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TRADITIONAL SELF-BUILD:

A Steep Learning Curve

Tracy and Nigel Roberts expertly project managed their first self-build: the perfect family home with a traditional exterior and modern living spaces — all on a steeply sloping plot

Words: Heather Dixon Photography: Dave Burton

OPPOSITE: Hathaway Brindle bricks and Eternit Hawkins Staffordshire Blue roof tiles give the house a firmly traditional, local feel; the triangular window in the attic had to be made three times due to the precise – and slightly asymmetrical – measurements

RIGHT: With so many tiled floors, Tracy and Nigel specified warm-water underfloor heating throughout the main living areas, approaching 26 companies until they found one which was prepared to design a system that would include the provision of hot water to the bathrooms. The chosen company, Radiant Heating, also pumped screeed over the pipes in just 90 minutes

Tracy and Nigel Roberts couldn't face the thought of doing up their old house again. Having already renovated and extended the five bedroom bungalow – their home for 13 years – to more than twice its original size, the couple were ready for a change. So they decided to fulfil a long-standing dream of building their own home.

"It was something we had often talked of doing and this seemed like the right time to move," says Nigel. "Some friends thought we were mad – we lived in a peaceful location overlooking a National Trust property – but we felt we had reached the limit of what we could do to the house. It was time for a change."

Fate quickly played a hand. They started looking for land at auction and got chatting to a man who was thinking about dividing up his one-acre garden and selling off half as a building plot. Nigel and Tracy went to see it the same day, liked it instantly and a deal was done on the condition that they could get detailed planning permission from Ashfield District Council for a detached house.

It wasn't a straightforward site. It fronts onto a busy road and there's a five-metre difference between the road level and a small wood at the bottom of the garden, which meant there would be a 2.5-metre fall between the front and back of the house. "The gradient didn't bother us," says Nigel. "If anything, we felt it would add to the character of the property."

They contacted architect Julian Owen, also the chair of ASBA (the Association of Self-build Architects), who suggested they write down their ideas using a bubble diagram which would show, in very simple terms, how they wanted to move around the house, how the rooms should flow from one to another and approximate dimensions. They were also told to take photographs and cut out magazine pictures of things they liked to help Julian to understand their tastes.

"We booked a weekend in Paris and while we were there we spent a number of hours sitting in the courtyard of the Louvre scribbling down ideas," says Nigel. "We wanted Julian to design the property and deal with Building Regulations, but we wanted to manage the build ourselves so we could control the way the house developed on a day-to-day basis."

It took about six months from the design stage to planning consent, but their plans were passed on the condition that they built a wall on an external balcony to give their neighbours privacy.



FACT FILE

NAMES: Tracy and Nigel Roberts

PROFESSIONS: Director and homemaker

AREA: Nottinghamshire

HOUSE TYPE: Detached six bedroom house

HOUSE SIZE: 320m²

BUILD ROUTE: Architect and self-managed

FINANCE: Private

CONSTRUCTION: Masonry

BUILD TIME: One year

LAND COST: £132,500

BUILD COST: £361,000

TOTAL COST: £493,500

VALUE ON COMPLETION: £750,000

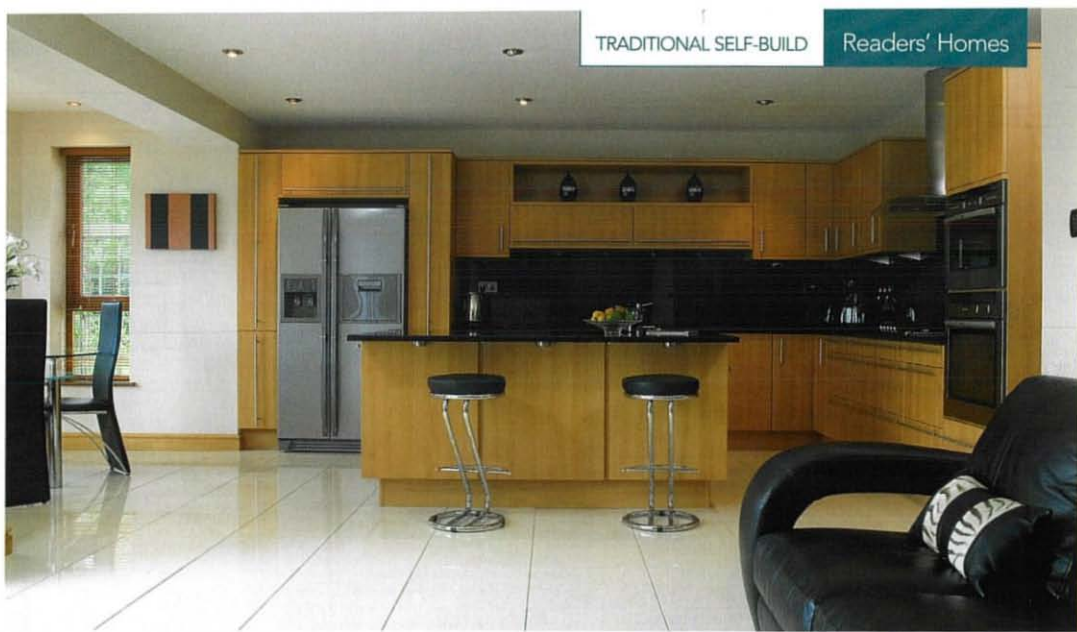
COST/m²: £1,128

34%
COST
SAVING

COST BREAKDOWN

Floor and wall tiles (excl fitting)	£8,354
Kitchens and Bathrooms	£38,000
Groundworks incl drainage	£47,700
Site preparation (incl removal of trees at front)	£2,700
Service costs	£1,800
Architect fees	£6,800
Structural engineering	£1100
Plumbing	£16,000
Electrics/network	£28,000
Windows	£10,000
Zoned underfloor heating and boiler	£19,240





ABOVE: White floor tiles from East Midlands Ceramics and neutral wall colours create continuity throughout the first floor. Light and space were high on the Roberts' list of must-haves in the open plan kitchen/dining/family area

TOP RIGHT: Tracy and Nigel opted for wooden floors in the bedrooms — one of the benefits being that they qualify for zero-rating for VAT, unlike carpets

MIDDLE RIGHT: The timeless ash staircase had to be completely redesigned because of a 2cm miscalculation on the bottom step, which meant it didn't meet Building Regulations for minimum head height

BOTTOM RIGHT: The en suite bathroom has a soft white suite from Simmons Kitchens and Bathrooms with a neutral stone-tiled backdrop; the space runs parallel with a dressing room

Given the go-ahead, Tracy and Nigel began to draw up a highly detailed plan of works, researching every last detail and creating a schedule to maintain a steady build pace from start to finish. Nigel was working four days a week, but had Fridays, weekends and evenings to devote to the project. Meanwhile, Tracy's day would start with phone calls at 7am, an early morning trip to the site, the school run and then hours of making sure everything was on track.

"I always approached three suppliers for the materials and asked for their best price. I didn't want to play them off against each other, but I made it clear that whoever came back with the best price would get the job in that instance," says Nigel. "It seemed a fair way to do it."

The couple's meticulous forward planning paid off. Apart from one week's delay through poor weather, the build ran smoothly from the start. There was just one major design change when they agreed to include attic trusses in the roof space, accessed by a solid staircase. Unfortunately, the roof design, which includes more than a dozen steel beams, was too complex for standard trusses and they had to have a cut roof which added considerably to their costs. ▶



Off-Mains Drainage

As well as building on a steeply sloping site, Tracy and Nigel faced another challenge: "Drainage was a nightmare," remembers Nigel. "There is no mains drainage on the site so we had to install a septic tank; however, we couldn't place it at the bottom of the garden because the lorries wouldn't be able to get close enough to empty it on a regular basis." They solved the problem by installing the tank in the front garden and, using a three-ton mini digger, building a sealed grid drainage system into the back garden with a pump to take waste up to the tank. The sealed loop drainage system took three weeks to install. "Access to the site was a challenge, though," says Nigel. "We created a temporary slope down the side of the plot for small machinery, and built the house from back to front."

"We don't regret it because it gives the attic space so much more character," says Nigel. "As it was, we still came in under budget on the structure of the house. It cost us £35,000 just to get out of the ground, which was £15,000 more than predicted, but by the time we reached roof level we were back on track with the budget. But building on a sloping site has its own set of issues; in total, we think it cost about 25 per cent more than it would have done on a level site."

A Volclay tanking system was installed at the section at the back of the house which would be built into the slope. Four hundred tons of soil were removed and 180 cubes of concrete poured into the base and shuttered sides. It took seven weeks to complete the concrete slab, retaining wall and tanking. A further 20 weeks saw builders use 29,000 facing bricks to complete the structure, which has 38 window openings, including French doors and six Velux rooflights.

"Although there was a lot of stress and anxiety involved, we thoroughly enjoyed the whole process," says Nigel. "It's a full-time job to project manage the building of your own home — so I was doing two full-time jobs for more than a year. It's very draining, but the only way to deal with it is to have control over it, and that means being very organised throughout. We also had a fantastic team of contractors, many of them exceptional in their standard of workmanship and reliability, which was a huge bonus.

"We would definitely do it again. The satisfaction of seeing your ideas being articulated on paper through an architect, and then coming to life before your eyes, is fantastic. There's something very special about seeing your own house when it's finished and thinking, 'We did this!'"



Living on a Sloping Site

Due to the steeply sloping nature of the site, the main living spaces are all positioned on the first floor, with an open plan kitchen/dining/family room being the house's hub. A formal living room, dining room, utility and garage make up the rest of the floor. Six bedrooms are sited over the ground level and attic. The master, on the ground floor, benefits from an en suite and dressing room. Two other bathrooms complete the footprint.

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Structural engineer Anthony Rudge Associates: 0115 965 4028 Self-build manager
Aizlewoods Buildbase: 01623 420384 Underfloor heating Radiant Heating Solutions: 01400
250572 Kitchen and bathrooms Simmons Kitchen and Bathrooms: 01623 422322 Electrics
Current Electrical Solutions Ltd: 01623 486551 Builders' merchants Jacksons: 01623 515515
Staircase manufacturers Clive Durose, Gavin Brown: 07970 798156 Pumped screed Jeff
Sealey: 07971 263998

LEFT: French doors open the living room out onto a decked terrace – the main living areas are all on the first floor – offering great views of the part-wooded site, and keeping the room light and airy

