

UNDERNEATH *the* ARCHES

A chance conversation at a dinner party led to a very special joinery project coming to fruition near Canworthy Water, as Andy Cooper discovered

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON HENDERSON & TOM LAST

Stuart Bowman-Harris shows Barrie and Sarah Ockwell the finished building



Far left: The scale of the project required a crane

Above and left: Hard at work on the timber frame construction

Traditional wood working might be seen as a craft which is in decline, but if one man in a remote corner of Cornwall has anything to do with it then it will never entirely die out.

Stuart Bowman-Harris has a passion for wood which seeps out of his very core. Talk to him about his craft and his eyes light up and he becomes animated and enthused.

And enthused he should be about the kind of traditional, time-served skills which can only be used in creating the kind of special project which Stuart has recently completed close to his home in Canworthy Water, North Cornwall.

Stuart was already a well qualified joiner in Surrey who had been making high end bespoke joinery items like windows, doors and staircases as well as kitchens and furniture when his passion for wood took him a stage further in his quest to learn new skills.

He extended his knowledge by training at a museum in Sussex to learn the old ways of building oak framed buildings. And when Stuart and his wife Katie moved to Cornwall in 2001 to establish Good Life Joinery, he found there was increasing demand for his specialist skills.

And those skills could not be better showcased than a mere three minutes' drive from Stuart's workshop where he has recently completed a magnificent

project to convert a pool house at the home of neighbours Barrie and Sarah Ockwell.

The Ockwells run Barfield Holiday Cottages on the site of their home on the edge of the village and, at the time the project started being discussed, the adjacent swimming pool had a roof over it which didn't seem quite in keeping with the surroundings.

“I am always a little sad when I hear that people have used tradesman from out of the county. There really is no need”

And the first talk of Stuart stepping in to bring his skills to bear to change the building came up over the dining table.

Stuart explains: “It was just a chance conversation over dinner about how the current pool house was not really in keeping with the rest of the building.

“Carn House has a beautiful Victorian frontage on a Cornish long house. The sad looking polycarbonate roofed pool building did not share its origins or its build quality.

“I enthused about the possibilities of a green oak building for a while and the conversation moved on. It was some

months later that Sarah called to say they would like to talk further about how it might look if I made a green oak building for the pool so I set to work on a 3D design.”

Eventually, after seeing designs which illustrated the spectacular way in which Stuart's work could transform the pool, the Ockwells gave the green light to the project.

Whilst the ground work was carried out, Stuart rented a local old parish hall as a temporary workshop to house and construct the building. Some 35 tonnes of green and seasoned oak arrived over a couple of days at the end of October 2011.

“There was no way my joinery workshop in Canworthy Water would be big enough for this project so the hall was





Left: The intricate design
Above and top: Hard at work on the timber frame construction
Right: Stuart Bowman-Harris shows Barrie and Sarah Ockwell the finished building

ideal. It looked huge until the oak arrived, then I was beginning to wonder how we would have room to construct the frame," laughs Stuart.

Every part of the frame was laid out and the complex joints cut, creating a huge jigsaw puzzle.

It took Stuart and three other framing carpenters just eight weeks to make the frame in the workshop. It was then transported to the site. Then the task of piecing together the giant jigsaw began.

"We raised the main part of the frame in less than a week, with the help of a crane, of course. Some of the sections weighed several tonnes once they were joined together".

The final part of each section was to hammer home the hand-made oak pegs – in keeping with the project keeping true to its traditional values there are well over 800 in the finished building

The whole building plot was sheltered from the Cornish winter with a scaffold tent. This meant all the trades could come and get on with their part of the project without being held up by the weather.

Stuart adds: "We had such a tight deadline. Sarah had taken a booking for the holiday lets for the first week of May so the pool had to be usable for the guests and the water warm enough for them to enjoy

the experience. We knew this was the case from the beginning so the pressure was always there. It kept us all on our toes, but we delivered on time."

Once the timber was dry enough it was blasted to remove any mud and marks incurred during its installation.

"This has been a great project to be involved in and one that I am personally very proud of. To have made it so locally for friends and neighbours is an added bonus"

The pool building is really two oak frames side by side sharing their adjoining posts. On one side there is a tie beam frame that houses a lobby, toilet, utility and larder as well as a sun room and changing and shower room.

On the other side Stuart wanted to give the feeling of space over the pool so an arched braced frame seemed the obvious choice with a tie beam truss to divide the garden room from the pool area.

Barrie and Sarah have been very involved in the frame design process as well as the building. Sarah in particular has thrown herself into the project rolling her sleeves up at every opportunity and getting stuck in - quite literally when the footings were being dug and the rain was pouring down.

Stuart explains: "What became clear at the beginning of this project was that Barrie and Sarah were very keen to use local trades. This made perfect sense, most people involved in the main build live and work within a couple of miles of the site and virtually all are in Cornwall.

"I am always a little sad when I hear that people have used tradesmen from out of the county. There really is no need; we have a wealth of highly skilled, highly qualified workmen and women in Cornwall who are enthusiastic and conscientious about their trades."

Another key feature that Barrie and Sarah were keen to have was some way of opening the pool up to show the whole room but also be able to close the pool off from the garden room to give some privacy.

Stuart achieved this by designing long sliding doors that disappear into a pocket in the wall. These glazed doors have another twist; at the push of a button the



opaque glass becomes clear.

Sarah is particularly fond of “the big reveal” which gives everyone the ‘wow’ factor as they are shown into the garden room where they get a glimpse of the oak frame above them, then at the push of a button, the glass becomes clear, revealing the whole of the building and pool.

There is something wonderfully tactile about wood, and oak in particular inspires a kind of awe in people. A building like this has its strong, oak skeleton on show for all to see how it is put together.

One can see and touch the very heart of the building, it’s a very honest approach to building and one that is centuries old. It is a building to take the breath away and produce admiration and awe in equal measure and the Ockwells are very pleased with the end result.

Sarah says: “We couldn’t be happier with the design Stuart has come up with and it is a very special place. It’s already proving a talking point with our guests.”

The final word on the project should go to Stuart, who has poured his heart and soul into the project, with spectacular results: “The inspiration for the pool house has been from the amazingly rich oak building heritage we have in this country. We should do more of it - it’s sustainable, long lasting and creates

fantastic living spaces.

“This has been a great project to be involved in and one that I am personally very proud of. To have made it so locally for friends and neighbours is an added bonus.”

For more details: Good Life Joinery Limited, East Witheven, Canworthy Water, Launceston, PL15 8UB, 01566 781704, www.goodlife-joinery.co.uk; or Barfield Cottages, 01566 781215, www.barfieldholidaycottages.co.uk ■

Above and below: Stuart Bowman-Harris shows Barrie and Sarah Ockwell the finished building

