

# HOME ON THE HILLSIDE

At just £35,000, this spectacular plot on the Mendip Hills was too good to miss, but it took a 10-year planning struggle before Chris and Anna Waelchli were able to build their charming, eco-friendly bungalow ▶

**Details** Oak frame self-build, Somerset, Dec 2007 – May 2009  
**Project Cost** £226,000 (£2,018/m<sup>2</sup>)  
**Designer** Wilf Burton **Oak Frame** Westwind Oak

Words: Clive Fewins Photography: Nigel Rigden



**A low-impact design** Built into the side of a hill, reclaimed local stone was used to form a retaining wall that extends to wrap around the majority of the oak frame structure, which is clad in horizontal softwood boarding. The green roof helps keep the building cool in the summer, attracts wildlife, reduces water run-off and, significantly, lessens the bungalow's impact on the landscape





From the balcony of their chalet bungalow on the Mendip Hills, Chris and Anna Waelchli can see Somerset’s best. Glastonbury Tor, the Polden Hills and the highest point on Exmoor, 25 miles away, are all visible; on a clear day they can even see the South Wales coast. A view to die for — and, as they jokingly say, at times they nearly did!

Being country lovers, it is hardly surprising that the couple fell for the two-and-a-quarter-acre site — especially as it cost them a mere £35,000. But 12 years on, as they describe their battles with the planners and

“Living in a caravan on the side of a hill, through one of the worst winters, proved testing”

the rollercoaster experience of their protracted self-build, the Waelchlis at times hit a rueful note when they admit that idealism rather took over when they bought the plot and planned a family home.

The fact is, only the youngest of their three children had the opportunity to live in the house — and then for only a few months until he, like his older siblings, moved on to university. It was May 2009 – a full ten years after they bought the plot – when the Waelchlis eventually moved into their new home.

The key to the purchase was a document called a Certificate of Lawfulness for existing use. It came with the plot, on which stood a very small dilapidated fruit picker’s bungalow that had been built without planning permission. As the Waelchlis understood it, the certificate meant that, because of the time lapse, no action could be taken by the local authority to prevent an application to build on the site.

Early on, the couple thought they had failed at the first hurdle. “Our first application was a fairly standard four bedroom chalet bungalow, but we were



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told by officers at Mendip District Council that a decision was likely to have to go to the Secretary of State for planning,” says Chris, who runs a builders’ merchant business in nearby Cheddar. “We took fright and withdrew the application.”

Unfortunately, the planning process was to prove agonising. “We submitted three more applications to the district council and, after professional advice in all three cases, withdrew them,” Chris says. “By this stage

**CHRIS AND ANNA’S SELF-BUILD**  
**Construction** Oak frame  
**Size** 112m<sup>2</sup>  
**Build Time** 17 months  
**Build Route** Self-managed  
**Plot Cost** £35,000  
**Build Cost** £226,000  
**Value on Completion** £500,000

we felt we were getting enmeshed in local politics and were very disillusioned.”

The real hammer blow was yet to come when, for reasons the Waelchlis still do not fully understand, the Certificate of Lawfulness was revoked. “We were back to square one,” Chris says. “Up until that point we had no idea this could happen.”

The next stage was the most challenging of all. To get the certificate reinstated they had to prove that the

previous building had been lived in for at least five years. Chris spent two years undertaking this task. He interviewed local residents and also found evidence in a drawer in the house in the form of purchase receipts that showed that the last resident, who had died in the building, had lived there for more than five years. The certificate was eventually reinstated.

When architect Wilf Burton arrived on the scene, he found himself dealing with a new planning officer ▶

**1: Letting in the light**  
A series of Rational windows seemingly enlarge the custom-built galley kitchen, from Riverside. Stone-look ceramic tiles are laid over underfloor heating – installed throughout the bungalow – which is powered by a ground-source heat pump





**Open to the eaves** With no attic, storage presented a problem, so the carpenters built in cupboards wherever they could (LEFT OF 2). The master bedroom (3) opens out to a terrace with fabulous views over rural Somerset

who proved far more sympathetic. Despite this, Wilf was informally advised that his first three schemes would not be likely to receive consent. So, he came up with a more cautious approach, a smaller oak frame house with impeccable green credentials – including a planted roof and ground-source heat pump – and was advised that this would be more likely to succeed.

It did. And then the fun began all over again. “Living in an on-site caravan on the side of a hill, through one of the worst winters we could remember, proved testing to say the least,” says Anna. However, because of Chris’ extensive trade contacts the build was relatively smooth, despite the logistical difficulties of building on such a difficult site.

Now all has ended happily, the Waelchlis love the house and the situation. “Not everybody would want to live here, at the top of a track with our only neighbours 40 yards away, but we think it is fantastic,” says Anna. “At times it seems like paradise.”

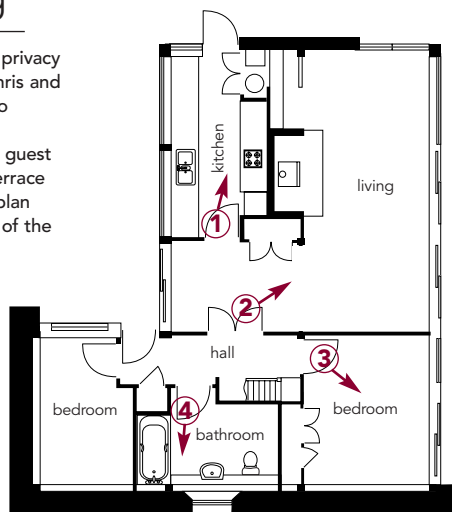
### Building in an Awkward Location

As if they had not had their problems gaining planning permission, the Waelchlis faced an uphill struggle – literally – in getting all their materials to the site. Most of the large items such as the oak frame (from Westwind Oak), which weighed more than 20 tonnes, and the window systems had to be transferred from larger lorries to the seven-and-a-half-tonne lorry that Chris uses for his work. This was able to make it ►

## One-Level Living

Surrounded by open countryside, privacy isn’t something that concerned Chris and Anna, which enabled the couple to maximise on windows and doors, including those to the master and guest bedrooms, which open out to a terrace and patio respectively. The open plan living and dining area is the heart of the home; note the built in storage, which also features in the master bedroom (FAR RIGHT).

Photographs were taken at numbered positions







**Opening out** The entire rear of the house opens through sliding doors from Rational onto a decked terrace, with views of Glastonbury Tor, the Polden Hills and Exmoor

**Below (4): Small luxuries** The space-efficient bathroom is kitted out with a rolltop bath and sanitaryware from CRS Building Supplies

up the extremely steep hill to the house. Other items had to be hauled up by tractor.

"If you are building in an awkward situation, always check with your suppliers to see if they provide off-load facilities such as a vehicle-mounted crane," Chris advises. "If not, you will have to provide some method of off-loading. Unfortunately, lots of willing hands are not always enough."

All this was nothing compared to installing the key services — water and electricity. For this, the road had to be closed in stages, as a large machine called a rock trencher cut deep slices into the surface for the burial of the cables and pipes. "Basically the trench ran along the centre of the road. All this took a month," Chris says. "There was inconvenience to the farmer up the hill, now our good neighbour, but fortunately very little to the two houses further down the road. We were very lucky because the weather was dry throughout at this early stage of the operation. However, it was at a cost — £47,000 to be precise." 🏠

#### CHRIS AND ANNA'S COSTS

<b>Design</b> .....	£10,500
<b>Fees for planning applications</b> .....	£15,000
<b>Other fees</b> .....	£3,000
<b>Groundworks, demolition and foundations</b> .....	£20,000
<b>Supply of services</b> ..	£47,000
<b>Green oak frame</b> .....	£27,000
<b>Roof structure, membrane and surface</b> .....	£26,500
<b>Carpentry</b> .....	£15,000
<b>Underfloor heating</b> ..	£3,000
<b>Heat pump</b> .....	£6,000
<b>Windows and external doors</b> .....	£12,500
<b>Staircase</b> .....	£1,800
<b>Kitchen</b> .....	£12,000
<b>Sanitaryware and tiles</b> .....	£2,500
<b>Electrics</b> .....	£5,500
<b>Additional labour</b> .....	£6,000
<b>Retaining walls and extra stonework</b> .....	£8,000
<b>Caravan rental</b> .....	£1,000
<b>Miscellaneous</b> .....	£3,700

**USEFUL CONTACTS:** Design **Wilf Burton:** 01458 831124 Groundworks **RJ and AD Duckett:** 01278 765974 Substructure, drainage and masonry **Julian Charles Ball and Sons:** 01749 672634 Hard surfaces and connection of utilities **RJ Symes:** 01749 674487 Oak frame **Westwind Oak:** 01934 877317 Electrical contractor **Reactive Electrical and Maintenance:** 01749 342958 Carpentry **TJD Montgomery:** 01749 678010 Windows and external doors **Rational:** 01869 248181 Internal oak doors **CRS Building Supplies:** 01934 744455 Heating and plumbing **Julian Rodda:** 01749 679848 Ground-source heat pump **ICE Energy:** 0808 145 2340 Kitchen **Riverside:** 01823 324499 Insulated roofing panels **Wyckham Blackwell:** 01675 442233 Roofing membrane **Delta waterproofing:** 01246 826611 Green roof **Greenfix Sky-Garden:** 01242 620905 Reclaimed stone, oak flooring, sanitaryware **CRS Building Supplies:** 01934 744455

