

Age of inspiration

With retirement beckoning, Tony and Patricia Watling decided it was time to develop a parcel of land they already owned and build a bright contemporary home using SIPs

WORDS GARY RAMSAY PHOTOS CARL PENDLE



“It seems to me that SIPs are the future of building as when the panels arrive all the work is already done”



It's never too late to begin a self build. The Watlings had been living on their spacious 0.3 acre plot overlooking the Kent Downs since 1978 but in 2008 Tony Watling, ignoring the fact he was in his early seventies, embarked on an energetic building project. The aim was to give the couple a comfortable, clean and light-filled new home ready for when they officially retire from running their cattery business. But why leave it so long before taking the plunge?

“The thought process began in 2006,” says Tony. “It was a result of a property developer coming here and asking us whether we wanted to sell half the garden. That put the idea in our head. Why should we move somewhere else when we can build a place here? The reason for the project was that we foresaw that at some point we would have to retire but we didn't want to move out of the area, so this gave us the opportunity to hive off about a third of the plot and build a totally modern new house.”

The Watlings were living in a renovated Victorian farmhouse on one side of the plot, and this was also the last plot within the permitted development envelope for their village. This gave them the confidence that there shouldn't be many basic objections to what they were proposing. At first, this had been a concept for two bungalows that Tony had sketched out himself. “The planners were not too happy about that idea,” he says. “They said we would squeeze the properties on and that it would be too cramped, not providing adequate car parking space and turning room, so we looked at building a single property instead.”

The first thing that Tony did was to get a piece of paper and draw on it exactly what he wanted, then he approached a number of companies about what kind of money it was going to cost to create it and what the practicalities were. After investigating a number of prefabricated ‘off the shelf’ houses, the Watlings decided on Hanse Haus. “We did plenty of research on the internet and read all the right magazines and decided to go down the prefab route,” says Tony. “We met Giles Hirst from Hanse at an exhibition. We already had a solid idea of what we wanted. It was different to the normal Hanse template but that wasn't a problem, as Hanse said that by working with their architect, we could have anything we wanted. We agreed the designs for a bespoke house in principle and went after planning permission.”

After submitting plans in January 2008, the Watlings were granted permission without a hitch in March. “The planning office accepted all of our arguments justifying the type and style of the house and where it sits on the plot,” says Tony. “I did all of the paperwork myself, some of which was quite tricky but the planning office were”





Part of the Watlings' garden was divided off and cleared to create a site for the new house



Groundworks begin on site, and the foundations were put in place by September 2008, ready for the build



The wall panels were craned into position and the house quickly begins to take shape



Once the roof was in place, the house became watertight and ready for internal works



Hanse fitted the wiring and plumbing so that Tony could concentrate on the finishing touches



The front door opens onto a spacious hall fitted with ivory porcelain floor tiles. An open-tread staircase is lit by daylight from the full-height windows on the ground and first floors

Good idea



"Make sure you talk to your local utilities companies several months before you actually need them," says Tony. "SIPs is a much faster build system than they're used to, and they talk in terms of months rather than days. Plus the costs can be phenomenal. We ran the electricity cable to the road ourselves. All the electricity company had to do was run it along a bit of pavement and up a pole yet it still cost us nearly £3,000."



very helpful. The local councillors even came to have a look. We were fortunate that we didn't have to go to the committee stage for approval."

Quick SIP

After signing the contract with Hanse Haus in July 2008, the Watlings had to make sure the foundations were ready for the impending arrival of the structural insulated panels (SIPs). SIPs are high performance building panels, typically made by sandwiching a core of rigid foam plastic insulation between two structural skins of oriented strand board (OSB).

The preparatory foundation and groundworks were done by P&P Brooks on a recommendation from Hanse. As the work is specialised, Tony and Pat decided to use a company that had worked with the Hanse system before.

"Penni and Paul Brooks were fantastic! I did get a couple of locals to come in to quote but the job frightened the life out of them," says Tony. "In theory they said it was no problem, but when I told them it was a prefabricated house and what the tolerance needed to be, they ran a mile. The SIPs panels can't be bent, so when they come along everything has to be the perfect fit."

The site cleared in July 2008 and the foundations finished in September, the scaffolding and crane arrived on 21st October, and the SIPs arrived the next day. "The very first morning was a sign of how efficient the whole build would turn out to be. Having travelled overnight from Germany, the two trucks containing all the components of our house arrived by 5am. By daylight, the 10-strong construction team was already at work," says »



Tony. "It really was a marvel to watch. There was nothing for us to do other than try to capture it all on camera and video. It all happened so quickly we could hardly keep up. The team were very polite and tidy and there was always at least one English speaker on site. A great thing to see was that if one person finished a job they would go and help one of their colleagues. There was no demarcation between tasks – it really was a team effort to make sure everything was done quickly but to a very high standard."

The 180m² house sits neatly on a 1,250m² plot. The interior walls are 120mm thick and the exterior walls are 245mm thick plus 100mm of insulating cladding. The house also boasts the Hanse Haus 'solid wall' system, which combines the advantages of timber SIPs and load-bearing construction. The pannelled walls have a stud every 300mm and are sheathed on both sides with OSB boards to make them load-bearing. Fixing wall units, including heavy kitchen cabinets is possible everywhere. At the rear of the house, three sets of patio doors open onto a raised veranda



Left and above: Open-plan kitchen was designed to Pat's specifications and includes a spacious island unit fitted with a hob and with a gleaming extractor above it. Pat decided on a feature wall of mosaic tiling to contrast the white units. Right: A stove warms both the kitchen and adjoining open-plan dining area

area that Tony built himself. It extends the full width of the house with steps down to the garden and the hard landscaped driveway. "Once we had decided on the design and layout considerations, I left the construction decisions to Tony," says Pat. "I made my input when we came to the kitchen of course and the decor such as selecting the floor and wall tiles and the light fittings; what you might call the 'nice' bits. It was all very interesting and exciting seeing the house shoot up so quickly, and the end result is superb. It's exactly what we wanted."

The gleaming interior has a double-glazed door opening into a wide entrance hall with a staircase leading up to the first floor and an open-plan living area. The house is brimming with natural light, a facet Tony and Patricia were determined to have. "One of the things we especially wanted was a bright house so we could see outside rather than staring at walls," says Tony. "From the upstairs sitting area we have wonderful views of the farmland surrounding the house and can enjoy the »

Tony's top tips

- ⊕ **Planning and preparation are paramount. Start early, then refine and refine. Knowing what you want to do before you actually get round to it is the secret to success**
- ⊕ **If you're not taking the 'turnkey' option and you're going to do some of the work yourself, you'll need to draw up priority lists, cost it all then add a big contingency expense. It always works out more than you think it will**
- ⊕ **It can be difficult to envisage what the living space will look and feel like so think really hard and be absolutely sure about lights, switches, power, TV and telephone points, working out exactly where you want them**



Favourite feature

“The huge floor-to-ceiling windows let natural light flood in, giving the house a true taste of the outdoors,” says Tony. “It’s this element that has given the house the exact feel we wanted and we’re so glad we opted for it.”

vista beyond, extending right across the Kent Downs.”

The Watlings sourced and fitted their own interior doors, skirtings and tiles to add to the home’s bespoke look. One of their cattery clients fitted ivory porcelain floor tiles throughout the ground floor for them. According to Tony, Hanse did the wiring and plumbing and the ‘important’ stuff and he did the ‘finishing off’ including the wall tiling, after which Hanse fitted the sanitary ware.

High energy, low bills

To cut down on energy usage and reduce bills, Tony and Patricia installed an exhaust air heat pump from NIBE that provides heat and domestic hot water alongside a mechanical ventilation system. This takes ‘used’ air (stale moist air from kitchens and bathrooms) in the house and filters it to create ‘fresh’ air bringing better air quality to the interior and reducing energy requirements. “Hanse sourced, supplied and fitted it,” says Tony. “It is the biggest one NIBE do and isn’t normally supplied in the UK. The house is slightly bigger than the space the machine is supposed to cope with but the combination of underfloor heating throughout, the ventilation system and the insulation has meant the heating and lighting bill for the first year has cost just short of £1,000.”

It’s a myth that self build projects are fraught with complications and minor disasters. The Watlings’ project was very simple and went like clockwork without any major hiccups at all. The total build time was only four weeks, from 22nd October to 14th November. The main construction of the exterior walls, interior partitions and roof took a speedy two and a half days. Costs were

certainly kept low due to the Watlings building on their own land. The total construction cost of £234,000 included the £154,000 for the Hanse home plus assorted groundwork and external landscaping.

Since March 2010 the house has been rented out but Tony and Patricia can’t wait to retire and move in themselves. “Overall it was a very smooth process,” says Tony. “If we were to build again I would certainly do it with Hanse Haus. We had very little difficulty and I have recommended SIPs as a system to at least 100 people so far. All the clients coming into the cattery wanted to see the house and several are thinking about doing a similar project. Everyone is very impressed.”

“It seems to me that SIPs are the future of building,” says Tony. “All the work is done for you. The closed panel system seems such an obvious way to build since the insulation, windows and all the ducting is pre-fitted within the panel. It is so efficient! The alternative of people standing out in all weathers sticking bricks together with cement seems prehistoric.” ●

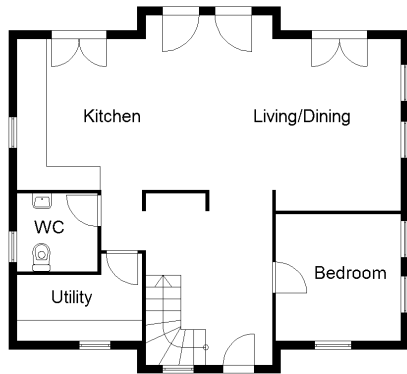
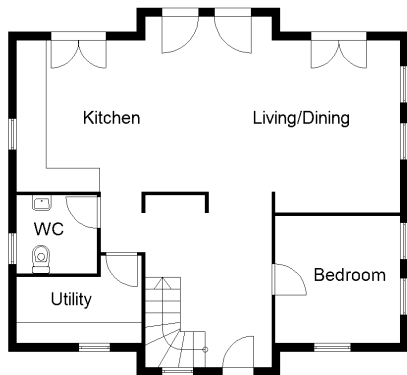


Build timetable


The Watlings have owned and lived on the plot since 1978. Just under 30-years later, in January 2008 Tony applied for planning permission. Three months later permission was granted and work began on the preliminaries shortly after.



Floor plans



Ground Floor

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The Watling file

Owners Tony & Patricia Watling
Occupations Business proprietors
Location Kent
Type of build New build
Method of construction SIPs
House size 180m² (1,937ft²)

Plot size 1,250m²
Build cost £234,000
Cost per m² £1,300 (£121 per ft²)
Date work commenced October 2008
Construction time 8 weeks
Current value £375,000

Build cost breakdown

Elements of the build	Cost %	Cost m ²	Total cost*
Hanse Haus	66%	£861	£155,000
Planning & fees	2%	£22	£4,000
Site clearance	12%	£155	£28,000
Utility connections	2%	£28	£5,000
External works	7%	£94	£17,000
Kitchen & utility	3%	£42	£7,500
Carpentry & joinery	2%	£28	£5,000
Floors, walls & tiling	2.5%	£33	£6,000
Contura woodburner	1%	£14	£2,500
Carpets & curtains	1%	£8	£1,500
Audio visual	1%	£14	£2,500
Grand total			£234,000

OUR VERDICT

The Watlings' project confirms the efficiency of SIPs as a building method, which gave them a speedy construction. Their bespoke design has resulted in a house that makes the most of the surrounding views.