

## QUICK CHECK

### The Property

A newbuild farmhouse near Cambridge

### Who Lives Here

Martin Jenkins, a farmer, and his wife, Angela, plus their four daughters, two dogs and a cat

### What They Did

Created a new home from scratch, with a focus on energy efficiency and low maintenance

### The Look

Airy and elegant, with a palette of muted tones



# GREEN AND CLEAN...

**PATIENCE AND A WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN** proved essential when Martin and Angela Jenkins came to creating their dream family home. Having searched for years to find a suitable plot that came with surrounding space to keep livestock, opportunity knocked when the couple purchased farmland in the Cambridgeshire countryside.

"The site's outbuildings were ideally suited to overwintering our beef herd," says Martin. "I'm a farmer's son and Angela comes from a village in the Ukraine. We first started farming in a few ramshackle barns situated on land close to my mother's historic home at Childerley Hall... where we ended up lodging with our four daughters, two Doberman Pinschers and the cat whilst completing the latter stages of this project.

Martin and Angela knew within days of owning the farm that they wanted to build a home there. The plot benefits from stunning views and privacy, and is also within close proximity of the main farming services, operations and structures. They set out to build a contemporary farmhouse that would be both

Their architect designed a property to complement its rural surroundings and provide outstanding environmental benefits. The scheme featured three floors, incorporating three reception rooms, five ensuite bedrooms, a mezzanine floor, a kitchen that opens up onto a conservatory and a farm office.

This is the couple's first self build, and they sold their house to part-fund the project, in addition to arranging a mortgage. It took three years before the planning application was approved.

"We encountered several difficulties due to the fact that we were building on a greenfield site lying outside the development boundary," says Martin. "In order to overcome this, we endured a lengthy consultation with planners about our needs for this home, including convincing them of the merits of the scheme from a wider perspective."

Martin and Angela sought assistance from specialists in the field, who turned the objections into a list of questions that required answers from the local planning officers. "In the end, we believe we received planning permission due to the livestock needs here," explains Martin.



*Martin and Angela Jenkins have built a property that blends seamlessly into the rolling landscape and will be extremely cost-efficient for years to come...*

words: natalie flaum | photography: alison hammond

One of the advantages of taking so long to gain consent, though, was that the couple had plenty of time to do their research, focusing on the green elements of their new home.

"Angela took me to a self build show, where we first learned about mechanical ventilation and heat recovery (MVHR) systems. This led us to be introduced to Ron Beattie, whose Beattie Passive System had been recommended as a good eco building solution," says Martin. This is a patented construction method that provides very high levels of insulation, eliminating cold bridges within the structure. It is the first of its kind in the UK to be certified by the Passivhaus Institute in Germany. The system works by creating a void around the whole house, which is then filled with Ecobead spray foam. Pumped in as liquid, it solidifies once in place, creating a sealed envelope.

Construction began in January 2012, five years after the couple acquired the plot. The farm staff undertook groundworks, helping with equipment and waste material disposal.

"Concrete cubes were used as footings over which concrete

beams were laid," says Martin. "The Beattie Passive system demands this approach and our soil type did not require piles. Pouring the foundation blocks was the one part of the build that we missed as we were on holiday. I was told that it was bitterly cold, and horrendously hard work."

Connecting the telephone and broadband utilities turned out to be almost as complicated. "I was tearing my hair out at points," says Martin. "It seemed to take forever to connect to the same line that the builders had in their cabin office on site, which was only 20m away from the house."

The couple's eco ambitions have been achieved thanks to the renewable technologies and the property's highly insulated structure. "The house benefits from being next to outbuildings with 29.9kw of solar energy production, so when the sun shines the electricity is effectively free," says Martin. "The Beattie Passive building system is extremely well insulated and airtight."

The choice of cladding materials, aluminum external finishes to the windows, man-made stone sills and lintels, all contrive to create a home that is as inexpensive to run and maintain

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as possible. "I love that the property is filled with natural light and that the design is very open and versatile," says Martin. "We adore the spacious central kitchen with hidden storage for logs, vacuums and other items. The limestone on the ground floor is designed with the inevitable needs of muddy boots and dogs coming and going. It's a happy coincidence that it's also a beautiful product. The woodburning stoves, meanwhile, are as much about looks as they are about producing heat."



**MARTIN'S TOP TIP:  
GET INVOLVED WITH  
AS MUCH OF THE  
PROJECT AS POSSIBLE  
THROUGHOUT THE  
PROCESS. ONLY YOU  
KNOW WHAT YOU WANT,  
SO YOUR OPINION  
COUNTS – EVEN IF YOU  
DON'T POSSESS THE  
SKILLS NEEDED TO DO  
THE JOB YOURSELF.**

The house has two heat exchange units, which are 95% efficient. "Masses of fresh air flows through a controlled system that works by extracting stale air from warmer areas of the house – such as the kitchen, bathrooms and areas surrounding fireplaces – and transferring the heat energy into the fresh intake air going to other areas. The house only costs £120 per year to heat. The system has transformed our dream home vision into reality."

Getting the design right also applied to the interior finishes, which was largely down to Angela, who sourced most of the furnishings from high street retailers, including White Company, John Lewis and Laura Ashley. Six months after moving in, however, the family experienced a drastic complication when lightning struck the north end of the house. "It was a miracle nobody was hurt," says Martin. "The alarm systems failed as they protect you from a surge coming down a cable, rather than a bolt hitting the structure. Some insulation material turned to soot, giving out lots of smoke, but thankfully no fire."

The hero of the hour was the family's cat, Souris, who awoke Angela and Martin. They discovered one of their daughters, Maria, had smoke pouring into her bedroom but

continued on page

continued from page 16...

was still fast asleep. "It took 40 firefighters to tackle the smoke. They had to spray water all over the house, knock holes through walls and trench mud all over the place to prevent it being any worse," Martin recalls. "Our master bedroom, mezzanine area loft and plant room were all damaged. Luckily, we were yet to put up sentimental photographs or pictures, so it was mainly the furnishings that had to be replaced."

As it happened, the couple had only just taken over the

insurances from the building contractors. Their provider had sent a surveyor to inspect the property the day before the storm, with the report, ironically, arriving the day after lightning struck. "The insurance team couldn't have been better to work with and were so helpful," says Martin. "The company ensured that the house was put back to a much higher standard than I had realised was necessary, thanks to the team's knowledge and integrity. I had no idea how damaging and



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corrosive some of the odours and soots left behind could be."

Whilst the external fabric of the house wasn't damaged, part of the internal wall structure had to be removed, cleaned and filled with new insulation. "Dealing with the aftermath of the damage caused by the storm was emotionally draining," says Martin. "We found it to be the hardest part of the process."

Six-and-a-half years after purchasing the farm, the house was finally finished in time to celebrate Christmas 2013. Although the property is eco-friendly and modern in its design, it is first and foremost a contemporary working farmhouse.

"Just two years previously the site was a derelict field," says Martin. "Now our home and office sits amidst the wheat, barley and oilseed crops, right next door to the overwintering quarters of our herd of beef cattle that has doubled in size."

Angela completed the garden design using plants that had been gifted or that she had grown from cuttings and seedlings. She is particularly proud of her sunflowers and marigolds, and enjoys her marvellous spacious greenhouse.

"We're pretty self sufficient in terms of vegetables and grow winter salads, potatoes, peppers, aubergines, tomatoes, corn, strawberries, raspberries, asparagus and beans," says Martin. "Every site demands a unique way of fitting into its environment. The garden will grow with the house as it nestles into the whole environment. We pinch ourselves every day and are delighted with our five-star home. We feel so privileged to have had the chance to build a home for ourselves. We've also made lifelong friends through the process, including our builder, architect and many of our contractors." ●

