



A house that breathes

Lynda and Andrew Higgott's 'forever home' is a bespoke eco-friendly haven made from solid timber and built with a miraculous lack of drama – and now it's done, they have no intention of going anywhere

WORDS AILEEN O'BRIEN PHOTOS RICHARD GADSBY

“We had an electricity bill recently and for the first time ever, we were in credit”

Lynda and Andrew Higgott had never thought about building their own house until they set eyes on a plot of land for sale near their Leicestershire home. Lying in splendid seclusion in the middle of open countryside and flanked by beautiful National Trust forest, the 11-acre plot even has its own trout-filled river running through it.

But, not surprisingly, it had a hefty price tag. “We’d always wanted some land and it’s a fantastic plot, but we knew there was no way we could afford it,” says Lynda, who runs a garden machinery business with Andrew. “When it went to auction it sold for half a million, so we put it out of our minds. But two years later it was still for sale as two purchases had fallen through.”

With the owners keen to sell, the Higgotts finally bought the land for £380,000 in 2008. Although there was already a house on the plot, it was completely derelict,

so the couple had no choice but to knock it down and start again. The project was to be funded by the sale of their home, a 1930s detached property near to their new plot of land. And in the meantime, Lynda and Andrew considered their options for self building.

Dreams and designs

“We wanted a house that was eco friendly and energy efficient because our last home cost us a fortune to run and, now that we’re getting older, we don’t want huge bills,” says Lynda. From an aesthetic point of view, the couple knew they wanted a contemporary design, but something that would also blend in with the surrounding countryside. “We looked at some German self build houses but we felt that they were all a bit OTT; we couldn’t have anything too glitzy because there’s agricultural land and forest all around us.” »





It was at a property show in 2009 that they first came across Stommel Haus, a German company specialising in bespoke timber houses. Made from seasoned, untreated polar spruce, which retains heat and allows the house to 'breathe', the dwellings are extremely energy efficient. The Higgotts were impressed by their contemporary look, spacious layout and quality finish, but Lynda wasn't entirely convinced until she went to Germany to see a house in situ. "I wasn't sure if I would like all the wood inside; I didn't want to feel as though I was living in a log cabin," says Lynda. "But in reality, they're nothing like that, and we really liked it. We sold our house and took out a mortgage with Swedish bank Handelsbanken – because we couldn't find an English building society that was interested in our self build – and bought the Stommel package."

The company recommended that the Higgotts contact an English architect to help them get planning permission. "There wasn't too much of a problem because there had already been a house on the land," says Lynda. "After sending in our initial plan, we were told that we had to make it a bit smaller in volume, to make it only 10% larger than the original house. So Stommel just brought all the walls in slightly."

Next, the Higgotts took a three-day trip to Germany to choose exactly what they wanted in the house. Aside from the kitchen, Stommel supplied all the fixtures and fittings, from flooring to tiles and bathrooms. "The house comes as a complete package, even down to the toilet-roll" ➤



Homeowners Lynda and Andrew Higgott splashed out on extras, like Miele appliances, knowing that they never wanted to move





Stommel Haus's distinctive-looking homes are made from prefabricated polar spruce panels, which are slotted together on site

Favourite feature

"The staircase creates that wow factor when you walk into the house. It's hand-made using different timbers and I love the stainless-steel spindles and little LED lights down the sides, which show it off to spectacular effect at night. It's beautiful"





holder and so you know the total cost before the build starts and it doesn't change," says Lynda. "They tell you what's included and if you want something different, it's obviously extra. We just chose whatever we wanted because we thought, 'This is it, we won't be moving again.'"

Work begins

While Andrew dug all the footings himself, the Higgotts employed German firm Glatthaar to create the base for the house. "You don't have foundations like a traditional home, where you dig down. Instead they made a slab out of reinforced concrete and the house sits on top," says Lynda. The following month, in September 2011, the house arrived on lorries from Germany. "It's like a flat-pack kit. It came in 16 large pieces – the windows were already in and they just slot it all together. By the end of the first week the whole structure was up and the roof was on; it was amazing."

The 350mm-thick walls are insulated with eco-friendly Knauf Ecosse, which is made from recycled glass, while the roof is insulated with Isofloc, made from shredded newspaper that's been treated with borate salt for fire- and mould-resistance. "They come with a special machine and just blow it all in, it's very impressive," says Lynda.

The next stage was the electrics and the burial of the underfloor heating via pipes beneath a layer of screed. The heating and all the hot water is powered by an electric air-source heat pump: "We received an £850 grant for the heating because it's green," says Lynda. "As the house is not connected to the mains water supply and is supplied from a well on our land, the build also had to include a special water system to maintain the pressure from the well to the heat pump. It would have cost about £25,000 to get on the mains because we're about a quarter of a mile away from them. But I am only too happy to be using water from natural springs. The couple who lived here before us always had water pumped up from the well, and they lived into their nineties!"

By the middle of November, the screed had been laid on the floors and the final fix took place, including laying the

"Minimal and modern" is how Lynda describes the decor. Plain white walls and window frames show off the natural spruce



What we learned

- ✚ **Remember to include all the hidden costs when budgeting, not just the price of the materials and construction. Before the work began, we knew what the total spend would be with all the fixtures and fittings, but there were some extras we hadn't thought about, such as the building control fee, which was £2,000, and the site insurance, which was another £1,000. Then, because we'd taken out a mortgage, we had to have a 10-year structural warranty, which cost £3,600. It all adds up**
- ✚ **Don't get so carried away with the big picture that you forget about the basic details. Neither we nor the builders had remembered about installing a phone line, but luckily there was already a line here because of the former house on the site, and we managed to put it where we wanted it in the end**
- ✚ **Build a house that suits your lifestyle and your own needs. We adapted the original Stommel house plan: instead of having an extra bedroom downstairs, which we didn't need, we added an extra lounge and created a large, sociable, open-plan living space that we really enjoy**
- ✚ **We love the fact that there are no wires or cables anywhere, for things like speakers or the TV. Everything has been run under the floors or inside the walls. It's fantastic**



The house has a big master bedroom upstairs, and a guest room downstairs; a planned third bedroom was repurposed to living space

oak flooring, tiling, fitting the bathrooms, decorating and finishing the stunning hand-built staircase. Apart from the kitchen, which was supplied and fitted by a local firm, everything was installed by teams sent over from Germany. "They all came to do specific jobs and they all seemed to know what they were doing – it was all written down in a big manual," says Lynda. "We were living in a caravan on site so we kept an eye on things and the main project manager came over a few times. But really, there were no problems."

The ground floor consists of a utility room, shower room, separate hall, guest bedroom and bathroom, and then a very large open-plan kitchen, lounge and dining room, plus a big car port outside. Upstairs is the master bedroom, a huge bathroom and a dressing room, together



with a gallery in the atrium overlooking the dining room. “Instead of a third bedroom downstairs we chose to have an extra lounge,” says Lynda. “My son and daughter only live five and 10 minutes away so they don’t really need to stay over, and I wanted a lovely big open space.”

From house to home

The house was ready to move into, on budget and on time, by early December 2011 and is currently one of just two Stommel houses in the UK. All that remained was to choose the furniture. “I wanted to keep the style minimal and modern,” says Lynda. “But I also wanted to add splashes of colour. Everyone initially thought I was mad when I chose a bright green sofa, but it works really well next to the black and white colour scheme downstairs.”

Stommel Haus supplied all the fixtures and fittings, from tiles to taps, with the couple paying a visit to its German HQ to choose them



So how does it feel, now they have lived in the house for a year or so? “We love it! The finished house is even better than we imagined it would be. And you don’t get all those gaps and cracks that you often get in new houses. There’s no movement in the wood, which breathes like a tree,” says Lynda. “What I like best about it is that it’s filled with light. There are electric shutters on all the patio windows outside but we don’t really use them because we’re not overlooked. We just gaze out onto the fields. And I also love the fact that it’s so quiet; there’s not a sound from outside, because the windows are triple glazed.”

Furthermore, the couple are over the moon that the house is very economical to run. “We had an electricity bill recently and for the first time ever, we were in credit,” says Lynda. She’s also enjoying open-plan living: “Our old house was very spacious but it was full of rooms, so if, say, I was cooking, I was shut away on my own. But now I can be chatting to Andrew as I’m preparing dinner. Our five grandchildren love it, too, they’re here most weekends and there’s plenty of space for them inside and out.” Outside, Andrew has just finished laying sandstone and slate slabs around the perimeter of the house. “We’ve run out of money so the rest of the garden landscaping has been put on hold for a while,” says Lynda.

Money spent on top-quality fixtures and fittings – oak flooring, luxury ceramic tiles, Miele kitchen appliances, a Villeroy and Boch bathroom suite and Grohe taps – was, says Lynda, worth every penny. “I wouldn’t change a single thing,” she says. “We’ve had everything we wanted, even down to the position of the electric sockets. We weren’t thinking of the resale value in any of our choices because we’re never moving. There’s no chance we’ll ever sell it.”

Useful contacts



PACKAGE BUILD Stommel Haus 0800 068 1611
www.stommel-haus.co.uk **FOUNDATION SLAB**
Glatthaar 01932 344454 www.glatthaar.co.uk

Floor plans

Ground Floor

First Floor

House plans re-created using ARCON 3D Home Design Software.
www.3darchitect.co.uk
Tel: 01252 267788 Email: arconsales@eleco.com

Build timetable

The plot was bought in October 2008; planning permission was applied for in June 2010, and it was granted in September. Building work started in July 2011, and work took just over six months from start to finish.

Schedule of the build	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Preliminaries							11					
Foundations								11				
External walls & windows									11			
Roof structure & covering									11			
Internal walls & doors									11			
Floors, walls & ceiling finishes										11	11	
Joinery & fittings										11	11	
Plumbing & heating										11	11	
Electrics									11			
Decorating										11	11	

11 Work in progress by year and month



The Higgott file

Owners Lynda and Andrew Higgott

Occupations They run their own garden machinery business

Location Leicestershire

Type of build New build

Style Contemporary

Method of construction Timber frame

House size 206m² (2,217ft²)

Plot size 10.7 acres

Land cost £ 380,000

Build cost £436,600

Cost per m² £2,119 (£197 per ft²)

Total cost £816,600

Date work commenced September 2011

Construction time 32 weeks

Current value £800,000

Total build cost breakdown

Elements of the build	Cost %	Cost m ²	Total cost*
Foundations	6%	£117	£24,000
Stommel Haus package	87%	£1,840	£379,000
Fees	2%	£42	£8,600
Kitchen	6%	£121	£25,000
Grand total			£436,600

OUR VERDICT

The Higgotts' smooth build is further proof of the efficiency of German housebuilders – but it was the couple's motivation to create a home they could live in forever that has taken the project to a new level of quality.