



SHIP SHAPE

TONY PITCHER AND JUDITH
MACONOCHIE HAVE BUILT
AN UNUSUALLY SHAPED,
ENERGY-EFFICIENT NEW HOME
IN RURAL DORSET.

STORY **ELEANOR WILDE**
PICTURES **STEVE TAYLOR**

PICTURES The new farmhouse is reminiscent of a ship, with its timber-clad stair tower, glass balustrades and decks. The marked overhang of the curving roof helps to shade the south facing glazing.

“People often comment that this house looks rather like a ship,” says Tony Pitcher. He and his wife, Judith, commissioned the design after interviewing a number of local architects, and were rewarded with a totally unique new home – complete with a funnel-like stair tower and triangular decks jutting prow-like from the building, which shelters beneath the vast canopy of an over-sailing curved roof.

Far from being designed to cross oceans, however, this heavyweight masonry and steel structure is strictly rooted in rural Dorset – where some serious excavation work was required to create the building’s basement level, which has been firmly dug into the hillside on which it stands.

“The partial basement contains a garage and is also ideal for storing tractors and other machinery,” Tony continues. “This was a small working farm, complete with 40 acres of land, and we’ve continued to farm the land with the help of a neighbouring farmer.”

Tony and Judith had lived in the same 1920s semi in Hertford for almost thirty years, which they had extended and improved over time, but when they both became self-employed and relocation was possible they decided to move to Dorset. Keen to find a property to either renovate or extend, they also considered the possibility of building a new house from scratch.

After viewing around twenty different properties the couple discovered a small, dilapidated 1950s brick farmhouse in an

CONTEMPORARY NEW BUILD



idyllic country location, which they determined to buy with the aim of replacing it with a brand new home.

“We took a calculated gamble, and purchased the farm at auction,” explains Judith, a management consultant in the pharmaceutical industry. “There was no agricultural tie and the farmhouse was run-down and unattractive, so we guessed the planners would agree to a replacement dwelling – although we weren’t quite sure what restrictions they might impose.”

Tony went onto the Royal Institute of British Architects website and compiled a list of around forty local architectural practices specialising in the design of one-off houses. He then contacted everyone on the list – sending out site pictures and a brief statement about the couple’s needs.

“We received about ten positive responses,” says Tony, an education management consultant, “and at that stage we weren’t even sure →



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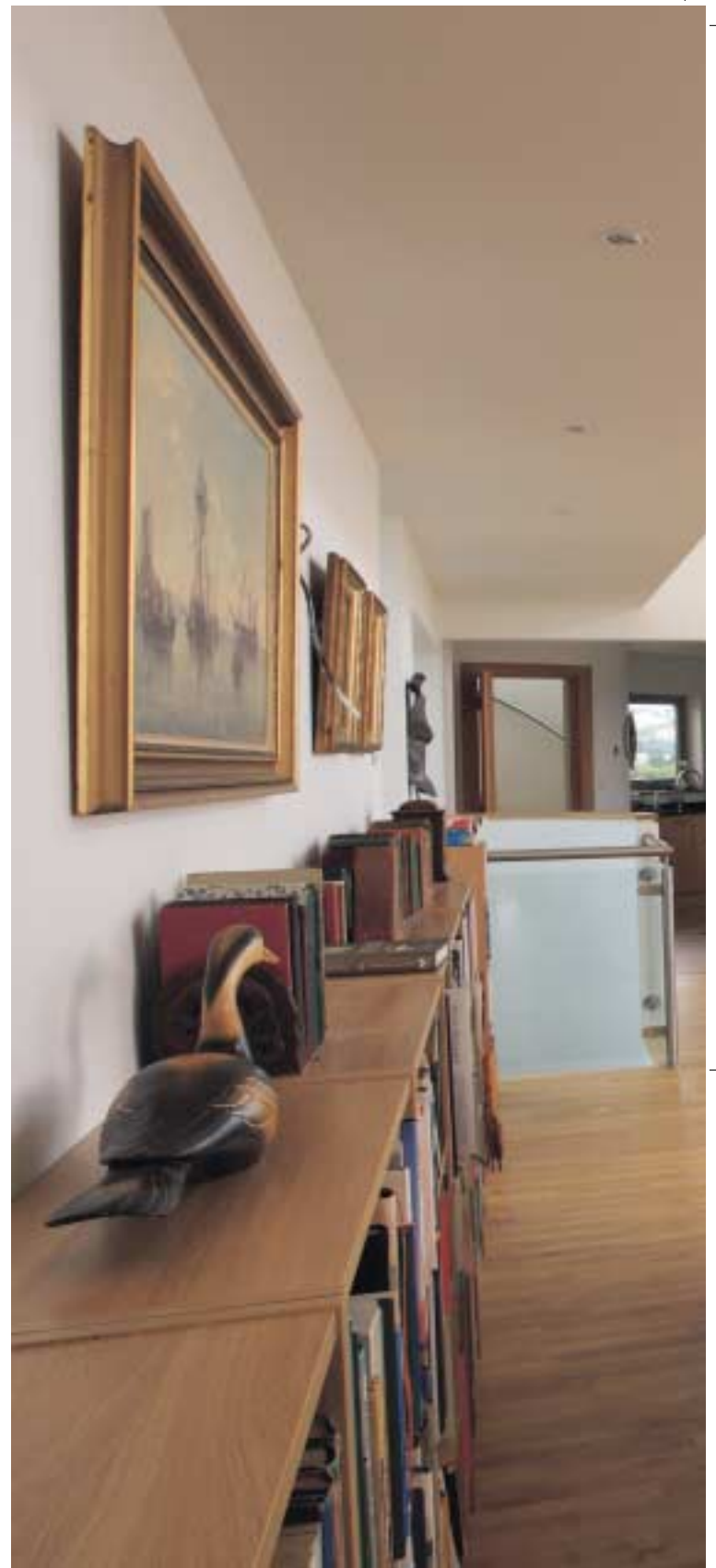


ABOVE The kitchen opens onto a balcony through folding glass doors and has a stone tiled floor over underfloor heating. An elliptical island unit acts as an informal dining area. Oak cabinets topped with black granite worktops complement the oak of the doors, flooring and skirtings throughout the house.



whether we wanted to build a traditional or a contemporary house, so we met with them all and then considered the three who seemed most interested and capable. Haddow Partnership showed us some of their previous designs, and we both loved the striking modern style of their buildings.”

Armed only with a functional brief of room requests, architect Robin Haddow went on to develop an ambitious and imaginative design for the couple, which incorporates a basement level to serve the farm, with four en suite bedrooms and a utility room positioned on the lower ground floor. Encased in a stair tower, a stone spiral staircase leads up to the predominantly open plan living



accommodation on the upper ground floor, above which two mezzanines are linked by a walkway.

“We were amazed when we first saw Robin’s scheme, because it involves so many unusual angles and shapes,” Tony recalls. “The huge curved roof echoes the roofs of the adjacent farm buildings and several of the rooms and terraces are triangular, with double height spaces, voids and large areas of glazing incorporated into the design. It’s something we would never have come up with ourselves – a complete one-off.”

As well as making a presentation to the local parish council Tony and Judith held an open day at the old farmhouse so that neighbours could visit and discuss their proposed plans –



which were pasted up on the kitchen walls. Planning permission was duly granted for the replacement dwelling, despite the fact that the new house is larger than its predecessor and in striking contrast to other buildings in the locality.

Haddow Partnership organised the selection of a builder and took on the project management of the build, which involved demolishing a large farm building and then excavating the site to accommodate the basement level. This is effectively dug into the hillside, with a final ridge height just below that of the original farmhouse.

"Once we'd sold our previous home in Hertfordshire we moved into the existing four bedroom farmhouse on site, where we lived for about a year during the build, after →



PICTURES: The imposing five metre high sitting/dining room on the first floor features a wood-burning stove and is filled with natural light from high level clerestory glazing and the conservatory space.



redecorating some of the rooms to make them tolerable," Judith explains. "Finally, we needed to vacate this house in order for it to be demolished, because the two properties stood just half a metre apart, so it was impossible to complete the west end of the new house until the adjacent land was cleared."

The couple moved into rented accommodation for the remainder of the build, which was completed in July 2007 at a cost of approximately £1.2 million. Complications arose when the basement roofing failed, requiring remedial work, and the specialist glazing company brought in to undertake the frameless glazing in the triangular conservatory proved less than efficient.

"We chose the glazing company ourselves, because we wanted a seamless glass to glass finish which required a specialist subcontractor," says Tony. "We were also responsible for the kitchen and for commissioning a panel of stained glass for between the master bedroom and corridor. Other than that our builders tackled everything and were really excellent – especially considering the complexity of the design."

Constructed in brick and blockwork with a steel-framed first floor, the house is finished in a combination of insulated render and decorative brickwork – with areas of header corbelled bricks laid to create distinctive horizontal stripes along the length of the walls. Aluminium framed windows and frameless glazed balustrades were chosen, and the curving roof is carried aloft on white painted steel supports.

"We particularly love the way the glass roof of the stair tower drops light down through the house," says Judith, "and at night there are uplighters which create a halo effect around the edge of the staircase."

The entire building is infused with natural light thanks to the many windows and panels of patent glazing on the south facade, which have been designed to capture warmth from the sun and ensure that the new farmhouse acts as an energy efficient heat store.

"It's an extremely warm house, and in summer we can open the doors and windows to create a breeze," says Tony. "The kitchen has folding sliding glass doors open onto a large terrace, which is sheltered by glass



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balustrades and is perfect for eating outdoors. We're particularly glad we didn't have any uprights between the glass panels, because now we enjoy uninterrupted views out over the farm."

In fact, the whole house acts rather like a giant look-out, perched on its Dorset hillside, with numerous windows, folding/sliding doors, terraces and viewing platforms which are ideal for appreciating the surrounding countryside.

From the first floor sitting/dining room it's possible to look down through glass balustrades into the void above the entrance hall, and the open plan nature of the layout creates a semi-transparent interior which is flooded with light.

In contrast, the aluminium capped side walls of the house have been extended to form sheltering arms, which slope towards the ground and act as much needed wind-breaks on the exposed site.

"From a distance the house does look pretty striking," says Tony. "We never imagined when we first saw the old 1950s farmhouse which stood here that we would ultimately be living in such a unique and unconventional new home. It's certainly been an extremely exciting house to build."

ABOVE LEFT The master bedroom is located on the lower ground floor. Folding/sliding doors open onto the garden. **ABOVE** A reconstituted stone spiral staircase winds up through the four storeys of the house and is encased within a blockwork tower.



PICTURES A triangular conservatory off the living room was originally designed as an open terrace. Revised planning permission was required to create a frameless glass structure.

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“Never underestimate the build time, especially for an unusual and complicated house. We had thought it would take about a year to complete but in the end it was closer to two.”

SPOTLIGHT

WHAT WAS THE HIGH POINT OF THE BUILD?

The site was particularly wet and muddy, so it was wonderful when the house was finally watertight, with windows and doors in place and glass on the terraces.

...AND A LOW POINT?

There were problems with waterproofing the basement, which required some remedial work and was pretty depressing. We also had difficulties with the conservatory glazing, which we had personally subcontracted out to a specialist company who later went into liquidation

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD CHANGE?

There's a slight privacy issue with some of the windows at the rear, particularly as we have very few curtains in the house!

WHAT WAS YOUR BIGGEST EXTRAVAGANCE?

It wasn't a budget build and we paid particular attention to finishes such as the flooring, and chose good quality solid oak doors.



THE FLOORPLAN

The house has been designed with a practical basement level which is ideal for storing farm machinery. Four en suite bedrooms (one of which is used as a study), and a laundry room are positioned on the ground floor, with doors opening onto the garden. The first floor living accommodation is predominantly open plan: a centrally positioned living/dining room leads into a triangular conservatory space, with the kitchen and TV snug opening onto private terraces.

