

**IN BRIEF**

**PROJECT** New build  
**LOCATION** West Sussex  
**COST** £125,000 (current cost)  
**SPENT** £30,000  
**WORTH** Not applicable



# Out of the woods

**Polar explorer Pom Oliver has built a unique cabin hideaway in a wildflower meadow, overlooking ancient woodland in the heart of the West Sussex Weald.**

STORY: **DEBBIE JEFFERY** PICTURES: **UNIQUE HOME STAYS**

**P**om Oliver is a polar explorer and former film producer, who was part of the relay team which reached the North Pole in 1997, and one of the five who became the first British all-women's team to ski to the South Pole. Following her polar expedition, she set up the outdoor education centre, Woodland Skills, in Shadow Woods near Billingshurst, where she has also built a charming cabin using green oak.

"The building was designed by Roderick James Architects, working with Carpenter Oak, who make oak-framed buildings," says Pom. "It's actually a scaled-down version of a house Rod designed for me, which regretfully was never built."

Renowned architect Roderick James is aiming to put more fun and informality back into buildings, trying to avoid stereotypical square rooms. His multi-award-winning practice, Roderick James Architects LLP, specialises in contemporary timber buildings, particularly houses, extensions, and waterside properties. The practice collaborates with

**EXTERIOR**

Little Bear is based on a prototype designed and built by Roderick James Architects. A terrace with built-in seating was constructed to the front of the cabin, and overlooks the woodland which includes oak trees, field maples and hornbeam.

specialist suppliers of timber frames, SIPS, natural building materials and renewable energy systems.

Pom first met with Roderick some years ago, when she contacted him about replacing her prefabricated pebble-dashed bungalow with a new house. "I'd seen an article about his work with green oak and went to his home in Devon, she explains.

"He then designed a fabulous house for my plot but, in the meantime, I'd renovated the bungalow into a sweet little two-bedroom property, which I went on to sell, never building the green oak house.

"Years later, Rod had a miniature version of my house design erected on the pavement outside the Islington Business Centre as a prototype during a Country Living fair. When I saw the cabin, I fell in love with the design all over again and thought 'I know just the place for that!'"

Pom was living in an 1880s cottage she had refurbished near the village of Billingshurst, which she bought together with almost 70 acres of woodland. "We had already cleared a huge amount of scrub and trees around our cottage and decided to turn the overgrown





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employed a local builder, who stayed on site during the summer months. A concrete slab was created, on which the cabin stands, with mains water and electricity brought from the nearby cottage to the woodland site.

The structure combines the advantages of modern building materials with the instant character provided by exposed oak beams and timbers. This slow growing wood has a tight grain which makes it durable, strong and a natural insulator. Untreated oak weathers to a silver-grey colour externally while remaining deep golden inside.

As the oak seasons it hardens to a nail-bending density, so carpenters tend to work the wood while it is fresh and unseasoned. Oak is described as ‘green’ when it has been felled only a couple of years and the timber still has a high water content and is not dry in the middle. It then takes between five and 10 years for an oak beam to dry out completely and season, and this process often results in shrinkage and movement.

“Every piece of green oak has special carpenters’ marks carved into it, so you know which piece to put where, rather like a giant jigsaw,” says Pom, who insulated the building using sheep’s wool. “We tried to use low key materials that wouldn’t jar with the local vernacular. It is a glass and oak building, lined in pine tongue and groove - wonderfully airy and bright.”

The cabin is just six square metres in size and makes the perfect tiny house, with its timber doors and windows, stained wood cladding, and sheets of corrugated fibre-cement on the roof, reminiscent of agricultural buildings. “It probably ought to be roofed in cedar shingles, but the building sits well in the woodland,” says Pom.

The main room has an open-plan kitchen to one end and a sleeping area to the other, with a central living space, a separate shower room, and a mezzanine snug with a day bed above, reached by an oak ladder.

“What I’ve learned over the years is that the charm of the cabin is vastly increased by the feeling of spaciousness, with its high ceilings, light interiors and uninterrupted views of woodland and the meadow,” says Pom. “At first, I used to just hang out there, and slept the odd night, but then I realised it would make a fantastic holiday property with some major tweaks.”

blackthorn patch into a natural wildflower meadow - it then seemed logical to have a writer’s retreat overlooking it,” explains Pom. “The cabin was stored by Rod in Devon for several years until we were ready to build it.”

Two oak doors are inset into walls of glass to the front, and there’s a combination of untreated oak cladding and stained timber boards. A mezzanine platform creates a pop-up section in the roof, with a small window, which is a quirky feature.

The green oak for the structure came from Devon, where the architectural practice was based, and Pom

**UNIQUE DESIGN**

The oak-frame cabin has a rustic feel, combining extensive glazing with quirky features.



**LIVING AREA**  
A handcrafted wooden kitchen was built to one end of the main open-plan space, and includes an oven, hob, fridge, microwave, and coffee machine.



## IN DETAIL

### PROJECT

**Design** Roderick James Architects:  
roderickjamesarchitects.com  
**Builder/groundsman** Mark Desmond,  
Southern Direct Services: 07511 912611  
**Interior design** PHI Concepts:  
phiconcepts.co.uk  
**Carpenter** Ty Cobie: 07812651895  
**Labour, materials** LN Renovations:  
lnrenovations.co.uk

### STRUCTURE

**Oak frame, windows, etc** Carpenter  
Oak: carpenteroak.com  
**Sheepswool insulation** Natural  
Insulations: naturalinsulations.co.uk  
**Mint Crisp Indian slate terrace**  
Infinite Paving: infinitepaving.com  
**Oak floors** UK Flooring Direct:  
ukflooringdirect.co.uk  
**White-tinted oil floorboard  
finish** Osmo: osmouk.com

### FIXTURES & FITTINGS

**Chairs** Loaf: loaf.com

### Kitchen, bed, flooring:

Ty Cobie: 07812651895

### Shower room floor

Tiles and Bathrooms

Online: tilesandbathroomsonline.co.uk

### Shower screen, towel rail

Victorian Plumbing: victorianplumbing.co.uk

### Solid oak worktop

Worktop Express: wprktp-express.co.uk

### Mattress, bedding

Soak and Sleep: soakandsleep.com

### Paints

Little Greene: littlegreene.com

### Scaffold table top

Smith & Chambers: smithchambers.co.uk

### Furniture and accessories

Louisa Grace Interiors: louisagrace.co.uk

### Goat skin armchair

Maisons Du Monde: maisonsdumonde.com

### Furniture, accessories

Stax Reclamation: staxreclamation.com

### Electric Victorian standing radiators

Feature Radiators: featureradiators.co.uk

### Tiles

Bocchetta Ceramica: bocchettaceramica.com

### Furniture

Amy Perry Antiques: amyperryantiques.co.uk

Pom approached holiday specialists Unique Homestays to discuss how best to upgrade and fit out the little building. The shell of the cabin remained virtually untouched, although a new porch was constructed, but Pom embarked on a total refurbishment of the interior, inspired by the woodland surroundings and led by Paul from PHI Concepts – an innovative interior designer recommended by Unique Homestays. “The interiors are a luxurious take on a cabin in the woods and we decided to follow a modern Danish pared-down look, using simple white and greys,” says Pom.

“The cabin was stripped out, as the kitchen was very basic, and it took a couple of months to replace the kitchen and bathroom and spruce everything up. The building is heated by a wood-burner, supplemented by radiators, and is highly insulated and very warm.”



Oak floors were given a limed finish to lighten them, and the timber cladding lining the internal walls between the exposed oak frame was painted. A useful shelf was formed behind the bed, which is made of rough-sawn timber.

New furniture was sourced, including a day bed and sofa, coupled with quirky finds such as a sewing machine table, vintage signs and a metal bucket which serves as a bespoke rustic sink in the shower room. Each area of this luxury woodland retreat feels separate, even though the cleverly designed open-plan living area organically flows from one end of the cabin to the other, and the glass is shrouded from the outside world by trees and the kaleidoscope of wildflowers which fill the meadow.

“As a building it’s still quite basic, but that’s the whole point,” says Pom. “There are no internet or laundry

#### OPEN VIEWS

The wood-burner, a repurposed sewing machine table, and comfortable sofa are centrally positioned overlooking the meadow.

facilities, no TV, and you can’t drive up to the door, but the parking is only a couple of minutes’ walk away and a wheelbarrow is supplied for carrying bags.”

One indulgence which has been added is a wood-fired cedar hot tub, to one side of the cabin, and outdoor seating areas have been formed within the natural setting. A particularly special spot, the hornbeam circle, is perfect for sitting a while and taking in the leafy sights and scents of the woods.

“We also have yurts and two aluminium airships on site and are in the process of building a cob roundhouse, but

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the cabin is totally private and an escape from modern technology – although it doesn't suit everyone,” says Pom.

“There are woodland walks leading to public footpaths, and our resident instructor offers bushcraft courses to learn skills such as foraging, coppicing, and woodland management. It's a very different kind of experience, and the cabin is such a clever design that it manages to feel quite spacious, despite its size.”



**RUSTIC FIXTURES**

Rustic fixtures complement the exposed oak frame of the cabin. The shower room has been refitted with some unusual items, including a galvanised bucket sink. The snug on the mezzanine is accessed by an oak ladder.



**FINAL WORD**

What were the high points of the project? How much people enjoy staying there, and how well it sits in the meadow and woodland setting.

And the low point? Everything takes longer than you anticipate, and we had to redo electrics and plumbing after it had been refurbished, which was irritating.

What was your best buy? Getting the cabin in the first place was the best buy.

**And your biggest extravagance?**

Designing a larger house, to end up with a mini version!



**Do you have any tips?**

Don't scrimp, because without insulation and double glazing this type of building simply isn't going to be habitable. The purchase price of a garden cabin is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to costs.