

Me and my hut

A building straight from the forest

The pretty woodland house of Sussex woodsman and author Ben Law captured the public imagination after it was featured on Channel 4's Grand Designs in 2003. Ben tells Ida Maspero how his home, hewn from the woods that surround it, followed a long battle with planning law, and how it reflects his philosophy of a building rooted in its surroundings.

“I built my first structures in the woods as a kid – benders made of sticks and bits of corrugated iron, so it’s been in me from a very early age. But my journey really started late 1980s during a visit to the Amazon rainforest, where I met people who had a deeper knowledge of the forest because they lived in it and depended on it. They built their dwellings, their huts, mainly from what was growing all around. Seeing that pattern, that way of life, I really made the connection between woodland management and forest habitation. I wanted to come home to Sussex and set up as a forest dweller.”

The principles of forest living Ben observed in the Amazon continue to guide him today: “Achieving a deeper connection and understanding of the landscape, staying simply on the land, building shelter from materials there, getting to know the food of the forest... I’m still building on this.”

However, in contrast to his Amazon role models, for whom knowledge is passed down the generations, he found himself having to reinvent and rediscover ancient skills.

Ben came to Prickly Nut Wood, a predominantly coppiced woodland at Lodsworth, West Sussex, in 1992 to pursue his forest dwelling dream. “I began by building what I knew – a bender with a few sticks and a tarpaulin over the top. That evolved to building a yurt. These were perfectly suitable structures for the kind of living I was doing at the time. As far as I was concerned, I was doing what people had done in the woods for years – working in the woods, managing the coppice, making charcoal and living near the charcoal fire. After the bender and yurt, my first timber building was my original workshop – a roundhouse structure still in use here.

“It was while living in a yurt that I got my first planning enforcement notice, pinned to the canvas... so began my journey of learning about planning law. I moved into a caravan while I tried to appeal against the fact that I was prohibited from living in the woodland where I worked. I lost that appeal and the planners told me I don’t fit into planning law, living as I was. I would have to comply or risk eviction. My only option was applying for temporary permission for a mobile home.... it was ridiculous, really, dragging this monstrosity into the woods; it just didn’t

fit.” Ben lived in the mobile home for three years while building up his business and applying for planning permission to build his house.

With a roundwood cruck frame and roof shingles of Prickly Wood’s own chestnut, cladding of local oak, and lathe and plaster of local clay, Ben’s off-grid woodland house is utterly rooted in its surroundings. “I had a very clear idea that I wanted the building to be made from the woods, to keep the feeling of the woods as if the trees were growing out of the floor.” Ben continues to develop this approach in the buildings he creates for others. “The house seems to touch something latent in people – the sense that they are wandering into somewhere that’s come straight from the forest. So we use aspects of my home in new buildings – the basic cruck frame, the aesthetic of round poles coming up through the building, which is so appealing to people. We use coppice materials, lathe and plaster, timber from the woods for the cladding, our own kiln-dried floorboards... we work with what is there within a woodland.”

Ben reveals he is also developing a small roundwood timber framed caravan, “something between a caravan and a hut” which meets planning law. “The idea is that it’s relatively simple, aesthetically pleasing, nice to live in and looks in place in the woods.”

Training courses and an apprenticeship scheme at Prickly Nut Wood share Ben’s skills and experience in carving out a sustainable woodland livelihood. But the chance to live and work in



Opposite page: The yurt which was one of Ben's earlier dwellings. This page: Ben outside his completed house. Below: A young Nigel at his hut in Maiviken. Photos: Ben Law, Steve Morley, Nigel Lowthrop

woodland is something he'd like to see being made available more widely: "I feel there is a real opportunity, with good planning guidance, to look at creating what I'd call small woodland lots, where people who genuinely want to run a woodland enterprise of some sort can build a single dwelling in order to live on site. After all, the revenue you would earn from managing a small woodland won't pay a rent or mortgage in town!"

www.ben-law.co.uk

See page 38 for a review of Ben Law's latest book, *Roundwood Timber Framing*, and a reader offer.



Simple living in spectacular locations

Nigel Lowthrop's early career as a field biologist took him from the Cairngorms to South Georgia, living in tents and then huts, often in unforgiving but spectacular locations. Now that his social enterprise woodland and family home at Hill Holt Wood in Lincolnshire is well established, he craves the simplicity of a hut.



Considerable time spent in huts, tents, caravans, caves, snow holes and general wild living has taught me that the most important factor in a wonderful place to live is location. With a bit of organisation, it's possible to be comfortable in even the most basic conditions. Close to half my adult life has been spent in 'primitive' accommodation and I sometimes

think that my present home is unnecessarily large, with too many things. A move to a more simple way of living would be a massive step towards a sustainable future. To me, a house is just the warmth and shelter in the environment in which it sits – the important bit.

My first experience of 'wild' living was while working on the Caledonian Pine Forest Survey in 1973. I spent the summer in a tiny, single-skin tent by the side of the loch in Glen Affric, at the south of the Lairig Ghru and on an island in the middle of the Quoich. I quickly learnt how to be organised in a tight space, how to stay

clean (!) and how to eat well. By 1975 I had moved to the Derbyshire Dales as a seasonal nature reserve warden, again living in tent, and after that I pitched camp in the Wyre Forest for a survey. My first real hut stay was as holiday cover warden, in the middle of a wood in Rostherne Mere National Nature Reserve. I remember listening to the radio in my sleeping bag in this bare wooden hut, in what I thought was splendid isolation.

The next series of huts, including the first I built myself, was 10,000 miles away on the island of South Georgia from 1976 to 1978. As Antarctic bases go, the main base was spacious and well equipped, but about a third of my time was spent at my field hut four miles north over a mountain pass, at Maiviken. The hut was flown over as a stack of timber by a Navy helicopter, and three of us quickly built the 11ft x 8ft, two berth residence and research base. It was

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clad with marine ply but had no inner lining and therefore no insulation. Maiviken hut stood by a lake and had to be guyed down against katabatic winds whistling down from the island's mountain spine.

The hut had a small entrance area for outer clothing and storing emergency 'sledging rations'. In the main 'room' was a large work top for cooking and research work; opposite this was the double bunk and two high stools for seating. Over the coming months I installed a short wave radio, and a generator for very occasional use. Many a night was spent wrapped in a sleeping bag with one Tilley lamp for heat and one for light, listening to a very crackly World Service. For most of the time in this hut, I was on my own.

After South Georgia followed assorted accommodation in mountain refuges in Ecuador, homemade tents in Malawi, assorted tents and barns and then an American Recreational Trailer (RT or caravan). After we moved to Hill Holt Wood, the RT was our family home for ten years as we fought for planning permission and then built our log cabin home. All the early buildings at Hill Holt Wood were built by me, largely of low impact, local timber and straw. Although simple and built initially without planning permission, they are all still in use, demonstrating that hut construction is not rocket science



and is achievable by anyone with elementary construction skills.

By the lake, we built a small hut out of local timber and recycled materials. It cost £2,000 – the main outlays were the wood burner, plastic roofing slates and insulation. Known as the Boathouse, this hut is now my daughter's weekend retreat. It consists of the boat dock and a sitting room on the ground floor, with an external

staircase to a bedroom above. Last year we added a balcony which also provides a covered seating area on the ground floor. The balcony is great for an evening glass of wine as it catches the last of the summer sun.

Hill Holt Wood now has a design team of graduate architects to develop our skills in construction and make use of pioneering eco-build knowledge. In March, we won the Sustain Award for Construction against large construction companies – amazing what you can do with a little hut derived knowledge. My own ambition is to go back to basics, find a site in a spectacular location and, planners permitting, build a small and simple off-grid eco-hut. This would show that sustainable does not mean building an urban extension to an existing settlement; affordable is not a commercially built Wendy house on an estate and small is beautiful. I reckon a two storey hut with a footprint of 30m² is all you need. I welcome suggestions for a site!

***Nigel Lowthrop** is founder of Hill Holt Wood in Lincolnshire, email nigel@hillholtwood.com and website www.hillholtwood.com*

This page, above: Nigel outside his hut at Twin Peaks Glacier, South Georgia. Left: The Boathouse at Hill Holt Wood. Opposite page: Alec assembling his hut, and posing with the finished product. Photos: Nigel Lowthrop, Alec Farmer.



Urban hutting experiment in Glasgow

Many of us associate hut-dwelling with rural environments, but one intrepid hutting pioneer has been pushing the boundaries to find out if it's possible to live comfortably in a hut in central Glasgow. Karen Grant sought out Alec Farmer and his self-built pod.

A student at Glasgow School of Art, Alec Farmer's thesis is based on the work of Ken Isaac, a leading light in the Urban Nomad movement in the 1960s. For several years he has wanted to build one of Isaac's designs, a kind of kiwi-fruit-shaped pod, designed to be a sustainable living space for one person. Isaac designed the space with forest dwelling in mind, but Alec was particularly interested in experimenting with how it would work in an urban environment.

He spent several years trying to secure access to suitable urban land before being given permission to place the pod in the thriving Woodlands Community Garden, on a piece of derelict land to the west of Glasgow city centre. Alec moved into the pod for six weeks in autumn 2010 as a demonstration of sustainable, hut-based living in the city. Resembling an old-fashioned caravan built from panels of hardboard, the pod nestled in the corner of the garden. With an internal space of around 8ft squared, it contains a stove, water container, sleeping area and electricity supply served by a solar panel on the roof.

Alec was keen to move into the very compact living space because he, "liked minimalism, but is not so good at living it!". Part of his mission was to conduct an experiment to see what obstacles would get in the way of urban hut-living. His approach to the project sits comfortably between campaign and lifestyle. "Being in the pod for six weeks has been an easy shift," says Alec, "although as a shelter, the structure isn't ideally suited to the Scottish climate. It is completely bolted together, so there are 1,000 holes for water to seep in."

"Living in this space has completely changed how I'm thinking about my next structure. When I first started I

was obsessed by Ken Isaac, but now I realise that, although the structure itself is potentially environmentally sound, the only way of moving it is to put it in the back of a van. As well as the environmental implications of that, there's no point spending three days building something then taking it apart to put in the back of a van – you should build something you can carry. I spent a stressful day trying to wheel the elements of the structure on a trolley down the steep hills around Glasgow School of Art towards the community garden. I wouldn't like to do that again."

So his next building is designed to be carried on a bike. It will be a modern interpretation of the yurt with a new method of putting it together. He has set himself the challenge that it must cost less than £200 to build and weigh less than 20kg. Although it will be a fully insulated and self-contained living space, he also wants to ensure that it will take no more than two days to manufacture. Alec reckons this kind of living space might also have potential applications in disaster relief.

Alec is cautious about the future of city hutting: "It's not likely to be reality in the near future, as the planning barriers to urban hutting are huge. But the ideal situation would be a plot of land with a hub of amenities for hut-dwellers. In the countryside, people could build something experimental in a hidden-away place, and, as long as there are no complaints during a four-year period, they may be in the clear. But in the city, that approach is very unlikely to succeed, so everything has to be completely above board.

"Finding land to experiment with is very difficult. I believe the opportunities lie in the gaps between homes – that's what I'm focusing

on now. In some parts of the UK it would be worth exploring how to apply squatters' rights to urban hutting experiments, but in Scotland there may even be possibilities to experiment with the laws on wild camping."

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