



Across the Centuries

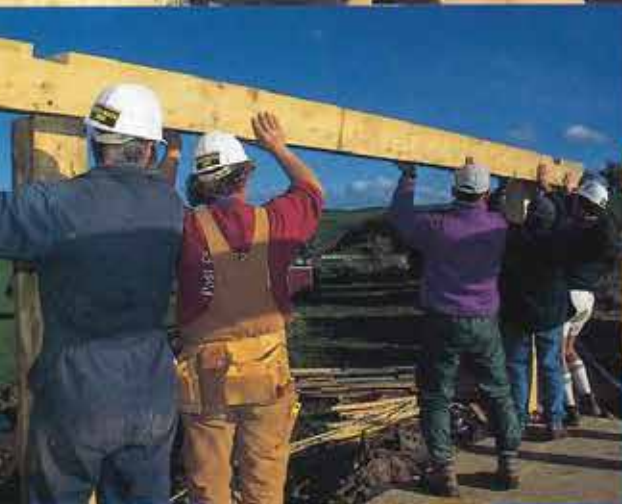
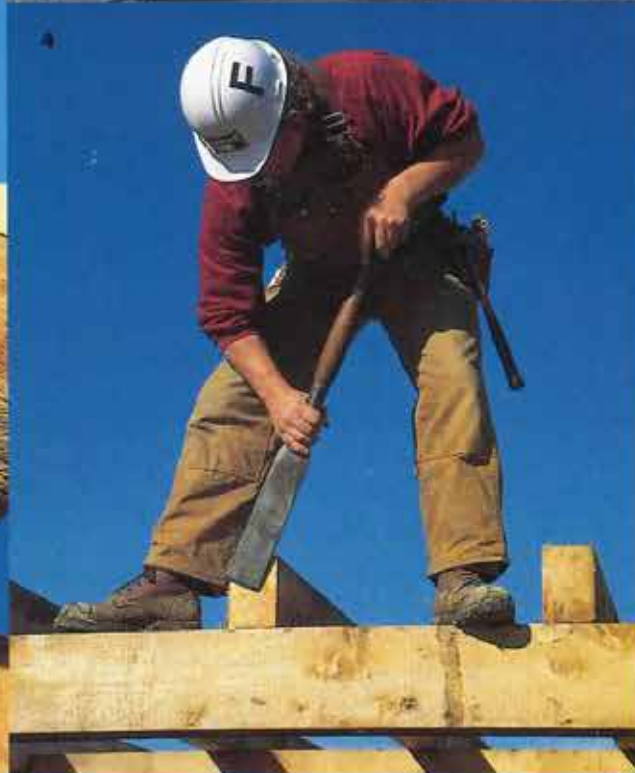
An enterprising company is using timeless building methods that span hundreds of years. Claire McCall reports

*Photographs:
Stephen Perry*

Slowly the frame of the house comes together in a farmer's shed the team now uses as a workshop.

It was customary in old England and Wales to name houses. This, the company's most recent venture, has been named Allt na Chriche, which is Gaelic for Burn on the Boundary.





The pioneering spirit is alive and well and flourishing in a small workshop just outside Matamata. It is here that a team of like-minded, passionate craftsmen are recreating a slice of history, using the tools and methodology that their forebears did many centuries ago in buildings like the Globe Theatre and Yorkminster Cathedral.

When carpenter Gordon Brouncker and dairy farmer Dewi Roberts discovered they held a mutual interest in traditional old English carpentry techniques, they decided not just to wallow in the nostalgia of it all but to live their dream; to build a timber-framed home from scratch which captured the distinct character of this ancient form of architecture. As far as they knew, it would be the first time this had been attempted in New Zealand.

Happily, Dewi's wife Jenny was not averse to the idea – in fact, she had always been captivated by the solid, distinctive nature of these buildings.

1. Man with a mission – Dewi Roberts relives a small part of the lives of his Welsh ancestors by building according to their lore.

2. The hand-crafted joints are each refined, then trial-fitted in the workshop.

3. Oak pegs, hand-whittled, take the place of nails in this joinery.

4. Randy Kauffman uses a slick to make a last-minute, on-site adjustment to one of the joints.

5. Teamwork has been the cornerstone of the success of this building project.

6. Precision and balance is what this form of building is all about.

7. Massive timber beams lie ready to be erected and locked into place. They are incised with a Roman numeral system to enable the pieces to be easily matched.



Nearly there – at the end of a day’s “barn-raising”, the timber frame of the new home is almost completely erected.

The Roberts’ own home was one of the first in New Zealand to be built entirely using the traditional post and beam methods. Even the lime plaster with its lime-wash finish used a traditional recipe and the Roberts created a pit in their front garden from which they drew their lime.

“I love the way the eye just follows the line of the beams,” she says, “and in the evenings the wood seems to glow, the whole place is golden.”

While Dewi and Gordon painstakingly handworked each piece of the timber frame that was later to become the skeleton of her home, Jenny delved into the library books, studying the historical, cultural and technical aspects of this refined craft – and ferried loaves of bread and flasks of soup out to the work site.

Shunning the use of power tools, the challenge was to create a timber frame by using rudimentary but time-proven post-and-beam geometric formulas and nail-less joinery. Dovetail, mortise and tenon, knee brace, collar tie and scarf joints were just some of the interlocking methods used. Beams were incised with carpenters’ marks to enable the workmen to piece together the gigantic puzzle of the structure. Hand-whittling the oak pegs that “nail” the frame together was another dictate of history.

In six weeks the frame emerged victoriously from the workshop and a traditional barn-raising ceremony began the Roberts’ ongoing love affair with their unusual home.

As a true labour of love, it had cost them around \$60,000 to construct.



Stepping inside the house is a sensual experience. The spacious character of the place is immediately apparent and a subtle scent of eucalypt used in the hand-carved parquet floors, permeates the air.

From a more practical perspective Jenny's home is blessed with an abundance of storage areas. The construction method allow the most efficient use of space with rooms that vie away from the conventional rectangle or square shape and occupy different levels and mezzanines.

With the dedicated and inspired input of Gordon and Randy, Dewi is, in the typical New Zealand way, learning more and more as he goes along.

"Dewi was brought up in Wales, on a farm just outside of Chester, so he's always had an appreciation of old solid-wood buildings," says Jenny.

"We're working our way back through history," says Jenny, "getting closer and closer to the traditional ways. It's nice to know we are developing a heritage – building with a lifespan that's measured in centuries, not merely decades." □

If you are interested in learning more about this building technique, contact Dewi Roberts at Post & Beam, Waghorn Road, RD Wabaroa, Tel/Fax (07)888091.

Such was the interest in this form of building that the team was soon joined by Randy Kauffman, a timber miller originally from Pennsylvania, who was not only avidly enthusiastic about the American timber frame but had a collection of 17th and 18th century tools which he happily donated to the cause.

As Jenny explains, the workshop, where the trio plan and craft these distinctive homes to commission (they recently completed a Tudor-style house), has become something of a tourist attraction.

"We've had visitors on a daily basis, both locals and from overseas, who are keen to see what we are doing here."

And Jenny, who actually lives in a timber-framed home with Dewi and her four young children, is an inspired hostess, happy to expound on the day-to-day virtues of this building revival.

This 18th-century mortise machine is made of cast iron. Randy imported it from his hometown in Pennsylvania.

Part of Randy's collection of 17th and 18th century tools includes a broad axe, an adze, spokeshave, corner chisel and drawknife.

