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# Bye bye bungalow

## How a Hertfordshire couple knocked down their home to build a radical new house

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# In with the new

The kitchen, with its freestanding oak island worktop

A Hertfordshire couple wanted a modern home — so they tore down an old one to build it, finds **Hugh Pearman**

Charlotte Wood/Chris Bourchier

**Building the Rushden house cost just over £500,000, while the site cost £430,000**

The entrance is guarded by windows from the kitchen and hall

John and Sue Heaps had always wanted to build their own home

As dreams go, this is a good one: a semi-retired couple living in a Jacobean house in Hertfordshire find themselves with more space than they can handle, and decide to downsize. So far, so straightforward. But John and Sue Heaps had always wanted to build themselves a new house. So they found an acre of land and an architect and did just that. The result is an object lesson in modern rural living.

The village of Rushden is almost, but thankfully not quite, picture-postcard. It has an assortment of houses that date from medieval times onwards, has a church and a tiny village green. And right on the village green, in an overgrown orchard sloping away to a view across fields that is worthy of Constable, stood a nondescript bungalow with a clutter of outbuildings.

It was for sale, with planning permission for it to be knocked down and replaced with a slightly gruesome new house. The Heaps spotted the advertisement in a local newspaper and reckoned they could do better than that. So they asked for ideas from several architects, were won over by the ingenious solution proposed by young architect Jeremy King, got the local planners on side, and went right ahead and built it.

Pull up in the village today, and you find a house that offers plenty of clues to building in Britain's fiercely protected countryside. It is obviously new, but with its assortment of three tiled and steeply pitched roofs it also echoes something of the layout and appearance of nearby houses and farms. It has things like dormer windows and a central chimney, but these look anything but folksy. It is clad in timber and white-painted render, but you wouldn't mistake it for a converted barn. In short, it is intelligent stuff: modernism meets traditionalism and they both get along just fine.

"We'd been living in our old house — Jacobean with a Victorian extension — for 30 years. Our family have grown up. And it's always been an ambition to build our own house," says John, as we sit at his old kitchen table in his brand spanking new kitchen, the heated stone floor gently toasting our toes.

It has been raining all morning but now the sun breaks through and Sue slides back the giant windows of the adjacent sitting room, opening up the whole house to the garden where a few late apples still hang from leafless branches. The house sits near the top of its site, hugging the village boundary. They have a giant-scaled canopy out there — King calls it a "supersized verandah" — sheltering a courtyard to sit and watch the sun set in the west. All in all, it is a bit of a rural idyll.

It is received wisdom that, in the overheated southeast, it costs as much to buy a site as it does to build a house. Here the equation was skewed a little: the site cost £430,000 and building the house cost slightly more than £500,000. There were also finance costs: although their house in nearby Benington eventually sold for a tidy (undisclosed) sum, they opted to carry on living there while borrowing the money for about two years to finance the new house. It's more normal to sell up to release the capital, then rent somewhere while the new place is being built. The mortgage was then paid off in full when they moved, so they now have a new house with no mortgage. That's the big appeal of downsizing. You don't have to overextend yourself.

**The brief that the Heaps gave to the architect was that they wanted to downsize, but also wanted to keep memories of the way the old house was arranged**

However, the Heaps had one very specific thing they wanted their architect to do. As King says, "Their brief to me was that they wanted to downsize, but to keep memories of the way their old house was arranged." That meant making the sitting room conveniently close to the kitchen, and keeping the feeling of space and high ceilings, in a house with far fewer rooms.

King does this ingeniously by stepping the house gently down the hill, allowing tall rooms without making the house too high overall. In the kitchen and bedrooms, the spaces rise right up to the white-painted roof. Elsewhere, as in the second "snug" sitting-room with its open fire set towards the back of the house, there are conventional ceilings.

Another memory of their old home is in the entrance, a low space guarded by windows from the kitchen and the hall.

In fact, there is also a separate door that leads directly into the home office next to the garage, but you hardly notice it because it is camouflaged in the timber-clad walls. So like some old castle postern, the front door is well overlooked.

Once you are through that, you are in a hall where white-painted slats filter daylight from a long rooflight above. Turn left and you are in the kitchen with its black Aga and freestanding oak island worktop, or you can slide open a Japanese-style screen into the main sitting room. Turn right instead, and you find yourself heading towards a suite of ground-floor guest rooms and the stairs. The office/study and utility room are round a corner behind the kitchen.

It is all very intimate, and if you count them all, there are only four bedrooms and three bathrooms, two sitting rooms, kitchen, utility room and study, but it feels a lot bigger.

The floor levels on both storeys step down from one end of the house to the other. That way, the master bedroom (being at the lower end) gets a very lofty roof. Unlike the sitting room below with its huge windows, the bedroom has just one or two small windows to frame the view. And that's one of the good things about this house: it mixes things up. It's not all to do with that modernist thing of maximum glassiness. But then it's not all to do with a fake notion of country-cottageness either.

Plenty of new houses get a bit fetishistic about costly materials. King manages to make cheap stuff look valuable. Those nice riven-stone floors downstairs are in fact standard garden-centre Indian stone paving slabs, with their rough edges smoothed off a little. The Japanese-style sliding screen looks like it uses waxed parchment but it's actually bog-standard flexi-plastic of the kind you tend to find on garage roofs.

Too many minimalist-modern houses are just a bit uncomfortable to live in. They dictate how you should live, and you can only use equally modernist furniture. But a real house in the countryside should be able to stand a bit of clutter. This one, which happily accommodates all kinds of pieces of good old furniture without complaint, is the kind of place that gives eclecticism a good name. It fits nicely into the village atmosphere — the Heaps have made good friends since moving in — and is the kind of place that will be able to get old without looking flaky. And we all want that, don't we?

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