

Extending a gamekeeper's cottage in a wood near Bath was a challenge: there was no road anywhere near it, says DOMINIC BRADBURY

The journey to Piers Taylor's front door offers a taste of adventure. After winding through a host of Somerset lanes, you turn down a private track into a former estate, now subdivided into a small hamlet of homes. At the end of this driveway you park your car and walk into the woods. Then you head down a long, sloping dirt path, and after 400 yards or so there is a small wooden gate.

Open the gate and you find Taylor's extraordinary home, set on a hillside overlooking a valley, with mesmeric views across rolling fields and the occasional farm in the distance.

A striking contrast of old and new, one half of the house is made up of an 1870s gamekeeper's cottage, with thick walls of Bath stone and tiny windows. The other half is a semi-transparent, shed-like pavilion built with a green-oak frame, wood and in cladding and banks of glass that allow you to see right through it to the landscape beyond. This is where Taylor, an architect, lives with his wife, Sue Phillips, and their three children, Imogen, 14, Lily, 3, and Archie, 1.

"I first went to see the place holding Lily in a shopping basket when she was four days old," says Taylor. "Sue was just recovering from the birth when we saw the cottage in the property pages of the local paper. I got more and more excited as I walked down the path to the house, and when I opened the gate and saw the setting, I knew immediately I wanted to live there."

"I was affected by it like no other place I have ever been to. Within five minutes, I had offered near to the asking price, and then the estate agent started pointing out all the problems, like the subsidence."

The family had been living in an end-of-terrace cottage in a nearby village, which they were rapidly outgrowing. Both Taylor and Phillips wanted a more rural home that would remind them of their upbringings in deep country, but at the same time they needed to be within striking distance of Bath, where Taylor teaches part-time at the university.

When the couple saw it, the property had already been on the market for three months, with prospective buyers put off by the lack of car access and the site's subsidence problems. Taylor and Phillips bought the house near the village of Tadwick, for £210,000.

"We had the offer accepted and sold our old cottage in a very short space of time. We moved in three years ago, in the autumn," says Taylor. "It was blissful when we arrived, and we had all our friends carrying our stuff down the path. We both immediately felt at home. Sue is a writer and poet and could understand my reaction to the place and was happy to go along with it. Now she feels as much at home here



Sliding doors on both sides of the extension help make the most of the cottage's hillside setting.



Deliveries by
wheelbarrow



Piers Taylor and Sue Phillips worked on the design together and he did much of the work himself; the extension cost £140,000 to build and was finished on time — and on budget

as I do, in the middle of the woods at the end of the path. There is something magical for us about that walk, and we have such a close relationship with the seasons now. Every day, through thick or thin, we make that walk."

Having successfully underpinned the original two-bedroom stone cottage, Taylor and Phillips began to think about extending. Imogen and Lily were sharing a small bedroom, which was not ideal, and when Phillips found out she was pregnant with their third child, Taylor was spurred into designing a large addition to the house that would double the family's living space.

As well as wanting a contemporary contrast to the old stone cottage, the site also demanded a lightweight

extension and a large, open-plan living room, dining area and kitchen downstairs.

"We did think about having the downstairs of the new section as one large sitting room," Taylor says. "For years, we both had this idea that we should have a posh sitting room, like our parents did. But then we realised that we hated the idea of an immaculate room that never got used and that we just don't live like that. We don't 'retire' in the evenings."

"We talked about a lot of options and decided on this one large, multifunctional living space, with the entrance at the utility and kitchen end, given that we arrive from the path with our boots and stuff and need to get rid of it as soon as we come in."

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structure to avoid further subsidence problems. Taylor was drawn to the example of some old oak-framed barns in the nearby valley that were coated with layers of black-painted corrugated metal sheeting.

Working with Phillips, he formulated a plan for a large shed-like extension, coated in wood and in cladding, with lots of glazing to make the most of the garden and surrounding landscape. Sliding glass doors, which contrasted with the heavy stone blocks of the original cottage, would lead out to timber decks at the back of the building. There would be two more bedrooms and bathrooms upstairs in the

extension and a large, open-plan living room, dining area and kitchen downstairs.

"The most stressful thing was actually coaxing people down that path," says Taylor. "I wouldn't tell people when we placed orders that we had no proper access, because they just wouldn't turn up. Most deliveries were left at the end of the estate track and had to be brought down the path. Getting the oak frame was the hardest job, as some sections weighed nearly a ton and

had to be brought down on a trolley. It was madness, but we managed it with no serious mishaps."

As the house took shape, Taylor was increasingly able to step back and get on with other work for his new practice, Mitchell Taylor Workshop. Six months later, the family were back in their radically reinvented home — in time and within budget.

Inside the house, materials are purposefully raw, with plywood sections for the walls and floors and bare plaster ceilings. The whole space is bathed in light upstairs and down, with no need for curtains or shuttering, given the absence of close neighbours.

The family has room to spread out, and the world is spread out before them — literally — in the valley below.

"I wanted to do a building that was really about this place, given that context is one of the subjects I like to lecture on, and how buildings respond to local materials, influences and conditions," says Taylor. "But another great thing was that we never plan to sell, so we never had to worry about the madness of spending money on a house in the woods. I imagine a standard four-bedroom house in the area might cost double what we've spent, but we never had to think like that. We never put our commercial hats on. It was always just for us."

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