



TIMBER FRAME SELF-BUILD:

Keeping it in the Family

Leah and Richard Allen overcame bats, pregnancy and a dwindling budget to build their stylish new home on the site of Leah's grandparents' former home in Devon

Words: Debbie Jeffery Photography: Jeremy Phillips

When Leah Allen managed to persuade her husband, Richard, that they should build a brand new house on the site of her grandparents' former home, she knew she needed to move quickly just in case he changed his mind.

"Richard isn't remotely interested in building or DIY, and was rightly concerned about taking on a first-time self-build," she recalls, "and I was naïve enough to think that I could organise everything by myself."

The Allens had been living in a period town house which was ideal for a couple, but when their son Joseph was born, they were determined to find a home with a larger garden which would be suitable for bringing up a family.

LEFT: The new timber frame house has been dug down into the site in order to meet height restrictions relating to the previous 1930s bungalow, which belonged to Leah's grandparents; the deep slate roof contrasts beautifully with stark white render, and a brick plinth gives the building a solid base — protecting the render, while adding character to the façade
BELOW: Leah with children Joseph and Jemima



"I grew up in Exmouth, just a short distance from my grandparents' house," Leah continues. "Their 1930s bungalow had a large garden and backed onto fields, so I was always visiting, and learnt to ride my bike in the quiet lane. When the family inherited the property I wondered if it could offer the solution to our problems."

At just 100m² the bungalow was too small for the Allens' needs, but the tranquil setting was exactly what they were looking for, and they took out a second mortgage in order to buy shares in the property from Leah's mother and brother.

The planners were agreeable to a replacement house being built on the site, but then the first major set-back occurred, which would ultimately impact heavily on the entire project.

"The council had a tip-off that bats had previously been spotted on the site, and it took four months of negotiations with English Nature to determine whether we could actually build here," says Leah.

"The outcome was that we needed to provide bat habitats, just in case they returned. It meant building a detached garage with a special cut roof, insulation and constant heating, as well as bat access in the main house. Overall, with the delay and extra costs, we

ended up almost £20,000 out of pocket for a garage that we never actually use."

Determined to claw back some of the lost time, Leah spotted an advert for Potton in a magazine and – spurred on by the promise of a fast build time – decided that their new house would be built using timber frame.

"The idea of a cottage-style home with small windows and heavy timber posts and beams didn't appeal to us at all, but Potton said that it could design the house to our own requirements, with large windows and open plan living spaces," says Richard.

The couple worked with Potton's architect to devise a layout which would give them a spacious, open plan

BELOW: Exposed timber posts and beams help define the dining area, where Leah has teamed a glossy white dining table from Bo Concept with acrylic chairs from John Lewis
OPPOSITE: The white high-gloss kitchen proved to be one of the best buys, enabling the Allens to fit robust black granite worktops for a touch of luxury; at a total cost of just £6,500, including the utility

USEFUL CONTACTS: Design, timber frame supply and erection Potton Ltd: 01767 676400 potton.co.uk Builder Chris Cox: 07970 481150 Project manager Sean Parker of Oghma: 01503 240108 Flooring JR Carpets: 07766 223711 Kitchen Mayflower Kitchens: 01823 665663 Painter and decorator Peter Flower, (Dulux Select Decorators): 01761 413415 Turfing and patio Four Seasons Contractors: 07971 837481 Decking and general maintenance Dennis Bentley: 07708 609505 Electrics Tim Chugg Electrical: 07768 772303 Underfloor heating Nu-Heat UK Ltd: 0800 731 1976 Hot tub Cloud 10 Leisure: 01392 362623 Dining table Bo Concept: boconcept.co.uk Dining chairs John Lewis: 0845 604 9049 Black sofa DFS: dfs.co.uk Sanitaryware Bathstore: 0800 023 2323 Lighting, curtain fabric Trago Mills: 01626 821111 White sideboards Habitat: 0870 411 5501 Red circular rugs IKEA: 0845 358 3363



kitchen/dining/family room on the ground floor with a separate 'adult' sitting room. Upstairs, they requested four good-sized bedrooms – two of which are en suite – and a shared family bathroom.

"I could stand in the middle of the kitchen and touch both walls in our last house," says Leah. "It meant that only one person could use the room at a time, and they were isolated from whatever else was going on in the house. At Christmas I would be stuck in the kitchen listening to the rest of the family enjoying themselves in another room, so this time we were determined to have a more sociable arrangement."

The couple hoped to have another baby once they had moved into their new home, and carefully calculated the dates; but delays caused by the non-existent bats meant that Leah was actually pregnant throughout the build, and she gave birth to baby Jemima just three short weeks after they moved in.

"Our budget was sorely stretched from the beginning and we had the added panic of wanting to finish everything before a certain date," says Leah. "We sold our house and moved in to live with my mum during the build. Not only did she have to put up with us and a toddler, but our two cats – Rosie and Barry – came along as well. She was fantastic about it, and even went on to make all the curtains for our new house."

With planning permission in place the Allens suddenly realised that they hadn't actually lined up a

builder to take their house out of the ground. Potton recommended its Partner Project Manager, Oghma Project Services, who undertook a series of rigorous tendering processes, following which Steve Pote carried out demolition and site clearance and building contractor Chris Cox prepared the foundations and slab ready for Potton to deliver the frame.

"I couldn't go to the site when the bungalow was demolished, it was just too raw," says Leah. "My grandparents had worked so hard to maintain the house, and here we

COST BREAKDOWN

Timber frame	£65,000
Builder	£81,000
Bathrooms	£4,200
Kitchen, utility, granite worktops	£6,500
Flooring	£14,000
Underfloor heating	£2,500
Electrics (Cat 5)	£10,000
Slate roof	£15,000
Glazing	£2,100
Plumbing	£5,000
Central vacuum system	£784
Plastering	£8,000
Lighting	£2,000
Tiling (bathroom walls and floors)	£1,200
Patio and lawn	£7,500
Utilities	£2,500
Materials, other	£33,000

Dealing with Bats

All of the UK's bats and their roosts are protected by law – it is a criminal offence to damage or destroy a bat-roosting place even if bats are not occupying the roost at the time – so if you are planning any building or remedial work that may affect a roost you must contact the local Statutory Nature Conservation Organisation (SNCO) before you proceed. Having bats does not mean building work cannot take place, but if you believe the work might affect them or their roost you will need to modify the way you carry out the work, such as by building at a certain time of year or using particular materials or methods of working. For minor works or maintenance, a SNCO volunteer or member of staff will visit you in order to inspect the situation and advise on how best to proceed. If the work cannot be carried out without affecting the bats or their roost, you will need to apply for a licence to remove their habitat and create a new one. There is, however, no guarantee of success and you should employ a professional ecological consultant to assist you.



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were tearing it down. It was structurally unsound, but I still couldn't help feeling terribly guilty. We do have a perfectly scaled model of the old bungalow, though, which my granddad made for me when he retired — right down to the exact furniture in all the rooms.”

Work progressed on site, and Potton sent a hard-working two-man team to stay in a local B&B and erect the Allens' frame — creating a watertight shell in just two weeks. Sean Parker of Oghma Project Services then managed a selected team of subcontractors to complete the build.

“I loved designing the interiors and shopping for bargains,” says Leah, “and found some really good buys on eBay which helped to stretch our budget. Even though I knew that the money was running out, I still kept asking the builder to bring more and more people in to finish the house on time.”

Additional funds of £50,000 were secured after some tearful appeals to high-street lenders, and family and friends rallied round to help complete the interiors. The entire house was spray-painted white in a single weekend, and Richard — who owns his own carpet and flooring company — was able to organise floor coverings to be supplied and fitted. A built-in vacuum, underfloor heating and multi-room music system have also been incorporated into the contemporary new home.

“It was a stressful, chaotic and worrying time — Richard was quite right to be concerned about taking on such a huge project,” admits Leah, “but it's a bit like childbirth. All the horrible experiences are quickly forgotten and we're now thoroughly enjoying living in the house.”

Predictably, the idea of a 'children- and cat-free' sitting room hasn't worked out as expected. “We thought that fitting an internal glass window between the sitting room and family room would mean we



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- 1. A red and white ball chair was purchased from eBay for the entrance hall, which opens into the kitchen
- 2. A multi-room audio system incorporating an iPod dock pipes the family's music throughout the house
- 3. All of the house's taps and sanitaryware were purchased from Bathstore
- 4. An internal window means Leah and Richard can see the children playing in the family room from their separate 'adult' sitting room
- 5. Jemima's very pink bedroom
- 6. Black granite has been chosen for the floor of the master en suite, which features a double-ended bath and separate shower cubicle
- 7. The limed finish on the exposed first floor beams was the result of an accident which developed into an attractive paint effect

FACT FILE

NAMES: Leah and Richard Allen	
PROFESSIONS: Management consultant and MD of flooring company	
AREA: Devon	
HOUSE TYPE: Four bedroom detached	
HOUSE SIZE: 242m ²	
BUILD ROUTE: Project manager and specialist subcontractors	
FINANCE: Stage-payment mortgage	
CONSTRUCTION: Timber frame, rendered blockwork, slate roof	
BUILD TIME: Oct '06 – Jun '07	
LAND COST: £270,000	34% COST SAVING
BUILD COST: £260,000	
TOTAL COST: £530,000	
VALUE ON COMPLETION: £800,000	
COST/m²: £1,074	



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ABOVE: Four sets of French doors open the house out to the rear, with a balcony leading out from the master bedroom; the rooflights are an effective way to introduce extra light into the rear of the first floor, where the ridge height was affected by planning restrictions

could keep an eye on Joseph while he played next door, but of course he wants to be wherever we are," says Richard.

The luxurious en suite guest room has already had heavy usage as friends and family line up to visit and enjoy the Allens' latest acquisition — a hot tub which stands on the deck outside the glass doors of the sitting room.

"Everyone comments on how bright and open the house is, which is made possible thanks to the exposed structural posts and beams of the timber frame, which give the house an added dimension," says Leah, who chose contemporary, high-gloss finishes throughout to help reflect light from the windows and four sets of French doors to the rear.

"Now when people come to dinner they can perch on stools at the kitchen island unit while I'm cooking. In fact, the utility room is larger than our old kitchen, and we now have enough space for Joseph to ride his toy car round and round indoors. It's exactly how I'd imagined, and the open plan layout really has changed our whole way of life." 🏡

Uninterrupted Views at the Rear

The kitchen, dining area and family room are positioned on the diagonal to allow uninterrupted views through the rear glass doors, with a separate 'adult' living room across the hall. Upstairs, the master bedroom and guest room both have en suites and the two children's rooms share the family bathroom.

