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blending in with the environment

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Written by Anna Reynolds

After visiting the Isle of Skye 16 years ago, Maggie Williams and her husband Stuart Quigley knew they wanted to live there one day. Although they loved the character of the old croft houses on the island, they felt that building their own property would give them the freedom to have a traditional-looking home, with all the modern fittings of a new build. It also meant they could choose a plot with beautiful views. Maggie, 37, says: "We originally intended on buying an old croft house and renovating it, but at the time the price of the old croft houses rocketed. It then dawned on us that we could buy a building plot for much less and build a home just as we wanted it, knowing that the roof and all the electrics would be sound."

The couple, who are both teachers, chose a Skye Homes kit to build their house because it was aesthetically pleasing and fitted in with the traditional, 20th century croft houses in the area. They first heard about Skye Homes when two

new houses were built in the nearby town, Portree, using the kit.

Maggie added: "Skye Homes seemed a natural choice as they had first-hand experience with building on the island. Their kits contain more wood than others, so they are strong enough to stand the windy conditions. We liked the simplicity of the design and how it is sympathetic to the local environment and surrounding style. We also liked the fact they had a bespoke design service."

In 2005, Maggie and Stuart bought a 1/2 acre plot in Elishadder, near Staffin, Skye, overlooking a small loch and the Trotternish Ridge. The planning process was straightforward and took place within the Highland Council's timeframe as the land already had outline planning permission. As the plot is in a National Scenic Area it was stipulated that the house had to have natural slate on the roof, which had been in the couple's original plans. Maggie and



EARLY STAGES OF THE SKYE HOMES KIT BEING ERECTED

Stuart, 38, also opted to have skewers on the roof to hold it down, which is a feature of original croft houses. This was one of the first designs that Skye Homes had made in this way.

John MacDonald, director of Skye Homes, newly acquired by Breton Developments, said: "We encourage our clients to make their houses look as traditional as possible to reflect the history of the island. Maggie's request for skewers was a challenge and required additional detailed work, which we were happy to provide. Since the project we have offered this design to other selfbuilders."

The drawings went into planning in 2006 but the build didn't start until 2008 as the couple were living and working full-time in Cumbria, an eight hour journey away. It was important that Maggie and Stuart could continue their teaching jobs while the house was being built, so they employed a project manager to oversee the development and Skye Homes handled the rest. Maggie

says: "Skye Homes dealt with the building warrant, drawings and registration process. We told them the layout and features we wanted and that was it. They explained everything to us and kept us updated at all times, while our project manager sorted out the tenders and tradesmen."

The severe weather conditions on the island presented several problems as it was often too dangerous for the builders to work on the site. On several occasions the scaffolding collapsed and a particularly heavy storm put construction on hold for two weeks.

The south-facing house has amazing views so the couple made sure that lots of windows were put in on all sides with Velux windows upstairs. However, the house catches the worst of the prevailing winds and initially rain came through, which meant that the windows had to be replaced with industrial strength seals; this solved the additional problem of draughts.

When it came to clearing the site, the builders

Severe weather conditions on the island presented several problems

THE BATHROOM FITTINGS WERE SOURCED FROM LOCAL SUPPLIERS ON THE ISLAND



MAGGIE CURRENTLY RUNS THE ART CAFE FROM HER FRONT ROOM



THE HARDWOOD FLOORING AND TRADITIONAL DOOR FITTINGS GIVE THE LIVING ROOM A 'COUNTRY' FEEL

were unable to lay normal foundations as the ground consisted of peat and clay. They had to opt for a raft, which increased the cost of the overall project by approximately £10,000 and meant that new structural drawings had to be made, which delayed proceedings.

The couple had previously been living on the Scottish Borders in an old Cumbrian farmhouse dating back to 1690. They were in the process of renovating the property, which was damp and had to be pinned by two buttresses to keep it upright. Maggie says that one noticeable difference is how much warmer the new timber frame kit is compared to the old stone-built

house: "While we love older properties for their character they do come with a certain amount of problems and a lot of maintenance, which we were keen to avoid this time round."

All of the tradesmen working on the new build were local and used materials sourced from the island to keep the character of the house. This meant that any plumbing or electrical problems could be solved easily. This was important because the house is so remote. Most of the products inside the house were from local suppliers in the Highlands, including the hardwood flooring and the bathroom fittings.

The interior design is also traditional and has

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THE HOUSE OVERLOOKS A SMALL LOCH AND THE TROTTERNISH RIDGE

WORK IN PROGRESS: PREPARING TO LAY
THE SLATES ON THE ROOF AND THE
SKEWS ARE ADDED TO THE
FRAMEWORK OF THE HOUSE



The functionality of
the layout is very
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– Maggie Williams

project costs

Cost of land: £52,000
Overall cost of project: £148,000
Value of property now: £225,000

What was the high point of the project?
"Seeing the house completed!"

The low point was:
"Discovering that the ground conditions were unsuitable to lay down the foundations. Combined with the severe weather conditions on the island, the house would not have been stable."

Contacts

- Joinery work: RK Joinery (Robert MacQueen), Braes www.rkjoineryisleofskye.co.uk
- Project manager: George Milne, Struan
- Flooring: Russwood, Newtonmore, Purpletree, County Durham www.russwood.co.uk
- Doors & worktops: British Hardwoods www.britishhardwoods.co.uk
- Ironmongery: Jim Lawrence www.jim-lawrence.co.uk
- Bathroom: The Bathroom Shop www.thebathroomshop-carlisle.co.uk
- Kitchen: B&Q www.diy.com

the same layout as a traditional croft house only it is slightly larger. Both the kitchen and master bedroom are 'country' style with ledged and braced doors and a range cooker. Maggie said: "The functionality of the layout is very appealing; it is cosy with no wasted space."

Maggie and Stuart were very involved in the building process from start to finish and would travel up from Cumbria during the school holidays to work on the house: "We very much wanted to be hands-on and spent one New Years Eve laying the stone slabs in the kitchen!"

They moved in during June 2009 and Maggie admits they were worried about the valuation of the property on completion: "When the house was being valued we were told that house prices in the area had dropped between 10 and 20 per cent," she said. "Fortunately, because of the high standard of workmanship, and in particular the joinery work, the house was still valued at £225,000, which was the same as had been predicted before."

Maggie's dream was to set up an art cafe in a purpose built building next to the house, where she could pursue her own artwork. She gave up teaching in September 2011 and is living in the new house in Skye while Stuart finishes the renovation in Cumbria. Work is now underway to build the 'Ellishadder Art Cafe,' however, the builders faced the same problem with the ground conditions and had to excavate 1.5 metres deep and fill it with almost 300 tons of rock for a solid foundation.

Meanwhile, Maggie has been running the cafe from her lounge in the Skye Homes house where she sells handmade home accessories. The location and beautiful views make it the perfect spot for Stuart to pursue his landscape painting, which will be sold from the cafe. Maggie added: "Everyone you speak to about building your own home envisages it being a stressful process but ours certainly wasn't, we really enjoyed the whole thing!"



THE HOUSE IS SOUTH FACING
WITH BRIGHTLY LIT ROOMS