

HEART OF THE COUNTRY

Patrick and Carol Creagh-Coen have replaced an unloved, badly improved house with a charming new traditional-style cottage ►

Details Self-build, Cambridgeshire, February – November 2006

Project Cost £286,000 (£1,505/m²)

Designer Stephen Mattick

Words: Clive Fawcett Photography: Darren Chung





When Patrick Creagh-Coen reflects on the three minutes he spent before the East Cambridgeshire planning committee in August 2005, he considers them among the most difficult moments of his 71 years.

He had received a clear indication from planning officials that they would recommend his scheme to demolish an undistinguished-looking mid-19th century house on the £360,000 plot in a village on the borders of Cambridgeshire and Suffolk, and replace it with a traditional-style three bedroom property for approval. On this basis he and his wife Carol had gone ahead with the purchase.

Following local objections and pressure from a local district councillor, the scheme went to full planning committee rather than being passed by officials under delegated powers. At the hearing, the chairman made it plain that he disliked the scheme and would vote against it. Patrick thought he was sunk.

"We had bought the plot when it was made clear to us that the officers were in favour of the scheme," says Patrick. "We had no real fallback, as we had received expert advice from several sources that it would be far more sensible all round to demolish and rebuild. In the three minutes available to me I had to explain our scheme, make this plain, and also indicate that if we were refused we intended to go to appeal. I found the experience very hairy!"

In the event the committee passed the scheme by a majority of 8:2, with three abstentions. The Creagh-Coens – and the planning officials – had scored a narrow victory.



Above: Home for life
Patrick sits outside on the patio, enjoying the beautifully landscaped gardens of his and wife Carol's retirement nest

Opposite: A new cottage lost in time Cream-painted render, a steeply pitched clay-tiled roof with flared eaves and two characterful brick chimneys (see p.24) are complemented by side-opening timber sashes (a regional variation) mixed with casements and a lead-roofed bay window. The house has been described as "a modern take on a traditional Suffolk cottage", but was carefully designed to give the impression of a home that has evolved through the years

"I think there is still quite a lot of hostility towards the house in the village," says Patrick. "But the point Carol and I were making all along was that what we were proposing was far more in keeping than the house that stood on the site before."

Carol continues: "It was a very ordinary, flimsy construction, and in the 1960s it had been made to look like an American colonial house by the addition of plastic weatherboarding and a plastic verandah. It was of absolutely no architectural merit. Fortunately the chairman of the parish council has come round a little. He says he likes the house – that it is a modern take on a traditional Suffolk cottage – but that he still thinks it is wrong in its setting."

"We disagree entirely. It has a lovely steeply pitched tiled roof –

just as the planners decreed – it is rendered and painted in a very gentle cream colour that fits in perfectly with its surroundings, and the whole building has been 'dropped down' by one metre in order to keep the roofline down.

Furthermore, we used a leading designer in this field: Stephen Mattick. Stephen

has won several awards for his traditional East Anglian designs. When you bear in mind the trouble to which we went to replace something quite nasty with a cottage that is so entirely appropriate in its setting, it really makes you wonder about the rural planning system in this country."

Stephen has gone to great trouble to give the Creagh-Coens the design they wanted. The plan is basically an L shape and, in true cottage style, it is one room deep – in this case 4.5 metres. This means that the west-facing front wing, which has an open plan kitchen/breakfast/dining room downstairs, gains light from both the front and rear. Stephen has managed to insert windows on both floors beside the large brick chimneystack on the southern end, so the light comes in on three sides.

"It really is surprisingly light for a cottage," says Carol. "This is because Stephen has positioned the windows very carefully." Stephen, whose traditional cottage designs have featured several times in past issues of H&R, is a specialist in making new cottages look as if they have evolved, as most historic cottages have, over many years. He has inserted traditional

PATRICK AND CAROL'S SELF-BUILD

Construction Rendered brick and block
Size 190m²
Build Time Nine months
Build Route Main contractor
Plot Cost £360,000
Build Cost £286,000
Value on Completion £690,000

Getting Cottage Windows Right

Though much cherished now, cottages were once homes to some of the poorest members of society and as such were not subject to the same standards of repair and maintenance that grander properties received. The hinged casement window reigned supreme until the sliding sash was introduced at the end of the 17th century; and as cottages tended to be updated in a piecemeal fashion, when windows needed replacing new sashes were often placed side by side with original casements. Those looking to replicate cottage charm would do well to mimic this characterful irregularity. Make openings small and plentiful rather than big and few, and don't be concerned with keeping windows the same size.





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1&3: A country-style kitchen for the 21st century

A traditional range cooker sits with a built-in oven and hob to maximise functionality. Hugh Kime made the timber units. The room is open plan to a dining area and snug with an adjoining conservatory

2: Maximising space in a small bathroom The timber-panelled built-in bathroom suite provides ample storage

4: A narrow stairwell evokes cottage charm The enclosed space is overlooked by a first floor balcony

5: Mixing up windows suggests an evolution through time Casements in the kitchen contrast side-opening sashes elsewhere

6: Narrow conservatory brings in the light The space is perfect for eating breakfast

7: A pitched roof makes bedrooms feel cosy The cottage has three in total

horizontal sliding sashes in most of the windows, though there are also some casement windows, and the panes in all the windows differ slightly in size. This, Stephen explains, is to give the building variety and interest, and to give the feel of a historic cottage that has been altered over the years by the addition of windows, sometimes in a different style. The lead-roofed bay window on the ground floor at the front is the best example of this. Above and to the left is a window that is smaller than the other upstairs windows in the front elevation. This makes it look as though it was a later addition, aimed at bringing in more light.

"At first I thought it had too many windows because they take up valuable wall space," Carol recalls. "However, they bring in a tremendous amount of light, and I think the way Stephen has designed the house means it will mellow beautifully and blend in perfectly with its surroundings. I don't think he is too pleased that we changed his plans to incorporate the snug into the open plan kitchen/dining room but this

USEFUL CONTACTS: Designer Stephen Mattick: 01223 891159 Main contractor Brian Low: 01638 750889 Kitchen Hugh Kime Joinery: 01284 769014 Interior design and decoration Fiona Neville: 01638 730642 Clay roof tiles Keymer: 01444 232931 Bricks Terca: 0161 491 8200 Other building materials Ridgeons: 01787 881777





has given us quite a lot more space in what is not a very big house. We love it this way — and so do many of our friends. After all, we have our very comfortable traditional drawing room downstairs at the rear and that suits us very well. Unlike the snug it gives us privacy, and it is also very cosy and inviting.”

PATRICK AND CAROL'S COSTS

Demolition and groundworks	£12,000
Main contractor ...	£251,000
Kitchen	£10,000
Fees	£7,000
Miscellaneous	£6,000

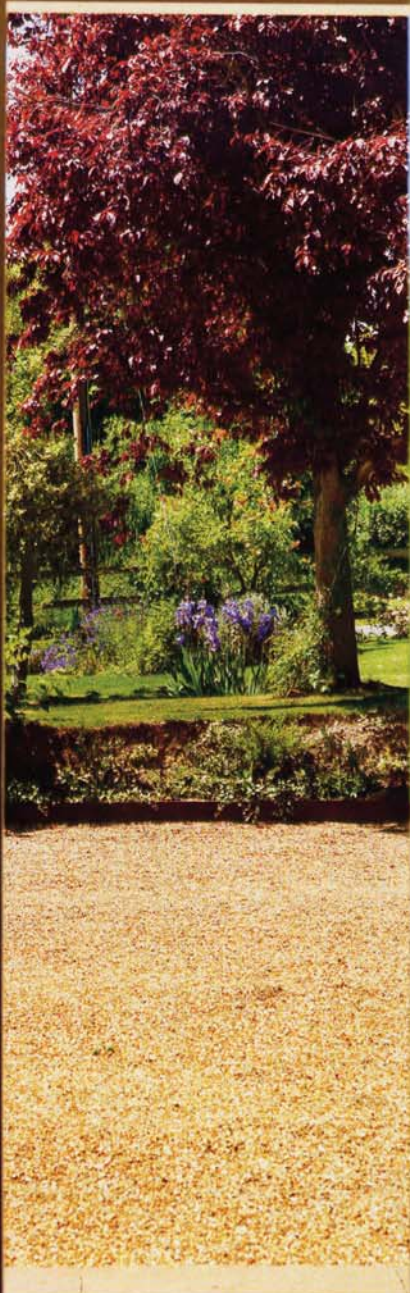


“It was never our intention to build to make a profit... this is our home”

Upstairs, the Creagh-Coens have also made slight changes to the layout to bring light from the room above the porch into their dressing room and bedroom lobby area. “We have this entire upstairs wing to ourselves, and we love it,” Carol says. “Again, light floods in from three sides.”

This page: Meticulous attention to exterior detail ensures the project's success

From the simple timber porch to the elaborate brick chimney, this is a cottage where no detail has been overlooked. Real clay roof tiles from Keymer have been laid in a subtle colour blend to avoid a characterless block colour — a real must when the roof pitch is this low. Simple half-round ridge tiles avoid competition with the feature chimneys, while flared eaves help prevent water run-off from soaking the soft-toned render. A gravel or shingle driveway is the perfect accompaniment to a country house, and established trees and plants are a must to ‘pull off’ new old-style homes



Stephen has positioned the staircase so that it rises at the point where the two wings of the cottage meet, thus avoiding an overly large landing and wasted space. There are two bedrooms in the rear wing.

Patrick says: "The project took a month longer than the projected nine months because it was very wet in the winter at the stage when we had to dig a metre down. We were slightly over our maximum budget figure of £280,000. However, this includes the garage, and the house is built to a very high specification.

"Although we might not get our money back if we were to sell it immediately, it was never our intention to build it to make a profit. This is, after all, our

"There is still hostility towards the house but it is far more in keeping than the [original]"

retirement home and it is our three children that will ultimately benefit. It has been an interesting experience; it was built by an excellent team led by builder Brian Low, and it has already achieved all we ever wanted of it.

"After having lived in several old cottages we find it incredibly warm and comfortable. Most of our friends are very complimentary and we are optimistic that the chairman of the parish council will come round to our view in the end!" 🏡

visit homebuilding.co.uk/extra to see more photos of Patrick and Carol's house, an interview with architect Stephen Mattick and other homes Stephen has designed



A Light, Open Cottage

While the floor area is not huge by self-build standards, it is large compared to traditional cottages, and therefore the ground floor enjoys a light and open feel (based around a large kitchen/eating/sitting space) that ensures the small windows work as hard as possible. (In a more conventional small-room arrangement, light would have been much harder to come by.) There's still space for a formal drawing room as well as a conservatory. Upstairs, there are three bedrooms, including a master suite, and two bathrooms.

Photographs taken whilst stood at numbered positions; refer to the numbers located in the corner of images throughout the feature

