

The **Searles** have self built a characterful home that's inspired by Scandinavian low-energy design but bursting with traditional style

WORDS **SOPHIE HOYLAND** PHOTOS **MATT JOHNSTON**

When a house with land came up for sale in their Cambridgeshire village, Rob and Sandra Searles jumped at the chance to purchase it, with the intent of knocking it down and building their dream home in its place. "We had always wanted to self build, but didn't want to leave the area we had lived in for over 30 years," says Rob. "So when some land went on sale we put in an offer to buy it. The location was perfect – on the parish boundary at the end of the village, shielded by woodlands and overlooking a nature reserve that we knew could never be developed. The idyllic views would always be protected."

Initial design brief

The Searles had been living in an 1890s farmhouse and, although they loved their pretty home, they wanted to build something completely different. "I used to travel to Sweden a lot on business and always loved the environmentally friendly building ethos they have over there," says Rob.

The existing house was cold, run down and generally needed a lot of improvement work. Furthermore, it was too small for the Searles' needs. Sited on the corner of the plot, next to a lane that had a popular veterinary surgery, it wasn't in the ideal position and suffered from noisy traffic. What's more, it was only a few feet away from a neighbouring property.

"We wanted to build on another section of the land to take the best advantage of the views," says Rob. "Our plan was to live in the old house until the project was complete, at which point we could then knock it down. It was a much more tempting solution than living in a caravan."

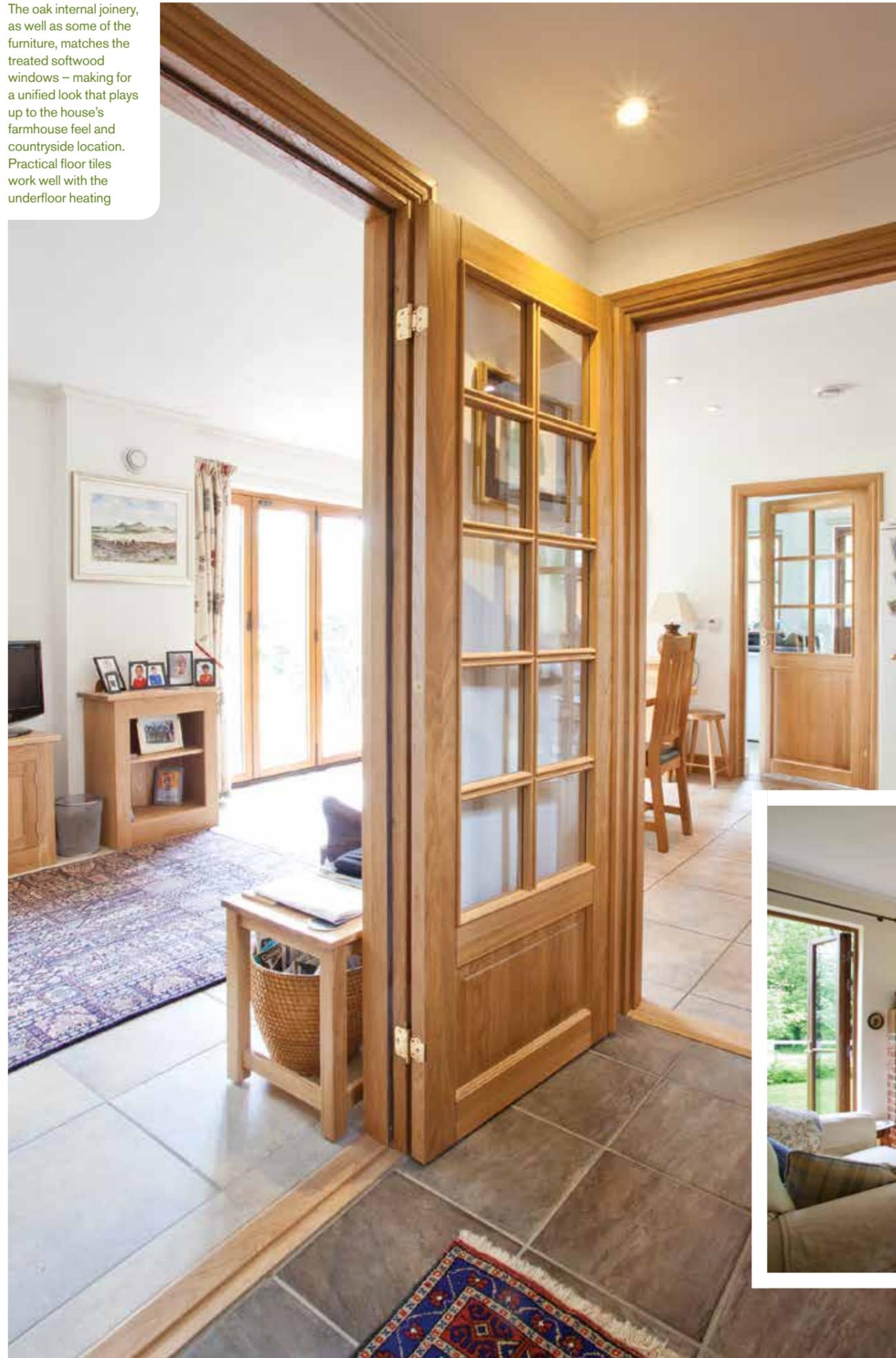
The couple initially approached Scandia-Hus and, after visiting its show homes, saw some designs that had potential. However, the scheme they liked the most was too large. "Although the plot had been part of the village for hundreds of years, it was outside the boundary and deemed to be in the countryside," says Rob. "Restrictions were imposed to limit any new building, which meant our new house could be no more than 15% larger than what was originally there."

The Searles modified a Scandia-Hus design for a chalet bungalow to get the maximum floor area for the volume available and



“We wanted to create a house that looked as if it had been around for some time, rather than brand new”

The oak internal joinery, as well as some of the furniture, matches the treated softwood windows – making for a unified look that plays up to the house's farmhouse feel and countryside location. Practical floor tiles work well with the underfloor heating



THE SEARLES FILE

NAMES Rob & Sandra Searles
OCCUPATIONS Retired marketing director & medical research scientist
LOCATION Cambridgeshire
TYPE OF BUILD New build
STYLE Traditional
CONSTRUCTION METHOD Timber frame
PLOT SIZE 1.75 acres
HOUSE SIZE 313m² (3,369 ft²)
LAND COST £315,000
BOUGHT July 2005
BUILD COST £548,398
COST PER M² £1,752 (£163 per ft²)
TOTAL COST £863,398
BUILDING WORK COMMENCED May 2007
BUILDING WORK TOOK 46 weeks
CURRENT VALUE £950,000



submitted drawings for approval. "The design went through to the full planning committee and was rejected for not being in keeping with the countryside location," says Rob. "We were advised to employ an architect who could design us something that was sympathetic to the local vernacular."

Back to the drawing board

After speaking with five architects, Rob and Sandra employed Ian Abrams. "He had designed a lot of houses in East Anglia that matched the style of dwelling we were after," says Rob. "We asked him to include dual-aspect windows to provide uninterrupted views out on to the woodland, and a partial basement for storage." A sympathetic rethink meant the new plans were approved.

Once consent was granted, the Searles sent Ian's drawings to Scandia-Hus for its designers to convert the plans for factory production of their timber frame. The couple also needed to find a firm to build an underground room. "We had a cellar in a previous home and always found it useful for storage," says Rob. "It was during the initial discussions with Glatthaar Fertiggkeller that we decided to include a full basement with a living area underground. It's a great way to add more volume and doesn't count towards the planning restrictions imposed on our site. As long as you're not putting bedrooms downstairs, and the space is ancillary to the main living zones, it doesn't count in the volume calculations." The Searles resubmitted plans with a full basement and it only took a week to receive approval for the revised design.

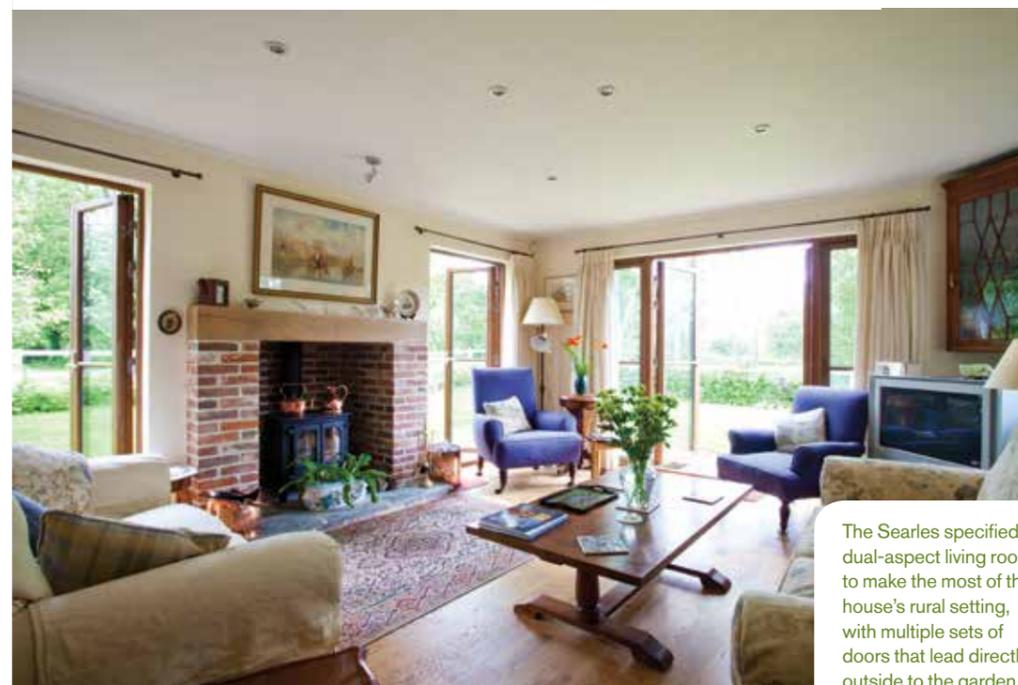
Taking a hands-on role

The Searles project managed the build, with Rob taking control of the contractors and the day-to-day management on site and Sandra overseeing the finances. The couple also kept architect Ian Abrams on board to check each phase and ensure those involved stayed true to his design. "Everyone worked really well together," says Rob. "I've constructed extensions before but never self built, so it was an interesting experience. I converted one of the rooms in the old house into a project office overlooking the new build. It meant I could see everything going on. If I wasn't on site but spotted something wasn't quite right, I could pop over and talk with the tradesmen."

The build process

Once consent was granted, the Searles looked for a contractor to build their home. "We wanted to use local people where we could," says Rob. "We put the project out to tender and finally chose a timber frame enthusiast. He had built a number of Scandia-Hus properties before, so he knew their system well and only lived two villages away, which was very convenient. He also selected the other trades, such as the roofer, plumber and electricians, who all worked really well together."

Construction commenced in May 2007 with groundworkers arriving on site to dig a 3.5m-deep hole for the basement. "The



The Searles specified a dual-aspect living room to make the most of the house's rural setting, with multiple sets of doors that lead directly outside to the garden

WE LEARNED...

SET UP AND MAINTAIN a dialogue with the local planning authority from an early stage. If pre-application advice is offered, then take advantage of the opportunity and consult the planners with your ideas before formally submitting plans

DRAW UP A BRIEF of your requirements and consult a number of architects. We contacted five different firms and asked them to show us images and plans of completed projects that were closest to our brief. We selected and appointed an architect who was willing to stay on board throughout the project to ensure our vision was maintained by all the contractors

PLAN THE PROJECT carefully, particularly the external and internal routing of services. This was particularly important for us as we had a prefabricated concrete basement, which meant all the service ducts needed to be fitted at the factory stage

excavation mirrored the footprint of the house with a metre added around the perimeter which was sloped back to stop the sides falling in – it was huge,” says Rob. “Glatthaar then built what was effectively a single storey house in the hole, a bit like a concrete block. They then tanked, sealed, insulated and backfilled it so that we were left with a concrete slab at ground level – the foundation.”

Next, Scandia-Hus arrived to lay out the sole plates on top and erect the frame. “It took just under eight weeks, including fitting all of the windows and most of the external doors,” says Rob. “We were surprised by how quickly everything went up and how little time we had between each phase. Glatthaar left on the Saturday, the scaffolding went up on the Sunday and the frame was delivered on the Monday. We wanted as tight a schedule as possible to keep the build costs down, but we didn’t quite comprehend how quick everything would be.”

The only big problem the Searles came across was water leaking into the basement before they fitted it out. “Some of the lightwells moved during the backfilling, causing seepage. Glatthaar solved it by injecting waterproof self-sealing foam into the basement and thankfully the problem hasn’t reoccurred,” says Rob. “It was the only major snag and it didn’t hold up the build. We were pleasantly surprised with how smoothly everything went. We thought the groundworks, build and basement would take a year; however, everything was completed in 46 weeks, which was a great achievement.”

Choosing materials

The Searles chose a fully sarked roof so that when the Scandia-Hus team left, the house would be completely weathertight. The couple chose a mix of tiles in various colours reminiscent of East Anglia to complete the roof. “We wanted to create a house that looked as if it had been around for some time, rather than brand new,” says Rob. The exterior is made up of a mix of materials – timber cladding, render and

masonry – and the bricks were also chosen because of their similarity in colour to others found in the Cambridgeshire area.

Creating an energy efficient home was a top priority for the Searles. They’ve installed extra insulation in the roof, a mechanical ventilation heat recovery (MVHR) system and wet underfloor heating. The windows are highly efficient with low U-values. They’re made from a treated softwood and fitted with triple glazing. “We wanted to build an environmentally friendly house,” says Rob. “The windows are made by Swedish company Tanums Fonster, which supplies all of Scandia-Hus’ windows and doors for its self builds.”

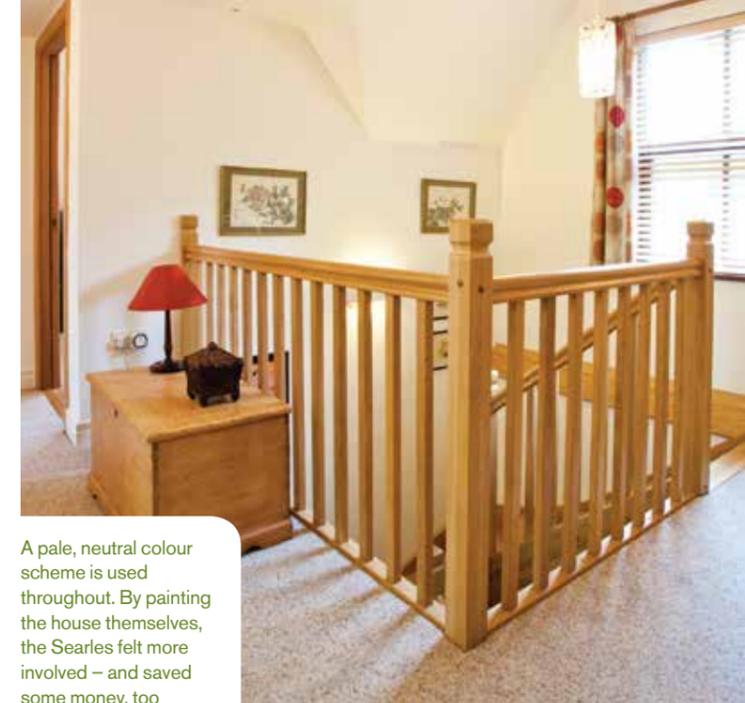
Rob and Sandra added 17 solar photovoltaic (PV) panels to their garage roof a couple of years after they completed the project. “We’re more or less self-sufficient in electricity because of the cashback we get from the Feed-In Tariff. The scheme was very favourable at the time we signed up to it,” says Rob.

Internal decoration

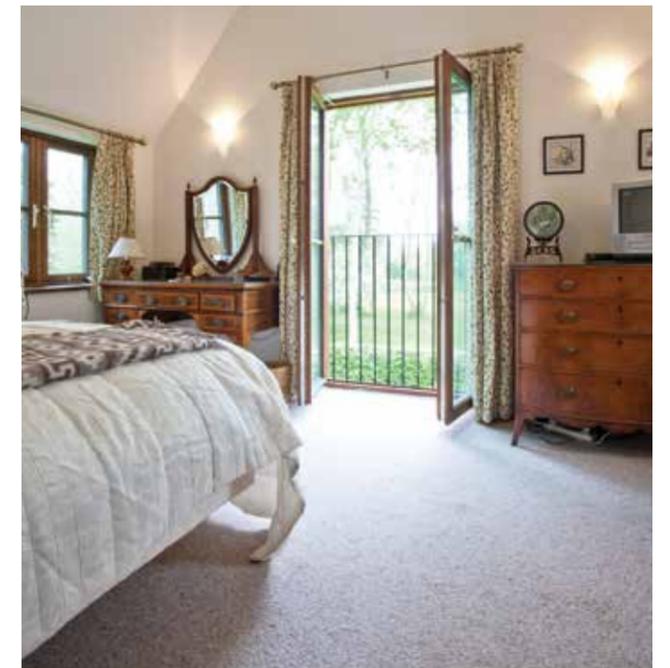
Inside the house, Rob and Sandra have kept to a simple neutral colour scheme. The bathrooms are painted white and the rest of the house in other pale and neutral tones. “We splashed out in the sitting room by giving it a lick of paint using Farrow & Ball’s Old White,” says Rob. “We did all the decorating ourselves to keep the costs down, much of it in the evenings after the builders had left for the day. However, I’m glad we did it; despite the hard work it was one of very few physical contributions that we could make.”

The Searles wanted a low-maintenance home, so all the flooring downstairs is ceramic tiles or engineered oak boards. Timber finishes are a recurring feature throughout the dwelling, with Swedish oak used for the skirting boards and architraves. All the

Centrally located staircases – such as the Searles’ – make a real feature of a larger hallway; the stairs continue down into the basement



A pale, neutral colour scheme is used throughout. By painting the house themselves, the Searles felt more involved – and saved some money, too



ground and first floor doors are in engineered or veneered oak, while pine doors are installed in the basement.

External aspect

The Searles did a lot of the landscaping from the outset. "We knew we would need access for a lot of heavy machinery so we got groundworkers in to build a hard-standing area to withstand the weight of the equipment," says Rob. "It's now used as extra parking

space in front of where our Roundwood three-bay garage now stands. We had to apply for a separate planning permission to build it, six months after we completed the build." All leftover top soil was reused to level out low-lying areas that were prone to flooding.

Rob and Sandra's house won the prize for best house in East Anglia at the LABC Awards. "We were really happy to win. Even though planning was a struggle, we wouldn't have done anything differently. This is our lifetime home, and we love it," says Rob.

closer look

Landscape design

The Searles have planted about 130 trees in their garden and the surrounding woodland, as well as hedges and shrubs. In the spring, there is a carpet of snowdrops, daffodils and primroses in bloom. "We tried to improve the landscape not just for us, but for the wider village, too," says Rob. "Before we bought the plot, the derelict woodland hadn't been touched for about 50 years and it's the first thing you see when you enter the village. I think we've managed to create a very attractive vista."



Extensive planting

Floor plans



House plans re-created using ARCON 3D Home Design Software. www.3darchitect.co.uk
Tel: 01252 267788 Email: arconsales@eleco.com

£ TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

| Elements | Cost % | Cost m ² | Total cost |
|--------------------------------|--------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Preliminaries | <1% | £6 | £1,930 |
| Foundations & basement | 21% | £367 | £114,882 |
| Timber frame supply & erection | 23% | £410 | £128,298 |
| Builder & installation | 41% | £717 | £224,300 |
| Kitchen & installation | 4% | £67 | £20,936 |
| Decorating materials | <1% | £3 | £840 |
| Garage | 4% | £71 | £22,111 |
| Landscaping | 1% | £26 | £8,185 |
| Gas & electrics | <1% | £6 | £1,897 |
| Fees | 5% | £80 | £25,019 |
| Grand total | | | £548,398 |

Useful contacts

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