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# HOME



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# Counting on quality

*CHRISSEY HARRIS explores a Dartmoor home where very precise thought has gone into its build and design to match the surroundings*

IF DARTMOOR is Devon's Wild West, then The Counting House is a last outpost. Shielded by a cluster of trees, high up on a hill, this comforting-looking building stands like a beacon of hope in an otherwise bleak landscape.

Many a weary visitor has called in here over the years - some after getting lost on their way to deliver an Amazon package, others to report an injured sheep or to find their dog.

Yes, life is never dull in these parts, according to owners Mike and Zoe Hope who have lived in The Counting House - once home to the wage captain of the local quarry - at Cadover Bridge, near Yelverton, for nine years.

Playing cowboys here is great fun, but that's not the reason Mike fell for this distinctive place. Well, not the main one.

The architect with a passion for oak timber frames saw an opportunity to use his know-how to restore this 1900 "pre-fab-style" building to its former, beautifully simple glory.



The Counting House has been redesigned as the perfect family home for Mike, Zoe and their three children Alex, seven, Tommy, four and Jojo, one





The lounge is the ultimate wow-y room

Inside, it's clear to see he's done just that. This is a conservation officer's dream – everything has been perfectly preserved but given a new lease of life.

Original woodwork flows seamlessly into modern oak beams and reinforced glass panels, ensuring this locally-listed building lasts at least another 100 years.

"It just hadn't been looked after and was rusty and rotten in places," says Mike, adding there was mould growing up the walls, broken windows, no insulation and no heating.

"It was in a bit of a mess, really. I said to the conservation officer, I could patch this up but by the time I've done that, there's going to be more new than original.

"So wouldn't it be better if we just replace it to match, using the materials we have? Let's get it looking right."



The boys mezzanine play area is a secret hideaway full of toys

*'When people come here they say: Cor! This house goes on for miles. But it just gives that impression'*

It was to be a massive undertaking that involved stripping the house back to its frame and reassembling it piece by piece, all while insulating and re-wiring to modern standards.

And, as with many of these renovation projects, the story involves temporary living in cramped conditions, a pregnant wife, oh, and a couple of wild guinea pigs.

"Zoe was pregnant and we were sort of camping in the studio building outside while the work was being done," says Mike, 45, a partner at Roderick James Architects, based in Totnes.

"The guy we bought the house off left these two wild guinea pigs living underneath the floor of the studio.

"We named them Wilson and Pickett. We didn't feed them, they just lived there, under the floor.

"Then one day the farm cat ran past the doors with Pickett in his mouth, so that was the end of him. But then I thought: I've got to catch Wilson.

"But how do you catch a wild guinea pig?"

Mike explains how he chased it for while but then decided to lean out of the window, clutching a small stick to help direct the animal into a waiting hutch with the door propped open.

A bit like a Benny Hill sketch?

"This whole thing has been like a Benny Hill sketch," he laughs, after telling me about the time the chicken they also inherited chased off a fox, and then how their dog ran off across the moor and had to be rugby tackled to the ground.

"To start with our life here was this sort of Good Life, which was part of the idea of moving here.

"But gradually, we started to learn things. We changed everything."

Dartmoor can be an unforgiving place but Mike and Zoe, 36, a nurse, have adapted and survived.

That has meant dealing with the wildlife and the weather but also the people who come to



#### THE LIVING ROOM

The lounge is the ultimate wow-room. "This is the bit of the house we added," says Mike. "It's like a big, oak-framed barn."

Timber braces lock the frame together and stabilise it and high-tech metal braces, made by Dartmouth-based engineering firm Hercules, go across the glass.

A ladder, disguised as a bookshelf, takes the boys up to their special mezzanine playroom. From here, they can go along another walkway and down a set of stairs to their bedrooms.



#### THE OAK FRAME PILLAR

"This is one of my favourite bits of the building," says Mike. "These four peg holes go through and lock this piece of wood into the mortise and tenon joint.

"The oak pegs are seasoned and tapered. When they drill holes through this beam, they offset the hole slightly. When you drive the peg in, it pulls it really tight. As oak dries, which can take years, the wood starts to shrink and it all locks in."

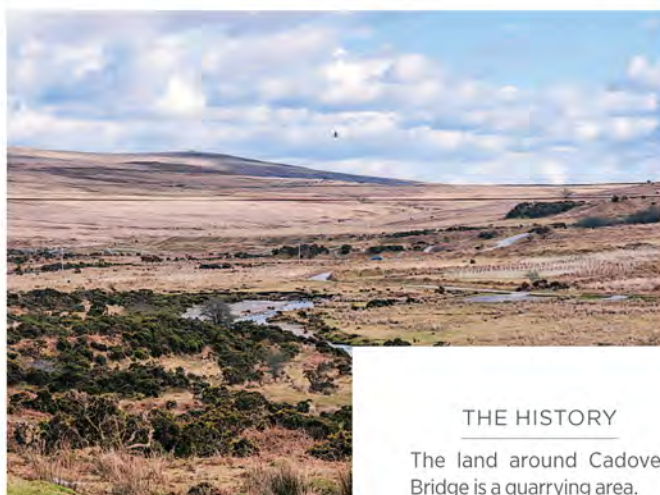
The oak frame is by Carpenter Oak Ltd, Totnes.carpenteroak.com

The family bathroom with not a tile in sight. 'I'm not a big fan of wall tiles,' says Mike. 'I like rooms feeling like rooms'



**above** Original woodwork flows seamlessly into modern oak beams and reinforced glass panels, ensuring this locally-listed building lasts at least another 100 years

**below** The family enjoys spectacular views of Dartmoor from their home



#### THE HISTORY

The land around Cadover Bridge is a quarrying area.

The Counting House is thought to have been home to the local wage captain for the quarry behind the house (now a fishing lake).

Local men used to walk up from the surrounding villages to the quarry and then come back and get paid as they went past the house.

The style of the building is unique. "In the latter half of the 19th Century, there had been this explosion in what we would now call pre-fabricated buildings," says Mike.

"Several companies in the country were starting to offer them via catalogues. "When you see buildings like this counting house, or a village hall or scout hut, they tend to be from that age.

"The point of them was that they were a dry-build. There are no 'wet works' (plaster) above foundation level."

They were put together like a kit but the timber is incredibly strong Baltic pine.

enjoy this popular patch of the national park.

In the summer, Cadover Bridge is a haven for day-trippers and swimmers who come to splash about in the River Plym. In the winter, it attracts legions of sledgers, keen to make the most of the only snow in Devon.

"We're a bit of an island in common land here," says Mike. "Everything you see outside that window is common land so people can walk around.

***"The big heavy timber makes you feel safe and nestled in. If it was all glass, I think you'd feel more vulnerable."***

"I knew I had to think about privacy."

The Counting House has been cleverly re-designed to allow the couple and their three children Alex, seven, Tommy, four and Jojo, one, to see the moors, but not let it see them.

There is plenty of glass to let in the beautiful views, but, at the crucial points, there is solid wall and oak.

"The big heavy timber makes you feel safe and nestled in," says Mike. "If it was all glass, I think you'd feel more vulnerable."

The cross-like shape of this house also helps to give the feeling of space, while at the same time keeping things cosy.

"You walk in, you see the moor, you know where you are," says Mike. But also for a family home, you're always connected with everybody, with these views going off in all directions.

"When people come here they say: Cor! This house goes on for miles. But it just gives that impression."

It's all so clever and I'm in awe of Mike's skill and attention to detail.

Who knew that a mortise and tenon joint in an unseasoned timber beam could be so satisfying to look at?

But it is. The very framework of this place is a work of art.

"It creaks a bit and you hear the rain, but you know, it's quite nice," says Mike. "It's a bit like camping."

Or being a cowboy. ♦