



BARN FREE

With straw-bale walls and overhead walkways, an architect and his wife have breathed new life
By Dominic Bradbury. Photographs by Mark Luscombe-Whyte



into the ubiquitous barn conversion.

They can't get enough of them in Norfolk. Turn your back for a moment and another one has magically appeared, with a gleaming 4x4 carefully positioned in a virgin driveway. The rural equivalent of the loft, beloved for their high ceilings, exposed beams and farmland views, barn conversions have spread like fire across the flat, brooding East Anglian landscape. So much so that in this great barn rush the original character and charm of many buildings have been lost within 'one plan fits all' developments.

However, when architect Anthony Hudson and his wife Jenny decided to turn an L-shaped barn in the grounds of their home into a pair of adjoining lodges, character was the key. Like so much of the residential work done by Anthony's London-based practice, Hudson Featherstone, the conversion of the 19th-century barn mixes local materials and craftsmanship with a contemporary style and a refreshing playfulness. While respecting as much of the original structure as possible, Anthony has experimented with straw-bale walls and locally sourced oak and flint. Instead of the usual Velux skylights, he has used traditional glass pantiles, while 'frameless' windows slide open and shut on metal runners.

'It is absolutely crucial that whatever we do is not only practical but has an element of fun within it too,' says Anthony. 'The local planners weren't a problem, although we did get a

Left Quaker Barn's living area is heated by a locally made wood-burning stove (Norfolk Stoves, 01603-860762). **Above** Anthony and Jenny Hudson outside Hall Barn's straw-bale wall

The living area in Hall Barn, seen from the bridge that spans the room, connecting bedrooms and bathrooms. **Below, from left** the bridge; the oak-clad exterior at the back of Hall Barn; Harry Bertoia Diamond chairs in Hall Barn's open-plan kitchen/dining-room





'WITH BEAMS EVERYTHING CAN EASILY END UP LOOKING LIKE YE OLDE CONVERTED BARN'



Left exposed flint walls in Quaker Barn's dining area. **Below** Beds for both barns were found in local antiques markets. This one, in Hall Barn, came from Key's Auctioneers in Aylsham (01263-733195)

bit of bother from the parish council. They thought that straw bales were not an appropriate material for a house. We thought that was extraordinary when we were talking about a barn.' Their convictions were right: the project has just won a regional RIBA award.

The Hudsons and their three children moved to Norfolk from Islington, north London, six years ago. They had spent the best part of 17 years working on their old house and, just as they finally had it the way they wanted, a hunt for suitable schools forced them into a move. 'We were up here and just said, let's look around and compare prices with what's going on in London,' says Jenny, who works as a potter. 'We decided to have a look at three houses and when we drove up to this one we thought it was amazing. That was it. The main house dates back to around 1700 and we haven't really done much to it. Then we bought the barn about a year later because it is close to the house and the idea of anyone else buying it would have ruined it for us. The dream was to have a house in the country with a barn that I could convert into a studio. But it hasn't quite worked out like that.'

Instead, Anthony decided to create two living spaces to be used as holiday lets in each wing of the L-shaped building. On two storeys with four bedrooms, Hall Barn is the larger of the two, in what would have been a Victorian grain store. Outside, the top section is clad in oak, while below are thick straw-bale walls, plaster-coated on the inside and pierced with a sequence of small windows. A protective transparent glass-fibre coating on the outside runs across bales and windows alike.

Inside, an open-plan sitting- and dining-room is spanned by a central 'bridge' above. This connects upstairs bedrooms and bathrooms at each end of the barn, while allowing a dramatic double-height ceiling for the living space downstairs. Colours have largely been kept neutral and natural; texture and contrast come in the shape of wood beams, bare plaster walls and a limestone hearth. The marble-chip and resin floor lends further contemporary edge.

'When you do have a lot of beams, then everything can easily end looking like "ye olde converted barn",' says Jenny, who acted as project manager for the conversion. 'But something as simple as the marble-chip floor transforms the place. If we'd used timber or slate it would feel so different.'

The adjoining Quaker Barn, in the other wing, is on a single level and would have been where farm carts were stored. Not so long ago it was also the children's indoor skateboarding track. Initially it was one large elongated space; Anthony installed an internal flint wall to separate an open-plan living area from the bedrooms and bathrooms beyond. Glass pantiles draw the light in, as does a small internal courtyard with flint cobbles on one side of the barn.

'With Quaker Barn there was actually less of the original structure left to work with,' says Anthony. 'So we were really able to extend and recreate the space using local materials, like the flint, in an unusual way. But we tried to keep the whole look fairly simple and, again, reduce the domestic look and keep a strong sense of the character of the barn itself, which was really important, especially from the outside.'

Furnishing both spaces on a budget fell to Jenny, who spent the best part of a year stockpiling pieces, such as the Harry Bertoia Diamond chairs and antique beds, the latter bought at auction in nearby Aylsham. As the deadline edged closer for the arrival of the first guests, the Hudsons filled the remaining gaps with sofas, coffee tables and other essentials from IKEA.

The project, begun in June 2000, drew to a close last autumn. With two days to go before guest D-Day, it was a case of all hands to the pumps. 'The last two or three days were really quite extraordinary,' says Anthony. 'We must have had about 30 people working here. But then it is good to have a deadline.' Especially for an architect.

Hall Barn and Quaker Barn are available to rent through Rural Retreats: 01386-701177