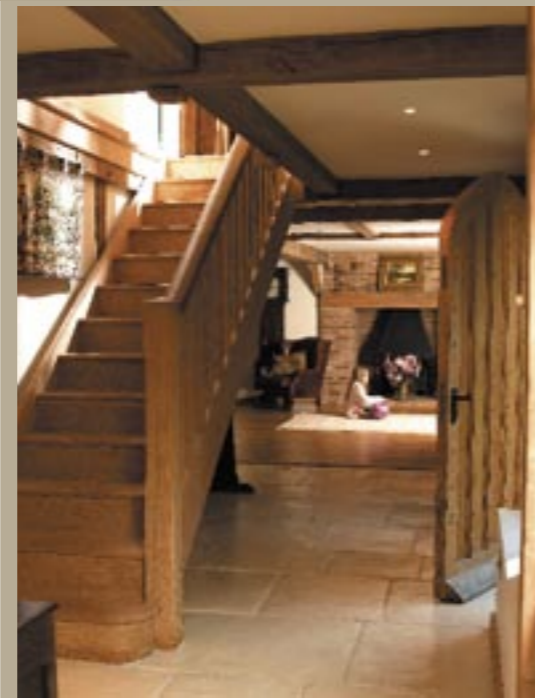
## Why is the oak frame the key feature of your home?

'I grew up in an oak house built in 1347 and have a keen interest in old buildings. We both like oak



## THE ORIGINAL HOUSE

When Debbie and Nick found the 1960s bungalow on its 1200 sq ft plot, it was under offer. But the buyer couldn't complete so the Aytons put in a higher offer and were successful.



homes as they have a warm vibe and, as we were doing it ourselves, we wanted to make it ecofriendly, too. Wood is the most energy-efficient building material and is considered renewable while, investment-wise, oak-framed homes are solid and rarely need maintenance.

'We began by doing some sketches and visited the Weald and Downland Open Air Museum in Singleton, where there are a number of historic houses, including a living museum of oak-framed properties. This gave us

design ideas and helped make our property as authentic as possible.

'We then started looking for oak-frame builders, and eventually came across Oakwrights, a Hereford-based company, which helps people design bespoke properties with oak timber.

'Generally, rooms in oak houses are small and dark, especially where they have exposed oak floor rafters. We wanted big open rooms with large windows to bring in the light, which presented Oakwrights with some design challenges.'

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**ABOVE** The living room feels warm and vibrant with red sofas from Selfridges, a cream rug from House of Fraser and a simple glass coffee table from

**RIGHT** Double-height spaces have been used to give a spacious, loft-style feel. The walnut front door ties in with floors elsewhere in the house

**FAR RIGHT** Sliding doors between the dining area and kitchen mean the space can be divided for more

## ORIGINAL HOUSE

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**FAR RIGHT** Sliding doors between the dining area and kitchen mean the space can be divided for more intimate occasions, and kept open for day-to-



**Why did you decide to project manage the build yourselves?**

'At the beginning we employed a project manager for his skills and expertise, but he failed to get on top of things, which resulted in a lot of costly mistakes and delays. The problems began as soon as we began digging out the basement. We had a height restriction because we were replacing a bungalow with a house, but the project manager miscalculated the steels' measurements and then laid them upside down. They ended up being a major expense of around £15,000 to £20,000, and his errors meant the site was empty for three months.

'We'd had enough and decided to do things ourselves, but our problems didn't end there. While the steels were being re-made, the basement filled with water, which soaked into the bricks. We had to use dehumidifiers for six months to suck out the moisture. 'Initially we were living on site in trailer homes with no heating, but after the problem with the steels we decided to rent locally. After we moved off site we were robbed several times and our losses included a two-tonne truck and four pallets of imported bricks.'

**Did you feel like giving up?**

'After deciding to manage the build ourselves we were back in control, and as first-time builders we knew we had a lot to learn. But we'd done our research and found the process much easier than expected. Things really started to improve once we got in a team of builders from Lithuania. For one thing, communication was easier because we didn't have to go through project managers and site managers to get decisions made. Each day we met the bricklayers, plumbers and roofers, and could talk to them directly. All of a sudden the stress disappeared.'

**How well did you manage your budget?**

'We ended up going £180,000 over budget. As a first-time builder it's easy to be taken to the cleaners by prime contractors. We built our home for around £107 per sq ft, but reckon we could have done it for £90 per sq ft if we'd managed the project from the beginning and sourced and ordered the materials.

**If you did it again what would you do differently?**

'We'd put in as many electrical cables as we could while the electricians were exposed because it's much cheaper to do it then than when the build is finished.

'I'd also go for 'heavy duty' commercial appliances. Our house is more like a hotel, with anywhere from eight to 10 people for dinner most nights, band practises all the time, as well as girlfriends and family visiting, so things age quickly. I can wear out a washing machine in a year. I'd also put a spa and steam room in the basement for some relaxation time.'

**Have you been put off building again?**

'We're already looking to build another house, using an oak-frame again. In the short time since we finished this house, the technology, building materials and methods have moved on a great deal, particularly for making a property ecofriendly. While our current home is very energy-efficient, we'd like to incorporate all the latest gizmos into our next build, such as a rainwater collection system.'

'We're certainly not put off by the experience of designing and building our own place. We believe we could do the next one at a lower cost and in less than a year, whereas this took 15 months.'

• For more information on Oakwrights call 01432 353353 or visit oakwrights.co.uk

**ORIGINAL HOUSE**  
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**DESIGNING YOUR OWN HOME**

Before you ditch the professionals, take our advice on where to start

- Don't start designing until you've found a site. Choose your plot carefully, looking at the price of the land, the kind and size of property you can build, and any potential planning permission issues.
- Think carefully about how much you can honestly afford, as your design and build will be largely determined by your budget.
- Ask yourself why you're designing your own home. Is it to make a quick profit, or because you're planning to live there for years to come? Think about your own lifestyle, priorities and, if you're in it long term, factor partners and family members into the plans.
- Compile a wish list of what you're trying to achieve in terms of the type, size, style and design of the rooms, as well as the furniture and materials within them. Sketch out your ideas and collect magazine cuttings, but be realistic in your expectations as some things may not be possible or affordable.
- As all new homes have to be carbon neutral by 2016, you'll need to make energy-efficiency a priority. 'Features to consider include recycling systems that reuse household water, super-efficient insulation or double-glazing, and energy-saving central and water-heating systems,' says Richard Lloyd, Managing Director of Hockleys, the surveying arm of Norwich and Peterborough Building Society, which runs an annual Eco Self-Build competition.
- Be prepared to question the professionals. Stand your ground with architects and designers and be clear about what you want.
- Do as much research as you can, and visit home-building shows and exhibitions for information on all stages of the design and build process.

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