

SELF BUILD & DESIGN



BARN CONVERSION



"FINDING SOMEWHERE WITH BARN TO CONVERT WAS OUR IDEAL SCENARIO."

LIVING THE **dream**

Conrad and Karen Allen have swapped life in London for the creative conversion of a stone and cob barn in beautiful Devon countryside.

STORY: ELEANOR WILDE PICTURES: JJ MARSHALL ASSOCIATES & HENRIETTA WILLIAMS

After more than 10 years spent living in the East End of London, Karen and Conrad Allen decided to uproot and relocate to the Devon countryside in 2007 when their sons were aged six and three.

"Moving to the country was something we'd wanted to do for a long time," says Conrad. "Karen's an online retail consultant and I work in wholesale designer-wear, so life on a smallholding was totally alien to us both, but we were determined to change our lifestyle so that Oscar and Noah could grow up in rural surroundings."

The couple spent six months looking for a suitable property, although they were unsure of exactly where they wanted to live. At first they explored the idea of moving to Cornwall, but later reconsidered and began to search the rugged north coast of Devon instead.

"We wanted to start up a holiday letting business close to the sea, so finding somewhere with barns to convert



Left: Conrad and Karen and their cob barn which was designed by award-winning architects Feilden Fowles.

Right: The Cob has two terraces and a large grassy garden.



Above: The Cob has been converted into holiday accommodation from a former agricultural building.

was our ideal scenario," says Karen. "Conrad had been driving around Devon and Cornwall every week searching for something within our budget, but we still hadn't found anywhere and he needed to return to work."

One final trip to Devon had been arranged for Conrad to view potential properties, including a smallholding on the border between north Devon and Cornwall. "It was a beautiful sunny day, and when I reached Venn Farm and saw the pretty 16th century farmhouse and the two barns I knew I'd found what we were looking for," recalls Conrad.

The tranquil seven-acre smallholding is four miles from Bude and the stunning north Cornwall beaches, nestling between two nature reserves and playing host to an abundance of wildlife including roe deer, buzzards, woodpeckers and barn owls.

One of the barns had already been granted planning permission to be converted into a dwelling, but the larger barn was an empty shell with a corrugated iron roof and no planning permission. Built of stone and cob, this 200-year-old structure was originally a milking shed complete with troughs for the cattle.

Conrad brought Karen to see the smallholding, along with his father who is an architect. The couple had tackled small renovations on previous homes but had never undertaken a building project on such a mammoth scale.



“WE DID GO SLIGHTLY OVER BUDGET CONVERTING THE COB, BUT WE’RE EXTREMELY HAPPY WITH THE END RESULT. IT’S A MODERN TAKE ON A TRADITIONAL BARN BUT STILL REALLY FAMILY-FRIENDLY.”

“We were lucky enough to sell our London home at the peak of the market, and moved into the farmhouse while we converted the barns,” says Karen. “The red brick barn was completed first and let out to holidaymakers while we turned our attention to the larger cob barn.”

The couple approached London-based architects Fielden Fowles after a friend recommended the practice. “We liked the fact that they are a young fresh company, because we wanted to push the boundaries and design something interesting and challenging rather than settle for a more traditional barn conversion,” Conrad explains.

The Allens preferred open-plan living spaces, large windows and sleek interiors to heavy exposed timbers and inglenook fireplaces, and plans were drawn up which involved retaining as much of the existing fabric of the barn as possible and inserting a load-bearing timber frame inside.

New openings are framed with pre-cast concrete surrounds and the roof stands proud of the existing walls, separated by a strip of clerestory windows

Above and right: A timber-clad addition contains the contemporary farmhouse-style kitchen, furnished with customised cabinets and polished concrete worktops. This space is open plan to the dining area in the original part of the barn, where new glazing in the gable end connects to the terrace beyond.

set back from the face of the cob. At high level, vertical fins have been introduced which provide solar protection to the upper floor, where three bedrooms and a family bathroom are located.

Downstairs, The Cob has been designed with an ensuite bedroom, a large, light-filled sitting room and a kitchen/dining room with bi-fold doors opening onto the east terrace. The kitchen area is contained in a new blockwork extension clad in larch, with a cat slide roof which projects out from the linear stone and cob barn.

“We did toy with the idea of designing a reverse-level house, with all the bedrooms downstairs, but preferred to have folding/sliding doors in the dining area and patio doors in the kitchen,” says Conrad.

“It was quite difficult to get planning permission, but the barn isn’t listed and it stands in the middle of fields about half a mile from the nearest neighbour, so overlooking wasn’t an issue – although we did have to forfeit a rooflight over the stairwell on the front elevation.”

Vertical slit windows have been introduced in the gable end above the folding/sliding glass doors in the double height dining area, and this shape is echoed in the sculptural irregular fence that runs along one side of the barn and was made using off-cuts of vertical larch for a rugged effect.

Conrad took time off from work during 2012 to oversee the building project and laboured on site alongside the couple’s chosen builder, Shires Construction, who had been recommended by friends. The challenge was to completely rebuild and restore the traditional stone and cob barn, with its myriad of angles and curves, working to exacting architectural plans and transforming it into the angular modern design.

“We needed to do a bit of underpinning towards the gable end, and a lot of the walls were rebuilt and repaired – especially the cob between the stonework and the new clerestory windows,” says Karen. “The barn has been roofed in a combination of new and reclaimed slates, which we love.”

