

TIMBER FRAME SELF-BUILD:

From Across the Pond

Dissatisfied with the 'standard' timber frame kits on offer in the UK, Howard and Celia Gough looked to the US to source a true one-off — built around unspoiled views across Dorset's Lyme Bay ►

Words: Clive Fewins Photography: Nigel Rigden







Howard Gough is a man of many talents: semi-professional cellist, retired director of a multi-national company, tennis player, carpenter, plumber and electrician. However, even he admits that when faced with the prospect of running a self-build project to construct a US-manufactured post and beam Empyrean Deck House on an idyllic coastal site in Dorset, he found the experience challenging and, at times, very frustrating.

The lowest point came on the first day of erecting the frame. Howard was assisting the carpenters he had hired to undertake the process, when he suddenly fell backwards and a heavy panel landed on top of him. The result was a badly damaged knee that put paid to his love of tennis and eventually resulted in a full knee-replacement operation.

However, the accident did not stop him from undertaking a huge amount of the fitting-out work himself, and now it is all finished he looks back at the project with a huge sense of satisfaction. "I know exactly what is behind and beneath every square inch of the building," he smiles.

The knee accident was not the only setback that resulted in the build taking a marathon three years to complete. Having got the project off the ground, Howard and his wife, Celia, thought they would be able to leave much of the day-to-day running of the project to a managing agent appointed by Deck House. However, all this changed a few days into the build when the agent's business went into liquidation.

"We were left in no man's land and we had little option but to self-manage the project," Howard says. "In theory, it saved us 15 per cent in management

1. The double-height, open plan living/dining space makes the most of dramatic views across Lyme Bay through full-height alu-clad timber windows

2. Different ceiling heights are a clever way to zone different 'rooms' in an open plan space, and to create sheltered, cosier areas next to double-height sections

3. Celia and Howard project managed the build of their US-imported timber frame home themselves, despite setbacks including an accident that badly damaged Howard's knee

4. A woodburning fire keeps the living area – overlooked by a landing gallery – warm



charges, but it cost us an initial £1,500 which we did not see again. The result was that we became reluctant self-builders."

Despite this, the Goughs set to with gusto. Celia did a great deal of the sourcing between regular trips to London, where she teaches oboe at the Royal Academy and also plays professionally. Howard hired the key subcontractors and looked after the day-to-day running of the project. Fortunately, proceeding at a fairly slow pace did not cause them undue problems as they were able to live in a nearby house.

Luckily, Howard had an excellent right-hand man throughout, in the form of all-rounder Stephen Kay, who they found through a friend. "Stephen stayed with it, and helped enormously at times when I was reduced to making tea," Howard says. "It is hard to see how we could have coped without him."

The venture began in the late 1990s: "We have always loved this area and had holidayed in Lyme Regis ever since the birth of our first daughter, now 35," says

"I know what is behind and beneath every square inch of the building"

Howard. "So in 1998 we bought a bungalow right by the sea for £185,000. It dated from the early 1960s and was rather badly built and very 'tired' but the position was absolutely wonderful, with a view right across the bay. There was lots of unused space in the roof and we had visions of using that and demolishing one end to replace it with a double-height extension."

The decision to demolish and rebuild only came about when they had a bad experience with an architect they found through the RIBA practitioners' register. "Two years on, we were £20,000 worse off; he kept presenting detailed drawings, but there was no real progress," Howard says. They parted company, and this, coupled with the budget for the extension approaching £200,000, demolishing and rebuilding rapidly became a more realistic option.

The couple were keen on timber frame and approached a number of UK timber framers, but gained the impression that the designs were all standard, whereas they wanted a one-off. Then Celia spotted an article on Empyrean, the owner of Deck House. "We both liked the clean lines and also a number of the ecological features this sort of design offers," says Celia. When Empyrean sent along an American architect, Joel Turkell, to see them they were similarly impressed. "It was clear we could choose our own design and pick out the features we liked, then Joel would draw up the finished design," she adds.

They also liked Joel's attitude and approach. Howard says, "Instead of rushing to the drawing board like the previous architect and presenting us with quite complicated designs, he spent a day with us

Importing a US Kit House

There is a big market these days for importing off-site manufactured kit houses – usually from Germany and Scandinavia, but also from the US – and there are several companies with UK representatives to cater to this growing client base. Normally, you will make contact with a UK representative who will explain the whole process and present you with examples of other houses – and preferably arrange a visit to see some that have already been built. A visit to the company's headquarters is also highly advisable. Once you have selected the company in principle, they will send a designer to your site to work with you in creating a design. When plans have been drawn up and you sign the contract, they will expect a sum upfront (but don't pay large amounts – insist the money goes into a separate trust which protects it). If you don't have a builder in your area with experience of building with the package company's system, they should offer to train your chosen contractor.

and quizzed us about our lifestyle and the sort of interior we wanted. Only after two hours did he draw a few shapes. His time for the day was free and it was made quite clear to us that if we decided not to go ahead there would be no fee."

The Goughs decided they would go ahead, and the design was approved by the officers under delegated powers. There were no objections from neighbours, but Lyme Regis Council did not like the design, stating that 'it did not fit in with the surrounding houses'. Howard countered this by photographing all the

A Double-Height Living Space

The two storey house was oriented around views of the coastline, and so a dramatic double-height living area is central to the design, with floor-to-ceiling windows flooding the space – open plan to a dining area and kitchen – with light. A separate family room offers a more enclosed space, and a downstairs bedroom has been included as a practicality for the future. Upstairs, a further four bedrooms, two with en suites, a family bathroom and gallery 'den' complete the floorplan.





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1. The upstairs rooms have tongue-and-groove ceilings, which betray the American roots of the house; 2. The double-height living room is overlooked by usable landing space; 3. Crisp, white sanitaryware contrasts slate-toned tiling in the master en suite; 4. Sleek, handleless units from European Kitchens give the small kitchen the illusion of more space

FACT FILE

NAMES: Howard and Celia Gough

PROFESSIONS: Retired company director and music teacher

AREA: Lyme Regis, Dorset

HOUSE TYPE: Five bedroom detached

HOUSE SIZE: 270m²

BUILD ROUTE: Selves as main contractors

FINANCE: Private

CONSTRUCTION: US-manufactured timber frame post and beam system

BUILD TIME: Jul '04 – Jul '07

LAND COST: £185,000 (1998)

BUILD COST: £311,000

TOTAL COST: £496,000

VALUE ON COMPLETION: £1 million

COST/m²: £1,152

**50%
COST
SAVING**

COST BREAKDOWN

Demolition	£5,700
Groundworks and drainage	£35,700
Empyrean kit, shipping and transport	£126,000
Erection, cladding and studwork	£26,300
Roof and guttering	£4,700
Other building work	£73,000
Equipment and scaffold hire	£3,300
Insurance and fees	£3,100
Miscellaneous	£11,200

USEFUL CONTACTS: Design Joel Turkell and Molly Tee, Empyrean: 020 7350 2345
deckhouse.com Timber frame, windows, doors, stud work and roofing material Empyrean: As before
Structural engineers Mann Williams: 01225 464419 Groundwork Hansford Construction: 01297 561133
Roofing contractor David May: 01278 786747 Erection, cladding and studwork Somerset Carpenters: 01278 425710
General building assistance Stephen Kay: 01297 20557 Sheep's wool insulation Thermafleece: 01768 486285
Lighting design John Bullock: 01305 889256 Water-harvesting system Klargester: 01296 633001
Chimney and fireplace Dorset Fire and Chimney centre: 01308 425900 Underfloor heating Underfloor Direct: 02892 634068
Tiles Surface Tiles: 020 7819 2300 Kitchen European Kitchens: 01628 666300

nearby houses and presenting a photo montage to West Dorset planners, showing that the reality was such a mixture that there was really nothing to 'fit in' with.

The scheme was praised for its 'modern, exciting design' by the chief planning officer, and this is how the Goughs feel about the house, which has four bedrooms and three bathrooms upstairs, and one downstairs bedroom, should they find getting upstairs a problem in the future.

Their seven grandchildren, who come to stay often, love it, especially the 'den' in the roof void above the top of the stairs where they like to play, and which has an access stair from one of the other bedrooms.

"We have overcome what we thought might be noise problems by using Fermacell acoustic flooring board, which is made from the same material we used for the internal wall linings, between the floors," Howard says. "As well as producing a very good finish

"[The designer] spent a day with us and quizzed us about our lifestyle"

with no skim coat needed, it has better insulation qualities than plasterboard, and also the major advantage that you can screw straight into it."

The only persistent problem they have suffered has been with the 'wall of windows' at the south-facing front. They are aluminium on the outside and timber on the interior. A persistent leak meant that the bottom set had to be replaced three times. "We have yet to get to the root of the problem," says Celia. "It may just be that we are in a particularly exposed position here, but the American climate is far more extreme. We went to the USA to see the Deck House operation in Boston and put in a lot of careful research before finally signing on the bottom line and we have found the window problem very frustrating."

However, they are delighted with the house overall. "It is hardly surprising that it took three years because we had a number of problems, including my knee injury," Howard says. "Even if we had gone ahead with the remodelling and extension to the bungalow we originally envisaged, I had always intended to do all the carpentry, electrics and plumbing myself."

"Despite everything, we really enjoyed it all and it has been incredibly rewarding — and we have one of the best uninterrupted views across Lyme Bay to Portland Bill." 🏡

Full-height windows connect beautifully with the immaculately landscaped garden, with established plants encircling cool stone paving, warm decking and an integral water feature

