February 2007

All systems go! Plus the planners stick their oars in again...
Thursday 1st February

The days of wrangling with the planners seemed a distant memory; once we'd got our planning permission, that was the end of them causing headaches...or so we thought !

One of the planning permission conditions was that samples of all facing materials are submitted and approved before the house is built. Quite a standard condition, and we assumed quite a straightforward formality.

Our builder got us a few samples of limestone from the local quarry. All new building work in the village uses limestone from this quarry, so we assumed this would not be an issue. As well as leaving the samples out for the planners to inspect, I enclosed a few photos with my letter (in the naive hope they'd say "Oh that looks fine" just from the photos). Our planning case officer said on the phone she thought they looked fine, but still had to physically see them on site. Around this time, our officer left on maternity leave, and handed our case over to a young chap, who did the site visit. Problem - he thought the stone and roof tile samples looked wrong...

The roof tile samples were made by Marley. When I asked the officer for suggested acceptable makes, he suggested....Marley. When I pointed out that's what he had rejected, he decided he'd have to speak to the conservation officer. A day or two later, we spoke again. This time, one of the acceptable makes suggested was Eternit. Problem - Marley and Eternit are the same company, the sample I'd submitted is made by MarleyEternit...
A few days later I tried to ring the officer again, but in his absence got to speak to a more senior officer. I took the opportunity to ask for his suggestions without giving away I was already in discussion with one of his colleagues. He suggested that Marley/Eternit were usually preferred as they have a ready-weathered appearance!
Rather than ruffle any feathers, I have not continued this discussion as the stone matter is more pressing.

So...the stone. When I asked our officer for recommendations of acceptable quarries, he first suggested a local quarry that's no longer in operation. Then he suggested a different local quarry - but one that only produces crushed aggregates for road use. He was still insistent that our stone samples, from the local quarry being used by all other new work in the village, was unacceptable as it looked "too yellow". My builder suggested he speak to the planner, which I thought might be a good idea given his experience of local quarries and working with stone. Still no joy, the planner suggesting we look for quarries further out of the area. An interesting idea, which seems to fly in the face of living in a conservation area! Our builder resigned himself to having to travel further afield for samples.

After festering for a while, I stood looking at our stone samples, which were "too yellow". I noticed that there was still some quarry dirt on them, and wondered what would happen if I set at them with a stiff brush. To my surprise, after brushing they looked quite a bit paler. I decided it was worth another shot with the planner. I took some extra photos, and wrote another letter showing the "before & after" difference.

Then we went away for a long birthday weekend, and I put it all out of my mind.Wednesday 7th February

Birthday weekend out of the way, I decided to phone our planner and see whether he would consider taking another look at our samples. He actually sounded semi-positive, saying he'd have another look early next week - and from the photos the stone would probably be OK - especially as "stone from this quarry is normally OK". A bit of a backtrack. But I'm still playing nice as there's more issues to conquer yet - and if we rub them up the wrong way, life could get quite awkward.Thursday 8th February

I spoke to the builder today - he is starting on Monday, hurrah !Saturday 10th February

Despite the deep snow, I get on with roofing the outbuilding extension that I'm putting up for the builders, with a helping hand from my Dad who has come up to visit. It will even feature a toilet cubicle, complete with pink toilet bought from Ebay. Lovely. Sunday 11th February

In preparation for the first day of building work, we put our specially purchased builder's kettle and mugs, tea, coffee and sugar in the outbuilding, together with plastic chairs. Plus the compulsory packet of hobnobs. We're ready. This time tomorrow...what will our plot look like ?Monday 12th February

The day starts with the builders turning up (a good start), armed with a copy of the setting-out drawings and sussing out the plot.

The digger arrives, and our old shed and stable quickly get flattened and turned into bonfire fuel. As the digger driver turns his attention to clearing and stripping the topsoil from the site, the two tree stumps are quickly uprooted, and a mountain of topsoil gradually develops - coupled with the bonfire & smoke, our plot (a former rose garden) looks like it's been the scene of a recent war.

A good start, a real feeling that we're moving ahead at last ! Tuesday 13th February

To our surprise, the builders spend much of the day carting our prized topsoil away to a local farm. We were surprised as we'd wanted to keep as much as possible for future garden use, but as the builder explained, there simply isn't enough room to keep it. Once materials start arriving on site there wouldn't be much room to move. So off to a local farm it goes, in lots of trips with a small tractor and small trailer. We're hopeful that we'll be able to cart it back in the future...

On arrival home, the builders had all finished for the day, as expected. I stood chatting to John our neighbour, when a full-sized JCB unexpectedly pulled into the top of the drive, shortly followed by a large quarry truck, quickly answering my question of whether large trucks would fit down the drive without hitting a tree...yes they do ! The large digger makes short work of clearing a huge mound of spoil left over from when our drive was relaid. I'd never realised just how big the front bucket of a JCB was, until I stood next to one.

Today was supposed to be the day when our planning officer paid a second visit to look at my newly-cleaned limestone, though I have no idea if he's been.

The roof tile samples I ordered last week from Forticrete also arrived today, hand delivered by the area sales manager. They do look rather nice, they are handmade and look a lot nicer than the Marley items. What we don't know is how much more they will cost. Wednesday 14th February

Unfortunately, no activity on site today. The digger driver has had to go and repair one of his hired-out machines, apparently someone has torn one of the hydraulic pipes off it.

No news from the planning officer, but we receive confirmation that another of our trade accounts has been opened with a local builders merchant. Thursday 15th February

The builders were back on site today, and made good progress. More topsoil was shifted off site, and the digger driver started clearing deeper soil from the footprint of the house.

Good news today - our builder rang the planner, who says he now thinks the stone samples look acceptable. On my return home I find a letter in the post, confirming both the gritstone and limestone samples are OK. This means the gritstone can be ordered, as it will take a while to cut & prepare.

Now the stone samples are OK, we need to turn our attention to the roof tiles. I spoke to a local roofing supplier today, and find the handmade roof tiles from Forticrete are about double the cost of the Marleys. They are however of much higher quality and will incur less breakages, and although the supplier says he makes much less profit from the Forticrete product (he would say that wouldn't he), he agrees that they will definitely look right in our village, an area he is very familiar with. They are also one of the tiles recommended by the planners. I'm fairly certain we will submit these to the planners for approval.

We also realise one aspect of the build that we'd severely underestimated - keeping the builders supplied with tea, coffee and biscuits. They have only been on site three days and have wolfed down enough biscuits and chocolate bars to feed an army! But they have expressed their gratitude; in the scheme of things it's a very small price to pay to keep everyone happy. Friday 16th February

More soil clearance today, and in the afternoon I take delivery of some cheap sheets of plywood to form the walls of the newly extended outbuilding and toilet.Saturday 17th February

A very busy day, finishing off the extended outbuilding, slapping on some creosote, and plumbing the toilet waste into the caravan waste pipe. Unfortunately, having bought the wrong pipe fittings, I couldn't connect the water supply to the toilet cistern. So plan B - I left a bucket of water which could be used for flushing.Sunday 18th February

More work on the outbuilding, fixing outside lights - two bulkhead units with low energy bulbs, wired back to a photocell so they turn on when it gets dark, and help light the site at night. Also fitted a double mains socket for the builders to run the kettle from. Monday 19th February

The day I'd been dreading - time for the retaining wall at the rear of the plot to come down. Since the clearance of a large depth of soil, the wall now towered around 10 feet above ground level. On the other side, soil right to the top of the wall, atop which our neighbours drive runs together with a few plants. Oh, and a large mature holly tree growing right next to the wall... How much collapse would occur nobody knew - we might be lucky and find well bound soil, or at the opposite extreme it could be loose infill behind the wall. I really hoped we could save the neighbours holly tree.

The builders first lifted off the large capping stones and put them to one side on pallets. We might re-use them in the

future, or sell them for a tidy sum.

Next they slowly started pulling the top foot or two of wall down. Then I got a phonecall - the material behind was loose, and it was likely that quite a lot of collapse would occur, so much so that the neighbours drive would disappear to some degree. Our builder suggested the neighbours drive could be re-routed back by quite a few feet - I couldn't picture it, but he seemed to think it could be easily done. I thought it best to come home for the afternoon and speak to the neighbours.

When I got home, the builder had already spoken to our neighbours, who seemed quite OK with everything, and the drive re-routing had already taken place. A good job, because a lot of the ground had fallen away. The builders had dug out all of the neighbours plants before pulling the wall down, and I set about re-planting them in a patch of soil in their garden.

But - the holly tree. It was starting to fall, as most of the underlying soil had fallen away. There was no way it could be saved. So I went and broke the news to the neighbours, who it has to be said were fantastically OK about it, and the chaos we were causing in general. So a few minutes with the digger and the tree was gone, shortly followed by the sounds of a chainsaw cutting it up.

I also notice that the caravan water & electric supply has only just survived. Both run across the plot, inside some spare 4" grey plastic BT duct. The digger tyres have churned the ground up to quite a depth, and walking across the mud I spotted a section of broken open duct with the water pipe and cable (armoured, thankfully) laying in the open. One more crossing with the digger would have finished it off, but I pointed it out to the digger driver and he managed to avoid it. Tuesday 20th February

More truckloads of soil were carted away today, it's surprising just what quantities need to be moved - and this looked a fairly level site to start with. We think back to some of the plots we looked at, some were on steep slopes - the amount of excavation they would have needed would be immense.Wednesday 21st February

Yet more truckloads of soil & stone carted away today. By the end of the day, the plot finally looks levelled off. Some hardcore has been laid over the worst section of mud to firm it up for the digger to drive over, and protect the previously exposed caravan water & mains supplies.

Meanwhile, I am trying to learn about the various types of Oak available, as we have a few exposed beams & joists, plus the framing of the two-storey glazed section to be made from it. Green oak, air dried oak, kiln dried oak, reclaimed oak, all very confusing. Thursday 22nd February

Today was quite exciting. The digging of the foundation trenches started - and in the worst possible weather, heavy rain. As the trenches were dug, sheets of shuttering plywood were fitted and spaced apart to provide formwork for when the concrete is poured. It's a wet, filthy job and one I'm glad to leave to someone else.

Also, we've hit rock in some parts of the trench, and this will need to be broken out.

The amount of mud spread around the site is unbelievable, and apparently a considerable amount has been trailed down the village road by the tractor that's been carting the spoil away. So much so that someone complained about it to our builder, and we might have to get a roadsweeper in to clean the road up.

Friday 23rd February

Mid-day finishes from work on Fridays meant I spent the afternoon on site. I helped out with the shuttering of the trenches - cutting timber props and helping lift the boards into position. It's surpringly awkward, slow-going work. On the upside, I got to play at diggers - loading a convoy of wheelbarrows with infill hardcore, and also some precision manouevring of the digger arm to hold shuttering in place while hardcore was filled around it. Monday 26th February

The trench digging and shuttering continues. Our builder asks the BCO to come and have a look at the bedrock, to see whether we can concrete onto it, or whether it needs breaking out. Good news - she's happy for us to concrete on to it.Tuesday 27th February

More trench digging and shuttering. Today sees the first official inspection of the trenches by the BCO, and by the inspector for our structural warranty providers. The young lady performing the inspections for the structural warranty certainly seems to have put a spring in the step of the builders! Wednesday 28th February

Shuttering was almost completed today. The concrete pour had been booked for tomorrow, but a fault with the suppliers concrete mixing truck forced our builder to find another supplier - so concrete will now arrive on Friday. A bit of relief on the builders side, as they'd never have finished the shuttering completely in time - heavy rain stopped play in the afternoon. We are forecast a very sunny day on Friday which is excellent news.