

f CABIN fever

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Having spent years trying to build a log home, **Tony and Sharon Rees'** efforts have finally been rewarded

There's an idyllic air about the Powys countryside. Far from city life, this peaceful spot is where Tony and Sharon Rees have built a rustic log home that is as thoughtfully handcrafted inside as it is out – complete with a beautiful spiral staircase and bedstead, handmade by the same log builders who erected the house.

However, the couple's local planning authority didn't have the same opinion when they first applied for permission in 2011. After years of battles, it's no surprise that Tony can hardly believe they have finally completed their beautiful home. "It's a bespoke house, so there will never be another one like it," he says. "Log building is an ultra sustainable construction method, and our home is really comfortable to live in."

The couple decided to look into self build in 2006 as Tony had bought a 14-acre smallholding years before from friends, which he felt had potential as a plot for a new home. "Property is expensive around here, so my friends sold me the land at a good price and encouraged me to get consent for a house," explains Tony. "On site there were stables and a mobile home connected to mains water, sewerage and electricity, with a lean-to block and tin extension."

Proof of residence

For many years Tony and Sharon used the land to keep livestock, so they were always coming and going from their rented home close by. Then one day they decided to seek advice from the local planning authority to find out what they needed to do to build their own home. "The planning officer suggested we apply for a replacement dwelling under local needs because I work 100 yards away on a farm and Sharon's job isn't far," says Tony. Before they could do so, they had to live on site to show it was occupied, and then apply for a

THE REES FILE

NAMES Tony & Sharon Rees

OCCUPATIONS Farm worker & care home team leader

LOCATION Powys

TYPE OF BUILD Self build

STYLE Traditional chalet

CONSTRUCTION METHOD

Log home with slate roof

PLOT SIZE 14 acres

LAND COST Already owned

HOUSE SIZE 135m² (1,453ft²)

BUILD COST £227,000

COST PER M² £1,681 (£156 per ft²)

BUILDING WORK COMMENCED

January 2013

BUILDING WORK TOOK 14 months

CURRENT VALUE

£550,000

The Rees' house is built using logs made from Western Red cedar. This timber structure sits on a stone plinth – the material matches that used to construct the retaining wall on the nearby lane





The exposed logs are contrasted with flat ceilings and stud walls, painted white



lawful development certificate (LDC – see box, opposite, for more). The advice seemed straightforward but it was a huge sacrifice, as the couple had to live in the mobile home for at least three years before they could put in a planning application. “It was pretty old so it was rough going,” says Tony. “Had we known planning would be so difficult I think we would have just sold up and moved away.”

Problems began when the couple applied for their LDC in 2009. The planning officer was under the impression that the Rees’ had put the mobile home on site themselves and claimed that they had been living on the site unlawfully. There was talk of eviction unless they could provide evidence the mobile home had been occupied before they moved in. “The planning officer didn’t know the building was already in place because the previous owner had planted leylandii around it so it couldn’t be seen from the road,” explains Tony. “We found an official satellite photo showing washing on the line and a parked car, plus proof that mail had been posted to the address.”

The warmth of wood

With the first hurdle overcome, the couple began to think about what kind of house they would like. Tony was keen on the idea of building in stone, but when Sharon went to a self build show, she fell in love with the log houses designed by British Log Cabins (BLC), and convinced Tony to think differently: “I was sceptical, but as soon as I saw one of BLC’s projects in Shropshire, I wanted it! We loved the feel of the wood, its warmth, and the workmanship,” he says.

The couple were happy with BLC’s work and liked the fact that it used British wood, so they looked no further and they asked the company to prepare some plans. “They are good guys to work with and very flexible,” says Tony. “We told them what we wanted size-wise and they came up with a design, which we liked straight away.”

“It’s hard to get our head around the fact we’re finally living here – it’s a dream come true”



A perfectly framed view of the Powys countryside through the kitchen window



The living room’s La Nordica stove – which can swivel to face different directions – emits enough heat to warm upstairs, too

LAWFUL DEVELOPMENT CERTIFICATES

A lawful development certificate (LDC) is used to confirm that the existing or future use of a building is lawful because:

- a) Your proposal doesn’t need planning permission
- b) It is allowable under permitted development rules
- c) It is immune from enforcement action, and therefore lawful by virtue of the passage of time

To put it simply, the LDC application is a legal question – is this use lawful? In the case of a mobile home, an applicant must provide hard evidence to show occupation for a 10-year period with not too many gaps in between. For Tony and Sharon, they had to prove as such with satellite photos and by showing that post had been received at the address. Once they had the LDC, their local planning authority told them they could go ahead and apply for a replacement dwelling.

Mike Dade, *Build It’s* planning expert, warns this isn’t automatic, however. “If you have a LDC on a lawful mobile home, a replacement dwelling is not a sure thing,” he explains. “Not all councils allow the change, but there are some that do, so you need to check first.”



WE LEARNED...

BE DETERMINED with planning and don't give up. We think that the more persistent you are, the more chance you have of succeeding.

CONSIDER using a chartered surveyor to help with your planning application. Ours, Graham Hislop, was excellent: we always felt there was hope when we spoke to him and he gave us advice that was vital to our project's overall success.

BE AWARE that it can be difficult to get a mortgage for a self build. We were told that we could borrow money once the kitchen was in, but the bank changed the goalposts and in the end we had to wait until our home had been signed off by building control with a 10-year structural warranty.

Below: The rustic-looking spiral staircase leads to a mezzanine master bedroom. Its balustrades are made from Shropshire hazel



By now it was 2010 and the Rees had their LDC, which gave them the right to apply for a replacement dwelling. The couple thought the worst was behind them, particularly as local folk were supportive of their ideas. However, in June 2011 they were advised to withdraw their proposals because the planning officer didn't like the design. He was critical of the windows, he wanted the roofline to be the same level, the roof overhang cut back and the logs built onto a natural stone plinth.

At that stage, the couple weren't overly concerned: "He did us a favour, in fact, as the revised plans mean we have more space upstairs now," says Tony. However another stumbling block came their way when an ancient public footpath was discovered crossing the point where they wanted to build. "We had to move the path around our house and put in gates with disabled access, which cost us £1,300 and delayed us by six months," says Tony. "It was ridiculous because the path leads to a very steep hill, which would be difficult to use with a wheelchair anyway."

Following that, they were asked to do a bat survey. "We know that bats don't live in tin sheds or mobile homes as they're too hot in summer and too cold in winter," says Tony. "So it ended up costing us nearly £1,000 to have someone stand with a torch at night for a few hours to confirm what we already knew."

The list of changes the couple were required to action continued to grow – at one stage they were told to put up a 50m x 30m shed to replace the old stables and deliberately hide the house from the road. Then the Highways Agency raised concerns, claiming the access wasn't good enough, although the lane had been used for many years. "I immediately went out and chopped down the hedge so there were no visibility problems," says Tony. "We also built a retaining wall where they were concerned the road might subside."

More complications

Determined to succeed, the couple dealt with all the changes asked of them and in September 2011 they once again sought planning permission. "We were made to jump through hoops, but once we had our sights set on building a log home, we did everything that we could to make it happen," says Tony.

The last straw came when the couple were told they could have the house if they rendered it in pebbledash. "It was unbelievable, so we said we'd appeal," says Sharon. "Then the next thing we knew we had approval."

In November 2011 the couple finally had the precious piece of paperwork, but incredibly the problems didn't stop there. The property is 135m² (with more or less the same footprint as the combined floor area of the 52m² mobile home and lean-to extension), but Tony and Sharon wanted to change the angle so the views look down the valley rather than directly into the hillside. "The surrounding

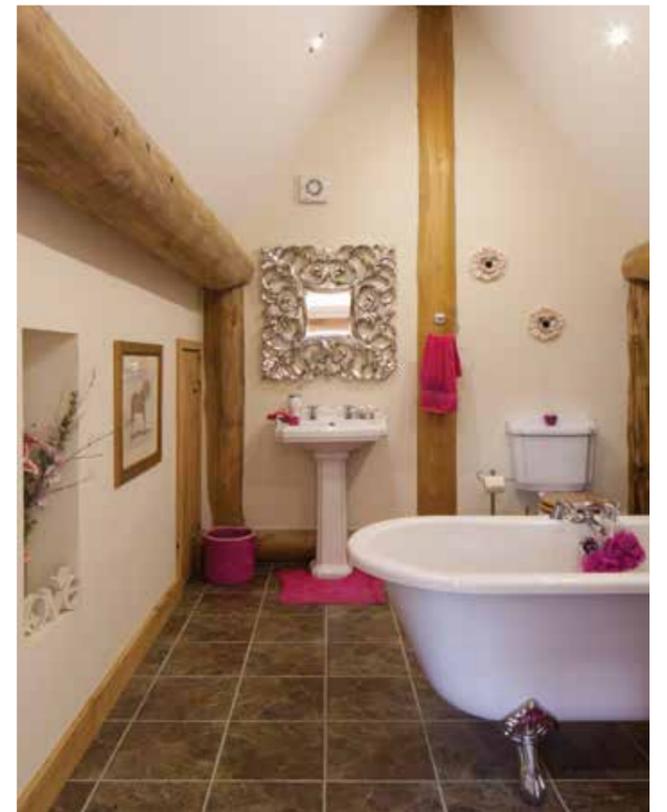
properties face the opposite direction but that was pointless for us because we'd lose the sun behind the hill," says Tony. "Eventually the planning officer agreed, but it took another three months."

Building the dream

By January 2013 all the issues seemed to be ironed out. Tony cleared the site, but when they began to dig the foundations they realised they'd need to go right down to the bedrock – the soil wasn't stable enough nearer the surface. It was a blow that increased their groundworks and foundation costs, but the couple soldiered on.

Fortunately Tony and Sharon had opted for the security of a turnkey solution with BLC, which took on the responsibility of their project from post-foundation stage to finish. The log house was built in the firm's yard first to ensure everything fitted together properly, and then dismantled and brought to site, where the shell was finished in 14 days. "Martin and Dan from BLC did all the building work and did an excellent job," says Tony. "We can't fault them."

The log house was required to meet Level 3 of the Welsh Code for Sustainable Homes. It is insulated with Xtratherm in the ceiling, floors and behind stud walls, with sheep's wool insulation between each log. A ground source heat pump supplies the underfloor



heating, so the house runs really efficiently. As for the layout, the footprint is almost symmetrical; it includes an annexe bedroom and ensuite where Sharon's father lives. This sits on the opposite side of the house to the kitchen and utility room.

Tony and Sharon breathed a sigh of relief when they finally moved into their three-bedroom home in February 2014 – some eight years

after they had first enquired about building a house. They love the views down the valley through the glazed gable end and bi-fold doors, and the personal touch of the handcrafted log spiral staircase that forms the centrepiece of the house. "It's hard to get our heads around the fact we're finally living here – it's a dream come true," says Sharon. "In the end, it was worth all the headaches."

closer look

Building a log house...

The log building industry in the UK is still very small, with British Log Cabins (BLC) – which created



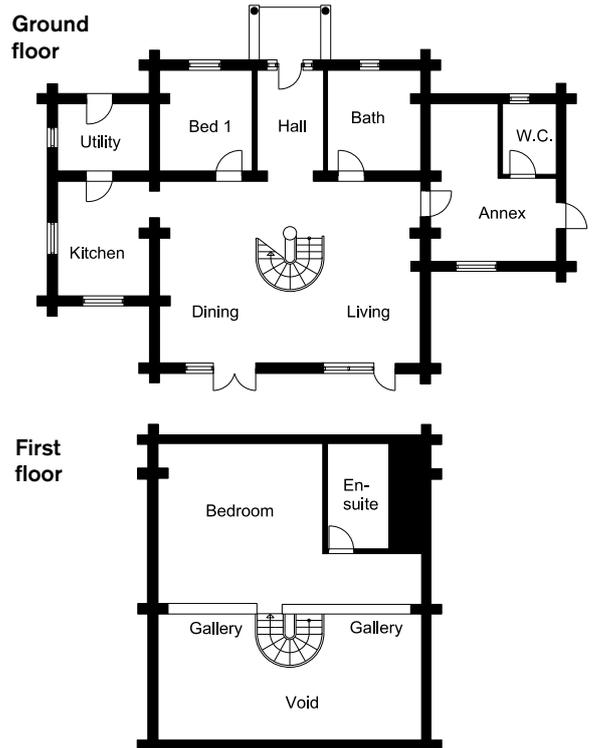
Saddle-notch joints

Tony and Sharon's home – being one of the few companies offering this type of build. The logs they use are made from sustainably sourced British-grown Western Red cedar, and this same wood was also used for the fascias, gable ends, skirting boards and trim. "Western Red cedar has a high natural resistance to decay and a distinct, sweet aroma which hits you when you walk into the house – it's a beautiful timber," says Dan Waring, owner of BLC.

The company handcrafts all of its buildings using a construction method known as full scribe, with saddle-notch corner joints; homes are made to the standards of the International Log Builders' Association (ILBA). The entire structure is first erected in BLC's yard and then the pieces are numbered before the house is then fully dismantled and rebuilt at its final destination. "We have plenty of space to get access to all sides of the building, allowing a more efficient, safer working process," says Dan. "It also means the footings can start on site while we're doing the log work, which saves time."



Floor plans



The house plans were re-created by architects van Ellen + Sheryn. For more information on the practice call **01364 653503** or visit www.vanellensheryn.com



TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

Elements	Cost m ²	Cost %	Total cost
Fees	£74	4%	£10,000
Foundations, plinth & wall	£266	16%	£36,000
Turnkey package	£1,340	80%	£181,000
Grand total			£227,000

Useful contacts

TURNKEY BUILD **British Log Cabins** 0121 288 2840 www.britishlogcabins.com CHARTERED SURVEYOR **Graham A Hislop** 01938 555655 **INSULATION Xtratherm** 0371 222 1033 www.xtratherm.com **KITCHEN Howdens** www.howdens.com **BATHROOMS Farr & Harris** 01743 236371 www.farrandharris.co.uk **WOODBURNER Stoves Online** 0845 226 5754 www.stovesonline.co.uk

