

# the selfbuilder

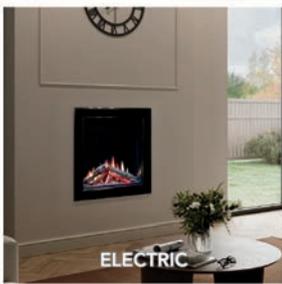
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# FROM THE EDITOR...

In January this year the Government finally announced the details of the Warm Homes Plan – its long-awaited scheme that aims to upgrade five million homes over the next four years.

Much of the plan focuses on helping low-income families, with £5bn to be invested in measures such as heat pumps, solar panels and battery storage. While the aim is predominantly to help those households move out of fuel poverty, the plan also promises that everyone will be able to access support to install technology that will reduce their energy bills.

For those of you tackling a big renovation project, that means £2bn worth of low and zero-interest loans, as well £2.7bn for so-called 'innovative finance', said to include initiatives such as 'green mortgages' that will offer a lower interest rate for those investing in making their home more energy efficient.

What impact these plans will have of course remains to be seen, but it's encouraging to see the Government backing those who are committed to improving the quality of the UK's housing stock – as many self-builders and renovators are.

Jess Unwin's case study on page 50 provides one such example of just how committed they can be – and what can be achieved. Isabel and Henry have completely retrofitted their 1970s bungalow to create a Passivhaus-standard family home, constructed around the bungalow using a specially designed timber frame system.

Amy and Adrian's home, built on greenbelt land within an area of outstanding natural beauty, includes a ground source heat pump, mechanical ventilation with heat recovery, timber, and a sustainable lime-based plaster. You can read more about their project in Alexandra Pratt's case study on page 42.

Also in this issue on the topic of energy efficiency, NIBE answers your frequently asked questions on heat pumps (page 14), and the National Self Build & Renovation Centre (NSBRC) unpacks the somewhat complex topic of Passivhaus in its first Masterclass instalment (page 22).

**ROSEANNE FIELD**

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**ON THE COVER...**

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## Family home

Andrew and Nathalie Wong renovated Andrew's childhood home to create a modern house for their family

## Built to last

The London Kitchen Company's Sebastian Aronowitz explores why material choice matters in your kitchen

## A dream come true

Martin reflects on the journey he and his wife, Siobhann, took to achieve their long-held self-build dream



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With rising energy costs and growing awareness of how our homes affect our health, Passivhaus is no longer a niche ambition. From new builds to deep retrofits, this proven performance standard is helping homeowners create comfortable, future-ready homes and the earlier it's considered the better the results.



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Simon Gittings and Lauren Jorgensen gave their 1950s home an extraordinary industrial-inspired makeover and extension, exposing original materials and embracing the principles of reuse and salvage.

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# selfbuilder Diaries

From reserving a serviced plot to moving into a high-performance home, Martin and Siobhann reflect on two challenging, rewarding years of self-building on the edge of the Lake District.

If you'd told me a few years ago that I'd be writing a diary entry about building my own house, I'd probably have laughed. Like many people, I assumed self-build was something other people did – architects, developers, or those with endless time and money. And yet, two years on, that's exactly where we are, after one of the most challenging and rewarding projects of our lives.

The idea didn't arrive fully formed. My wife and I had lived in the same house for almost 20 years, and while it had served us well, it was hard to keep warm, and the awkward spaces never quite worked. I had always considered a renovation, but each time I explored it seriously I came to the same conclusion: what we really needed was a blank canvas, not the unknowns that come with altering an existing building.

That thinking led us to self-build, and more specifically to a serviced plot where the key infrastructure and services were already in place. We found a plot in Bootle, Cumbria, on the edge of the Lake District. There was no dramatic lightbulb moment, just a quiet sense that this could work. The location, the landscape, and the opportunity to design a home that genuinely suited how we wanted to live all felt right. We reserved the plot in August 2023 after just one visit to the site.

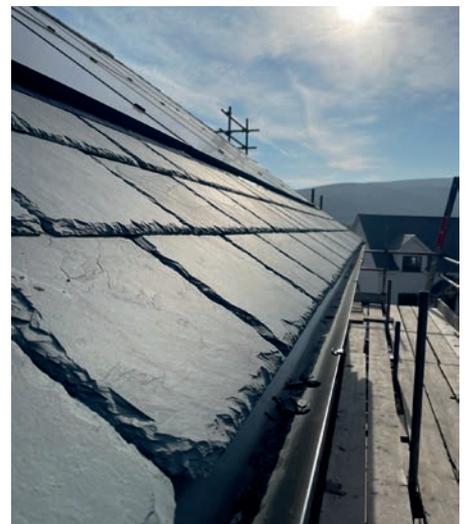
From the outset our priorities were simple. We wanted to build once and build properly, and we were clear that if we were going to stretch the budget anywhere, it would be on the things that affect how the house performs every day. Energy efficiency was non-negotiable. The house would be all electric, highly insulated, and designed around long-term comfort rather than short-term

trends. Triple glazing, an air source heat pump, mechanical ventilation with heat recovery, and solar panels with battery storage were all part of that thinking – not because they were fashionable, but because they made sense.

The biggest challenge came right at the beginning, before we had a main contractor in place. Reserving a plot immediately triggered a chain of questions with no obvious order. What happens next? We didn't yet have a design, we didn't yet have the funds in place to buy the land, and we were suddenly responsible for decisions that carried long-term consequences. Buying the plot wasn't just a transaction; it came with legal and planning obligations, and I found myself reading every line of the covenants to understand what we could – and couldn't – do.

We were extremely fortunate in one important respect. This was a serviced plot, with the developer having already secured planning permission and provided all the key services. The plot sits within the Lake District National Park, which naturally brought restrictions – uPVC windows were not permitted, so timber or aluminium were the only options. The real advantage, however, was the design code. Set out over just three sides of A4, it clearly defined the parameters we had to work within. If we followed those rules, we would have real freedom to design the house we wanted.

We decided early on that a timber frame house delivered through a main contractor was the right route for us. Speed of construction and clear accountability mattered. In practical terms, we dealt with two suppliers and the coordination of everything else sat with the contractor. It cost more in



pounds, but it saved us many months in time and removed a significant amount of day-to-day complexity.

Even so, the early stages felt relentless. Land purchase, house design and cost planning all ran in parallel rather than in sequence, often crossing over and pulling in different directions. I also struggled at times with hesitation – knowing when enough analysis had been done and when it was time to commit.

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Looking back, the first six to nine months were without doubt the steepest part of the learning curve.

In May 2024, we sold our old home and moved into rented accommodation to release the funds needed to make the build possible. It was another moment where the project stopped being theoretical and became very real.

Building close to the coast in Cumbria has brought its own challenges. Wind and horizontal rain are constant factors, and they have a habit of finding their way through the smallest gaps. It quickly teaches you that detailing and build quality matter because the environment will test them.

Despite everything, there has been a huge amount to enjoy. Seeing the timber frame go up on 20 January 2025 was a genuine turning point – suddenly the project felt real. Walking through the rooms for the first time, Siobhann understood space in a way drawings never quite capture. Decisions that once felt abstract suddenly became tangible.

One thing I've genuinely enjoyed is how much the process forces you to engage. On a self-build, decisions are your decisions. You can take advice and learn from others, but ultimately this is your house. Whether it's choosing the right heat pump or deciding how



much control you want from your phone, these are choices you will live with. It's worth taking the time to think them through.

If I had one piece of advice for anyone considering a self-build, it would be this: slow down at the beginning and prioritise clarity. Remember, this is your dream – don't let others dilute it. A clear framework, whether that's a design

code, a good contractor, or a well-thought-through brief, makes everything else easier.

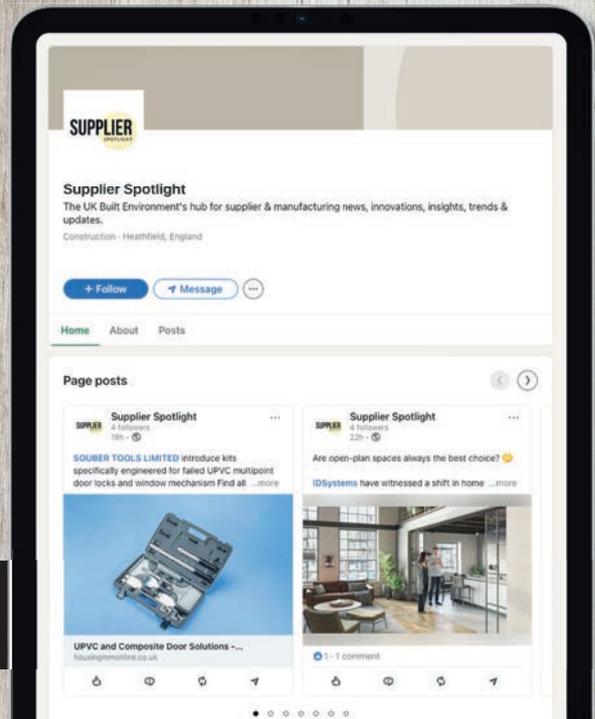
Two years after reserving the plot, we moved into the completed house in August 2025. Turning a long-held idea into a real home has been incredibly satisfying, and I am very proud of what we have achieved.

Would I do it again? Absolutely.

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garden, while sliding doors and Juliet balconies upstairs embrace the surrounding landscape.

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# Heat pump evolution



James Parker speaks to Rick Clarke, product manager at NIBE, about why air source heat pumps are not the only answer, and how self-builders can benefit from an array of user-friendly smart tech to fine tune their heating's efficiency.

## WHAT DO I NEED TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING HOW TO HEAT MY HOME?

The starting point is always the home itself. Things like insulation levels, airtightness, heat loss and how the building will be used all influence what heating system will perform best. It's also important to think long term. Heating systems are typically in place for 15-20 years, so future energy costs, comfort expectations and potential regulation changes matter.

Heat pumps work most effectively as part of a well-designed, low-temperature heating system, which makes them particularly well suited to new builds and well-planned renovations. Working with an experienced designer or installer early on helps ensure the system is correctly sized and matched to the property, avoiding compromises later.

## WHAT ARE THE KEY BENEFITS HEAT PUMPS OFFER OVER MORE TRADITIONAL HEATING METHODS?

One of the biggest benefits is efficiency. Heat pumps move heat from the outside air into the property, rather than generating it from burning a fossil fuel. The heat pump multiplies this heat during this transfer (using a very clever process), which allows them to deliver significantly more energy than they consume in electricity. This can translate into lower running costs, particularly in well-insulated homes.

Correctly designed systems will also provide a very consistent, comfortable form of heat. Instead of sharp temperature peaks heat pump systems deliver steady warmth that works well with underfloor heating and modern radiators. In addition heat pumps support the move toward low-energy homes by reducing reliance on fossil fuels and working seamlessly with technologies like solar PV and smart controls.

## HOW HAVE HEAT PUMPS EVOLVED OVER RECENT YEARS?

Heat pump technology has advanced rapidly. Modern systems are quieter, more efficient and far easier to live with than earlier generations. Improvements in compressors, refrigerants and control systems mean heat pumps can now perform reliably even in the coldest outdoor conditions.

Controls are a major area of ongoing development. Today's heat pumps

use intelligent software to optimise performance automatically, adapting to weather changes, household demand and how the building behaves. From the homeowner's perspective this means systems that largely run in the background, delivering comfort without constant adjustment.

## WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT HEAT PUMP OPTIONS & HOW DO I CHOOSE WHICH BEST FITS MY PROJECT?

The most common option in the UK is an air source heat pump, which extracts heat from the outside air. These systems are versatile and suitable for a wide range of homes, from compact new builds to larger renovation projects.

Within that category, there are different configurations depending on space, hot water requirements and whether ventilation is integrated. Choosing the right solution comes down to a combination of property layout, energy demand and lifestyle. This is why system design is so important. A properly designed heat pump system will always outperform a poorly matched one, regardless of technology.

## ARE HEAT PUMPS NOISY?

Noise is a common concern, but modern heat pumps are far quieter than many people expect. At NIBE, acoustics are considered from the earliest stages of product design, covering everything from fan and compressor technology to casing and control strategies.

As a result, a number of NIBE heat pump models are Quiet Mark accredited, meaning they have been independently assessed and recognised for their low noise output. This provides reassurance for homeowners, particularly where outdoor units are installed close to living spaces, boundaries or neighbouring properties.

Good system design is still essential. Correct positioning of the outdoor unit, suitable mounting and thoughtful commissioning all help ensure quiet operation in real world conditions. When these factors are combined, heat pumps can integrate into residential settings with minimal impact on day-to-day life.

## HOW WELL DO HEAT PUMPS INTEGRATE WITHIN A SMART HOME?

Very well. Heat pumps are increasingly designed to be part of a connected home rather than a standalone appliance. Smart controls allow homeowners to monitor and adjust their heating and hot water through intuitive interfaces,





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whether that's on a controller inside the home or via an app.

For example, NIBE systems use myUplink, a cloud-based platform that allows homeowners to monitor and manage their heating and hot water through a simple app or web interface.

myUplink provides clear visibility of system performance, energy use and comfort settings, whether the homeowner is at home or away. It also enables useful features such as notifications, performance insights and remote adjustments if required.

Behind the scenes, connectivity allows the system to optimise itself automatically, using data such as outdoor temperature and usage patterns. For most homeowners, this means a system that quietly manages comfort and efficiency in the background, with the option to engage more deeply if they choose.

### HOW DOES HEAT PUMP TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT THE SHIFT TO LOW-ENERGY HEATING?

Heat pumps are central to low-energy building strategies because they



align well with modern construction methods and energy standards. They operate most efficiently at lower flow temperatures, which suits well-insulated homes and heat emitters like underfloor heating.

They also integrate easily with renewable electricity generation, such as solar PV, helping homeowners make better use of onsite energy. As the electricity grid continues to decarbonise the overall environmental impact of heat pumps will reduce further. From a futureproofing perspective they offer a clear pathway toward compliant, comfortable low-energy homes.

### CAN I STILL INSTALL A HEAT PUMP IF I'M WORKING ON A TIGHT BUDGET?

Budget is always a consideration but it's important to look at the full picture rather than just upfront cost. While the initial investment for a heat pump system can be higher than some traditional options, lower running costs and available incentives can make a significant difference over time.

Careful system design helps manage costs too. Matching the heat pump to the building's actual heat demand avoids oversizing and unnecessary expense. For self-builders, factoring heating decisions into the early design stages often delivers the best value, allowing the heating system, insulation and layout to work together efficiently.

*To listen to the full podcast and hear more of what Rick has to say about heat pump technology, scan the QR code*



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# CHOOSING A KITCHEN THAT LASTS

Sebastian Aronowitz, founder of The London Kitchen Company explores why material choice is so important when designing a kitchen, deserving the same attention as the overall appearance.



Kitchens are usually chosen for how they look. Layout, door style, colour and appliances dominate early conversations while materials are often discussed much later if at all.

Yet it is the materials the kitchen is made of – how they age, how they can be repaired, and how they respond to daily life – that ultimately determine whether a kitchen still feels good 10 or 20 years later.

Materials are presented in a simple ‘good, better, best’ structure. Certain options are positioned as upgrades, others as compromises with little discussion of the pros and cons for your specific family and lifestyle. This makes material choice feel like a ranking exercise rather than a practical decision about how a kitchen will actually live.

Alongside this there are ideas about kitchen materials that circulate widely

but are rarely explained. One of the most common is the belief that solid wood is always the best option. In reality, whether solid timber is suitable depends entirely on how it is being used. The issue is not quality but suitability.

## HOW KITCHENS ARE FINISHED TODAY

Most modern kitchens are factory finished. Doors are spray-painted in controlled conditions, creating a smooth and consistent surface. At the more affordable end of the market, vinyl-wrapped doors are common, while some contemporary kitchens use acrylic finishes to achieve a high level of uniformity.

When new, these finishes look immaculate. The precision is part of their appeal.

The difficulty is that this perfection is fragile. Once a sprayed kitchen picks

up a few chips – often through ordinary use rather than abuse – those areas are difficult to repair invisibly. Over time, the kitchen starts to look tired surprisingly quickly, not because it is poorly made but because its finish does not lend itself to renewal.

## WHY REPAIRABILITY MATTERS

Instead, a hand-painted finish offers a more flexible approach. This allows a kitchen to be maintained in the same way as the rest of the house. Damage can be repaired and repainted. Doors can be refreshed rather than replaced.

Visually, this also changes how the kitchen sits within the home. A hand-painted kitchen feels less like a product placed into a room and more like part of the fabric of the building itself.

This matters not only aesthetically, but practically. A kitchen that can be renewed gradually is far less likely to reach a point where wholesale replacement feels necessary. From a sustainability point of view, that ability to repair rather than replace is significant.

## HOW MATERIALS AGE

All materials change with use but they do so in different ways.

Timber deepens in colour, picks up scratches and shows wear in areas of frequent contact. Painted surfaces wear around handles. Natural stone stains, scratches and wears unevenly over time. None of this is failure; it is simply the result of daily life.

Some homeowners welcome this as adding character and interest. But many don't. The key is understanding in advance how different materials will age, and deciding whether that pattern of change feels comfortable.

Problems arise when materials are chosen for how they look when new, without considering how they will look

years later.

### WORKTOPS IN EVERYDAY USE

Worktops reveal these differences most clearly.

Many homeowners initially ask for timber worktops. They are drawn to their warmth and the associations of nature, tradition and craftsmanship.

They often change their minds once they become aware of the upkeep needed. Regular oiling, wiping away spills and standing water as soon as they occur and generally taking care (not leaving washed dishes out on the surface to dry etc) are all part of living with wooden worktops.

The appearance of natural materials also changes over time. Because no matter how much care you take, they will inevitably pick up stains and scratches. The colour of the wood will deepen over time. This patina is for some people part of the attraction.

Similarly, natural stones such as marble provide depth and character but are porous and sensitive to acids, meaning spills can etch the surface rather than simply stain it.

There are many engineered materials which aim to reduce some of these risks. Quartz worktops are much less porous and are resistant to staining. Ultra-compact surfaces such as Dekton or Neolith are even more resilient and offer excellent heat resistance.

However, even these materials aren't indestructible. Their very hardness works against them, as they chip more easily. Design plays a very important role here, as edges should never be left too sharp for this reason.

Repairs are sometimes possible but they are not always invisible.

Acrylic solid surfaces such as Corian or Hi-Macs strike a different compromise. They are less heat resistant, but even severe damage can be invisibly repaired using an offcut of the same material. Although the surface will scratch and mark, it can be re-sanded and brought back to new.

Each of these materials performs well in certain situations and less well in others.

One material may stay pristine for years, but offer few options once damaged. A repairable surface may show wear sooner, but can be renewed many times over its lifespan.

Understanding this difference helps move material choice away from a simple hierarchy of "best" and towards a more thoughtful decision about long-term use.



*The best materials are those that suit daily habits, tolerance for wear and willingness to maintain.*

### CHOOSING WITH INTENTION

The kitchens that continue to feel right over time are rarely those chosen purely on appearance or status. Instead, they are shaped by a clear understanding of how materials behave and how a household actually lives.

There is no universally correct choice. The best materials are those that suit

daily habits, tolerance for wear and willingness to maintain. When those decisions are made intentionally, the kitchen becomes not just something that installed in a home, but something that genuinely belongs there.

*Sebastian Aronowitz is the founder of The London Kitchen Company*



# INTERIOR INSPIRATION: HOME OFFICE

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**1. Swoon's Reyna Desk** in light brown mango wood and brass (pictured with the Penfold Footstool in pillarbox linen) is made with natural materials, each one individually handcrafted. The desk features mango wood drawer fronts, drawer boxes and legs, a mango veneered plywood body back panel and drawer base, and solid brass handles. It features two drawers on traditional wooden runners to store all your work essentials. Price: £659  
[www.swooneditions.com](http://www.swooneditions.com)

**2. The Chester Charcoal Hideaway Home Office** from **The Cotswold Company** is the perfect combination of function and style. It's painted in charcoal with contrasting oak and oak veneer white wash details, and comes with two fully adjustable shelves, door mounted storage and a sliding desk surface. There is further storage space underneath, and a sliding tray to sit a printer on. Price: £1,799  
[www.cotswoldco.com](http://www.cotswoldco.com)



3. The retro-inspired office **Lana chair** from **Cult Furniture** features a solid wood frame in a warm, walnut stained finish paired with a handwoven cane backrest panel. The curved back and contoured seat in mohair-style velvet offer both style and comfort. The chair blends nostalgia with functionality for a workspace that's both inspiring and inviting. The velvet is made from 100% recycled PET yarns making it kind to the environment. Price: £229  
[www.cultfurniture.com](http://www.cultfurniture.com)

4. The **Basebox+ Garden Room** from **Green Retreats** is an affordable garden room offering style and practicality. It features premium cladding, a side screen for enhanced privacy and an integrated deck step, and is fully insulated to provide year-round comfort. The garden room includes professional installation in one to five days and foundations as standard so your home office can be up and running with minimal hassle. Price from: £9,995  
[www.greenretreats.co.uk](http://www.greenretreats.co.uk)

5. The oak **Ballatta desk** from **ercol** is ideal to use with a laptop, or as a writing desk, adding a touch of style to your workspace. The desk sits on tapered legs designed to be elegant yet understated, and is compact enough to sit within a hallway or lounge as well as a home office. The desk, made from both solid oak and oak veneers and finished with a clear matt lacquer, also features a built-in drawer to help keep it tidy. Price: £955  
[www.ercol.com](http://www.ercol.com)

6. The **Shelved modular desk unit and room divider shelving unit** offer a great home office solution, featuring shelving and built-in storage to provide the ideal place to keep accessories and essentials. The modular shelving system can be used to create a self-contained space for working and studying, providing the separation required for a healthy work-life balance. The units are finished with a white frame and white panelling. Price: Modular Desk Unit: £888.80, Room Divider Shelving Unit: £3018.95  
[www.shelved.co.uk](http://www.shelved.co.uk)



# NSBRC Masterclass: Passivhaus

With rising energy costs and growing awareness of how our homes affect our health, Passivhaus is no longer a niche ambition. From new builds to deep retrofits, this proven performance standard is helping homeowners create comfortable, future-ready homes and the earlier it's considered the better the results.

For many self-builders and home renovators, energy efficiency begins as a goal. Increasingly, it becomes the guiding principle behind the entire project.

Passivhaus is an internationally recognised quality assurance standard that delivers exceptional comfort, high levels of indoor air quality and dramatically reduced energy use. Backed by more than 30 years of measured building performance, it is widely regarded as the leading low-energy building standard in the world.

Unlike style-led approaches, Passivhaus is about measurable outcomes. It focuses on how a building performs – not simply how it looks.

The standard can be applied to almost any building type, whether you are creating a brand-new home or undertaking a deep retrofit of an existing property. For retrofit projects, the equivalent standard – EnerPHit – adapts the principles to suit existing structures, bringing them as close as practically possible to full Passivhaus performance.

Given that we spend most of our lives indoors, the performance of our homes plays a critical role in our comfort, health and long-term running costs.

## DESIGNING FOR PERFORMANCE FROM THE START

The most successful and cost-effective Passivhaus projects begin before designs are finalised.

Integrating the core principles early allows the building's form, fabric and services to work together seamlessly. Airtightness, insulation continuity, high-



## *Rather than relying solely on theory, visitors can explore real construction details*

performance glazing, thermal bridge free detailing and mechanical ventilation with heat recovery (MVHR) must all be carefully coordinated.

When considered late in the process, these elements can become expensive or difficult to implement. When considered early, they inform intelligent design decisions that improve performance without inflating budgets.

Including Passivhaus principles within a planning application can also provide clarity and reassurance both for building control and for the wider project team.

The outcomes are compelling.

## FIVE REASONS TO CONSIDER PASSIVHAUS

- Comfort all year round – stable internal temperatures, even in extreme weather, achieved using

- very little energy
- Healthy indoor air – continuous filtered fresh air, reducing pollutants and improving wellbeing
- Ultra-low heating demand – up to 90% less energy required for space heating compared to conventional buildings
- Assured quality – rigorous modelling, detailing and testing ensure that design intent is delivered
- Futureproofing – certified performance provides protection against rising energy costs and tightening regulations.

Passivhaus is not experimental; thousands of buildings worldwide have been certified to the standard, demonstrating that low energy use and high comfort are entirely achievable together.

In the UK, adoption and development of the standard is supported by the independent, non-profit Passivhaus Trust, which promotes Passivhaus as a robust and practical pathway towards net zero buildings.

#### MAKING BUILDING SCIENCE UNDERSTANDABLE

For many homeowners, the challenge is not deciding whether they want a high-performing home – it is understanding how to achieve one.

This is where The National Self Build & Renovation Centre (NSBRC) provides a unique and valuable resource.

Open six days a week (Tuesday to Sunday) and free to visit, the centre offers a hands-on educational environment where building science becomes tangible. Full-scale exhibits and interactive displays allow visitors to see exactly how airtightness membranes are installed, how insulation continuity is achieved and how ventilation systems function in practice.

Rather than relying solely on theory, visitors can explore real construction details and speak directly to technical experts.

For those seeking deeper insight, the NSBRC runs a dedicated Passivhaus Workshop in partnership with the Passivhaus Trust.

#### INSIDE THE PASSIVHAUS WORKSHOP

Designed specifically for self-builders and renovators, the workshop combines technical guidance with practical application.

The programme includes:

- An introduction to core Passivhaus principles
- Technical ‘surgeries’ covering

- airtightness, insulation, ventilation, windows and doors
- Real-life case studies
- Question time sessions with industry specialists
- Guidance on improving existing buildings through deep retrofit

Whether at concept stage or refining specifications, attendees gain clarity on what good looks like – and how to assemble the right team to deliver it.

Visitors consistently highlight the value of seeing construction details in context:

- “If you’re planning any sort of self-build or renovation, this is the place to go.” – NSBRC Visitor
- “I learnt a lot from the speakers and from the displays in the building. Definitely will visit again.” – Workshop Attendee

#### REAL PROJECTS REAL RESULTS

Early decisions and thoughtful design are shown to have a profound impact on home performance. Documenting the experiences of past NSBRC visitors, these case studies reveal the transformative potential of the Passivhaus approach – demonstrating that with careful planning, even older homes can be elevated to exceptional levels of comfort and energy efficiency.

In Oxford, Guy and Susan Hargreaves undertook a major renovation and extension of their 1906 mid-terrace home, achieving EnerPHit certification. Through careful detailing and a fabric first approach, they combined modern performance standards with traditional character.

In Weymouth, Dorset, Alan Muncaster carried out a comprehensive retrofit of his detached bungalow. By upgrading insulation, installing mechanical ventilation with heat recovery, incorporating photovoltaic panels, battery storage and an air source heat pump, he raised the property’s EPC rating from D to A – dramatically reducing imported energy demand while retaining the original layout. You can read these case studies and more on the NSBRC’s website.

Projects like these demonstrate that Passivhaus principles are not limited to new builds. Existing homes can also be transformed into comfortable, low-energy spaces.

#### FIND OUT MORE

The next Passivhaus Workshop takes place at The National Self Build & Renovation Centre on Friday 24 April, 9:00 am – 5:30 pm.



The NSBRC Visitor Centre is open Tuesday to Sunday and is free to attend, offering independent advice, educational exhibits and access to industry experts for anyone planning a self-build, renovation or retrofit project.

Because when performance is understood from the outset, better, more sustainable homes will follow.

To register scan the QR code:



## Fleming Homes opens new factory



**Fleming Homes** has announced a major step forward in its manufacturing capability with the launch of Platform 1 – a new factory, state-of-the-art CNC technology and an expanded prefabricated product offering designed to give self-builders more certainty, reduce onsite disruption, and create a smoother, faster process. The investment responds to rising demand for factory-built solutions that ease onsite labour pressures. Fleming Homes has been designing and manufacturing bespoke timber frame

homes for 40 years, bringing freedom, flexibility and individuality to self-building. Platform 1 marks the next stage in the Company's evolution – strengthening its commitment to innovation and continuous improvement.

01361 317093 [fleminghomes.co.uk/our-company/news/new-factory-cnc-investment](http://fleminghomes.co.uk/our-company/news/new-factory-cnc-investment)

## The Selfbuilder website



The **The Selfbuilder** website is an online provider of past and present products and news items for all those involved in and working on a self-build project. [www.sbhonline.co.uk](http://www.sbhonline.co.uk) is a one-stop source for all the latest press releases, providing visitors with access to information about products and services that they may require. From the website, you can find links to digital issues that have live links to advertisers' sites, as well as daily email alerts to keep you as informed

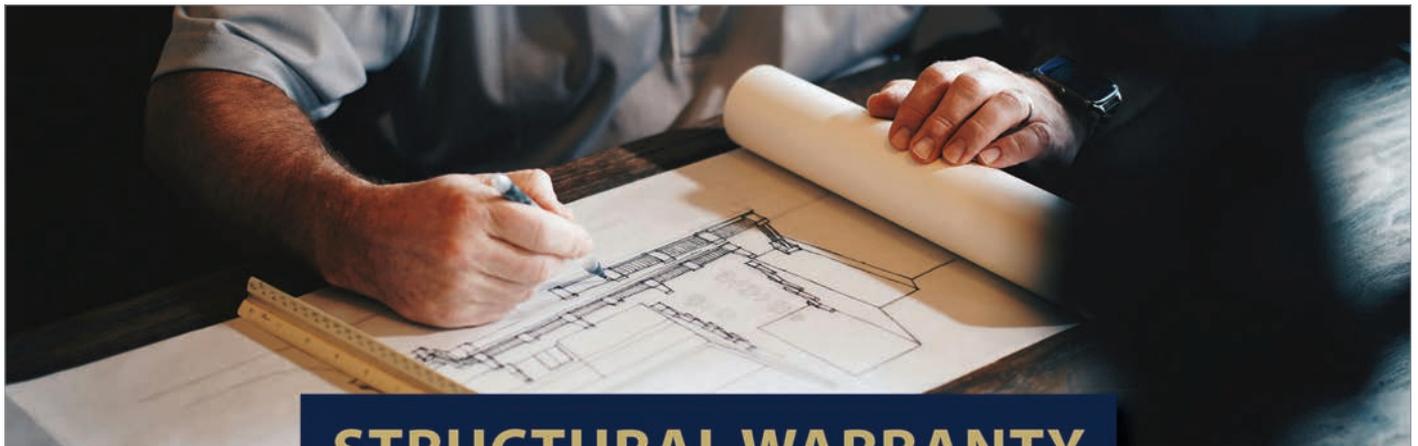
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[www.sbhonline.co.uk](http://www.sbhonline.co.uk)

## Ecological Building Systems strengthens technical team

**Ecological Building Systems** has appointed George Mikurcik as Technical Specification Architect, reflecting the company's commitment to advancing innovative straw wall panel solutions in the UK through its close collaboration with EcoCocon. The new role follows Ecological Building Systems' recent exclusive partnership with leading straw wall panel manufacturer EcoCocon. Alongside supplying the EcoCocon range, Ecological provides comprehensive technical support, including design consultation, detailing, training and on-site guidance for the prefabricated straw wall system across the UK and Ireland. George will technically support Ecological Building Systems' expanding portfolio while continuing to drive EcoCocon's UK straw panel development. Working part-time for both companies, his dual role strengthens ties between the two organisations and opens new opportunities for collaboration in natural building innovation. Penny Randell, UK Director and General Manager of Ecological Building Systems in the UK, explains: "We are really pleased to welcome George to the business. He has specified and worked alongside Ecological Building Systems for many years and his in-depth knowledge of our natural building systems, combined with his expertise and understanding of EcoCocon, will be invaluable to our customers looking to build sustainable homes."

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# Renovation finance unlocked

Thomas McSherry at BuildStore explains how Light Renovation mortgages are helping buyers finance uninhabitable homes and unlock the potential of renovation and retrofit.

**B**uying a home that's currently uninhabitable can be an opportunity, but it's also where many purchases fall down.

When a property can't be lived in at the point of sale, most high street lenders are unable to support the purchase, regardless of its potential. That leaves buyers struggling to find a way to fund both the purchase and the essential renovation needed to make the home habitable.

Yet this challenge comes at a time when upgrading existing homes has never been more important. Across the UK, millions of properties require renovation or retrofit simply to bring them back into safe, liveable use. The Government's Warm Homes Plan, which commits £15bn to upgrading up to five million homes by 2030, underlines the growing need to improve what already exists.

Despite this focus, access to suitable finance at the point of purchase remains one of the biggest barriers for buyers taking on uninhabitable homes.

## WHEN STANDARD MORTGAGES DON'T FIT

With limited options available, many buyers feel pushed towards bridging finance as the only way to move forward. While it can work in some situations, bridging is usually a short-term and expensive option, with the loan repayment typically required within 12 months. This is unsuitable for many projects as the work will take longer than the loan term offered, which can add unnecessary pressure and uncertainty at an already demanding stage of the project.

## A MORE FLEXIBLE OPTION

Whether you already own your home or are buying a property to renovate, a Light Renovation mortgage is designed to provide a more suitable solution.



Instead of being limited by the home's current value, borrowing is based on the property's value once the renovation is complete. This can allow borrowing of up to 80% of the finished value, and in many cases can cover up to 100% of the renovation costs.

Funding is released through guaranteed stage payments, linked to the progress of the work. Crucially, funds can be released before each stage of the works begins, helping you pay builders and suppliers on time and maintain a positive cashflow throughout the project. This reduces reliance on savings or short-term borrowing and makes it easier to plan and manage your renovation

with confidence.

## WHAT TYPES OF PROJECTS ARE SUITABLE?

Light Renovation mortgages are designed for work that improves, modernises and futureproofs a home.

To qualify:

- The property must be wind and watertight at the outset
- The build period should be no more than 12 months
- The work must fall under permitted development or Building Regulations, rather than requiring full planning permission

Typical qualifying projects include:

- Replacement windows and doors

- New or upgraded heating systems, including boilers and MVHR
- Roof repairs or replacement of non-structural elements such as tiles, slates, fascias and gutters
- Rewiring, plastering and internal redecoration
- New kitchens and bathrooms
- Loft conversions
- Insulation upgrades
- Solar panels and solar thermal systems
- Removal of internal walls where Building Regulations approval only is required

Projects involving major structural changes or full planning permission may fall outside the Light Renovation criteria, but can still be supported through our major renovation mortgage options, which support projects requiring planning permission.

**HOW LIGHT RENOVATION FINANCE WORKS**

Because Light Renovation mortgages are based on your home’s future value, you can borrow more than with a standard mortgage, helping to fund the renovation work without relying heavily on savings or short-term borrowing. This means:

- Borrowing reflects the full scope

*Across the UK, millions of properties require renovation or retrofit*

- of the renovation
- Cashflow is available as the project progresses

Key features include:

- Stage payments are released in line with the build
- Flexible payment options, with funds available in advance or in arrears
- Guaranteed stage payments in advance or arrears
- One mortgage that can fund both the purchase or remortgage and the renovation works, all under a single facility

**DESIGNED TO MAKE RENOVATION SIMPLER**

As part of the application, you’ll need to provide details of the work you plan to carry out and the associated costs. This helps ensure the funding is matched to the project and released in line with the build.

Because Light Renovation projects are less complex than major rebuilds, there is a simplified costing process. This means there is less paperwork and a clearer, quicker route to approval, giving you greater confidence when planning and managing your budget.

**SUPPORTING WARMER, MORE EFFICIENT HOMES**

As energy efficiency and retrofit move centre stage, access to the right finance will become more important. This type of mortgage is designed to support improvements that make homes warmer and more comfortable, cheaper to run and better suited to modern living.

As the UK moves towards a lower-carbon future, upgrading existing homes will be just as important as building new ones. Having access to the right finance can be the difference between putting plans on hold and turning them into reality.

*Thomas McSherry is national business development manager at BuildStore*

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# Choosing the right slate

Steven Pearson at CUPA PIZARRAS explores the importance of material selection for longevity and why your new home's roof is one area where it doesn't pay to cut corners.

If there's one thing that's certain about building your own home, it's the huge number of decisions that need to be made. From choosing your plot to working out the design details, every aspect needs to be carefully considered. Of course there's a cost attached to everything, so when decision fatigue starts to set in, it can be tempting to use price as the deciding factor.

However there are several fundamental components of your build that it's crucial to get right, with the roof being one of the most important. While digging into the performance characteristics of roofing materials might not have the same 'fun factor' as choosing internal fixtures and fittings, mistakes made in this area can have costly and long-lasting consequences, so it's worth taking the time to do it properly.

When it comes to choosing roofing slate, natural slate is an ideal option for self-builders, crowning British homes for centuries, and for good reason. Its timeless appeal, exceptional durability and minimal maintenance requirements make it an ideal choice for self-builders who understand that real value lies not in the initial price tag, but in the decades of reliable performance. However as the roofing market has evolved, so too have the challenges facing homeowners trying to make informed decisions about their roofs.

For instance, it's extremely important to look at the origin of the materials and to confirm that what you're buying is indeed genuine, tectonic slate. In recent years, the UK market has seen an influx of products that have been falsely marketed as 'slate' but are in fact made from other materials. While they may look similar at first glance, they are formed from an entirely different rock and therefore cannot offer the same performance quality or longevity as genuine European slate.

Recent guidance from the National Federation of Roofing Contractors (NFRC) has highlighted this growing concern and published a guidance note



*Natural slate is an ideal option for self-builders*

in 2025 specifically warning about the risks associated with other alternatives. Understanding the difference between authentic metamorphic slate and lower grade alternatives isn't just technical pedantry; it's essential knowledge that could save you from costly callbacks and protect your most significant investment.

**GEOLOGY BEHIND PERFORMANCE**

Genuine Spanish slate, such as that quarried in Galicia, is a true metamorphic rock formed through millions of years of intense tectonic compression. This extraordinary geological process aligns minerals to create a strong metamorphic cleavage plane, giving the material its unique combination of strength, flexibility and weather resistance. The interlocking crystalline structure that results from this transformation is what enables Spanish slate to deliver its exceptional performance credentials and expected product lifespan of 100 years. Indeed, Welsh and other UK slates follow the same natural process.

**WATER ABSORPTION & WEATHER RESILIENCE**

One of the most significant differences lies in water absorption rates. Testing shows that quality Spanish slate has an absorption rate of just 0.28%, while some other roofing materials can absorb nearly



twice as much. In Britain's freeze thaw climate, this distinction is critical.

When water freezes inside roofing material it expands, causing cracks, surface flaking and eventual structural failure. Spanish slate's low absorption rate means it remains impervious to the elements, maintaining its structural integrity through countless seasonal cycles.

**WORKABILITY & INSTALLATION**

For self-builders working closely with their contractors, the practical advantages of genuine Spanish slate extend to the installation process itself. Its versatility makes contractors' lives easier onsite, cutting cleanly and handling intricate details beautifully. This workability allows for a wide range of designs and architectural styles, from

traditional pitched roofs to contemporary applications including rainscreen cladding and even interior feature walls.

The material's flexibility means it can be easily cut onsite into various shapes and sizes, accommodating features such as hips, valleys, gables and dormers with relative ease. Whether you're creating an m-shaped roof, a gambrel design, or incorporating steep pitched and extended floating gables, natural Spanish slate can be adapted to make your roof a standout design feature rather than simply a functional necessity.

For self-builders, investing in Spanish slate protects your home and your long-term peace of mind. While genuine Spanish tectonic slate may require a higher initial outlay than lower quality alternatives, the true cost of any roofing material must be calculated across its entire lifespan.

When you consider a roof that will outlast multiple generations, require no replacement and maintain its aesthetic appeal throughout decades of service, choosing authentic Spanish slate isn't just good practice; it's good business sense for the long term stewardship of your family home.

*Steven Pearson is UK country director at CUPA PIZARRAS*

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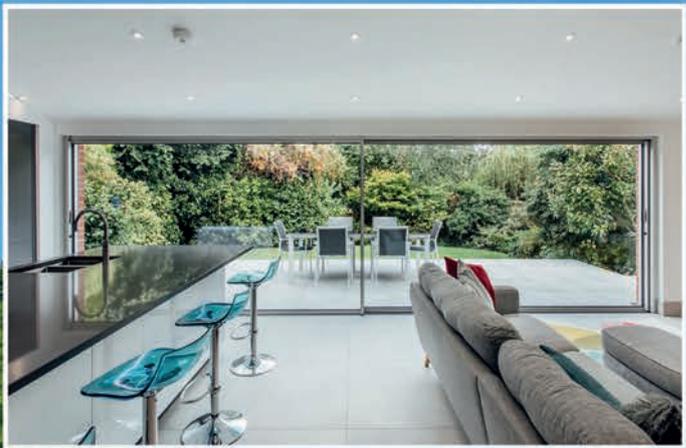
**Thermomur® ICF from BEWI is a big hit**

When engineer Andrew Brash and his wife were looking to build a forever retirement home in the Suffolk village that they love, Andrew was immediately attracted to the elegance of an Insulating Concrete Formwork (ICF) solution. It was the thermal performance and simplicity that particularly appealed. He also liked the durability of ICF: "If we were going to build a house with our name on it, we wanted something that was going to be around for a long time," he says. 'Mouses' is a build of 330 sq m on a 0.6-acre plot, which was completed in just 14 months, despite the large size of the building, reflecting the ease with which projects can be carried out using ICF. The product selected was BEWI's Thermomur® 350 Super, which is designed to provide an outstanding thermal performance (with a U-value of 0.15 W/m²K), and has full NHBC and BBA approval, while also enabling a fast and efficient build. The cost/performance equation was viewed as a key benefit, which could provide the thermal performance necessary to gain a Passivehouse rating. The house also easily achieved its airtightness target. From a practical point of view, the ability to screw into the sides of the blocks and the way they all fit together also makes for a more straightforward build than with other systems, while generating less waste. The flexibility of the system meant that the team were able to deal with challenges as they arose on the job

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CASE STUDY

# RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Take one traditional childhood home, deconstruct it, then add delicious curves to whip up a stunning property for chef Andrew Wong and his family.

TEXT DEBBIE JEFFERY IMAGES JAMES MCDONALD





British-born chef Andrew Wong grew up in the same Pimlico end-terrace house where he lives today with his wife Nathalie and their two children, aged 11 and nine. "This part of London has always been home," he says. "My parents used their life savings to buy this house in 1989, but there was very little money left over to do any work, so it was quite dated and rundown."

As a chef, Andrew has been immersed in the world of restaurants since childhood. His father was the first Chinese publican in the UK and later opened a Cantonese restaurant in Pimlico, now the location of Andrew's own celebrated restaurant, A.Wong – the first Chinese restaurant outside Asia to be awarded two Michelin stars.

"We had gutted and rebuilt restaurants before, but never a house," says Andrew, who previously lived with his wife and children in a small Pimlico flat. "When my mum moved back to Hong Kong I started thinking about selling our old family home but walking around the building with architect Alex Michaelis completely changed my mind, as memories of wonderful times there came flooding back."

The resulting extreme makeover is testimony to the talents of architecture and design studio Michaelis Boyd and to Nathalie Wong's minimalist vision. Windows that had once been blocked up to evade the window tax were reinstated and the building's tapering corner footprint presented a unique opportunity to create unusually shaped bathrooms at the narrow end.

A pivotal architectural decision was to relocate the staircase from the corner to the centre of the house. This sculptural feature spirals elegantly

from basement to attic, crowned by a skylight that floods the vertical core with daylight.

"We stayed living in our flat during the build, which was all organised by our architect. The entire place was gutted, and all the floors have been recalibrated to create enough head height in the loft for our son's bedroom," says Andrew. "We work 16-hour days in the restaurant business, but Nathalie somehow found time to source curved furniture and light fittings to complement the design."

The family sitting room is situated in the basement and opens onto two small courtyard areas, while the original chimney wall now contains a bespoke fireplace and fitted cabinetry, with the dramatic staircase cascading down to create a focal point.

"After living in a flat, it feels strange walking downstairs to the living room," says Andrew. Light oak flooring and underfloor heating create a warm, inviting atmosphere, and the neutral palette enhances the sculptural quality of the space.

Step down into the building's original vaults to find a laundry room and library storage for Andrew's thousands of cookbooks. "The vaults were always outside, so incorporating them into the house has given us additional usable space," he explains. Once cold and unused, these compact chambers now contain a Belfast sink, fitted cabinetry and shelving designed to make every inch functional.

Adjacent to the sitting room, a guest room offers a bright retreat with its own ensuite bathroom, while at the front of the house a bold boot room – painted deep blue – provides a striking contrast to the soft, natural colour



palette used elsewhere.

The ground floor kitchen and dining space form the family's main hub, with dark wood cabinetry, topped with cool-toned marble quartzite counters, creating a sleek and functional setting for both family life and filming cookery videos.

"I wanted a room where I could cook, research recipes, listen to music and enjoy spending time," says Andrew. "Having enough storage and work surfaces was obviously important, with a burner for a wok, and now our daughter has started baking so she's often working in the kitchen, too."

A bespoke leather banquette seating area curves around the table beside the kitchen, echoing the home's architectural theme. "We came from a small flat with no room for a dining table, so it's great to be able to sit together now to eat," says Andrew.

The master suite benefits from bespoke joinery, a dressing room, and dual-aspect windows offering striking contrasts between views of contemporary and historic London. "I grew up looking out at Battersea Power Station, so it's an important landmark for me," says Andrew. A built-in dressing table follows the curved theme seen throughout, while carefully chosen furniture maintains the soft, understated aesthetic.

The master bathroom occupies the narrowest point of the property, where its shape has been used to full advantage. White walls contrast with warm oak cabinetry, and a freestanding bath serves as the focal point. "My two requests were for super-power showers and a Japanese toilet," Andrew explains.

***"We had gutted and rebuilt restaurants before, but never a house."***

On the upper levels, the children's bedrooms each reflect the same attention to form and function. "Originally, we planned for both children to sleep on the second floor, but now our son is at the top of the house in the converted attic," says Andrew.

New skylights frame views of the neighbouring chimney tops, and bespoke cabinetry provides storage within the apex-shaped room. On the floor below, their daughter's bedroom also overlooks Battersea Power Station, now a shopping and leisure destination, and includes a custom-designed desk area.

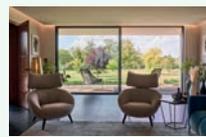
It took 16 months to complete the extensive remodelling project ready for the family to take up residence. "We left all our old belongings behind, and it felt like moving into a chic hotel," recalls Andrew.

For Andrew and Nathalie, the transformation has created a light, connected home that retains the warmth of Andrew's memories while functioning for a busy family life. Every space, from the sweeping staircase to the smallest alcove, reflects careful design and a personal story. "It's been so special giving my old family home a new life," says Andrew. "The house still feels familiar, but now it finally works for how we live." ■

# Sliding doors and bifold doors bring the outside in

When Martin Shaw began building his dream home in the Bedfordshire countryside, he wanted the best quality for every element of the build. The picturesque spot, situated on what was a 2.5-acre paddock, is less than 100m from the River Great Ouse. To make the most of the beautiful views, Martin worked with Spectrum Architectural Glazing and Solarlux to create a highly glazed home that brought the outside indoors, while also ensuring adequate thermal performance and wind resistance for the exposed location.

Having used Solarlux products before, Martin knew about the high level of quality, performance and service he could expect. A combination of Cero III sliding patio doors, Highline bifold doors, and a bespoke glazed panel was used to create floor-to-



ceiling glazing across two storeys, providing clear views from the inside while delivering adequate thermal performance in the winter months.

"It's pure indoor-outdoor living," says Martin. "Even in winter, we can enjoy

the landscape in complete comfort without going out onto the balconies. The Solarlux sliding doors bring the outside in, and every window feels like a picture frame."

Solarlux's precision-engineered aluminium-frame systems offered the ideal combination of strength, weather resistance and elegance.

The Cero III profile incorporates a multi-chamber frame design, with internal brush seals and gaskets to manage air and water infiltration. As a result, the sliding doors can achieve watertightness up to Class 9A, as tested to EN 12208, equating to resistance against driving rain at pressures above 600 Pa, or wind speeds exceeding 100 km/h.

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# Hörmann delivers a complete door solution – inside and out

A contemporary renovation project in Leicestershire has been completed with the installation of a comprehensive suite of high-quality residential doors from Hörmann UK, showcasing the brand's ability to deliver cohesive solutions both externally and internally. The family home features a Hörmann sectional garage door and aluminium entrance door, complemented inside by a range of side-hinged, pocket, and fire doors.

Externally, the property features a Hörmann LPU42 double-sized sectional garage door, designed with a 42mm thick door leaf that delivers excellent thermal efficiency—making it an ideal choice for the integrated garage. For added convenience and security, the door is fully automated with a Hörmann Supramatic P motor, operated by two hand transmitters. The door is



finished in elegant Silkgrain, perfectly complementing the home's modern architectural style, while the Agate grey (RAL 7038) colour harmonises seamlessly with the external cladding and overall material palette of the property.

A Hörmann ThermoSafe high-performance aluminium entrance door with a glazed side panel was selected to complement and match the style and

premium finish of the sectional garage door. Equipped with the latest multi-point locking systems, it provides enhanced security and peace of mind against forced entry and achieves acoustic insulation of 30dB. To harmonise with the garage door and the home's exterior aesthetic, the entrance door is finished in a silk matt Agate grey.

Internally, the project was completed with a total of 12 Hörmann ProLine Duradecor doors, including nine side-hinged, two pocket, and a 30-minute fire door connecting the integral garage to the living area of the house. Constructed from high-quality timber materials with a vibrant, textured laminated surface, the doors deliver a clean, sophisticated finish that complements the home's modern interior design.

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# Avoiding overheating when using large glazing

## HOW TO PREVENT OVERHEATING IN GLASS EXTENSIONS: EXPERT TIPS FROM SOLARLUX UK

From glass canopies and verandas to wintergardens, bifolding doors and curtain walling, glazed extensions are widely used in UK architecture.

Glazed extensions bring many functional and aesthetic advantages to a property. However, large areas of glazing can also raise the risk of overheating if they are not carefully planned. To reduce this risk, appropriate design and specifications should be implemented.

## THE BALANCING ACT BETWEEN THERMAL EFFICIENCY AND OVERHEATING

The problem of overheating can be partly attributed to the high levels of thermal efficiency that the building regulations require. Large glazing features can contribute to increased interior temperatures by several degrees.

## WILL A GLAZED EXTENSION BE TOO HOT OR COLD?

Solarlux wintergardens are engineered to ensure thermal comfort, quality and aesthetics. Our glass structures can include low-G glass, triple glazing, ventilation, shading, bifolding doors, sliding doors, heating, lighting and automation. Combined, these elements help to maintain a stable temperature throughout the year, whatever the weather.

## OVERHEATING PREVENTION: WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SPECIFYING LARGE GLAZING

Some of the most common pitfalls to avoid when specifying glazing are:

- Check the orientation of the glazing and its exposure to direct sunlight
- Specify Solar control glazing
- Consider external shading strategies
- Ensure adequate ventilation for cooling and moisture control
- Carry out thermal modelling



- Ensure compliance with Approved Documents L, F and O

“At Solarlux, our glazing systems are designed with aesthetics, comfort and performance in mind. By working with our specialist partners early in the planning process, architects and homeowners can achieve a perfect balance of light and thermal efficiency,” says Jeevan Matharu, Marketing Manager at Solarlux UK.

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## Innovations for a self build project

The self-build market is an aspirational one, with many media titles targeted towards those people who are merely dreaming about building their own house. Unlike some newsstand magazines, **The Selfbuilder** has a focused readership of genuine self-builders, renovators and agents, reaching only the people who already own their land or property, have planning permission and are ready to start work. As well as the magazine, **The Selfbuilder** has an established online presence. Its informative website is a one-stop shop source for all the latest press releases, providing visitors with access to information about products and services that they may require. A variety of features offer inspiration and practical advice, and each in-depth case study tell a unique self-build or renovation story from the owners’ perspectives. From the website, you can also find a complete company directory that has live links to advertisers’ websites. You can choose to subscribe to receive regular copies of the printed and digital versions of the magazine, or sign up to the monthly email newsletter. In addition, **The Selfbuilder** has expanded its social media portfolio, meaning that you can now follow us on LinkedIn and Instagram as well as Twitter to keep you as informed as possible.

[www.sbhonline.co.uk](http://www.sbhonline.co.uk)

# Separating fact from fiction

Joe Raftery at Samsung Climate Solutions explores the most common myths around heat pumps and explains how modern systems offer a reliable option for UK homes.



**M**ore UK homeowners than ever before are looking for modern, efficient ways to heat their homes. With government approved data indicating an upward trend in terms of heat pump deployment, the technology has become a mainstream consideration for households across the country. Air-to-water heat pumps have been heating homes across the UK for decades.

Put simply, a heat pump is a part of a heating system that can be installed outside a property. It draws in air across an outside radiator using a large fan. This radiator is filled with refrigerant, which boils at a lower temperature than water. The refrigerant is then compressed, increasing its temperature, and passes over a heat exchanger, like in your common heating boiler.

The heat then goes into your radiators or underfloor heating system. This refrigerant cycle is what makes a heat pump so thermally efficient.

#### **SUITABLE IN LOW TEMPERATURES**

While many think heat pumps can't work in cold weather that is not the case. In fact, according to the International Energy Agency, Scandinavian nations – where winter conditions are far harsher than in the UK – have some of the highest heat pump installation rates in the world, proving that freezing weather does not limit uptake of this technology. In the UK, air-to-water heat pumps must achieve an average SCOP (Seasonal Coefficient of Performance) of 2.8 minimum to meet MCS compliance. This means heat pumps must emit 2800 watts

of heat for every 1000 watts of electricity the heat pump consumes to be admitted to the MCS product register.

Systems are designed to perform reliably at outdoor temperatures as low as -25°C. This demonstrates that low temperatures are not a barrier to a well designed and correctly installed system, while achieving a SCOP of up to five with well designed heating systems.

#### **LOW NOISE LEVELS**

Another common concern is that heat pumps generate considerable noise which could disrupt the home environment. This stems from outdated ideas rather than real-world performance of modern units, as, in practice, the sound level from a modern external heat pump is low – roughly similar to that of a

## Good installation planning helps reduce noise further

large, American-style fridge freezer. It is noticeable only when standing close to the outdoor unit and generally fades into the background of everyday life.

Good installation planning helps reduce noise further. For outdoor units, the heat pump should be positioned on a stable base with enough space around it, preventing vibration and improving airflow. Ultimately, when installed to MCS standards, a modern heat pump should not disrupt the household or neighbours.

### SIMPLE TO USE

Some homeowners feel unsure about heat pump controls, assuming the technology must be complex. In reality, once installed, the systems are straightforward to operate. Many offer smart controls or user-friendly interfaces. This visibility helps users understand how small adjustments can improve comfort and efficiency.

### MINIMAL SPACE REQUIRED

Another concern is that heat pumps require large amounts of unavailable space to operate. While there is no universal heat pump size, in practice modern and compact

units can be ideally positioned in a garden, against an external wall or even on a flat roof. The indoor components including a hot water cylinder generally take up a similar amount of space as a traditional hot water tank, for instance in a utility room or airing cupboard.

An installer will select the right system for a property based on a heat loss calculation, which identifies how much warmth a building loses through its walls, windows, and roof. For self-builders, this calculation can be incorporated early in the design process. For renovators, an installer will assess the existing structure and advise on placement.

### WORKING WITH EXISTING RADIATORS

Many also believe that heat pumps cannot work with existing radiators, which is a myth. While some homes benefit from upgrades, when designed correctly, heat pumps can integrate with a range of emitters, including radiators and underfloor heating. Radiators need to be the right size for the room and lower flow temperatures used by heat pumps, but often this requires only small changes in certain rooms.

For self-builders, designing a

heating system around a heat pump from the outset of a project is the simplest solution.

### LOOKING AHEAD

As expectations around comfort and energy efficiency continue to grow, heat pumps are a reliable heating option for those looking to create homes that are fit-for-purpose. Support schemes like the government's Boiler Upgrade Scheme, which currently enables funding of £7,500 for qualifying heat pump installations, make heat pumps increasingly accessible.

For self-builders and renovators, having early conversations with qualified installers is the best way to understand what is possible with your property. Independent organisations such as Nesta and the Energy Saving Trust, along with manufacturer websites also offer helpful guidance for those starting their journey. With myths addressed and facts understood self-builders will be able to approach their projects with confidence and clarity.

*Joe Raftery is heating product manager at Samsung Climate Solutions*

## Garador launches Portal by Garador

**G**arador has launched a brand new premium range of front doors.

Portal by Garador front doors have been designed and manufactured here in the UK. Developed to meet the demands of modern homes, the Portal collection combines contemporary design, advanced security and high thermal performance, offering a complete entrance solution for homeowners and developers alike.

A key differentiator of the Portal range is the extensive customisation available. Architects, builders and homeowners can choose from a wide selection of door styles, colours, glazing options and hardware finishes, allowing each door to be tailored to suit both traditional and contemporary properties. This flexibility makes Portal by Garador suitable for a broad

range of architectural styles and project requirements.

Security is a core across the entire range, with all Portal doors have been engineered to meet stringent standards and available with Secured by Design accreditation, the official UK police-backed security initiative. High-security multipoint locking systems and reinforced frames are designed to provide robust protection and long-term reliability.

Thermal performance is another standout feature. Using advanced construction techniques and carefully selected materials, Garador's Portal doors are designed to help improve energy efficiency and reduce heat loss. The range includes options that exceed current building regulations and are engineered with future standards in mind, supporting the drive towards



more energy-efficient homes.

Garador's Portal range has also been designed to complement its extensive range of garage doors for co-ordinated styling.

Find out more about Garador's exceptional doors by talking to your local dealer, builder or merchant or contact Garador's friendly sales team.

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## Quicker delivery for coloured radiators....



Last year, **Stelrad** introduced a new quicker turnaround service for the supply of some of its radiators in colour.

This new rapid turnaround service applied to the popular Column and Concord ranges, and to the Classic Towel Rail, Caliente and Concord towel rail products in one of the 55 standard RAL colours. The lead time was reduced to just 14 days.

Now Stelrad has announced phase 2 of the rollout of the same rapid turnaround for more coloured radiators.

For more information head for the Stelrad website.

0800 876 6813 [www.stelradprofessional.com](http://www.stelradprofessional.com)

## The Radiator Company turns up the heat



**The Radiator Company** has released four exciting new aluminium radiators – the Oglio, Mezzola, Gravina and Termal. Available in matt white and flat anthracite as stock options, for a more personalised finish, the radiators can also be made-to-order in 188 RAL colours to either co-ordinate or contrast with walls, floors and décor. Finally, aluminium radiators provide excellent thermal properties, including fast, responsive heating, meaning they perform well with low temperature renewable systems, and can help

to reduce homeowners' energy bills. The Radiator Company offers special finishes, colours, different sizes and formats of radiators and towel rails, making it one of the UK's largest selection with thousands of combinations.

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CASE STUDY

# RISING FROM THE RUBBLE

Amy and Adrian Mole self-built their stunning new family home on a disused site adjacent to greenbelt land.

TEXT ALEXANDRA PRATT IMAGES ALAN WILLIAMS (IMAGES COURTESY OF EMRYS ARCHITECTS)





Adrian and Amy Mole have managed the impossible: building their dream home in rural Kent within an area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB), and just outside the greenbelt. The home, which they share with daughter Emilia, was once the site of an old garage on a builder's dump. Today, the land has been restored, and thoughtful design, natural materials and low-impact construction have created a modern sanctuary, quietly nestled among wildflower meadows and an orchard.

The family bought a derelict Grade II listed property in a Kent village just over 10 years ago and renovated it, before moving in and enjoying life. "But," says Adrian, who is a semi-retired builder, "We always had a plan. The house had an acre or so of land with a large garage. Some of the land was inside the village curtilage and some was in the greenbelt. From above, it looks like a wedge of cheese."

Working with Emrys Architects, whom they had met previously through the recommendation of friends, and worked with on other projects, Adrian and Amy "sailed through" the planning process. Yet to do so meant they "ticked every box," says Adrian, who ensured they carried out several surveys and tests. These included ground contamination (which was clear, despite the rubble) and animal surveys. Evidence of three slow worms meant Adrian had to build a special, temporary fence around the construction site. "It cost a lot of money, but we see them now in the garden," says Adrian.

Another requirement was an archaeological survey, and the presence of an archaeologist for two and a half weeks when Adrian's team broke ground. "He rushed over to say, 'Good news,

I've found the remains of a Roman dog!'" laughs Adrian. "It wasn't so good for us!" Fortunately, the dog was eventually classified as more recent, and the build wasn't impacted.

Amy and Adrian didn't want a pastiche of the village's period properties, so local farm buildings inspired the design of the family's home. Three barn-like sections are connected via glazed links, which allow light in and frame views of the landscape.

"The unusual geometry of the site inspired the design, resulting in three distinct building forms connected by glazed links," explains Catriona Jones of Emrys Architects. "The surrounding field was transformed into a meadow, ensuring the greenbelt character was preserved, while still giving the family the sense of a large private green space."

The three-part form of the house feels natural, and the meadow landscape ensures that the house does not feel like overdevelopment, partly due to the exterior finish. Like local barns, the two outer buildings are clad in black-painted timber cladding. By contrast, the central building is painted white. Each has a pitched roof, finished in standing seam zinc, another nod to the metal roofs of neighbouring agricultural byres.

"We didn't want some fake Georgian box, we wanted something modern," explains Adrian. "I also really like painted timber. It looks a lot better than plastic or cement fibre. This cladding looks very natural."

Natural is the word for this project. The layout and orientation of the family's home make the most of the surrounding landscape. At the rear, huge sliding glazed doors open



onto the wildflower meadows and surrounding fields. Not only does this indoor/outdoor connection mean the family feels immersed in the beauty of the surroundings, but careful landscaping was central to the overall vision, with hard landscaping limited to defined areas near the house.

Adrian's creation of the meadow, new wildlife habitats, orchard and a small wood extends and enhances the natural environment, as well as screens the house. It's a constantly changing backdrop that shifts with the seasons.

With years of experience in building to draw on, Adrian took project management of their self-build in his stride. Onsite every day, Adrian managed a core team of two builders alongside numerous subcontractors, while also rolling up his sleeves to get hands-on, from digging out the basement to designing and fabricating the steel-framed internal doors before having them powder-coated by a local firm. "I did glass work for refurbishments in a previous job," he explains. "You can get a third off the price of glass when you order it directly from the manufacturer yourself."

At one year, the basement was the longest phase of this project. Yet it was something Adrian wanted to do as it gave them 70sqm of extra space for the laundry, heap pump room and storage, plus a studio for Amy's clothing business. Relishing the challenge of tackling something new, Adrian admits this was his biggest challenge on the project. To start, he researched processes and products on YouTube. He then dug out the basement, did four pours of waterproof concrete, damp-proofed it and added a sump pump.

## *Amy and Adrian didn't want a pastiche of the village's period properties*

Above ground, the buildings went up in just seven days, thanks to Adrian's choice of structural insulated panels (SIPs) as a build system. "It seemed a sensible way to go, even though it was more expensive," explains Adrian. "It went up very quickly, and I was able to add in even more insulation."

Glazing is a significant part of this design, and the couple chose double glazing in aluminium framing.

"I went to lots of different suppliers to find ones we liked," explains Adrian, who chose IQ Glass as he felt he needed specialists to supply the huge, glazed sliding doors. But, "In hindsight, I would go triple-glazed for the extra heat saving in winter,"

In the glazed links between the three sections of the house, the windows are fixed, and for these Adrian measured, ordered and fitted the glazing himself, saving, he estimates, around £30,000.

Other jobs Adrian tackled himself included the oak-treads in a stunning staircase designed by Emrys Architects, and the kitchen. Although Adrian sourced the cabinetry from Devol,



he measured and fitted it himself. For the countertops, Amy opted for a composite stone that looks like Carrara marble.

When it came to the interiors, Amy was firmly in charge, choosing a neutral palette that frames the beautiful views from every window. The interiors are simple and elegant. Natural materials and finishes are sustainable, and they echo the surrounding environment, including timber, microcement, and lime-based plaster. Together, they create a calm, textured interior.

One of the most significant choices was the flooring. The couple had initially wanted concrete floors throughout, but after seeing a concrete floor at a London art gallery, they decided against an industrial feel. "We saw an amazing concrete floor with shadow gaps in a London Art Gallery and were really tempted to use concrete throughout the ground floor. However, after much debate, we decided to break it up with really wide wooden planks, for a warmer, less industrial feel in the sitting room and kitchen," says Amy. "We opted for Chauncey's oak floorboards throughout the sitting, kitchen and dining room," adds Adrian. "Chauncey does the most amazing wide oak boards (320mm), which we fell in love with, and they give a really warm modern rustic look."

Elsewhere, in the hallways, bathrooms and utility areas, Amy and Adrian chose microcement. Like in every other aspect of this build, Adrian was determined not to hand over aspects to outside firms. Instead, he sent one of his builders on a course so his team could install the microcement themselves. "We were really

## *Natural materials and finishes are sustainable, and they echo the surrounding environment*

keen to use microcement," explains Adrian. "I don't like tiles in bathrooms, and we even made the shower tray from it."

A more unusual choice was a new product from Armourcoat, called Clime. This is a sustainable replacement plaster made from clay and lime, mixed with quartz. It's self-coloured, too, so there's no need to paint. "We absolutely love the natural soft chalky look of this and have used the same colour throughout the house," says Adrian. "There are no pictures up in this house, as we love the finish of the walls... and the views through the windows."

Light is a major element of this design, including not just the glazing, but the lighting design, too. Amy and Adrian attended a workshop with a specialist lighting designer so they could get this exactly right.

"We felt it was essential, both in the look of the lights themselves and also the ambience," says Adrian. "We both attended a lighting workshop at John Cullen and then used them

## CONTACTS/ SUPPLIERS

### ARCHITECT

**Emrys Architects**  
www.emrysarchitects.com

### GLAZING

**IQ Glass**  
www.iqglassuk.com

### FLOORING

**Chaunceys**  
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## AMY & ADRIAN'S TOP TIPS

- \* Do your research. It's easier online now. I learned how to do staging for basements by watching online videos.
- \* Keep going. You do have low days, but push on through. Don't forget to enjoy it!

as consultants to design the lighting throughout the ground floor."

In such a contemporary home, it's unsurprising that Adrian and Amy also opted to avoid radiators and install underfloor heating. This is a wet system, run by a ground source heat pump. Although more expensive than air source and reliant on three 111m deep bore holes, a ground source heat pump is also far more efficient, drawing steady warmth from pipes buried in the earth to heat the home and hot water. For those with land, it's a low-carbon, long-term choice that cuts fuel bills.

"I was quoted £3,500 to bring in gas," says Adrian. The ground source system cost £40,000, but I have the Renewable Heat Incentive, so over seven years they pay us and we will get back £20,000."

The couple also chose a mechanical heat recovery and ventilation system to complement the underfloor heating. This draws in fresh air while capturing warmth from the stale air it expels, keeping the home airy and energy-efficient. "It keeps the house at 20 degrees and we have outlets in every room," says Adrian. "It works pretty well."

Adrian kept costs down by going direct to manufacturers, such as with the glass and also for the steel used in the basement, which was manufactured "a few miles down the road." The couple sold their renovated cottage to finance the completion of the home, and the build would have been faster if Adrian hadn't occasionally taken some time out to work and top up their funds.

As if this were not inspiration enough, Adrian

*"Moving in here was lovely, living in something we have created from an idea"*

also struggled with his health, juggling the demands of building their home with medical challenges. "I need a kidney transplant, so I would be hands-on during the day and do dialysis at home in the evenings," he says.

Now that their home is complete, the whole family is enjoying their new modern country lifestyle. "Moving in here was lovely, living in something we have created from an idea," says Adrian. "From my office, I have a view of a 12th century church, and I love the light. As IQ Glass say, 'light is the new luxury' and we really appreciate that, having moved from a 17th-century cottage, which was quite dark."

Catriona Jones, from Emrys Architects, adds: "By combining architectural innovation, sustainable constructions and a personal touch, this home is as beautiful as it is functional. I'm most proud of how the design not only met strict planning constraints but turned them into an opportunity for creativity. I am really happy that Amy and Adrian have a family home that feels unique to them and completely at ease in its environment." ■

## Setcrete Latex Helps with Kitchen Prep



**Setcrete** Latex self-smoothing floor levelling compound has been used to create a smooth and level surface to optimise the appearance of a Luxury Vinyl Tile (LVT) installation in a kitchen/dining area refurbishment at a residential property in Chesterfield. The concrete subfloor was first prepared using Setcrete Acrylic Primer, which is used to promote optimum performance characteristics of the levelling compound and, when used over absorbent subfloors, such as concrete, also prevents moisture being drawn

from the levelling compound, which can cause it to dry too quickly. After priming, Setcrete Latex, which is designed to create a level and smooth surface over various subfloor types, was applied over the entire 50m<sup>2</sup> area.

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when installed on its own; it reduces sound but will not completely proof buildings from the transference of sound. Greater reductions are reached when used within a system for noise transference reductions.

[uk.westfraser.com](http://uk.westfraser.com)

## The Value of Permanence

Homeowners and designers are moving away from fast, trend-led updates and towards permanence and design that stands the test of time. According to Paul Clifford, Managing Director of British architectural hardware specialist **Croft**, the focus on longevity is fundamentally reshaping how finishing touches are specified. "In recent years, we've seen a marked change in mindset. Homeowners are investing more thoughtfully and asking more informed questions - not just about aesthetics, but about material integrity and lifespan. Architectural hardware is no longer an afterthought; it's being specified at the earliest stages of a project as a core design decision. As kitchens, utility rooms and boot rooms become increasingly design-led, the finer details are under greater scrutiny. Solid brass door handles, cabinet knobs and pull handles are being chosen for their thoughtful design, reassuring weight and tactile quality. Designers are deliberately using hardware to introduce contrast, warmth and cohesion, often linking door furniture and cabinetry throughout the home to create a consistent visual language. Finishes such as Aged Brass and Antique Brass are particularly sought after, valued for the way they evolve. There's a growing appreciation for patina, with clients understanding that solid brass will develop character. The gentle darkening around a handle or the soft burnish on a cabinet pull helps to tell a story. It reflects a desire for homes that feel authentic and layered, rather than flat or overly polished."

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CASE STUDY

# BUNGALOW REBORN

Isabel & Henry's remodelled Norfolk property is unrecognisable, transformed into a family home offering the combined benefits of plenty of extra living space, Passivhaus-standard low-energy costs and a timeless character and charisma.

TEXT JESS UNWIN IMAGES ISABEL BADGER





With the search to find that perfect empty plot often turning into a long and frustrating challenge, there are plenty of self-builders who eventually decide that reconfiguring an existing property is the way forward.

Isabel and Henry Badger have done just that with great success, completing the retrofit and remodelling of a 1970s chalet bungalow to conjure up in its stead a remarkable Passivhaus-standard Georgian-style family home.

The reborn property now has double its predecessor's available floorspace – up from 193m<sup>2</sup> to 410m<sup>2</sup> – but without drastically increasing the footprint. How? Well, while there is a small side extension, the majority of the project involved incorporating the existing structure and building upwards.

Whereas the bungalow once had four bedrooms, the new home now boasts six on the first floor, including an ensuite master bedroom with a walk-in wardrobe, three children's bedrooms (two of which are also ensuite) and two guest bedrooms (one ensuite). A family bathroom is the final room leading off the generous landing.

Downstairs, on the left-hand side of the house as you look at it from the south east-facing front elevation, there's kitchen/dining and living space that stretches right through to the doors that open onto a large patio at the back.

The front door leads to an impressive hallway and lobby, where the standout feature is without doubt the stunning two-storey lightwell that's capped by a glass skylight. However, this central section of the retrofit also accommodates a boot

room, larder, plant room, storeroom, a toilet and a utility room.

On the right-hand side of the house, which upstairs hosts the aforementioned children's bedrooms, the space downstairs has been laid out to provide a study, playroom and drawing room.

Recent valuations of The Willows, which is located just a 10-minute drive from the centre of Norwich and yet is also close to the Norfolk Broads, have come in at prices between about £1.25m and £1.5m.

But more importantly, how do the couple who created it feel? "We're delighted that we've got what we set out to achieve," says Isabel. "We're in a beautiful location and we have a home that combines low-energy Passivhaus credentials with a Georgian-style look."

The couple's journey to this point began back in March 2020 when Isabel and Henry decided they wanted to leave London for more space in a countryside setting. A spell renting a "cold and drafty" Victorian house and experiences of being outbid in a fiercely competitive property market prompted a rethink and the couple started looking for houses they could retrofit to combine modern comforts with a traditional exterior design.

By September 2021 they'd found the bungalow through an estate agent and purchased it and surrounding land for £650,000. The couple's plans were submitted almost immediately, and permission was granted in December.

Isabel believes planning permission was quick for a number of reasons: "The green credentials

## LOW POINT

"To save on rental costs, we lived onsite at the beginning and end of construction, which meant trying to complete parts of the house with a crawling baby and a lot of dusty chipboard flooring!"



## HIGH POINT

“Seeing the transformation from a cold, outdated chalet bungalow into a spacious, comfortable family home. It’s the house I hope our three children will grow up in and that we’ll enjoy for many decades to come. Nearly three years after moving in, we’re finally finishing the last room. Much of the transformation was completed by my husband’s hard work, which makes it feel even more personal. It’s been a long journey, but I’m incredibly proud of what we’ve created – and love being able to share it with friends and family on long, lively weekends.”

of Passivhaus, the fact we weren’t drastically increasing the footprint and the Georgian-style exterior all probably ticked the right boxes with the planning authority.”

Using the existing structure, foundations and services helped make it a simpler planning application and brought welcome cost savings too. Isabel explains: “We believe the cost of demolishing the bungalow and starting again, even on a very cheap budget, would probably be near £1m. The retrofit approach cost around £450,000 – less than half the price.”

The couple put together the overall design themselves but then had the plans drawn up by design and technology company Beattie, which was the main contractor and Passivhaus consultant on the project. Choosing Beattie was one of the easier decisions to make as Isabel is a Beattie director and also the daughter of the company’s founder.

Construction got underway in January 2022 using a clever system that Beattie has developed for this sort of project. In essence, and greatly simplified, it involved constructing a timber shell that surrounds the existing bungalow and also provides the framework for the new first floor and side extension.

The panels of this shell, which of course includes openings to accommodate Passivhaus-standard triple-glazed windows and doors, are filled with a high-performance insulation material creating a continuous and airtight, thermal-bridge-free envelope.

The insulating material used is expanded polystyrene (EPS) beads made up of small round balls stuck together with a water-based additive.

*“We have worked on other properties before – this is our fourth project – and Henry’s a quick learner”*

They are mostly full of air, typically composed of approximately 98% air and only 2% actual polystyrene plastic.

While the bungalow’s external walls have been retained as an integral part of the new building, all the old internal walls, the original ground floor ceiling and the bungalow’s roof were removed at different stages of the work. A new roof, using Spanish slate, was installed.

Isabel recalls that at one point a special purple paint was applied to help create the new building’s airtight envelope. She jokes: “I think our neighbours did worry for a while because they could see this purple-coloured house across the field!”

Inevitably, as with any build project, there were some adjustments as work progressed. Isabel says: “About two months in we realised we hadn’t factored in the sun’s path during the day. So, we moved the kitchen, dining and living space to the other side of the house to get the best light. Fortunately, the timber framework system is very easy to change.”



## CONTACTS/ SUPPLIERS

### CONTRACTOR/PASSIVHAUS CONSULTANT

**Beattie**  
www.beattie.io

### INSULATION

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### WINDOWS (TRIPLE GLAZED)

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## *With fixtures and fittings, the couple have been imaginatively inventive and mixed and matched*

Removal of the bungalow's ground floor ceiling also wasn't part of the original plan, but the couple decided it was worth the extra cost to ensure the same extra room height was consistent throughout the new building.

The main structural works, plus all external finishes and internal works up to plasterboard finish, were completed by July 2022. "After that," says Isabel, "it was basically down to my husband and I to finish the property inside – although it was pretty much Henry because I was caring for the children. In January 2023 we moved in with just three bedrooms, one bathroom and the kitchen ready. The rest of it has taken a further three years to finish."

She is full of praise for husband Henry, a banker by trade, who has set about tackling a dizzying range of tasks including plumbing, carpentry, kitchen installation, floor-laying, painting and tiling. Plastering and electrics, however, were left to professionals. "We have worked on other properties before – this is our fourth project – and Henry's a quick learner. My dad's guidance has obviously been invaluable too, but it's been many, many hours of work – a lot of weekends."

With fixtures and fittings, the couple have been imaginatively inventive and mixed and matched. "We have bought new items," says

Isabel, "but Henry and my father built a lot of the furniture, which at the same time makes it very special as well as more affordable, while the bungalow's old kitchen has been repainted and repurposed as our utility room."

To meet the requirements of Passivhaus standards, the couple's new home includes a substantial built-in mechanical ventilation with heat recovery (MVHR) system to provide fresh, filtered air and help cut energy demand.

Playing an important role in this is an underground REHAU pipe that's been installed to help regulate incoming air temperature. As Isabel explains: "Outside air is taken in and travels along 25m of pipe at a depth where the underground temperature is a consistent 15°C. This has the effect of changing the air's temperature by about 7°."

"So, in winter, if it's 4°C outside, the air will come into the house at 11°C, meaning the MVHR has less to do to heat the air. In the summer, this effect works in reverse so outside hot air is cooled in the same way."

She adds: "We do have an electric combi boiler for supplemental heating – towel rails in the bathrooms and a few radiators – but we've plans in place to eventually heat water using solar panels."

While the green credentials of this retrofit

## ISABEL & HENRY'S TOP TIPS

\* Invest in the building fabric first. These are the elements you'll live with forever and are harder to change, while bathrooms and kitchens can be upgraded later as budget allows.

\* Make a checklist of all the rooms and features you'd love – pantry, dressing room, store-room, boot room and so on – then see how many you can make work. It's your dream home after all, so it's worth trying to include everything that will make it truly yours.

\* Take time to consider the sun's path – make sure the rooms you want to feel bright and sunny actually get the light. We caught this just in time, but it's something I wish we'd thought through more carefully at the design stage.

\* Visualise how you'll live in each room and plan your sockets and lighting accordingly. I always knew I wanted a huge Christmas tree beneath the lightwell, so we installed a floor socket there – and another at the bottom of the stairs for the garland!

\* Enjoy the process. It can be intense at times, but it goes by quickly – and seeing your ideas take shape is incredibly rewarding. There's nothing quite like living in a home designed entirely around your family and lifestyle.



*“Once we have solar panels, our bills will be a fraction of those of a house of similar size that's not Passivhaus”*

project are very much of the 21st century, the property's exterior is designed to look much older. Isabel says: “We not only wanted a Georgian-style look, but we also wanted to use materials that would help the house age and appear as if it's been here a long time.

“Lots of construction materials, rightly, are made so that properties don't need maintenance – we went the opposite way. For example, we opted for traditional lime render and then painted the walls rather than a modern silicone-based product.

“For the same reasons the windows are all wooden, which will definitely make for extra work when they need repainting, but we didn't want windows that were aluminium-clad or PVC.”

The couple wanted Georgian-style windowsills but knew stone, the material traditionally used, would be too heavy for the retrofitted timber frame of their house. “We experimented with lots of alternative materials,” says Isabel, “but eventually settled on vermiculite insulation mixed with sharp sand and cement and then painted it. It's lightweight and has a rough texture along the edges that was the sort of thing we were looking for.”

A stylish Georgian-inspired finishing touch,

which was only added in 2025, is the porch covering the main entrance to the property. A steel structure with a zinc roof, it took just a day to put up.

“It has transformed the look at the front of the house, which was a little stark previously with quite a lot of white wall. This has made a big difference and, of course, we will continue to soften the appearance with wisteria and other appropriate planting too.”

The retrofit is now all but complete. Isabel says: “The final room, in 2026, will be the drawing room, which Henry has been using as his woodwork room up until now, and the installation of solar panels is also scheduled for 2026.”

She is clearly delighted with the family's new house: “We've very much been building our dream home here and we now have all we need – enough space for three young children and also to have guests.

“The house's heating performance is already great, and once we have solar panels, our bills will be a fraction of those of a house of similar size that's not Passivhaus. As to the look of the house, I think it's already the case that people who drive past don't realise it's a new build – and that's exactly what we wanted.” ■

# How a bespoke spiral staircase transformed a rooftop terrace

Forest Hill, south-east London, is a district defined by grand terraces, robust brickwork, and a long history of craftsmanship, and when Ashely Williams set out to transform their Forest Hill rooftop into a private terrace, the design evolved naturally from its surroundings. Planning permission had already been secured, but the property had no existing roof access, and the route to achieving this wasn't straightforward.

There was only one viable location for a staircase that would grant access to the new terrace above, an exceptionally tight courtyard and no room for error – requiring a bespoke solution. Ashley wanted something that would enhance the architecture of their home and complement its Victorian and industrial roots. To achieve this in such a confined and awkward space, British Spirals & Castings were brought in to develop a bespoke solution: “We did a lot of research to try and find a provider that could create a bespoke staircase that was light enough for our needs but still looked like a traditional iron structure. We found British Spirals & Castings through a google search, and they were one of very few providers that could deliver exactly what we needed – and with a sensible price point!” said Ashley.

Needing a product that was lightweight and traditionally styled, Ashley selected a Victorian-style cast aluminium spiral staircase. Given the relatively small size of the courtyard, aligning a spiral staircase with the terrace floor above initially appeared impossible without repositioning its base. Instead, a more inventive solution was developed. Two straight steps were added at the top of the staircase, allowing a perfect flow onto the terrace without compromising the space below. Using CAD software, the team developed detailed drawings that defined the staircase's style, proportions, and dimensions, allowing for these adjustments to be made before manufacturing began.

Once the design was finalised, the components were cast, finished with a black powder coat, and assembled.



Standing at 3.26 metres tall, the finished staircase featured 12 Victorian-style treads, each incorporating an ornamental infill panel and spindle that together would form the balustrade. The staircase was also designed to meet current UK building regulations while preserving authentic Victorian proportions and detailing.

For spiral staircases, aluminium offers clear advantages over cast iron, maintaining a classic appearance and structural integrity while significantly reducing weight and improving its resistance to corrosion. All cast aluminium staircases produced by British Spirals & Castings are sand-casted at the company's Staffordshire-based non-ferrous foundry. This process blends time-honoured casting techniques with modern design tools, enabling traditional forms to be recreated with precision.

The staircase's thoughtful, bespoke design ensured it fit precisely within the available space, while the material



created a compelling dialogue between eras. Ashley explains, “Our home has a mixture of industrial and Victorian features, and we felt the style of the Victorian spiral staircase was very complementary to the overall feel and character of the building.” Dark metalwork and intricate detailing echo Victorian ironmongery and the area's industrial roots, while the surrounding elements, like the green tiled walls and dark timber floors, reinterpret traditional London service spaces in a more contemporary, domestic context.

Despite the tight constraints and evolving design requirements, the completed staircase exceeded expectations. Ashley Williams commented: “British Spirals & Castings provided a brilliant service. The staircase complements the overall feel and character of the building, creating a beautiful centrepiece in our home. The team was engaged and patient throughout multiple planning permission changes. I highly recommend British Spirals & Castings for anyone needing a spiral staircase, especially for more complex builds.”

This finished staircase sits confidently within a space that balances old and new. Steel-framed glazing opens the home onto the courtyard, framing the spiral like artwork in a gallery. As natural light moves through the space, the staircase's ornate detailing casts shifting shadows across the tiled walls throughout the day. Above, the new terrace features sleek glass railings that contrast with the decorative metalwork below, reinforcing the home's blend of Victorian and industrial design influences.

Ultimately, the project demonstrates what can be achieved when careful planning meets bespoke British craftsmanship. For homeowners facing complex layouts or tight footprints, it highlights how specialist design and manufacturing can turn constraints into opportunities and create spaces that feel both purposeful and beautifully resolved.

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# Wall panels vs tiles

Amanda Mills at Saniflo looks at how wall panels compare with traditional tiling in terms of installation time, maintenance and long-term performance.

Tiles have long been the default choice for bathroom walls, valued for their durability and familiar aesthetic. However, as self-build projects become more time-pressured and cost-conscious, alternative solutions are gaining traction. One option increasingly specified in modern bathrooms is wall panelling, particularly in shower areas and wet zones.

Advances in materials and manufacturing mean today's wall panels bear little resemblance to earlier generations. Designed specifically for bathroom environments, they now offer realistic finishes, reliable waterproofing and installation benefits that appeal to self-builders looking for efficiency without compromising on appearance.

## INSTALLATION TIME & SIMPLICITY

One of the most significant advantages of wall panels is the speed of installation. Traditional tiling involves multiple stages: surface preparation, fixing, curing, grouting and sealing. Each stage introduces waiting time and increases the risk of delays if trades overlap or schedules slip.

Wall panels are typically supplied in large formats, allowing full walls or shower enclosures to be covered quickly. Industry data suggests a typical 2.4m shower enclosure can be installed in four to six hours compared with two to three days for equivalent tiling work when curing and grouting time is factored in. For self-builders managing their own projects or coordinating installers alongside other finishing works, this faster turnaround can make a tangible difference to overall timelines and help maintain momentum during the critical final stages of a build.

## REDUCED LABOUR & FEWER SNAGGING ISSUES

Tiling is a skilled trade, and complex layouts or large-format tiles require precision and experience. Wall panels simplify the process, reducing reliance on specialist labour and minimising the number of variables that can lead to snags.



*One of the most significant advantages of wall panels is the speed of installation*

With fewer joints and no grout lines, there is less opportunity for cracking, discolouration or uneven finishes. This typically results in fewer post-installation issues and a cleaner handover at completion. For self-builders operating on fixed price contracts or managing their own warranty periods, this reduction in potential callbacks represents both a cost saving and a practical advantage.

## MAINTENANCE & LONG-TERM PERFORMANCE

Grout is often the weakest point in a tiled bathroom. Over time, it can stain, degrade or require resealing, particularly in high-use shower areas where silicone joints are subject to constant water exposure.

Bathroom wall panels provide a continuous, grout-free surface that is easier to clean and maintain. Regular cleaning with standard bathroom products is typically sufficient to keep panels in good condition, whereas grout may require specialist treatments or periodic replacement.

This makes panels particularly

attractive for family bathrooms, ensembles and guest spaces where ease of upkeep is a priority. When correctly specified and installed, quality panels are fully waterproof and well suited to wetrooms and shower enclosures, offering reliable long-term performance in high-moisture environments.

## DESIGN FLEXIBILITY

Wall panels offer a wide range of finishes, including stone, marble, concrete, tile and textured effects. Large-format designs allow self-builders to achieve seamless, contemporary looks that would be costly or complex to replicate with traditional tiling. A single panel can cover an entire shower wall, eliminating the visual interruption of grout lines and creating a more cohesive aesthetic.

Consistency is another benefit. Manufactured finishes reduce variation in colour and pattern, helping deliver predictable results, particularly useful when working across multiple bathrooms or phased builds where matching batches of natural materials can be challenging.

Panels can also be cut onsite to accommodate niches, windows and pipework, providing flexibility when dealing with irregular layouts or renovation projects where existing features need to be worked around.

## PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Compared with tiles or stone slabs, wall panels are lightweight and easier to handle, which can be advantageous on upper floors, loft conversions or projects with restricted access. A single installer can often manage panel installation, whereas large-format tiles may require two operatives.

Some systems can be installed over suitable existing substrates, reducing the need for demolition in renovation projects and helping to control dust and waste. However, substrate preparation remains important. Surfaces must be clean, dry and structurally sound, and installers should always follow manufacturer guidance to ensure

performance and warranty compliance.

**COST CONSIDERATIONS**

Initial material costs for wall panels and mid-range tiles are broadly comparable, though panels can represent better value when labour and time savings are factored in. The reduction in installation time can translate into lower labour costs, particularly if hiring professional installers, and may reduce site overheads in managed builds.

However, premium tiles can offer distinct aesthetic qualities, and in heritage or design-focused projects, the material choice may be driven by architectural considerations rather than efficiency alone. That said, wall panels are no longer limited to neutral finishes. Full-print panels featuring bold graphics, botanical designs or statement imagery are increasingly available, offering self-builders the opportunity to create feature walls or hero pieces that would be difficult or cost-prohibitive to achieve with tiling alone.

**IS PANELLING RIGHT FOR EVERY BATHROOM?**

Wall panels are not intended to replace tiles in every setting. Some self-builders may prefer the tactile quality or traditional appeal of tiles, particularly in period properties or design-led feature



spaces where natural materials contribute to the overall character of the home.

However, for shower areas, ensuites and bathrooms where speed, cleanliness and long-term maintenance are key priorities, panels offer a practical alternative worth serious consideration. Beyond purely functional applications, the expanding design range now includes statement finishes, full-print graphics and bespoke patterns that allow panels to serve as design-led choices in their own right, rather than simply practical substitutes for tiles.

**WHAT TO LOOK FOR**

As with any building product, specification matters. Self-builders should prioritise panels designed specifically for bathroom and wet-

area use, manufactured to recognised European standards such as EN 15102 for decorative wall coverings. Look for products with clear waterproofing and installation systems, including compatible trims, joints and adhesives. A broad and well-supported design range indicates an established manufacturer, as does robust warranty provision and accessible technical support. Choosing a reputable supplier with proven performance credentials helps ensure panels deliver as intended over the lifetime of the bathroom.

**CONSIDERED CHOICE**

Bathroom wall panels reflect a broader shift towards solutions that prioritise efficiency, reliability and ease of ownership. For self-builders balancing design aspirations with practical constraints, they provide a credible, modern alternative to traditional tiling, particularly where time, maintenance and build coordination are critical factors. As with any specification decision the choice between panels and tiles should be informed by the specific requirements of the project, the skills available and the long-term use the space will see.

*Amanda Mills is marketing manager at Saniflo*



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CASE STUDY

# THE 'UNFINISHED' HOUSE

Simon Gittings and Lauren Jorgensen gave their 1950s home an extraordinary industrial-inspired makeover and extension, exposing original materials and embracing the principles of reuse and salvage.

TEXT ALEXANDRA PRATT IMAGES AGNESE SANVITO/OEB





A 1950s semi-detached, three-bedroom home is a common sight across the UK. Now more popular than ever, they are prized for their generous proportions. Yet, as these homes approach their eighth decade, their condition is often poor, with little insulation and small windows in functional spaces such as the kitchen. “The elderly man had passed away, and we found a lounge full of junk, an old mint-coloured bath with an electric heater above and no fitted kitchen,” says Simon.

While living in East London, Simon, a creative director, and his wife Lauren, an accountant, found this project just 20 minutes away. The couple were able to stay in their home while refurbishing the new property, also adding a single-storey extension. Throughout, their principle was ‘less is more’, choosing to peel back the layers of the house and reveal original materials, opting for ‘raw’ new materials and sourcing salvaged and recycled fittings themselves.

“We had never worked with architects or builders before,” says Simon, who used Google to find architecture practice OEB. “I wanted people who are down to earth and into sustainability. We chose OEB because they listened when we said we wanted a warehouse apartment vibe.”

The renovation of the original parts of the house included adding some insulation in the attic and installing a new gas boiler. Yet Simon and Lauren’s main focus was on removing and

## *Throughout, their principle was ‘less is more’*

repairing the existing building fabric, giving unexpected texture and character. If the plaster came away with the old wallpaper, the couple kept that wall as exposed brick. If the plaster stayed they simply left it, complete with historic holes and paint splashes.

Although sceptical at first the couple’s builders soon got on board with the approach. “When they took out the chimney breast in the bedroom, the wall to the bathroom fell in, and the builders repaired it with salvaged bricks from the outside toilet, which had been painted yellow. So, there are now half a dozen bright yellow bricks in our bathroom.”

The most significant part of the project was the “factory-like” new extension. Refused planning permission on the first application due to roof height, their second application passed but with enough height still to create a ‘warehouse’ feel in this L-shaped space. Those ceilings are high enough for a clerestory window to catch the sun, which tracks around the room until a roof light fills the kitchen with evening light. A large picture window and two outward-opening patio doors, spanning 2.5m wide, improve the overall connection to

### HIGH POINT

“We loved seeing the clerestory ceiling and glazing go in. We used to live in a Victorian two-up, two-down, and it was so dark. Now we love going into that space.”

### LOW POINT

“We had odd challenges, such as sub-contractors who went in gung-ho and put sockets in the wrong places, and they even drilled holes in metal joists.”



## SIMON & LAUREN'S TOP TIPS

- \* Be very clear to your builders about your expectations.
- \* Design-wise, don't be afraid to push the boundaries.
- \* You don't have to build a rectangular box. Play with things!

## CONTACTS/ SUPPLIERS

### ARCHITECTS

OEB  
[www.oebarchitects.co.uk](http://www.oebarchitects.co.uk)

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Grestec  
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the garden.

Once again, Simon and Lauren chose simple, low-tech materials for the construction such as plaster, brick and red-oxide steel beams. Inside, the roof is exposed, proudly showcasing softwood timbers and grey fibreboard. The floors are poured concrete in a natural, undyed colour. "Lauren said 'I want it to look like a car park'", says Simon.

Yet this home is far from drab, with the bold approach to construction reflected in the interiors. An orange Formica worktop is a brilliant foil against the brushed steel of the "Kebab shop" kitchen cabinetry. It is a colour the couple used again in the downstairs WC. Upstairs, ravishing ocean-blue tiles cover the bespoke dual, curved shower walls.

"We have two showers next to each other, as Lauren was fed up waiting for me to get out of the shower each morning," laughs Simon.

The interior style – from the raw finishes to the metal balustrade hand-made by a local metal fabricating firm – came from Simon and Lauren. Simon also specified the radiators in standard copper piping. These, like the bath taps made from 'uncoated brass' are turning dark green. The couple even got hands-on with their huge, shared desk. At 4.5m long, it was made entirely from scaffolding poles and boards.

Salvage is a significant part of the décor, and Simon enjoyed reusing items found onsite, such as the fluted glass doors, originally from the sitting room. They are now upstairs, installed in the master bedroom.

## Salvage is a significant part of the décor

"Glass doors have their drawbacks in a bedroom," says Simon. "But I'm proud we saved them."

Most of the lighting was also rescued from a Russian factory. There are even fully operational traffic lights from New York.

"We didn't want any reproduction vintage," says Simon. "We like the authenticity of it. We were inspired by the pubs and clubs of East London, which have been refurbished in this way."

The couple moved in a little while ago, so is there anything they wish they had done differently?

"We chose only to replace half the old roof," says Simon. "I wish that we had done it all, as the other half is starting to fail."

The new extension, however, has been transformative for this couple, who moved here from a dark period home.

"I love the light, especially in winter, and it's warm," says Simon. "Space, light and flexibility are the three reasons why we love our extension with its integral kitchen and 'snug' area. The multiple windows generate natural light that continually changes during the day, connecting us with the outside world." ■



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# Low carbon heating

Niall Parkin at Calor discusses the role of LPG and BioLPG as a long-standing and dependable heating solution for off-grid domestic properties.



## *BioLPG offers a pathway to decarbonisation*

Self-build is becoming increasingly popular in the UK, with more than 64,000 individuals now registered on local authority self-build registers, a number that continues to rise year on year. Independent platforms such as the Right to Build register suggest true demand could even exceed 130,000 people, highlighting the growing appeal of creating a home from the ground up.

Designing and building your own home is one of the most exciting projects you can undertake. Every decision from the layout to the materials shapes not only the look and feel of the property but also how it performs for years to come. Against this backdrop one of the most critical choices for those working off the gas grid is how to heat the home. It is

not a question of whether to heat, but selecting a system that balances comfort, cost, sustainability and practicality, ensuring that the solution installed today will still make sense tomorrow.

### **HEATING OFF-GRID HOMES**

For anyone embarking on a self-build project in an off-grid location, heating is one of the most significant design considerations. Around 1.5m UK households are estimated to be off the gas grid, many of them rural or bespoke builds where a mains connection simply isn't available. Traditionally, oil has been the dominant fuel, but its high carbon intensity makes it increasingly unsustainable. What's more, the UK's net zero 2050 target means homeowners

must now consider not only cost and reliability but also carbon impact.

Electrification, particularly through heat pumps, is often promoted as the leading solution. Yet for off-grid homes, where high insulation standards, significant upfront costs and limited local grid capacity pose challenges, this pathway is not always practical.

For self-builders, who are already balancing budgets and design choices, the idea of committing to a system that may not deliver in practice is daunting. The challenge is clear – securing reliable heating today while ensuring compatibility with a low-carbon future.

### **A FUTURE READY ALTERNATIVE**

Liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) has long

provided a dependable answer for off-grid households. It offers instant heat and hot water, integrates seamlessly with existing appliances such as wet heating systems, hot water cylinders and cookers and offers continuity for homeowners who want reliability from day one.

Crucially, BioLPG also provides a bridge to renewable alternatives. BioLPG, a non-fossil fuel distributed on a mass balance method, can further enhance carbon reduction efforts, offering up to 80% fewer emissions compared to conventional LPG. This makes it a sustainable, futureproof heating option, enabling homeowners to cut emissions without the disruption and high costs associated with full electrification.

For self-builders, the advantages are compelling. LPG provides a proven, reliable foundation for heating today, with infrastructure that can be sited flexibly. BioLPG offers a pathway to decarbonisation that is flexible, cost-effective and aligned with the UK's net zero ambitions.

**PATHWAY TO NET ZERO**

Together, LPG and BioLPG create a dual approach that allows homeowners to decarbonise at their own pace, supported by an industry investing in



renewable ready infrastructure. Rural communities often risk being overlooked in the energy transition, but BioLPG ensures they are not left behind.

It represents a bridge to a low-carbon future that does not compromise on comfort, reliability or affordability – giving self-builders the confidence that their heating systems are not only dependable today but also futureproofed for tomorrow.

Heating systems are not just about carbon, they're about lifestyle.

Self-builders want homes that are comfortable, efficient and tailored to their needs. LPG and BioLPG deliver instant heat and hot water, integrate with familiar appliances and avoid the compromises often associated with other technologies.

For those designing homes in rural Britain, that combination of practicality and sustainability is hard to beat.

*Niall Parkin is sustainable fuels product manager at Calor*

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The self-build market is an aspirational one, with many media titles targeted towards those people who are merely dreaming about building their own house. Unlike some renovation magazines, The Selfbuilder has a focused readership of genuine self-builders, renovators and agents, reaching only one group who already have their foot on the ground, have planning permission and are ready to start work. The brand has something to offer every self-builder, whether they're looking for advice on what build method to use, guidance on specific products or simply inspiration on final finishes. The mix of content in The Selfbuilder allied to its strong circulation means now is an exciting time to be involved with the magazine.

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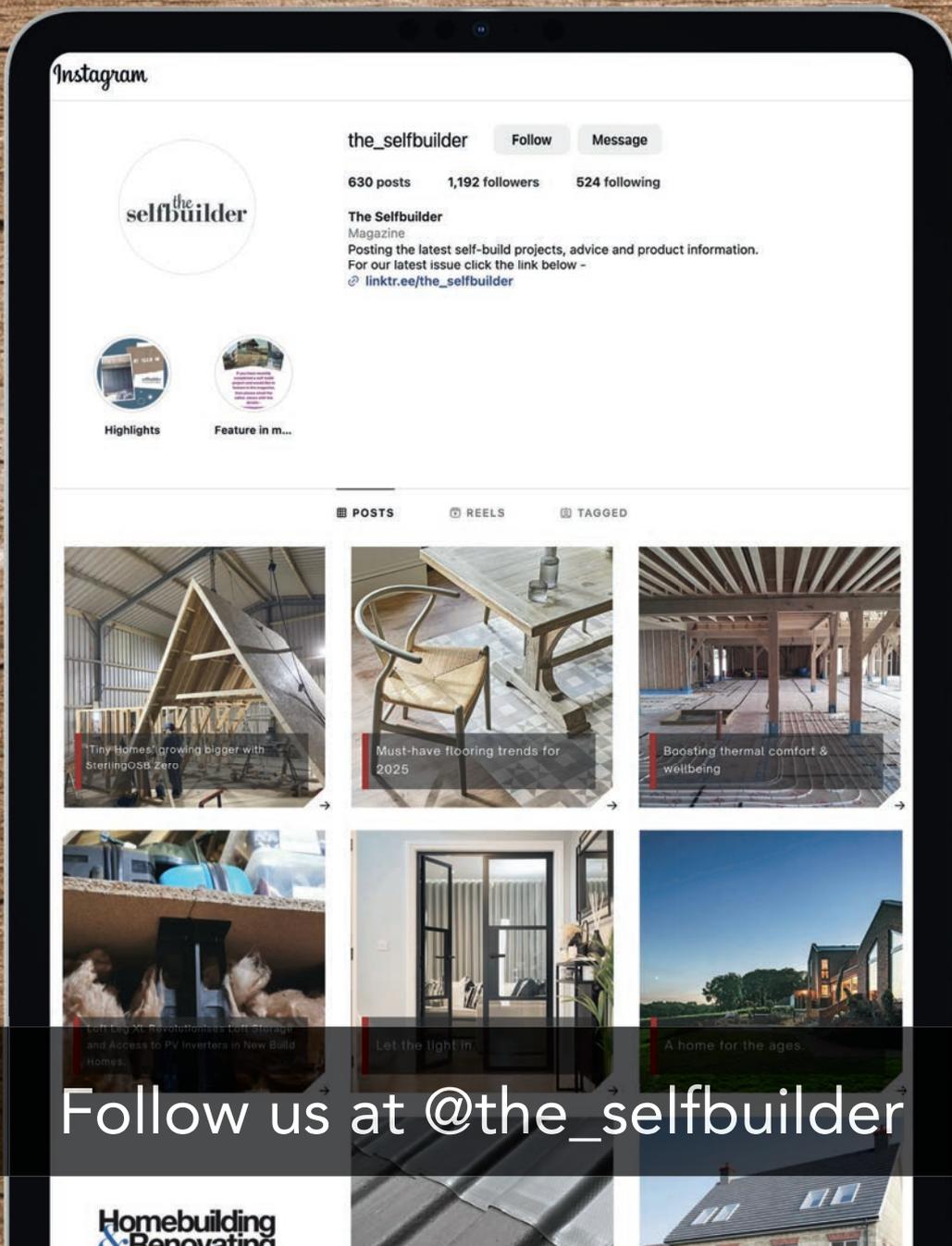
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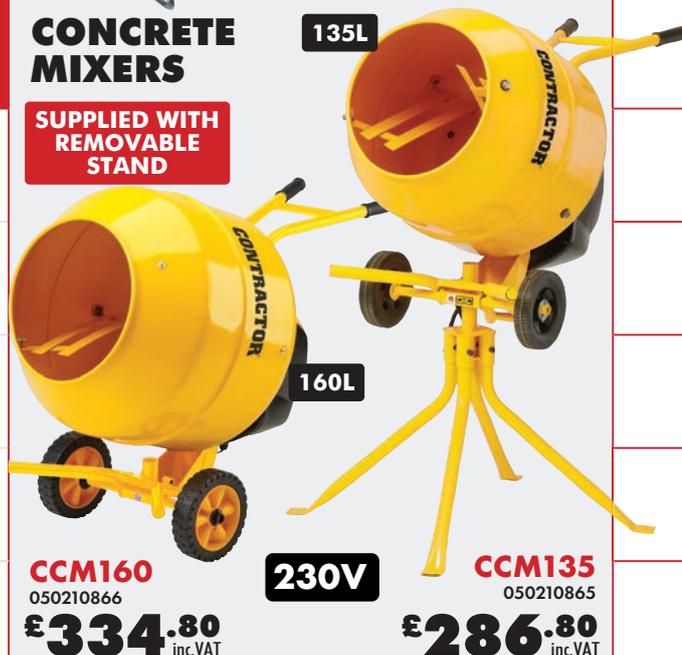
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