



Watson and Marsha Watson-Steele were only 36 hours into a holiday in France when they received a phone call informing them that their large listed 17th century timber frame Essex farmhouse had been destroyed by fire. It was a huge upset to say the least, particularly for Watson, whose parents had bought the farm in 1952; he'd spent his formative years in the beloved family home.

The fire took place on – of all days – the eve of Bonfire night 2005. Only a few years prior, in 1999, the couple had spent £200,000 undertaking a complete renovation, following the death of Watson's mother. The work took 18 months and the couple eventually moved in – from their former home elsewhere on the farm – in 2000.

The interiors had to be gutted following the fire, with the remaining walls demolished. The lovely furnishings Watson remembered since his childhood were destroyed. All that was left standing was the 110m² south wing – itself an extension added in the 1960s – which looked sadly stunted on the large plot.

“At one stage we thought we might just sell the site as someone offered us £600,000 for it,” says Watson, a farmer by profession. “We might have been financially better off that way. However, that would have been to leave unfinished business behind.”

Ever optimistic, Watson hoped the house could be rebuilt within 15 months. However, by the time he and Marsha finally moved into their newly built home in June 2010, the process had instead taken four-and- ▶



FROM THE ASHES

Watson and Marsha Watson-Steele became reluctant self-builders when a fire devastated their listed farmhouse — the traditional-style replacement is the result of quality design and a large dose of perseverance

Details Traditional-style self-build, Essex, Aug 2008 – Jun 2010
Project Cost £625,000 (£1,004/m²) **Designer** Stephen Mattick



Words: Clive Fewins Photography: Darren Chung

Traditional details
Flared eaves, jettied, sash windows and ornate crafted chimneys help to make this new traditional-style home look as if it's been on site for centuries. The large rendered house sits beneath steeply pitched roof slopes tiled in rich hand-crafted clay tiles in 'Aylesham Mix' from Marley Eternit



a-half years. The long delay was not due, as one might expect, to the planners, but instead to insurance issues and an 18-month wait to have the house de-listed by English Heritage.

Once it dawned upon the Watson-Steeles that there would be a considerable wait, they decided to convert the adjacent former cowshed into a temporary home. “We had given up dairying in 1979 and the single storey building was standing idle,” Watson explains. “I thought converting it into a house would be a good dress rehearsal as, sooner or later, we were going to have a five-bed house to rebuild.” The conversion took 18 months, during which time the couple stayed with friends briefly, then rented a local cottage.

To add to this the couple also needed to find a designer to get a plan for a new home approved and give thought to the construction system. “The loss adjuster for the insurance company was very keen we should rebuild in timber frame. That way he thought the build would have been quick and he could close the book,” Watson says. However, the couple were adamantly against traditional oak frame. “After what had happened to the old farmhouse I was all for rebuilding in masonry,” Watson continues. He and Marsha also realised that to rebuild in timber frame in the way that was suggested would result in smaller rooms than they had previously enjoyed.

WATSON & MARSHA'S
SELF-BUILD

Construction Brick and block, rendered wall and clay roof tiles

Size 622m²

Build Time 22 months

Build Route Self-managed

Plot Cost Already owned

Build Cost £625,000

Value on Completion £1,700,000



THIS PAGE: Gables add architectural interest
The large jettied gable end provides a feature externally as well as adding further floor space internally. Note how the steep pitch of the gable is repeated in the timber porch

OPPOSITE: A modern farmhouse kitchen
The luxury kitchen, from Knights Country Kitchens, features a large range cooker and curved island which doubles as a breakfast bar — further informal dining is provided at the end of this spacious open plan room (2)



As things happened they were leafing through an issue of HB&R and spotted the work of designer Stephen Mattick. Realising he lived just 25 miles away, they made contact. Stephen consequently produced a scheme based on the original footprint in brick and block. He added an extra gable on the north-east elevation and two sections of jettying, in which the first floor overhangs the ground floor. “Stephen specialises in making traditional-style new builds look as though they’ve been there many years, and this is what we wanted,” says Marsha.

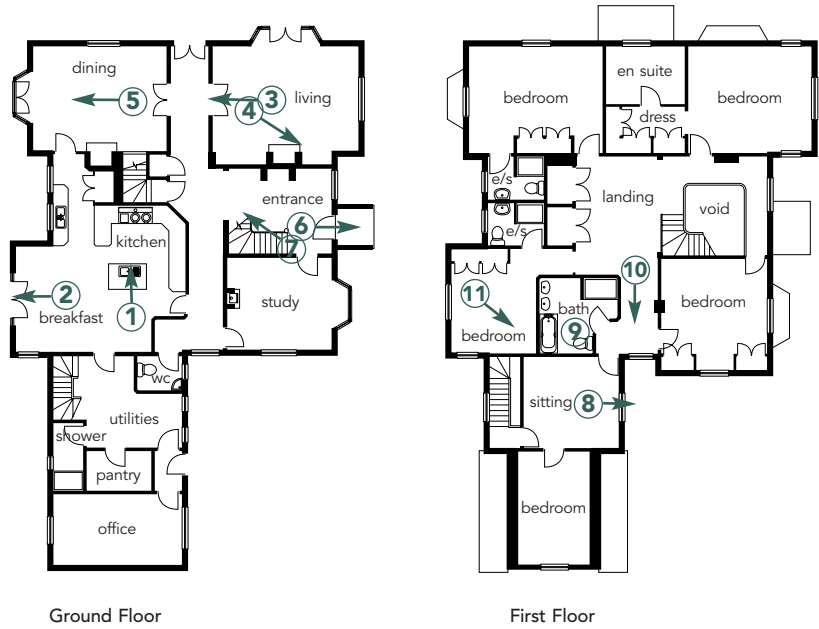
Planning permission was duly granted, and work began on site in August 2008. By this time the Watson-Steeles were living in the converted cowshed. Living so close is usually a great advantage when self-managing a project, so when the couple could only find one builder who promised a quote for the job that they found reasonable but never arrived, they decided to take on the task themselves.

“After the farmhouse renovation and the cowshed conversion project, I reckoned I had just about

A Return to Glory

All but the 110m² south wing (which now houses the utility and office on the ground floor, with a sitting room and fifth bedroom above) was devastated by the fire. The new ground floor now contains a drawing room, study, kitchen/breakfast room and separate dining room. Five bedrooms, a sitting room and a family bathroom radiate off a spacious hall on the first floor — the master features an en suite accessed via a dressing room. The farmhouse also possesses a spacious cellar and attic (not shown), providing additional accommodation and storage.

Photographs were taken at numbered positions



Attention to detail
A pleasing symmetry has been created by aligning two sets of double internal doors – from Southern Doors & Cubicles – with large windows in the dining room and living room (3). Cornicing and a white marble fireplace – ‘The Edinburgh’ which features bowed reeded pilasters, from Chesney’s The Regency Collection – lend established character to the living room (4)



Fine dining

One large room (5) has been dedicated to formal dining. Note the serving hatch painted to blend in with the surrounding wall. The timber flooring, from Stuart Preston, has been laid vertically, drawing the eye towards the large window at the end of the room

A new home filled with period touches

The sweeping staircase is the focus of the entrance hallway (7) — it was crafted by a local joiner for a reasonable sum of £10,500. A marble fireplace — Chesney's 'The Victorian Corbel' — and traditional-style Jim Lawrence light fittings lend to the period style of the interiors. The practical large-format flagstones used here continue through to the rear of the house, where a cast iron porch (6) above the rear entrance frames the view of the garden beyond

enough experience,” says Watson. By taking this course and buying all the materials, the couple believe they saved around £200,000 — possibly more.

After two years of constant battling with their insurers, Watson and Marsha managed to get their initial, lowly offer of £186,000 increased to £525,000. The additional money needed to cover the cost of the rebuild and new furnishings came from the couple’s own funds — and totalled around £100,000. “It was very testing financially, especially as farming was going through the doldrums at the time,” Watson says.

“We still regard ourselves as having lost five years out of our lives — it was an experience we would not consider inflicting upon our worst enemies,” Marsha reflects. However, one major plus was that they gained a property — the converted cowshed — which has provided a useful holiday let and an additional form of income. “We loved the old house and still feel hugely sad that all the contents went,” Marsha says. “But we love its replacement. All the rooms are in the same place, and we have retained the cellar — something we were very keen to do. And when you approach it along the long drive it really doesn’t appear to be a new house at all.”

USEFUL CONTACTS: Designer Stephen Mattick: 01223 891159 mattick.co.uk Structural engineer HSM Consultancy Newmarket: 01638 665088 Building Regulations Project Support Services Newmarket: 01440 708688 Brick and blockwork Whitbread and Bacon: 01787 476169 Kitchen Knights Country Kitchens: 01787 277914 Joinery Reynolds Joinery: 01799 525308 Heat recovery and central ventilation system Rega Ventilation: 01767 600499 Roofers Newgen Roofing: 01376 553467 Carpentry S&B Contracts: 01206 383834 Electrics Stuart Day: 01787 474147 Plumbing and heating Forbes Plumbing: 01787 249474 Steelwork Pleshey Forge: 01245 237233 Heat pump installation Kensa: 01872 862140 Roof construction CR Timber: 01787 223003 Interior doors Southern Doors & Cubicles: 01206 862216 Light fittings Jim Lawrence: 01473 828176 Cast aluminium guttering Harrison Thompson: 0113 279 5854 Leadwork Phil Jiggins: 07801 258255 Clay roof tiles ('Aylesham Mix') Marley Eternit: marleyeternit.co.uk Cellar tanking Cambridge Asphalte: 01223 863000 Timber flooring Stuart Preston: 07771 520790 Stone flooring Natural Stone: 01376 326230 Plastering and rendering Colne Plastering: 01206 728898 Sanitaryware Graham: graham-group.co.uk Tiling Paul Freeman: 01621 852270 Builders' merchant Ridgeons: 01787 881777 Bathroom tiles Tile Giant: 01376 347467 Other fittings and fixtures Frank Howard (Braintree): 01376 327454 Marble fireplaces Chesney's: 020 7622 1078 Cast iron porch Essex Replica: 020 8305 0907



WATSON & MARSHA'S COSTS

Design and other fees	£17,500
Archaeological survey	£2,000
Groundworks, including re-instating cellar	£27,000
Cellar tanking	£6,400
Structural warranty	£3,500
Roof	£35,000
Building materials	£190,000
Bathroom fittings and tiles	£15,600
Electrics	£21,500
Plumbing, incl underfloor heating	£23,200
Beam and block flooring	£12,800
Wood flooring	£7,500
Kitchen	£42,000
Heat recovery and central ventilation system	£5,300
Heat pump system	£17,800
Steelwork	£15,000
Carpentry (labour)	£50,000
Other labour	£56,300
Staircase joinery	£10,500
Other joinery	£42,500
Internal doors	£3,500
Fireplaces	£4,800
Guttering	£5,300
Hire charges	£8,000
Miscellaneous	£2,000

The Archaeological Investigation

The former farmhouse was a historic structure, and as such, an archaeological investigation was deemed a necessity. Archaeologists from Essex County Council spent two days on the site. They discovered a ditch and three pits dating from the late 12th/early 13th century, and the remains of an earlier 17th century farmhouse. Other finds included some Mediaeval pottery – the oldest piece dating from about 1200 – some ancient roof tiles and oyster shells. These now form a small display in the local Braintree museum. The archaeologists concluded that the site has been in continuous use since the early 13th century.

“When we were told there would have to be a dig we were terrified at first because, quite naturally, we thought there was a possibility they might find something that would prevent the rebuild,” Marsha says. “However, this was irrational really because by the time the dig started we already had our planning permission. But the archaeology did hold the project up for a few days at an early stage. And we had to foot the bill — which was £2,000.”

De-listing the Site

After the fire, English Heritage came to inspect the remains of the house, which had been listed Grade II, in order to remove it from the schedule of listed buildings in Essex. “We thought this would be rapid and straightforward as none of the original building ►

Elegant first floor

The refined interiors continue upstairs, where a soft palette of colour has been introduced on the walls and through furnishings. Note the discreet use of roller blinds (8), which unlike curtains or similar window dressings do little to distract from the glorious sash windows



8



9



10



11



was left remaining,” says Watson. However, having filled in the requisite form, the Watson-Steeles had to wait 18 months – until April 2007 – before they were finally informed that the house had been de-listed.

“In terms of the rebuild it did not matter hugely,” explains Watson, “because there was the archaeological investigation to complete, and the insurance claim to settle.” However, the fact that the de-listing was not complete meant that the couple were advised by the local authority to withdraw the application to convert the cowshed. It would not be possible to grant permission until the de-listing process was complete, because the cowshed, being in the curtilage of the former listed building, was also deemed to be listed.

After discussion with the planners, the Watson-Steeles therefore went ahead with the conversion and applied for retrospective planning permission, which was granted. “As our lives were completely upside down it was worth taking a chance on this,” says Watson. “Our local planners were most helpful throughout. From the beginning they could see our predicament and did everything they could to help.”

Dealing with English Heritage proved different: “It was a nightmare,” Watson says. “We rang the Cambridge and London offices and left messages, but nobody came back to us. When we eventually managed to make contact, nobody seemed to know anything about it. In the end, it transpired that the paperwork had gone to the wrong department. But we are still mystified as to why it took 18 months.” 🏠

Creating a traditional-style home

A series of different-height gables give the impression that this new replacement home has evolved with time — like its listed predecessor. All elements are tied together by the light render, rich clay tiled roof and complementary redbrick plinth course at the base of the walls. The jettied first floor (ABOVE) is a particular highlight, lending additional floor space inside

