



Castle in the air

Architect Piers Taylor had a vision: to transform a poky woodland house into a home for his growing family. So he gave up the day job and rolled up his sleeves.

By Hilary Robertson.
Photographs by Chris Tubbs

Moonshine is one of those houses that isn't found easily. The narrow woodland path, 300m from car to gate, is intriguing, a fairytale entrance. After a steep slope, you come upon a castle – an up-to-the-minute transparent box attached to a diminutive, castellated house.

It's clear why architect Piers Taylor chose this site – the ancient woodlands, the silence broken only by birdsong and rustling leaves, the wraparound view of a rolling green valley... Nevertheless, it does seem extraordinary that he and his family – wife Sue Philips and children Immy, 17, Lily, six, and Archie, four – are not simply weekenders but based here seven days a week, managing the transition from sylvan paradise to metropolitan life, five miles away in Bath, with the aid of a lot of patience and a wheelbarrow (for journeys that require luggage). But then, architects do have a tendency to take on projects that would frighten mere mortals, and sometimes even their own wives.

Taylor was working for a practice in Bath, Philips was heavily pregnant with Lily and they were planning to extend their small end-of-terrace when he spotted an advert for the house in a local paper. He took days-old Lily with him to view it – and made an offer there and then. "Then I had to come home and convince Sue we were going to move to a place that



Turret syndrome: The extension has helped transform the house from a dark, unloved space to a light-filled family home



was falling down and didn't have vehicle access."

Just home from hospital, Philips was not so sure. "I was in nesting mode," she says. "The last thing I wanted to do was move." She asked for two weeks to think about it: "Just enough to emerge from the fog. Our old house was very small, and Piers had a real vision for this place. Finally I said, 'Let's go for it'."

Within three months they'd sold up and moved in. It was a dark and poky space, with only two bedrooms, but they lived in it as it was for two years, which gave them plenty of time to think about the ideal extension. Taylor had trained as an architect in Australia, and was keen to design the type of contemporary, lightweight pavilion that's common over there. The clay soil dictated that any extension needed to be light – and designed with the tricky access in mind.

The whole ground floor of the new building was to be a kitchen/dining/playroom. Upstairs, in the new section, would be two bedrooms separated by a bathroom, plus a shower room with dressing room and a child's bedroom in the adjoining upper level of the original building. Downstairs, the former sitting room would become a bathroom and guest bedroom/study. The couple decided that the old, gloomy kitchen, with its wood-burning stove, would work better as a cosy evening retreat.

When Philips became pregnant again, it was time to get building. Taylor hired a contractor, rented a cottage for the six-month build, and off they went on a three-week holiday. When they discovered, on their return, that the builder hadn't even started work, Taylor decided to take on the project himself. He resigned from his job, set up his own architect's practice at evenings and weekends, and turned builder during the day. But despite his driving ambition, even he had doubts: "I remember coming home having just resigned, drinking a bottle of wine, feeling euphoric... and in the night sitting bolt upright in fear."

It took six months of coaxing suppliers and building materials down the track, with pieces of oak frame and 300kg glass sheets balanced on trolleys. Permission was given to bring a crane through neighbouring fields for three days to raise the structure. Taylor even drove it himself, before rushing to the hospital to see Archie born on the final night.

Philips remains philosophical about tackling the path. "There are times I'm on it with the kids in the rain, one needing the loo, the other having a tantrum, and I get frustrated, but then a buzzard swoops down or a deer passes in front of you, and it's magical." **Mitchell Taylor Workshop** (mitchelltaylorworkshop.co.uk).