

BUILDING THE DREAM

It might have been constructed during a global pandemic, but Beech Trees is a dream come true for retired financial adviser Zoe Roberts and retired science teacher Tony Francis, who wanted 'to do a project together' and decided to build an eco-home. The elegant, larch-clad passive house is the stunning result, filled with treasures from their lives

WORDS ANNE ARMSTRONG PHOTOGRAPHY JENNY WOOLGAR



Zoe Roberts and Tony Francis at their home, Beech Trees

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Maguire, who is based near Dundee, and specialises in eco design and low energy Passivhaus buildings.

After a site visit with Kirsty, and being impressed with other projects she had completed, the couple decided she was the perfect architect for them, and she was available to take on the venture.

Kirsty designed the house to reflect the rural vernacular of metal roofs, with inspiration from a small shed in a nearby field and a beautifully weathered barn with a rust-red roof. Tony and Zoe's larch-clad house brings the red into the link building between the living and bedroom wings, and has a silver-grey zinc roof.

The shape of the building cleverly takes advantage of the sun at different times of the day: a courtyard catches the sun to enjoy a morning coffee and al fresco breakfast, while the vegetable patch and main garden catches the sun during the day, and there's a perfect spot for sitting outside for dinner in the evening.

The house was built using eco materials in its construction, is super-insulated and has triple glazing, with infrared panel heating, an air source heat pump for water, and full ventilation system and heat exchanger. This means the house



The generous living, dining and kitchen space has a cathedral ceiling



Trying to build a new home during a global pandemic might seem like a recipe for disaster, but for Zoe Roberts and Tony Francis, it all went like clockwork.

Work on their new eco home in Upper Nithsdale had been due to start in September last year, falling between two Covid-19 lockdown periods. Fortunately, the build started on time and there were no hitches. Even as the second lockdown was suddenly announced, to start just after Christmas, the work continued, following all guidelines, and the couple were able to move into their completed home in February.

"To be honest, the build was a welcome distraction from the pandemic. To build this house was a dream," says Tony.

"Given that it happened during a global pandemic, Brexit and a Scottish winter, it all went very smoothly."

The result of all the hard work is a stunning and elegant larch-clad house, built to highly environmentally friendly passive house principles, in a peaceful spot overlooking farmland on the outskirts of Thornhill. It's the perfect home for Zoe, Tony and their three black Labradors: Fin, Lily and Nina.

"We realise we were very lucky with the build," says Zoe. "We just love it here and it's such a comfortable house."

Zoe, a retired financial adviser, and Tony, a retired science teacher, met a few years ago on Mull in the Inner Hebrides, through Zoe's brother. Tony had moved to Mull from Hampshire, but decided to settle with Zoe in her home region of Dumfries & Galloway. They sold both

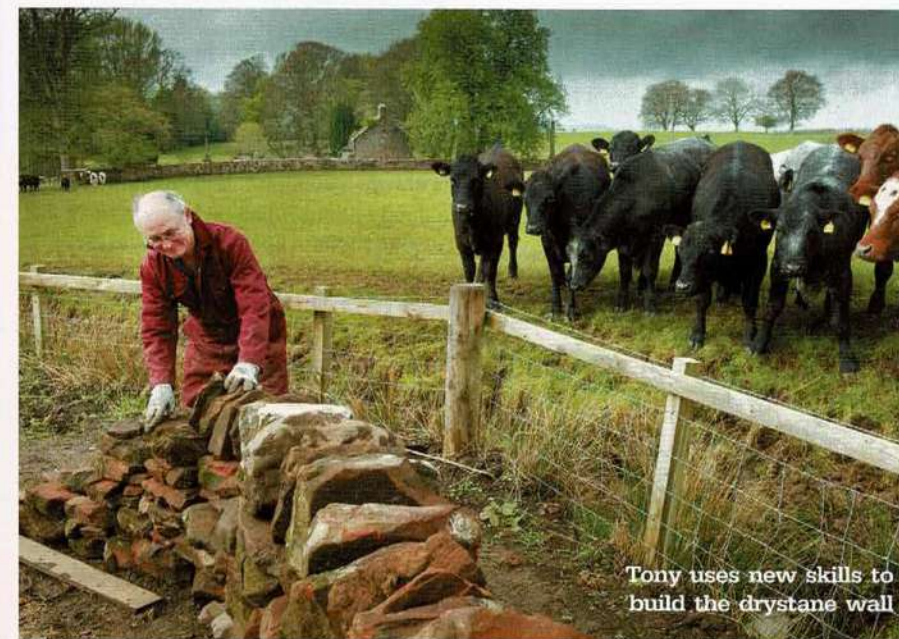
their properties to find a plot of land for a new home together.

"We wanted to do a project together," says Zoe. "We were very keen to do something environmentally sound; something sustainable. That was the idea behind it: either a sustainable renovation or a new build. Building a passive house was a no-brainer."

In May 2019, they spotted a plot for sale near Thornhill and the village of Gatelawbridge. Overlooking farmland towards Thornhill and the hills beyond, the land had never been built on, and the ground, full of three-foot high nettles, was easy enough to deal with. It was ideal.

"We came to see the site and there was no discussion. It fitted everything we wanted," says Tony.

A friend of his daughter suggested they check out the work of architect Kirsty



Tony uses new skills to build the drystone wall



An ice-axe, signed by Sir Edmund Hillary, and photos from Tony's trip to Nepal



Bespoke shelving made by local craftsman, Philip Wilson



The second bedroom also has office space



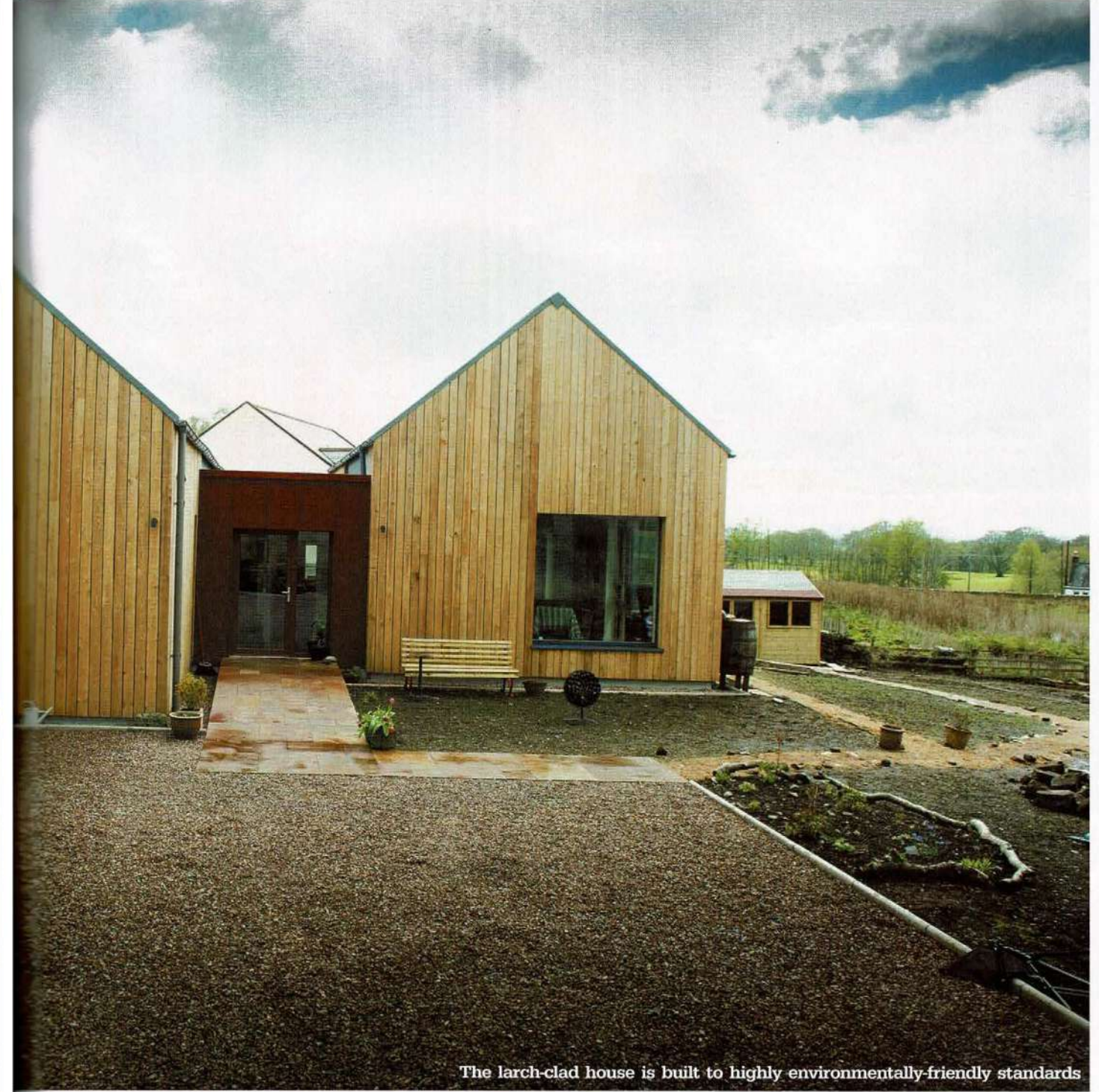
The beech windowsills are infused with a blue resin, representing a burn near the house



is always a comfortable temperature, with a handy utility room – which they call the ‘engine room’ – housing the necessary systems.

“Right from the beginning, we really valued the relationship between architect and client,” says Zoe. “Kirsty was great to work with and her attention to detail was incredible. The building contractors, Broatch Construction from Lochmaben, had never seen such detailed and accurate plans.

“Small things like the window recesses she created for the blinds to disappear into, and the bin store, which fits the bins perfectly, are just great.”



The larch-clad house is built to highly environmentally-friendly standards

Tony adds: “There’s a real balance in the house; there’s something about the building and its proportions which are very comforting.”

Inside, the generous living, dining and kitchen space has a cathedral ceiling, with large picture windows to make the most of the views, and glass doors leading outside to the courtyard and garden. A more private wing across the hall has two bedrooms, one of which is en-suite, and there’s a family bathroom.

The house is named after mature beech trees on the site, which were retained as much as possible, and wood from a felled tree was used for bespoke

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shelving and windowsills, made by local furniture designer and maker, Philip Wilson, of Tools and Timbers.

The bespoke shelves are fitted with brackets specially made by a local blacksmith, and the windowsills are a stunning addition. Philip infused the

beech sills with a striking blue resin, representing a burn near the house.

Zoe wanted a mainly white colour palette, with pops of colour from artwork, and in the living area, a green painted wall in the kitchen is a colourful focal point. Zoe’s friend, Yvonne Forsyth, helped with interior styling and hanging artworks.

The couple used local businesses as much as possible to source fixtures and fittings, including Hi-Line Kitchens in Dumfries for the kitchen, with a much-desired drawer fridge Zoe wanted; Graham’s in Dumfries for bathroom fittings; Solway Tiles; Anderson’s in



Tony and Zoe love their shepherd's hut

Dumfries for utility room fittings; and Howden's in Dumfries for the oak doors throughout.

The couple have furnished and decorated the house with a collection of much-loved items. "We've bought nothing new," says Zoe. "Bringing two houses together we had to be a little bit brutal in deciding what to keep. We wanted it to be fairly minimal and not to have anything we didn't need."

"Just about everything has a story to it - the flagstones for the outside courtyard came from a friend's house - and the house is full of treasures from throughout our lives."

These displayed treasures include an ice-axe, signed by Everest conqueror Sir Edmund Hillary, along with photos of a trip Tony made to Nepal, mirroring one his mum made years earlier; a small child-sized wooden chair Zoe's mum had made for her grandchildren; and a collection of teddies with special family connections.

The couple have enjoyed settling into their new home, and are now working on the outside. Zoe is working hard to

'Just about everything has a story to it and the house is full of treasures from throughout our lives'



Inside the hut

establish an organic vegetable garden, and Tony is using his new drystone dyking skills, learned on a course at Gatehouse of Fleet, to build a wall around the garden, using stone from another wall which had to come down on the site.

They love spending time outside, and are looking forward to summer evenings around their bespoke firepit, which has a beech leaves design, made by Scottish makers, Forge of Nature.

Another recent addition to the garden is a shepherd's hut, which is set to become a third bedroom, for when family come to stay. Tony and Zoe have five children between them, and grandchildren, who all are eager to visit.

Delighted that their shared house project has been such a success, the couple are now looking forward to happy days ahead. "We'll grow old together here," says Zoe.