January 2007

Happy New Year ! Onwards and hopefully, upwards - where will we be this time next year ?

Monday 1st January

Happy New Year !

The first few hours of 2007 brought with them the strongest winds yet. Fortunately we were not staying in the caravan overnight - as on our return there were quite a few things blown over that had remained standing throughout previous stong winds, and the plastic sheeting round the base of the caravan had come completely adrift. It had obviously been a horrendous stormy night. Thankfully the caravan was still in one piece.

We start the new year with determination to get cracking; first we need to stick some explosives up the architect's bottom to get them to finalise the building regulations application, and add the final amendments to the drawings. There are two builders quotes to chase, and stone samples to get hold of.

We have also found a way to help recover from the excesses of Christmas. Shift 3 tonnes of sand by spade and wheelbarrow ! After our drive was relaid, we had just over 3 tonnes of surplus sand left at the top of the drive in bulk bags. They were sat in the shared part of our drive and bright green bulk bags aren't the most attractive feature in the world. So today we (or rather, Emma) decided it was about time we moved them. Finally the drive is back to it's original state - relaid and cleared of building materials (for now...), the neighbours are happy, and we ache - in a satisfying way.

Let's hope this time next year I'm typing this not under the loud drumming of rain on a caravan roof, but from the comfort of a room in our new house. Fingers crossed ! Thursday 18th January

The absence of any updates for a while might make you think things have been moving slowly, but for once I'm happy to say - quite the opposite !

The architects submitted the revised drawings for building regulation approval in the first week back after new year, along with a letter to the planners requesting permission for some minor alterations to the plans.

Last week, we received our final builders estimate back which enabled us to select our builder. I wasted no time in telling our builder Wayne that he's got the job, and spent some time on Sunday going through the plans and drawing up a long list of things to get done before he can start.

Several phone calls have been made to builders merchants requesting trade account application forms. Most merchants want to see references from similar merchants with whom similar accounts are already held with - which makes you wonder how you actually get your first account opened ! Luckily for us, we applied for BuildStore's Trade Card ages back, doing so set us up with accounts with Wolseley group (Build Center, Plumb Center, everything-else Center) and Jewson. So hopefully these will be good enough references to give the more local firms some confidence in us.

Wayne has supplied us with samples of gritstone quoins and limestone, plus we have got some sample roof tiles - so I have written to the planners inviting them to have a look and approve them. They also wanted some details of "how" we intend the walling stone to be laid, so with the letter I included photos of the samples, and of walls of local building whose style we want to match.

I borrowed a guidance booklet on the Party Wall act off our neighbour John (who sold us the plot) who has just given a Party Wall notice to a neighbour of the cottage he is renovating. So just to keep things official I wrote him a letter of notice yesterday, and today received his consent to begin work as soon as we like. Building the rear wall of the house means removing and replacing a 16 metre section of 2.5 metre high retaining wall running along our boundary, not an insignificant task, and one that will require a fair amount of reinstatement work on our neighbours side of the boundary. Of course, we have chatted with the neighbours about this before and they are happy with what's got to be done, but we agreed it never hurts to keep things official.

Wayne also suggested we'd need to get a large capacity, diesel-powered cement/concrete mixer. He sourced a second-hand model and we've agreed to buy it. Today he dropped it off, it really is a beast of a machine, which helps justify the beast of a cheque we've just written to pay for it. Assuming it survives, we should be able to sell it on and recoup some of the cost when finished with.

Lunchtimes at work have seen me measuring plans to work out quantities of various materials - blocks, insulation, guttering, roof tiles, etc etc.

Also today, we found out that the council have approved the amended building regulations application, the letter is going in the post today or tomorrow.

Wayne's stonemason has quoted for supplying all of the cut gritstone needed on the house (quoins, windows heads/cills/jambs/mullions, string courses behind buttering, door canopy etc etc - much more than we realised). What surprised me is the cost of the cut gritstone compared with the large amount of limestone needed for the bulk of the walls. The gritstone is going to cost appros £17,000 while the limestone may only be £2 - 3,000. Obviously the cost of the gritstone is the labour involved in cutting & shaping each piece to size. The gritstone has been ordered today.

Another recommendation from Wayne was to use a particular private building inspector to perform Building Regulation inspections as the house goes up, instead of the council. However, when I called today, I discover they have a protocol whereby they will only perform inspections on builds that they have also performed the drawing approvals for - not ones already done by the council, and the council also operate the same policy. So as the council have already passed the drawings, then it will be the council who perform the inspections.

So aside from the planners approving our samples, we are ready to go. Wayne is finishing off his current job and thinks he will be able to start within 2 weeks.

After months of frustratingly slow progress, it looks like 2007 is getting off to a cracking start.