

# JOINT VENTURE

When Andy and Ruth and their neighbours Martin and Jen decided to make alterations to their semi-detached homes in Tudeley, Kent, it made sense for them to join forces and work together with the same builder. The stunning results speak for themselves...



Andy and Ruth's house



Andy and Ruth's oak-framed extension

## Andy and Ruth

### Where did you live before you moved to Tudeley?

Andy lived in Kent and Ruth lived in Yorkshire.

### What attracted you to this particular house?

The setting, and the fact that it was a period building which had been newly renovated. Ruth grew up on a farm in the country and had always lived in rural settings. Having spent some time working and living in the city, it was definitely time to get back to the countryside.

### When did you buy it, and what condition was it in?

In 2007. On the face of it, it was good – it had just been renovated by a developer. But we knew there were some underlying problems with damp, which hadn't been effectively dealt with by the previous developer.

### How many rooms did it have?

Two bedrooms (one en suite), a bathroom, kitchen, lounge and dining room.

### What changes did you want to make, and why?

We needed another bedroom for Andy's children to have their own room when they come to stay. We also wanted more living space downstairs. We thought about moving because we didn't think we would get planning permission, but we could never find anywhere that gave us everything we wanted. And when we came back home, we just kept thinking how this is where we wanted to stay. We were talking to our neighbours about it and they said exactly the same thing, so we decided to change our homes together.

### Did you need planning permission for any of the changes? If so, how easy was the process?

Yes, we did – and it wasn't easy! Although the house is not listed itself, we are in the curtilage of listed buildings and in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. We had found old photos of the surrounding buildings from the 1950s and used those to inform our plans – designing our extension in line with an old cart barn, which had been knocked down. Despite changing our plans to give the planners and conservation team what they wanted, they still rejected our application. We knew we had gone as far as we could with the plans without compromising what we set out to achieve in the first place. It was also more difficult because our neighbour's application was successful! So it was either give up and move, or appeal. We thought we would give it a go – Ruth had a work colleague who knew about these things, and Andy's uncle had been through a similar situation when undertaking a barn conversion in Wiltshire, so we talked to them to learn from their experiences.

We also engaged our local councillor, who was incredibly helpful and supported our application, as did the local parish council. He requested that our plan be submitted for a full planning-committee hearing. We prepared a brief and photos, and emailed these to each of the 25 committee members in advance, explaining how the changes we wanted to make were sympathetic to the surroundings, and would put back some of the character that had been removed in the previous renovation. We attended the planning committee with our architect and had three minutes each to explain our plans. It was extremely tense, while they debated the proposal, and fortunately they voted in our favour!



Stylish and uncluttered





Using oak has restored character



The downstairs is now open-plan with defined spaces



The extension flows seamlessly from the house

**How did you come to choose Lee Fletcher as your builder?**

We had sent a tender document to seven builders who we had shortlisted, but about a week before the tenders were due back, we read an article in *Kudos* about an oast conversion, which Lee had done. The way in which the homeowner spoke about Lee convinced us that we needed to approach him, but we knew we were short on time. Fortunately, Lee came to look at the house and the plans pretty quickly, and submitted his proposal within the week – for both our extension and our neighbours. He was also the only builder who answered all of our questions in his response, provided references, a project plan and a detailed budget. And we knew as soon as we met him that we could work together.

**How much input did he have in your plans for the house?**

The plans were pretty much set, but Lee pointed out things that could be improved within the existing planning permission. He was able to come up with ideas that we hadn't thought of from his previous experience. Most importantly, he introduced us to Paul Cresswell of InSitu Designs, who created our oak frame. Lee had a good working relationship with Paul as they had worked together in the past. This transpired to be absolutely key in many aspects of the build, as they were both dependent on each other's phases. Paul had to make some structural alterations to the design of the frame, in particular the glazing system he uses, which the planners had to approve. We needed this re-approval before the oak could be ordered from the supplier in France.

**How long was the estimated build process at the start of the project?**

Four to six months.

**Did it run to time?**

Pretty much. We were really lucky in that we had brilliant weather over the summer. We think, in the end, it ran over by a couple of weeks, but that's because of the things we kept adding to Lee's list!

**And did it stay on budget?**

With the exception of the extra bits of work, yes, pretty much.

**How involved were you in the build on a day-to-day basis?**

Very! We are both complete control freaks and have OCD, but we did warn Lee in advance! We were living on site until it got to the stage where the build broke through into the body of the house. But even when we moved into holiday accommodation, we were sufficiently close to pop back to the site every day. We measured everything and had to have the electric sockets moved because they were 3mm out!

**What was Lee's company like to work with?**

Brilliant! Lee is very approachable and knew the things that we would want to have some input on, as well as those that we didn't. We quickly came to trust him just to get on with it. He has a great team – they became like part of the family and we all got on brilliantly.



The kitchen before...



Now it's a stunning space





**How disruptive was the work?**

No more than we expected. We spent some time living, eating and sleeping in our bedroom before we could move into the holiday rental. But in reality, it was all our neighbours that had the most to contend with. But they were all very understanding and knew that if there was ever a problem, then they could come and speak to Lee about it.

**Did you hit any snags along the way?**

Not as many as we expected. We knew that there could be problems because of some of the work the previous developers had done. We weren't quite sure what they would find when they started digging the foundations for the extension, and at one end of the house we found about 12 feet of concrete underpinning the existing house. Building control came to inspect, and thankfully they were very pragmatic and couldn't see the need to replicate this under the new extension, which would have significantly impacted on the budget.

Another issue was sourcing the bricks. The planners had to approve all the materials that would be used, but by the time they finally approved them, the original suppliers had run out. There seemed to be a national shortage of bricks last year! Lee spent a week trawling around builders' merchants across the south east and finally managed to source enough of the correct type.

When it came to tying in the new oak frame with the original oak beams, Paul discovered that the original beams were about three inches shorter than they should have been, meaning that there was insufficient timber to create a secure fixing between new and old. With some creative engineering and careful measurements, he designed five bespoke steel

brackets that could be hidden above the beams and secured in place with huge carriage bolts. A forge he knows made these up within the week and they fitted perfectly.

We were on a tight schedule to get the kitchen painted before the units were installed. Tragically, our decorator had a death in the family and had to pull out the day before, so Lee recruited his father-in-law's help and the next day the two of them painted it all while we were at work!

**How does the style of the house now differ from when you bought it?**

It feels more of a barn conversion than a cottage. There's lots of oak! It's exactly the sort of house we were looking to buy but couldn't find. We have managed to reinstate the character back into the house that was unfortunately lost over time, particularly with the oak-frame extension.

**What are your favourite features?**

The oak-frame extension and the kitchen. It all just works really well. Whilst it's now mainly open-plan, the way we have created separate spaces defines their function. Lee and our kitchen company, Silks, worked really well together.

**Is the result exactly as you imagined it would be?**

It's so much better! It's always difficult when you see a plan on a page to really imagine what it will be like when it's finished. But it is so much more than we ever thought it could be.

**Is there anything you would change?**

We have asked ourselves this many times and the answer is a resounding no!

**Martin & Jen**

**Where did you live before you moved to Tudeley?**

We lived in Pembury in Kent before a short stint in Egham, Surrey.

**What attracted you to this particular house?**

The fact that it was in the countryside yet not isolated, in a little community and close to both Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells.

**When did you buy it and what condition was it in?**

We bought it in August 2007 when it was being renovated by a developer, and it was an absolute building site! But we saw the potential and fell in love with it. The following year we were still living on a building site whilst the other properties around us were being finalised, but it was really worth it.

**How many rooms did it have?**

It did have four bedrooms split over the ground and first floor, but we use one of the bedrooms as the playroom.

**What changes did you want to make to the house, and why?**

We have twins who were getting to an age where they needed their own space and bedrooms, so we wanted to explore the opportunity to expand upstairs.

**Did you need planning permission for any of the changes? If so, how easy was the process?**

We are in an area of listed buildings therefore we had to go through a large amount of work with the planning application.

Throughout the process we had to liaise with the council (not easy) and get approval on all sorts of things, from the type and spec of bricks used to the windows! Our architect, Tony Cartwright, from PlanArch Associates was fabulous in liaising with the council, as was our builder, Lee Fletcher. We would definitely recommend using an architect who has dealt extensively with the planning department in your specific area, this made an enormous difference for our project!

**How did you come to choose Lee as your builder?**

We had sent a tender document to seven builders who we had shortlisted, but about a week before the tenders were due back, our neighbour Ruth read an article in *Kudos* about an oast conversion which Lee had done. Lee was kind enough to submit a tender at short notice and liaise with the owner of the oast to arrange a visit to see the end results of that project, which were outstanding. This openness and honesty, combined with the fact that Lee was passionate about wanting take on our project, made it a very easy decision for us.

**How much input did he have in your plans for the house?**

Lee's expertise along the way was of huge value. He would present any situation, from planning stages through to physical build with the issue, the pros and cons of the various solutions, giving guidance and advice to arrive at the best outcome. Lee was also excellent regarding any decisions relating to tiles, lighting, fittings, etc.

**How long was the estimated build process at the start of the project?**

At the start, we were looking at four to five months.



The family hub of the home





**Did it run to time?**

In the end it took closer to six through a combination of material availability and scheduling of trades. Lee will only use a trusted group of tradesman and the results speak for themselves, so the minor delay was worth it.

**And did it stay on budget?**

Pretty much.

**How involved were you in the build on a day-to-day basis?**

We had to move out for most of the build, but luckily only down the road, so we were always there to “inspect” a few times a week.

**What was Lee’s company like to work with?**

They were a great team – especially Lee and his dad. They were hard working and trustworthy.

**How disruptive was the work?**

It was not so disruptive for us as we moved into a holiday let. However, we did feel for our other neighbours as there were obviously daily deliveries and builders around on site all day, making lots of noise! One of our neighbours works nights so, bless her, she had little rest during the day.

**Did you hit any snags along the way?**

A few here and there, the main one being our wooden oak flooring. It bowed during the build as it got moisture in it. In the end we had to replace the entire floor, which was obviously not in budget. But what it did show was that the flooring, when originally put down, was never properly installed by the original builders, so we would have had to replace it at some point, anyway.

**How does the style of the house now differ from when you bought it?**

There is now a real mix between new and old, modern and traditional country. We love this feature but appreciate it might not be to everyone’s taste. Most people would have gone for a traditional country-look kitchen, but we were adamant that we wanted to create a modern family space with white everywhere! We love the fact that you move out of the kitchen into the warm oak and more traditional country feel of the house.

It’s the same upstairs. Again, we could have made the twin’s bedrooms country and traditional, with oak doors and carpets. We wanted a more modern and streamlined look, whilst still keeping to the oak feel we have in the rest of the house. So we chose white oak floors, which we’re delighted with. They give a wonderful mix of old and new.

**What are your favourite features?**

We are in love with the kitchen! It has great gadgets, including the Quooker instant hot water tap. But what we love most of all is that this is now the true heart of the home. We cook, whilst the children sit at the dining bench and play, draw or do their homework. It’s the family hub.

We also love the hidden utility area. We didn’t have space for a proper utility room, but we wanted to make sure that our white goods were not on display. So we designed this feature ourselves and suggested it to our excellent kitchen company, Burnhill Kitchens, who took on the challenge and created our magic hidden utility behind floor-to-ceiling doors, in the same design as the kitchen.

**Is the result exactly as you imagined it would be?**

Better!

**Is there anything you would change?**

No!