

Top: Dewi Roberts:

"No one else knew about these methods."

Right: the climbing rose Wedding Day has taken over the front entrance to Pen Saer Loft.

Below: now the spadework is done, it's time to add the finishing touches.



barn dance

A timber and plaster house, handcrafted in ancient Welsh style, is raised from the Waikato pasture with music and celebration.

The majestic Kaimai Ranges provide the perfect backdrop for this unique, timber-framed "affair of the heart". The result of years of planning, research, milling and constructing, Pen Saer Loft rose from the ground in 1992.

The traditionally built timber home is a tribute to the vision and hard work of an enterprising couple, Jenny and Dewi (pronounced Dowie, and Welsh for David) Roberts.

Welshman Dewi had worked on New Zealand dairy farms in the 80s and enjoyed the way of life. Back in the UK he met New Zealander Jenny, and after marrying here, they headed back to Wales for a year.

"We eventually decided to put some roots down, in New Zealand," says Jenny. "We'd heard about a quarter acre for sale in Wardville. But when we bought it in 1990, it was just an abandoned heap of rubbish."

During Jenny's UK travels she had photographed many beautiful timber-framed houses and barns, dating back to the 16th century. Little did she know that within a few years, she and Dewi would be constructing their own, using the same time-honoured methods ►



1992 PEN-SAER LOFT

This page: the parquet flooring adds a feeling of tradition to the lounge. The hand-hewn beams display the dovetailing and dowel pegs. The settee, chairs, chestnut corner unit, the wooden curtain rails and the voluminous calico curtains were all made by Jenny and Dewi.

beeswax gives
the eucalyptus floor
a warm, honey glow

barn dance

she had seen used in Welsh barns.

Their first move was to advertise locally for suitable timber. The response was incredible: "We'd set off for a farm with our Alaskan chainsaw mill, and fell then mill trees on the property in between milkings." Soon they had enough macrocarpa, oak, chestnut, lawsoniana, London plane and poplar (*Populus deltoides*) to begin frame construction.

Hundreds of hours of study combined with the application of ancient building methods saw the "barn" begin to take shape.

The timber was milled, then treated for borer. Once the Matamata-Piako District Council gave planning approval, Dewi and Jenny picked up their tools and "hewed" into action!

With Dewi working on a nearby farm during the day, and Jenny managing their family, which had grown to four by that stage, the evenings were entirely taken up with frame construction. "We used to have credit and debit days," says Jenny wryly. "A debit day was when we hit a nail with the chainsaw – the results were always disastrous!"

They used dowel – a traditional method of holding a frame together. Tree nails were hand hewed and used throughout – these take up the moisture in the timber and swell, making them nigh on impossible to remove! "I found it very pensive work," says Dewi. "I had to train myself to think three-dimensionally. It was a solitary existence – no-one else knew about these methods."

The basic tools were a chisel and a sledgehammer, used for the hundreds of mortise and tenon, dovetail and bird's mouth joints. Everything had to be sized and squared up, and after months of effort the four "bends" (main frames) were ready for raising.

In true barn-raising style, Jenny and Dewi's family and friends were called upon to help. "The local farmers turned up to help, gumboots and all, not knowing what on earth they were doing," says Jenny. With the assistance of a 20th-century crane, many pairs of hands, and lots of community spirit, the frames were hauled up into position. The Robertses' relief was immeasurable – it all fitted perfectly.

To celebrate the successful barn-raising, food and refreshments, ►



Above: daughter Rhian's wonderful bedroom, complete with restored antique hospital bed and calico-draped kidney dresser. The lime-plastered walls have a final coating of pink limewash, made the traditional way.

Right: in the main bedroom, rough-sawn lawsoniana provides the framework for traditional lime plastered walls and the sill for the dormer window. A quilt by Jenny adorns the bed.

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barn dance

music and a barn dance followed. "It was really just the beginning," says Dewi. "Then came the oak doors, the hundreds of pieces of eucalypt for the parquet floors, the internal stairs and all the kitchen units fashioned from chestnut. I had to do a lot of thinking before I started each project."

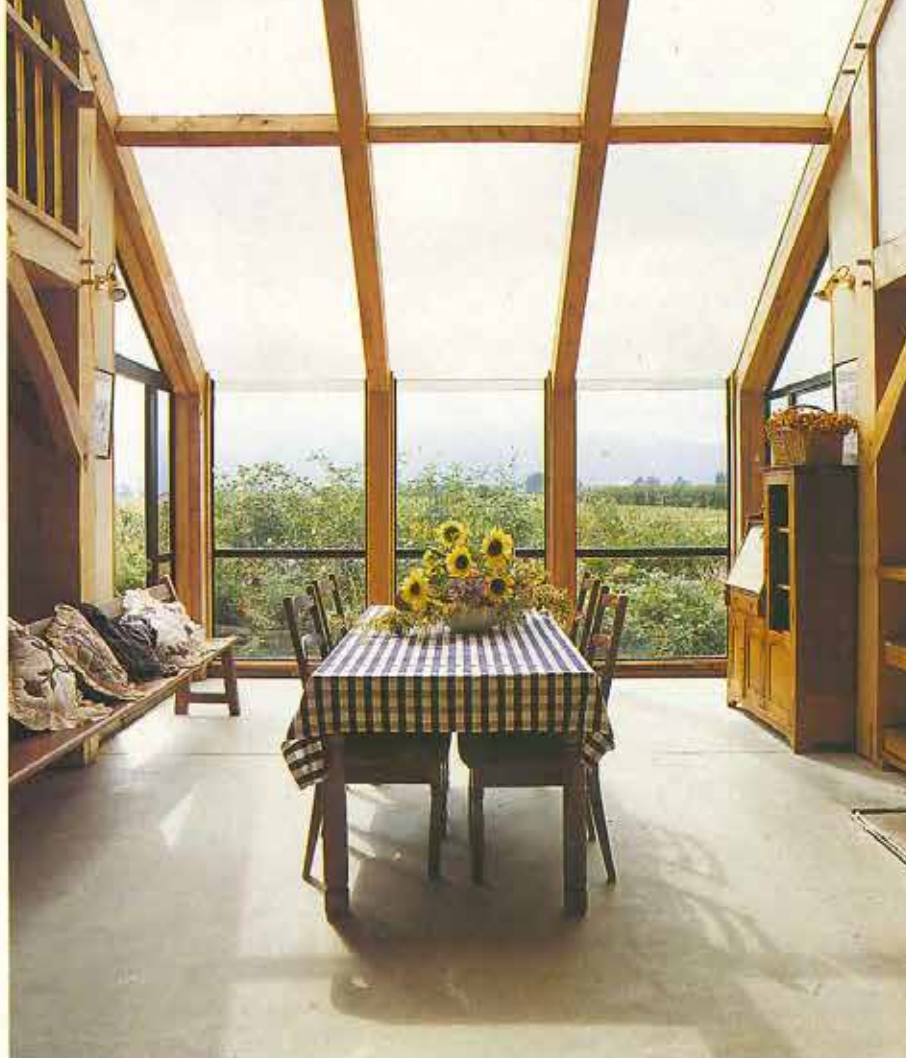
In keeping with fire regulations, Gib board was used internally, but all the hand carved beams are there on magnificent display, mellowing with time. The application of home-made beeswax to the parquet floors has brought a rich glow to the unusual grain.

The master bedroom walls are now finished in traditional lime plastering. "In all the old buildings of this nature in Britain, lime-plastered walls feature. The craft had all but disappeared with the advent of concrete, but the result is far more pliable and able to withstand climatic variations. A limewash protects the plaster for many years. Limestone from quarries is burnt in kilns dotted all over the English countryside, producing a lime calcium oxide. This oxide, when mixed with water, produces calcium hydroxide putty."

So, three years after the great barn-raising, the Pen Saer Loft – Welsh for "the chief carpenter's loft" is home for four growing children, the chief carpenter and his wife.

Now they have time to create the perfect old fashioned garden to surround this enchanting structure. □

Dewi and Jenny Roberts have since built two more timber-framed homes for like-thinking people. For more information, contact them on phone/fax (07) 888 0911.



Above: looking through from the solarium to the garden and the Kaimai Ranges beyond. The restored furniture comes from local dairy farm sheds and barns.

Left: the completed masterpiece employs 16th-century building techniques blended with some 20th-century finishes.



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