April 2007

Up to first floor height...

Sunday 22nd April

Oh dear, my diary writing seems to be taking a back seat !

OK, so what has happened in April so far ?

March ended with the floor slab being laid. Since then, much progress has been made.

The month started with random limestone being laid up to damp proof height, where it has to be cut to a fairly straight edge for the DPC to be laid.

The blockwork started to shoot up quickly - some days we would come home from work and suddenly rooms had appeared !

Towards the second week of the month, the rear retaining wall was built, in a couple of stages. This is slow work, as it is built from hollow blocks, with steel reinforcing rods fitted vertically through every hollow, and laid horizontally in every mortar course. Finally, the blockwork has to be filled with a strong (C30) concrete mix. The first stage saw the builders lay around 5 courses, and fill with concrete. The second stage saw the remaining rows laid, and the concrete filling was our homework for a weekend. It's very awkward and physically exhausting work - mixing and barrowing the concrete, shovelling smaller amounts to muck buckets, climbing up onto the trestle platforms, funneling the concrete into the blocks and ramming down with a length of 2x2 timber.

By the middle of April, all the ground floor blockwork walls were up to first floor joist height. One thing that has surprised us is the ceiling height of the ground floor rooms - they are quite high. Obviously these dimensions have always been on the drawings, but it's not until you see the walls built that the real height hits home.

We have been very fortunate so far - no rain this month, in fact the weather has generally been very warm and sunny, temperatures climbing into the low 20s on some days.

Gradually the concrete lintels arrived, and were lifted into place above the windows - the two largest (above the kitchen and living room) requiring the use of a small crane due to their weight.

Friday the 13th lived up to its reputation, with the discovery of a major cock-up on the drawings. The steels above the kitchen which take the weight of the gable wall are also supposed to support the joists under the main bedroom ensuite and wardrobe. The drawings show no details of how the joists are to be attached to the steel. However this is only the start of the problem - the steels are approximately 16" too high! After discussing possible workarounds with the builder, I spend the weekend drawing up some ideas. The steels can't be lowered without significantly reducing the size of the kitchen window - an area that was of focus to the planning officers in the past. The only option was to weld joist hangers from one of the steels. If we wanted a level floor into the ensuite, this would mean a significant area of kitchen ceiling would have to be lowered, we felt this would look daft.
In the end, we chose a design that gives a step up into the ensuite and wardrobe. It still leaves around 7ft of headroom, and adds a bit of quirkiness...

Early in April we paid a visit to Cawarden Reclaim in Staffordshire to choose some bricks for our fireplace. They have a huge choice of reclaimed brick, and after some time walking round we settled on some "Wolverhampton Pressed" bricks. We were also on the hunt for a supplier of oak for beams and joists in the living and dining rooms; while looking at bricks I enquired at Cawarden and was given a surprisingly good price. Two days later I phoned up and ordered all of the bricks and oak. Delivery times started to turn into an issue, as they were waiting on the suitable sizes of oak arriving. So we had to have the bricks delivered ahead of the oak to prevent the builder being held up.

One of the next tasks is the tanking (waterproofing) of the rear retaining wall. This needs doing soon, so that we can backfill. Not only will it be nice for the neighbours to have their driveway back, but soon we will need scaffolding at the rear of the house and currently there is no ground to build it on.

The tanking is applied to the rear (exterior) of the retaining wall, and consists of two layers. First, a liquid bitumen-based primary membrane is painted on, in two coats. For this we are using RIW LAC (Liquid Asphaltic Compound). On top of this will be attached a second membrane - a continuous sheet of RIW Double Drain. This provides protection during backfilling, and is also hollow to allow water a drainage path - so most water should never actually get to the primary membrane. As luck would have it, this is sold in rolls of 2x15m - just the size we need.
I had intended to start applying the LAC this weekend, but upon reading the application instructions carefully, I realised the porous surface of the concrete blocks had to be sealed with a "cement slurry". A quick google and a quick call to the

builder later, I learnt that this is just cement mixed with water to a runny consistency, and applied by brush to the wall. Our builder warned that this will set very quickly, so we have to mix it no more than half a bucketfull at at time. He was certainly right - once applied to the wall it started to set within minutes.
Two or three hours and aching arms later, Emma and I had coated the entire wall. Hopefully - weather permitting - we will be able to start applying the LAC during the weekday evenings.

Next week sees the arrival of the joiner to start fitting first floor joists, and the roof timbers above the kitchen/utility.