





TRADITIONAL SELF-BUILD:

# One Man's Masterpiece

Artist, photographer, poet, musician and self-builder, Graham Ovenden believes "it is bad for the soul to be in too much of a hurry" — a good job, as he's been building his charming dream home for 35 years, on and off ▶

Words: Clive Fewins Photography: Jeremy Phillips





**G**raham Ovenden describes his house as being “two left turns from London”. There are 240 miles in between, but this is basically correct, providing you take the appropriate left turn off the A30 as you approach Bodmin. This does not make Barley Splatt Farm easy to find, because it lies beside a fast-running stream in a remote section of moorland. However, once you have found the correct second left turn, it is almost impossible to miss it because the road ends at Barley Splatt.

The name ‘splatt’ means ‘field’. It is an intriguing name for a highly idiosyncratic house: an asymmetrical Gothic fantasy built around an ordinary little 17th century cob and stone cottage. When he first saw it 35 years ago, the site, which goes back many centuries, immediately appealed to Graham, a poet, writer and photographer of note as well as an accomplished musician and self-builder of talent. However, it is as a leading exponent of the English Ruralist tradition of painting that he is best known.

Ruralism, or ‘The Brotherhood of Ruralists’, is a tradition of ‘escapist’ art that dates back to ancient Greece.

In this country, within that tradition, in writing, music and art you have to think of

ABOVE: When Graham (BELOW) bought the 22-acre site 35 years ago for £22,000, all that was there was a small 17th century cob and stone cottage, now enveloped by ‘Barley Splatt’  
OPPOSITE: Graham says he wanted the house to be fun and for it to be seen from every angle; therefore, there is no main entrance but instead many smaller ways into the house

names such as Elgar, Albert Ketèlbey and Eric Coates, and in poetry and prose much of the work of Shakespeare, Milton, the Romantic poets, Thomas Hardy, Edward Thomas, Richard Jefferies and Laurie Lee. In art Graham would cite Samuel Palmer, Paul Nash, Stanley Spencer and Graham Sutherland as major influences. The most famous name in the current school of Ruralists is probably Peter Blake. It has been described as art that ‘peers into sacred places’ but ‘protects’ them by the power of the artist’s imagination.

Names from the world of art, music and literature spill out incessantly from Graham, a bearded, rotund 65-year-old with a cigarette constantly drooping from one corner of his mouth. The eyes behind the spectacles and low-brimmed hat are thoughtful, even sorrowful. In appearance he is not unlike an ageing Quentin Bell. An affectionate, but also enigmatic man.

Graham’s work is widely featured in many famous collections, notably the Tate Britain. His art draws household-name collectors to his eccentric home on Bodmin Moor, and his paintings can change hands for as much as £80,000.

They take a long time to create. “It’s because of my technique and because I am a ▶



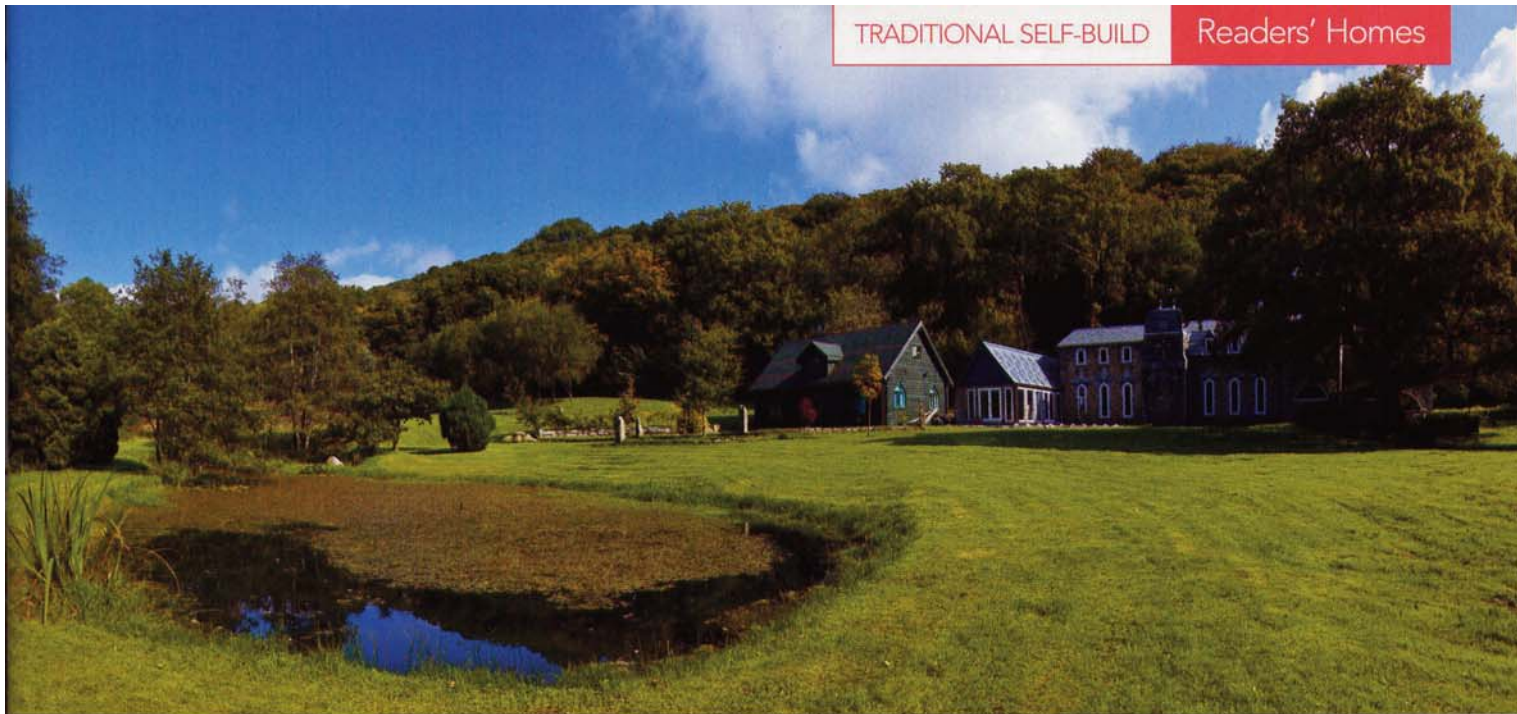












draughtsman as well as a painter," Graham explains. "My method is to apply very thin layers of oil paint so that no colour is entirely negated." He says the best way he can explain it is to say it is similar to the approach used by the Pre-Raphaelite painters, who he much admires. It often produces the same sort of translucent, diaphanous effects that so characterise Pre-Raphaelite art. Today he only produces about eight works a year.

You could say that everything Graham does takes a long time. Over the years, he and his now estranged wife, Annie, another painter in the Ruralist tradition, have constantly extended the original cottage, now totally absorbed by the 14-room architectural extravaganza.

"It's bad for the soul to be in too much of a hurry," says Graham. Another, more practical, reason for the

- 1 & 5. Graham's paintings are displayed throughout the house. Responsibility for work on the house has been handed over to his son Edmund to allow Graham to concentrate on painting before his eyesight fades
2. Graham is a great collector — the log cabin is crammed full with old records, books and photographs
3. The log cabin is constructed
4. Graham's studio is situated within the new log cabin, whilst his estranged wife, Annie, occupies the main house

church interiors of the highest quality were being sold up for silly sums — or simply being trashed.

The result is that Barley Splatt contains a huge amount of reclaimed materials from Victorian churches and other buildings. As an enthusiast for all things Victorian, Graham loves polychromy, exotic, highly worked inlays, and highly patterned decorative tiles.

Another reason why work on Barley Splatt progressed so slowly in the early years is that Graham, who has always seen the creation of the mini-mansion as a work of art in its own right, carried out so much of the decorative work himself. This included most of the exterior decoration, which has a huge richness of texture involving stone, slate and tile. Amazing glowing colours are achieved using these materials in harmony, plus repeated arrays of Pugin tiles the Owendens snapped up at sales many years ago, and also large quantities of marble arranged into amazing geometrical patterns. The kite-like symbols of lead, tile and stone that dominate represent crossbows and bolts: they are certainly of the world of fantasy. The

models for much of this are romantic and idealised designs, such as those of Gothic revivalist William Burges.

Graham's other great architectural hero is Pugin, whose heavy-flock House of Lords wallpapers adorn much of the upstairs. The quality of light at Barley Splatt is of extreme importance. The small arrow-slit windows at the end of the upper gallery create a rather gloomy atmosphere. The original idea was to preserve the magnificent collection of books and paintings that lined the room. Today the gallery is still a dramatic and womb-like space with a brooding atmosphere.

Downstairs, the semi-circular kitchen windows, with their rich adornment outside, relate back to Lutyens in his

"Although it has been taken extremely seriously in the architectural world, it was always intended to be fun"

start-stop nature of the 35-year project is that the old self-build adage that 'time is money' has been applied in reverse. Graham and Annie had to fit the building round their work — that is, the sale of paintings. When they had money they added to it, embellished it and worked hard on the as yet unfinished interior. In hard times they retreated to their art. And, when times were at their hardest, they sold items, including much of the wonderful furniture they had collected.

Later, they rediscovered their love of antiques. At the time, John Betjeman — a long-standing friend — was championing the cause of Victorian architecture. Simultaneously large numbers of Victorian





Classical phase, but also resonate of ancient Rome. Really Barley Splatt is in the grand line of artists' houses. The Arts & Crafts movement and William Morris' Red House immediately come to mind. "Only an artist would design a house like this," Graham quips. "Although it has been taken extremely seriously in the architectural world, it was also always intended to be fun."

As part of the fun there are several ways into the building, but no main entrance. Graham says, "I have deliberately created something of interest on each side of the building. Traditionally a house has a front and a back, with nothing to the sides. I wanted people to walk around every corner of Barley Splatt and see something delightful. To me, the most fantastic side is the north façade, with its pinnacles and matching pyramidal tower."

Graham has now handed over the day-to-day care (and continuing building programme) of Barley Splatt to his son Edmund, 36. Poor health and problems with his eyes mean Graham now wishes to concentrate on a rigid painting regime for as long as he is able. This does not stop him from attending to his other great passion — his collections. The adjacent log cabin that serves as his home nowadays as well as his studio is crammed with his book, photographic and early-recorded music collections.

As a collector Graham has been active since the age of 11, when he started his paper round to pay for his records and his burgeoning hobby of photography. In his teens he took many series of darkly observed monochrome photographs in Rotherhithe and other areas of the East End. These were to be a precursor to many of his finest paintings. His 19 published books include volumes on Victorian photography and art history as well as three volumes of poetry.

Barley Splatt is still unfinished. Indeed, some areas of marble embellishment are never likely to be finished because Graham's health is not up to large interior decoration projects. However, Edmund, a



ABOVE: Many reclaimed materials from Victorian churches feature in both the interior and exterior of Barley Splatt. Much of the scheme was modelled on designs such as those of Gothic revivalist William Burges

"My world today seems many generations away from 1973 when we sold our semi in Hounslow"

master carpenter, is working hard to complete the display room in a new wooden annexe, and this is where future Ovenden exhibitions are likely to be held. Edmund also has permission to build another log cabin in the grounds that will act as a holiday let, and so hopefully enable the Owendens to stay at Barley Splatt.

In the meantime, Graham paints on incessantly. "I am spending all my available time painting before my eyesight goes," he says. "My world today seems many generations away from 1973 when we sold our semi

in Hounslow and bought 22 acres and a section of Cornish riverbank for £25,000. We were able to add to the cottage because technically it was an extension. The only real constraint was money. We used contractors when we could afford it, but basically we worked and worked — over many years."

Barley Splatt is an extraordinary testament to a Ruralist artist's vision of the ideal house — an original and eclectic mix, much of it built in an amateurish way, more with a will than skill. Nowadays, with Graham living in the log cabin and Annie in the main house, it is an unusual ménage. Barley Splatt is today more like a museum inside than a family home; a museum with more than a dash of mediaeval magic about it, that in an odd way resembles Graham's collections. Slowly, now under the direction of Edmund, it continues to grow and change. So the house seems to be locked, almost one might think for ever, in a state of evolution. In the words of another of his great Victorian heroes, Lewis Carroll, with Graham Ovenden things just get "curiouser and curiouser". As his old friend the late Laurie Lee once observed in an essay, "Graham still rules his own private island."