



FRAMING THE VIEW

Cut into a hillside, in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, this oak-framed house looks out across miles of open countryside.

Story: Debbie Jeffery

STORY: **DEBBIE JEFFERY**
PHOTOGRAPHY: **MATTHEW HERITAGE/CARPENTER OAK**

When Peter O'Brien and his father bought a Grade II-listed Georgian manor house in the Devon countryside they also took on several holiday cottages on the 14-acre site, which were sold as a going concern.

"We'd seen advertisements for Gitcombe holiday properties, and when the estate came onto the market we spent a year considering the idea of buying the business," explains Peter. "The location between Totnes and Dartmouth seemed ideal, and when we finally made an offer in 2013 it was immediately accepted."

Peter and his father had previously operated a holiday complex of 18 properties in Dorset, where they had built new brick and flint cottages as well as a magnificent oak-framed tearoom. After selling the family business they meticulously renovated a Georgian house, before deciding to buy Gitcombe.

"We could see there was scope for improvement and were looking forward to the challenge of upgrading the main house and existing barn conversion holiday lets, always with the idea that we'd eventually like to tackle another new build," says Peter.

EXTERIOR

Designed by Roderick James Architects, Gitcombe Retreat was the result of a close working relationship between client, architect, planning consultant and building contractor.

The oak-framed holiday let is suitable for wheelchair users and has been awarded 5* Gold by Visit England.



In brief

Project New build
Location Devon
Cost Already owned
Spent approximately £650,000
Worth £1.2m+

HOMES **New build**

A dilapidated, three-bay stable block stood on a sheltered site, enjoying an incredible outlook across rolling countryside, and Peter approached Roderick James Architects LLP to discuss replacing this disused single-storey structure with a new house.

The multi-award-winning architectural practice specialises in contemporary timber buildings, particularly houses, extensions and waterside properties, and has extensive experience of working with specialist suppliers of timber frames, SIPs, natural building materials and renewable energy systems.

“The design and planning process took about a year, partly because we’re in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and wanted to build within the curtilage of a listed building,” continues Peter. “I also commissioned an ecological survey and took the advice of a local planning consultant, which was invaluable as he pre-empted some potential problems. The current planning status is as a holiday property, which means that the new house can’t be sold off as a private home.”

Cleverly designed to be slotted into the hillside in order to visually reduce its scale, the new stone and larch-clad house is almost eight times larger than the stables it replaces, but significantly minimises any impact on the surrounding area.

“We wanted an accessible property, suitable for wheelchair users and people with disabilities, and digging

In detail

Gitcombe Retreat is available for holiday rental through Gitcombe House Country Cottages: gitcombe.co.uk

PROJECT

Architect Roderick James Architects LLP: roderickjamesarchitects.co.uk
Builder (Kevin Hoare), foreman (Russell Bentley) Alec Hoare and Son Ltd: alechoare.co.uk
Soft furnishings Holly Keeling: hollykeeling.co.uk
Planning consultant Mark Evans Planning: 01752 872162
Garden design Naila Green Garden Design: nailagreengardendesign.co.uk

STRUCTURE

Oak frame, balcony Carpenter Oak Ltd: carpenteroak.com
Triple glazing Velfac: velfac.co.uk
Stone Yennadon Stone Ltd: yennadonstone.com
Roof slates Lugo Spanish natural slate, available from Bradfords Building Supplies: bradfords.co.uk

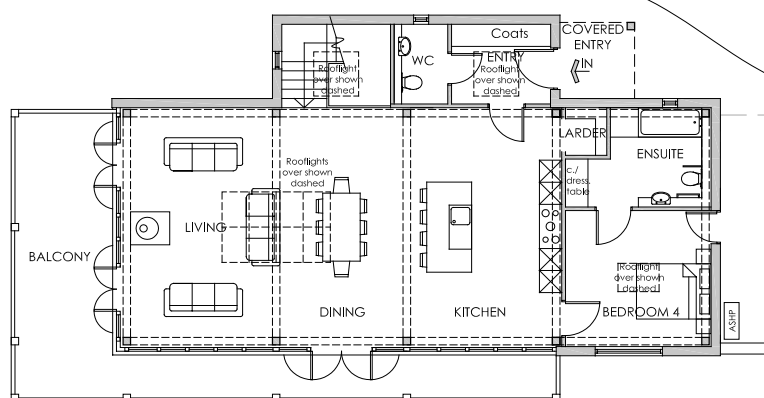
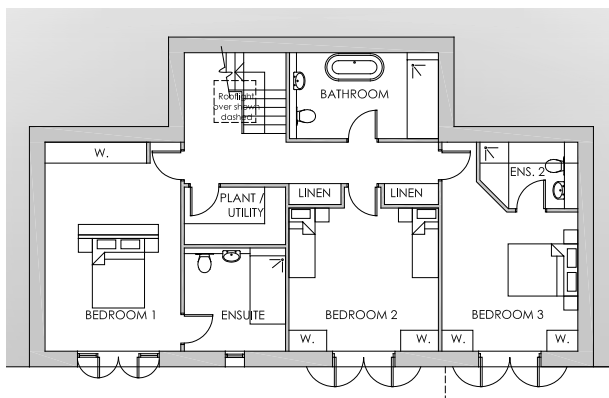
FIXTURES AND FITTINGS

Lighting Amos Lighting: amoslighting.co.uk
Electric roof lights Velux: velux.co.uk
Limestone floor Fired Earth: firedearth.com
Engineered oak flooring Beach Bros Ltd: beachbros.co.uk
Bathrooms, tiles Sapphire Spaces: sapphirespaces.co.uk
Log-burner Morso: morsoe.com
Dining table furniture Neptune: Neptune.com
Sound system Sonos: sonos.com
Bath Ashton and Bentley: ashtonandbentley.co.uk
ASHP, underfloor heating Omnie: omnie.co.uk
MVHR Blue Ocean (SW) Ltd: bosw.co.uk
Granite SCI Masonry: scimasonry.co.uk



FLOORPLAN

The 220 sqm house has the main bedroom suite, open-plan living/dining/kitchen and pantry at entry level, and three further bedrooms, a bathroom, two en suites and a plant room on the lower ground floor. The entrance, cloakroom and stairs are contained in a single-storey lean-to.





DINING AREA

Barn-style living/dining/kitchen enjoys views on two sides, and a Danish wood-burning stove has been positioned centrally in front of the glazed gable window.

“The glass and oak frame give it that wow factor, which was exactly what we wanted – something different that stands out.”

down into the hill helped to achieve this,” says Peter.

An accessible threshold opens into the entry level, where the main open-plan living space, the master bedroom and en suite are located, plus there are three other bedrooms on the lower ground floor.

The project is an example of hybrid construction, combining a green oak structural frame by Carpenter Oak on the entry level, over a concrete block lower floor which is partially sunk into the ground. An oak-framed balcony was designed to wrap around two sides of the building, and a key part of the design brief was to embrace and capitalise on the far-reaching countryside views across a mosaic of pasture and woodland towards Dartmoor.

Over the past few years Roderick James Architects has been developing and evolving innovative methods to incorporate high levels of glazing into its designs, and this includes wrapping joinery screens outside the timber frame, with Gitcombe Retreat offering the most significant example of this approach to date.

From the entry side the property appears single-storey and barn-like, with few windows, but one gable end has been entirely glazed and the rear elevation is predominantly glass. “The glass and oak frame give it that wow factor, which was exactly what we wanted – something different that stands out,” says Peter. “It’s definitely a building of two halves, with a very low, discreet front, whereas at

the rear you can see both levels and the balcony.”

It was the balcony which was the only detail requiring amendment by the planners, who felt that an oak design would be preferable to the original contemporary suspended version – a decision which Peter readily admits was the right choice for the oak-framed building.

When it came to selecting a building contractor Peter believes he was extremely lucky – taking the recommendation of a local he had been chatting to in the pub. “He’d recently renovated his own home and the finish by Alec Hoare and Son was outstanding,” Peter recalls.

“I wanted to use a local company, and after meeting me on site Kevin Hoare was confident that they could work within my time-scale and budget. He also took me to visit other new houses in the area built by his company, and I was happy to hand over the entire project to him rather than trying to subcontract to various trades.”

Work began in November 2017 to demolish the existing stables and excavate into the hillside ready to build retaining walls. Ground conditions proved challenging, and the builders hit rock at one end of the footings and discovered soft ground at the other, which required deeper foundations.

Once the structural steelwork and blockwork walls of the ground floor level had been completed the oak balcony was attached before the hand-crafted oak frame could be delivered. This stands on



MAIN LIVING AREA

Built to exacting standards with a traditional hand-crafted structural oak frame which is fully glazed on two sides, the open-plan living/dining/kitchen enjoys far-reaching views across rolling countryside. Bifold doors open onto the substantial oak balcony.





KITCHEN

Peter chose a simple painted kitchen with a substantial curved island and robust granite worktops so the kitchen didn't detract from the oak frame.

a beam-and-block floor and was built and erected by specialist oak-framing company Carpenter Oak, which is based just one mile from the site.

"I went to the workshop and spent hours watching the frame being made – it was fascinating to watch them working the oak with hand tools and to see the level of craftsmanship," says Peter, who lives on the Gitcombe estate in one of the other properties and was on site every day.

Once the frame had been erected, with the help of a 40-tonne crane, the entire structure was scaffolded and enclosed using heavy-duty waterproof sheeting. "It meant that the builders could continue working in the dry, whatever the weather, inside what looked like a giant marquee," Peter explains.

“I’m so glad that I paid attention to the finer details.”

Glazing was installed externally and designed as a separate entity, which will not be affected by movement in the oak frame. Composite window frames of timber internally with aluminium externally have been triple glazed to create an energy-efficient structure which has high levels of soundproofing. Eight electronically-operated roof lights are fitted with rain sensors to offer additional ventilation and natural light to the high, oak-framed living space.

The frame was sandblasted to remove any discolouration, and the timber has been left untreated. Natural slate was chosen for the roof covering, designed to complement older properties on the



BEDROOMS

The oak-framed master bedroom and expansive wet room en suite are located at entrance level for ease of access, with three further bedrooms on the floor below.

site, and untreated European larch cladding was attached on battens to the external walls, with natural Yennadon stone chosen to clad the lower level.

“The idea was that Gitcombe Retreat would be all about comfort, luxury and modern technology,” says Peter, who specified underfloor heating, a multi-room music system, and a mechanical ventilation and heat recovery system to control air quality. The water heating is powered by a discreet air source heat pump, installed at the rear of the house.

“I spent time landscaping the garden, which gave me a chance to chat more to the people working on site and tap into their knowledge,” says Peter, who installed a private hot tub in a sheltered corner enjoying views across the South Hams towards Dartmoor. “Everyone took huge pride in the construction of this magnificent property and would input their ideas and



BATHROOMS

A specialist local company was employed to design and deliver the bathrooms. Great care and attention was taken to create luxurious spaces incorporating walk-in showers, heated mirrors and light sensors.



suggestions during the year it took to build the house.”

Limestone flooring has been laid throughout the ground floor, with engineered oak boards on the lower ground floor and designer tiles in bathrooms. “I wanted the finishes and furnishings to be extravagant, but it was important not to detract from the amazing oak frame,” explains Peter, who chose a simple painted kitchen with a substantial curved island and robust granite worktops for the open plan space.

This barn-style living/dining/kitchen enjoys views on two sides, and a Danish wood-burning stove has been positioned centrally in front of the glazed gable window. “The flue for the stove needed to be completely central, to avoid breaking up the symmetry of the space, which meant separating the oak ridge beam with a stainless-steel collar for the flue to rise up through,” says Peter.

“It was costly and time-consuming, but I’m so glad I paid attention to the finer details, because they help to take the house out of the ordinary and make it look and feel exceptional.”

The final word

What was the high point?

Seeing the oak frame going up in just a few days was fantastic, especially as we were lucky with the weather and enjoyed bright blue skies and sunshine. When the giant waterproof marquee came down and the house was finally revealed it was phenomenal.

...and the low point?

At the beginning, during winter, when we hit rock at one end of the footings and soft ground at the other.

Your best buy? The magnificent limestone floor was an investment and won’t need to be changed or upgraded. It’s been laid in a random staggered pattern, so your eye doesn’t follow any line and is drawn instead to the view.

...and the biggest extravagance?

I blew the budget on the bathrooms,

which are exceptional and cost around £60,000. It was important that they would be timeless and wouldn’t date in a few years.

Any tips for others?

Don’t overdo the oak in an oak-framed building – allow it to create a strong, simple statement – and save back enough money for high quality fittings, as these are the things that really stand out.