John Hardiment and his Swiss wife, Nicole, have been living on the Isle of Wight for many years, much of that time living on a sailing barge, the Wilhelmina Maria – see the Footnote. But they have just moved into a little jewel of a house that they have built for themselves by the seashore near Cowes. From the outset, they wanted an ecological build (within their financial constraints), and I have been following their progress. It was a somewhat leisurely build lasting three years – one break of two months, for example, was for a cycle tour in Cuba.

Neither had any previous experience of new build, though John had chaired an historic building preservation trust for 25 years. He had originally been trained as an engineering draughtsman, and he put that training to good use during the project to produce detailed drawings, especially for details of insulation and airtightness.

At the end of the build I interviewed John about the experience.

Me: Where were you and Nicole living when you started to think about selfbuild?

John: When we bought the site in 2007, we weren’t thinking about selfbuild.

House prices were soaring out of control, and Nicole was worried that house prices could shoot up beyond our means – and we would be stuck on a boat for ever.

I happened to see ‘Beach Cottage’ [a shack with garden] advertised in the local paper on a Friday, and the auction was the following Tuesday. It just so happened that we had put some money into our bank account for something else, and there would be enough money in the account to pay a deposit – you have to pay the deposit the minute the hammer comes down.

We knew there was a restrictive covenant on the site, but we didn’t know much else, and we didn’t really have time to properly research it. We had been to visit the site, and we’d looked at the deeds, and so on. But we didn’t realise there was a public sewer running down one side of the plot, and that turned out to be quite a problem later on.

How much did you pay?

We decided we could afford to spend £150,000 – that was our ceiling. I was going to get an estate agent to bid on our behalf, but he was busy. I had never bid at an auction before, and was very anxious about being run up. So I held back. It looked as though it was going to make just over £100,000, and then I put in a bid of £110,000. But someone else was keen, and we ran up, and eventually it was knocked down to me for £144,000.

What had you bought?

It’s a small plot, roughly 8 metres by 20, and it had a shack on it that an elderly lady had been living in – the garden had been quite a picture. The site is only thirty metres from Gurnard Sailing Club and the beach. We put the property in the hands of a letting agent, and rented it out for four years.
The building on the site was originally a seaside hut built in the 1920's. It had been clad originally with corrugated iron, but this had been covered over later with timber boarding. It had a felted flat roof. The windows were rotting.

Many years before, I had a large Georgian house that I completely refurbished. An architect sorted the space out, and did all the detailed drawings. I organised all the work – that took 18 months. But it wasn't going to be economic to renovate the shack. So I thought I'd get an architect to sort it out, to replace the shack.

Our letting agent suggested an architect, and we went to him. He produced a scheme for a replacement new build that was nothing like what we wanted, but he did come across the public sewer problem. We weren't allowed to build within three metres of a public sewer. And with a restrictive covenant on the other side of the plot, we were left with a strip about a metre and a half wide that we could build on!

I knew a semi-retired structural engineer, Denys Barron, and he negotiated a fairly standard deal with Southern Water. They allow you to build within half a metre of a public sewer, provided that you renew the sewer yourself and the foundations go down 150 mm below the sewer invert. That enabled us to get a sensibly sized building on the plot.

So you had decided to replace the shack?

Yes.

In the first scheme we were keen not to take any view from our neighbours, so we tried to keep the replacement to the shack's footprint. But we went from one storey to two. I then had to engage another architect, because the sewer negotiation was too complicated for the first one.
The second architect put in for planning permission. This was for a building that was very similar to an office building I had renovated in Cambridgeshire. This second scheme had a timber and glass screen facing the sea, with a shallow pitched roof. It really wasn't suitable, and the planners refused it. The planners said our proposal was too tall, and they didn't like all the glass. We said we wouldn't have enough floor space if we only had a single storey; so they said we could extend our footprint towards the road.

I then asked the architect to draw up some plans along these lines for a one-and-a-half storey bungalow. I did some sketches, increasing quite considerably the glass area in his design. And then the architect interpreted my sketches to produce his drawings. He submitted the new drawings, the third scheme, and we got our permission.

ELEVATIONS

North Elevation
Due to the constricted site, most of the glazing faces north. Solar gain is lower, but the view over the Solent from the upper storey and balcony is grand.

Standard advice is not to make changes once the plans are drawn up. But these plans evolved during the build, eg, slates were used rather than the galvanized sheeting shown in the drawing.

South Elevation
This facade is overshadowed by the neighbouring property – hence the lack of glazing in the ground storey. (In fact, a small porthole window was fitted here during the build.)
When the plans were being drawn up, did you have any ethos for the build?

Because of its location, it was going to be a seasidey sort of place, in timber.

We went to the Eco Exhibition [at ExCel, London] – that was Nicole's idea – and as a result I was very fired up with the idea of a Passive House. The show came just at the right time for us and was very important. It opened my eyes to a whole world that I had very little knowledge of. Because of that, I got hold of a copy of The Sustainable Building Bible [by Tim Pullen]. This helped me with much of the basic thinking. It answered a lot of the questions I was finding difficult. It laid great emphasis on airtightness. In my view, airtightness is as important as anything else. It's one thing in which the building industry is very undisciplined. That's one of the problems of building these sorts of very energy efficient houses. At the moment, the discipline and basic understanding often just isn't there.

Did you feel that the planners put unreasonable constraints on the design?
We were unhappy in that they were saying our proposal was quite in order but then they changed their minds at the very last minute. We had developed a scheme, and then they threw it out – which I was annoyed about, especially as I had gone ahead and speculatively asked the architect to do all the building control drawings, too.  

That was the scheme for a two-storey box with a shallow pitched roof and a timber and glass wall facing the sea.

I can see now the planners’ objections, and I think that after the subsequent negotiations we came up with a much better scheme.

**FOOTNOTE: The 'Wilhelmina Maria'**

Before and during the build, John and Nicole lived on the 'Wilhelmina Maria' – a Dutch sailing barge, dating from 1895. It had been found ruined in a canal in Holland in the Seventies, and a Dutchman did a lot of work to restore it. The vessel was brought over to England – it does have an engine – and somebody lived on it moored in London. It eventually found its way down to the Isle of Wight.

![The Wilhelmina Maria](image)

While the barge was moored on the river in Newport, John happened to notice it from the bank and liked what he saw. Later, he was showing it to his wife, Nicole, when someone's head popped out from a porthole and said 'Would you like to have a look?' And from there it went on, with John and Nicole eventually becoming the new owners of the barge.

They have taken her down French canals halfway to the Mediterranean, and in the future they want to take her up to the Baltic.

**Next month:** Turning plans into reality.

© Copyright article by Robert Matthews in SelfBuild & Design magazine, April, 2016.