

The model for the English country house is changing beyond recognition.

Dominic Bradbury talks to the owners and the architects.

Photograph: James Winspear.

Across the English countryside a quiet revolution is gathering pace – a revolution by design. A new breed of English country house is at last coming into being, nurtured by a fresh generation of imaginative architects on the one hand and an open-minded commissioning class on the other. Just a decade ago, most new-build English country houses were neoclassical monsters, pastiche versions of a tradition that belongs to centuries past. But now England is finally catching up with other parts of the world and embracing a modern, contemporary approach, creating its own 21st century English country house with a big emphasis on sensitivity to the landscape and the environment.

All this has been a long time coming. A few years ago I wrote a book called *New*



Country House which celebrated original architectural thinking in the US, parts of Europe, Australia and elsewhere. But there was pitifully little to publish from Britain, which still seemed fixated on pastiche, borrowing from the 18th and 19th centuries. But now there are signs of a significant shift and a wave of striking modern houses either built or under construction.

“People who’ve made their money since the 1970s or 1980s no longer aspire to cloak themselves in the architectural garb of the English upper classes of the 18th century,” says architect James Gorst, well known for his superlative country houses. “They don’t

feel that the way to legitimise their wealth is by recourse to neoclassicism.”

Gorst’s clients are an open-minded group of design-conscious entrepreneurs, business people and financiers who want a country retreat yet also want a house of today, with all the comforts and crafted detail of city living. The new country house client is a sophisticated creature for whom modernist houses, bathed in light and open to the landscape, are an inspiration rather than a carbuncle. They are spurring a new tradition that may build upon the modest scattering of modernist English country houses that were built in the 1920s and 1930s and then largely ignored

for half a century, but also looks to California, Scandinavia and Australia for inspiration.

“People who commission modern houses have made their own money,” says Gorst. “They are individualists, entrepreneurs and professionals. They are well travelled, they stay in contemporary hotels, they read magazines such as *Wallpaper**. They are sophisticated and quite style-driven.”

As well as self-made, they also tend to be young or youthful and, for them, a neoclassical country pile belongs to another era; Brideshead is dead. A country house is a place to enjoy the landscape, to live a rural life, perhaps to raise a family, but not to compromise on style nor surround oneself with the trappings of another age. At the same time, the number of barns and other buildings ripe for conversion is shrinking, pushing the new breed of rural sophisticate to think about building from scratch.

“I’ve noticed that there’s much more interest in new-build contemporary country houses, especially over the past two years,” says John Pardey, another much-respected practitioner of the genre. “It does make me feel optimistic. Five years ago we’d be doing one house at a time, and probably one a year, but now we’ve got

HERE COME THE MODS



Main picture: Jackie Lee outside her Derbyshire hillside home by Hudson Architects. Inset, left: inside The Light House by Hudson Architects.



The new country houses immerse themselves into the landscape rather than trying to dominate it, and shroud themselves with natural materials that link into the land.

10 houses on our books. There is still an island mentality here compared to some other countries but now when I talk to my clients about Danish modernism or the Case Study Houses, they do light up.”

One of Pardey’s latest clients is Steve Hind, a company director involved in communications, who with his wife Dee Hind has commissioned a house by the architect in an idyllic spot in Wargrave, Berkshire. Like many new country houses it replaces an existing house on the site, a two-storey 1960s building. Hind and his family used to live in a 15th century farmhouse which they painstakingly restored. But they grew tired of the low beams and the lack of light from the small windows.

“It’s a quantum leap for us,” says Hind. “It’s an amazing site and it’s going to be a fantastic house which we can shape according to the way we want to live. We want a modern, open-plan environment and having lots of glass means it’ll be stunning. You’ll have this explosion of trees, greenery and the river.”

Like Pardey’s other house projects, this is a carefully crafted and original building, partly clad in cedar and raised up on stilts to protect the house from threat of flooding. As well as being eco-conscious, it’s sensitively designed according to the setting, orientation and the light.

“There are two kinds of country house getting through the planning system,” says Pardey. “One is nostalgic, mostly a neoclassical kind, and the other is modern. Good contemporary houses are getting through because they do attend greatly to

context and are thoughtful in their use of materials and resources.

“There’s a generation of architects, of which I’m a part, who have learned from the mistakes of previous generations, and for us concrete and render is anathema. This generation is more about using good, natural materials. The priorities are to create a house that is looking out, not in, and working with nature and embracing the outdoors.”

The whole ethos behind the new country house is very different to that of the past. Typically, a neoclassical country house – however beautiful an achievement it might have been in its day – imposed itself upon the landscape and dominated it while the landscape itself was shaped and changed to suit. These were houses, like castles, that could be seen for miles around – indeed, that was partly the point.

But today’s country houses take more lessons from the belvederes of the past – more modest structures that open themselves to the landscape and draw it in – rather than the master’s country seat. They take lessons, too, from barns and agricultural buildings, immersing themselves in the landscape with discretion rather than trying to dominate it, and shrouding themselves in natural materials that link into the land and environment. These models are spliced with inspiration from the classic country houses of the modernist movement, yet softened with a lighter approach to materials, colour and texture, while sustainability in all things is another constant priority.

All of this and more is true of a new country house

designed by Aedas Architects for its client Mick Claffey, an entrepreneur in property restoration and other businesses, and his wife. For many years Claffey has been restoring a small collection of Voysey cottages and lodges that once formed part of the estate of Voysey’s Perrycroft House in Herefordshire, an Arts & Crafts classic from the late 1890s. Claffey and his architects recently gained planning permission for a contemporary country house on his



seven-acre site in the Malvern Hills. This striking, flat-roofed house will be pushed into a hillside with a stone plinth and a casing of oak and glass above. The main living spaces of the three-bedroomed house will be on the first floor, maximising the views across the valley below. This labour of love, which will be built next year, will also have the highest possible eco credentials.

“We were clear from the beginning that we wanted to go for a modern building,” says Claffey. “We wanted to do something that was simple and elegant; to reflect

the kind of thing that Voysey might do if he were working today. That’s where we started from. We do need to be looking more to the future in the way we design and construct our houses.”

Sitting within the context of historical listed buildings and a site of outstanding natural beauty, this kind of contemporary house would have stood little chance of getting through planning a few years back. But with a massive amount of homework and support from a forward-thinking local planning office, the scheme got through under a recent directive called Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS7) which allows for occasional one-off country houses if they reflect “the highest standards of contemporary architecture” and enhance the immediate setting. The word “contemporary” was a key change in emphasis from an earlier planning policy, which was often interpreted as being more in favour of pastiche buildings.

“The planning officer was involved right from the start, before we had even started on the designs,” says Dan Barnes, project architect at Aedas. “And they were insistent on a contemporary approach and something set apart from the Voysey buildings. If it had been a pastiche house, it could well have taken away from the importance of the original Voysey house and cottages.

“Both the planning and conservation officers were much more enlightened than you might have expected 10 or 15 years ago in a rural location. One of the biggest stumbling blocks to developing a

Top: Aedas Architects’ house for Mick Claffey will have the living area on the first floor to maximise views. Above right: a Norfolk house by James Gorst.



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new English country house tradition was the perceived 'pastiche' approach of planning authorities but now PPS7 encourages a more contemporary approach. That encourages architects because these are the kind of things that we want to be doing."

With three bedrooms and 2,000sq ft of living space, plus stables and garaging, the house is not tiny but it is modest in comparison to the neoclassical drama of many pastiche houses that have got through the system in recent years. It is also modest in attitude and approach and discreetly positioned in the landscape, while the use of stone and timber help tie it into the surrounding woodlands.

The new breed of country house covers a wide spectrum of design styles and approaches, but sensitivity and sustainability as well as a considered approach to materials and context seem to bind together disparate country house projects. Anthony Hudson's Light House in Derbyshire is

Above: a computer visualisation of a house in rural Dorset by James Gorst Architects, being built in cement panels and oak.

to their own specification, and I thought I just won't rest until I've done it. I know the amount of effort that it takes to do something

slightly different, and the expense of it, but I think it's worth it. We don't want houses that look like the kind of thing we've been building for centuries. We have so much creative talent, why not use it?"

The idea of a contemporary building tailored to your individual needs is a hugely attractive one. These are houses where conventions can be broken, where technology can be built in, where innovation can come as standard. Rather than squeezing your way of life into an old building or the shell of a barn, the new country house offers a different kind of style statement allied to a bespoke product.

"With a new building tailored to your own brief you can introduce elements that you might enjoy in the town or city, such as home cinema, home offices, modern technology," says Piers Smerin of architects

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a very different kind of building to the Claffey House, but also pays great attention to site, context and materials.

Hudson has designed a number of country houses, including Baggy House in Dorset, which was one of the first of the new generation of English country homes. Jackie Lee, managing director of The Dolls House Emporium, commissioned a new home perched on a hillside site near the Derbyshire town of Belper. This is a bespoke and flexible house which makes the most of the stunning views, while keeping the main living areas on the upper floor with guest bedrooms and service spaces tucked away below. Stone and slate help anchor the building into the site, with banks of glass towards the front, including a miniature observation room projecting from the front of the building.

"I had been looking for somewhere modern and interesting to buy for years and never found anything," explains Lee. "Derbyshire has very little between farm cottages and mill owners' houses. The more I looked, the more I thought I wanted to start from scratch.

"So few people are in a position to build their own house and create something

Eldridge Smerin, currently at work on three new country houses. "These clients want those kind of comforts and may also have art or wine collections. We tailor a building around those needs.

"Once it was only mavericks who were building modern buildings in the countryside but now there is a new generation which wants the benefits of living in the country but also the sophistication of city living. It's a new kind of person. Somehow, for them, an old building seems inconsistent with the way they want to live. They're not necessarily that knowledgeable about styles of architecture; it's just that there's now a different set of requirements and values." ♦

ALL MOD CONS

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