FROM HAMPSHIRE TO THE HEBRIDES

It was a heart-over-head decision for Linda Brown and her family when they decided to build a house on the Isle of Lewis whilst living 700 miles away from the action.

Pictures: The house is clad in Siberian Larch which weathers over time and blends into the landscape. Tata steel roof houses the PV panels, facing due south.
Though we live on the western edge of the New Forest in Hampshire, our newly-built holiday home, The Longhouse, is on the Isle of Lewis, the northernmost island of the Outer Hebrides, 50 miles north-west of the Scottish mainland where we have strong family ties.

I was born in the island’s main town, Stornoway, my parents hail from the island, and I spent many long holidays there growing up. Paul is a Yorkshireman but loved Lewis after our first trip there together more than 20 years ago.

The Longhouse – Taigh Fada in Gaelic – is built on a half-acre plot of our old family croft on my father’s side (MacLeods). My great-great-great-grandfather was probably the first occupant of the croft and its first house, 200 years ago. On the land where The Longhouse now sits, our crofting families grew potatoes, corn and vegetables for themselves and hay for animal feed. There had been three houses on the croft – two thatched blackhouses and a more recent whitehouse where my father grew up.

We built The Longhouse at one end of this long strip of crofting land, with reed beds, sea, moor and big skies around us. Primarily, we wanted to build a family home, though we do rent it out as a self-catering holiday home with a touch of luxury. We wanted our house to be a modern take on local tradition that would deliver all we wanted when spending time there ourselves.

We thought about the different routes we could take, but distance drove us down the architect-led sole contractor route. Of three island-based architects, we appointed Gordon Anderson in January 2011. The choice was important as we had to trust him to be our eyes, ears, and...
heart, to oversee the build for us but keep us involved. It worked, though not without challenges for us all.

We began by coming up with a wish list and discussed many ideas with Gordon so he had a good understanding of what we wanted for the design. At the core, Gordon created a modern interpretation of the traditional island style, a light-filled house with lots of glass so we could enjoy both the inside and out as it blended into the landscape the way the old blackhouses used to for protection from the elements. Traditional blackhouses were single-storey structures and, using natural materials and the local topography, would fit rather than fight with the landscape. The Longhouse reflects that concept with the main living area set lower than the sheltered entrance space and bedrooms and whilst we have a second level, it is built into the roof space to retain a low profile.

We secured planning permission in July 2011 without any hiccups, and by December had received six replies from tenders. We chose our local island builder, Alex Murray Construction, redefined our costs to get back on budget, and were ready to break soil in January 2012.

On our visit in March, we saw the 110 sq m layout in reality rather than on paper for the first time. The entrance to the house is on the road side but as you walk in you can see right through to the front. The triple-aspect, open-plan space gives us light and expansive views south and west from the living space and bedrooms. Even the corridor link from living space to the main bedroom is naturally lit from above with skylights. A steel portal frame was designed into the structure so that it could withstand the Hebridean gales.

Sticking to our budget was a challenge throughout. We worked hard number crunching before the build to bring the tender cost back within budget and Paul sought to maintain that cost level during the build. But within the first few weeks, we had the additional unplanned expense of a sewer pump to link us with the mains.

Though the logistics of the project forced us to use a sole building contractor, we agreed all finish specifications, and to source and supply many elements ourselves so that we could be in control of what we wanted, at the best price possible. This entailed a year of some serious shopping! That meant research to hunt around for the best deals and interesting furniture, getting to grips with a multitude of technical nuances, ensuring correct measurements from a distance and trying to visualise rooms still to be built.

The final cog was the delivery logistics to get these to site. Many retailers don’t deliver to the islands so we worked with Simon Dunne, a ‘man with a van’ in Inverness, to help with onward deliveries. This was a real help.

We searched long and hard for the kitchen units. I wanted something that wasn’t too ‘kitcheny’ as it was part of the open-plan living space. We found the perfect aqua-coloured units in the end from Wren. We finished the
kitchen off with three amazing pieces of beech from trees felled locally in Lewis Castle Grounds after storm damage. These became a stunning central island unit worktop. Some of our other more interesting interior design touches travelled home with me from overseas business trips during the two years of planning and building. We did buy some goods such as the bathroom fittings locally, but as very little is actually produced on the island, we bought what we wanted at the best price, either from high street retailers, shops close to home, or online. We did look first to suppliers in Scotland at least.

All the timber for the structure came from Russwood, with Siberian larch cladding chosen for its durability, and engineered oak flooring and internal doors sourced from McNairs of Glasgow. Choosing socket, light fitting and switch locations was interesting, considering the walls had yet to be built.

To constant blue skies and dry weather – and early summer reports of the islands facing drought conditions for the first time in living memory – rooms began to take shape and a serious amount of insulation was packed in. According to the Met Office, the area received only 14.5mm of rain for the first 24 days of June 2012 compared to the monthly 78.4mm average. By then, we could see how the floor to ceiling windows framed the views that were so important to us in the design. It was very difficult – practically and emotionally – to find ourselves so far away from the action. We visited Lewis every couple of months, thanks to some great flight connections between Southampton and Stornoway – only five hours door to door!

The distance did cause frustration and visits were critical in checking on details. We relied on email (2000+ exchanges) and phone calls to progress things with the architect as we were keen to be actively involved in decision-making, which were often of the "we need to know NOW" variety! A weekly photo journal provided by my uncle in Stornoway plugged the visual gap between visits so we peered at photos to view progress.

But we were there midsummer, when the underfloor heating pipework went in, and followed the miles of cabling through the house to the main junction. Paul experienced his first Hebridean summer solstice, the longest day of the year with light in the sky at that latitude around midnight.

**The floorplan**

The 113 sq m ground floor was designed to make the most of living space and open southerly views to the front. Upstairs evolved as a second relaxing area, with 30 sq m, overlooking the open-plan area below and cabrio windows opening up to the front.
We had deliberated long and hard about the wisdom of fitting photovoltaics this far north, but finally decided to take the plunge, so when the roof was fitted in August, we installed 16 Schuco PV panels (4Kw). Over the year and thanks to long summer days, we get enough daylight to generate power to provide some payback through FIT. We secured a small grant to fit the Mitsubishi air source heat pump that is our main source of heating. It was costly, but there is no mains gas on the island.

Like most builds there were problems, challenges and hiccups along the way— but none proved insurmountable. One hiccup was the glass balustrade for the stairs, with the supplier going bust. This meant a month’s delay while we scrambled to find another supplier. Ironically, a local island company was able to supply it, albeit at twice the price.

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Eight months in, we could explore our 30 sq m space upstairs and were surprised by how spacious it was, our wee holiday home had grown into something else, something special, but something that felt just right.

A local artisan stonemason built the feature stone walling. The days he spent selecting stone from a small quarry on the island reaped rewards in the colours and warm tones in the stone and complement the small areas of smooth coloured rendered wall and the cladding.

Then we saw another wow factor – the Cabrio balcony windows from Velux set into the roofline. This is the perfect place to soak up the views on sunny days with a glass of something chilled.

By November, we were impatient to see the house completed. Externally it looked finished. The standing seam steel roof from Tata, which Gordon had thankfully persuaded us to go with instead of slate, was on, complete with PV panels and electrically controlled Velux windows. The larch timber cladding was on, and our front door and double-glazed windows all from NorDan were installed ready to weather all storms.

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The final clean-up of the site began in December 2012 and continued into the new year. Finished at last. As we peered at the latest photos the house looked fab except for one thing. Our lovely Charnwood multi-fuel stove looked very far from the wall; and wasn’t that the heatshield leaning against the wall? So, the final challenge was for the builder to relocate the stove to the correct position – the legacy is a kinky flue, which I guess adds a bit of character!

We headed up on our first road trip from Hampshire to the Hebrides, aiming to drive the 700 miles in two days. Paul wanted us to do the interior painting – our contribution to finishing the house – but we spent nearly a week just cleaning so we ran out of time when our real lives got in the way. In Hampshire, I run my own corporate communications consultancy, Cardeas, and travel overseas frequently; Paul is a performance manager in the petrochemicals industry.

We conceded and local painters came in during February and March 2013 to finish what we started. Wall colours were kept neutral and light, adding a palette in the soft furnishings that reflected the landscape around the house. The larch cladding is now softening the house into the landscape.

Despite all trials and tribulations and budget panics (and there were plenty of each), it has been more than worth it – we love the house, its calm, light feeling and the views. The Longhouse looks pretty much how we imagined in the original design drawings. It is light whatever the weather, and it’s an idyllic place in which to sit, and watch the world go by.