

own eco-barn project, he is creating a 'barn community'. Victoria Hawkins meets Norfolk's Barn Man. Pictures: Antony Kelly



Barn folk: Ed and Clodagh Masters at their Alburgh barn home, left, and, above and below, the rural setting of their eco-barn venture at Saxlingham Nethergate.



started to read up more and more. When somebody suggested using a wind turbine at first I thought, you are having laugh. I imagined these huge great things but it turns out there's a guy in the village who provides smaller ones.

"Unfortunately when we were doing this barn, we were dreadfully over budget, doing things like digging out a cellar, so we couldn't do it here. I also build the garden wall, which is 44 metres long – and I handpicked every single flint for that from the local quarry."

When the Masters bought their barn it was utterly derelict, with old pigsties, mud floors and discarded machinery. "One end was full of hay and there were big barn doors in the middle, a Victorian end and a cartbay. The village used to hold their harvest festivals here so the villagers know it well."

He started work in October 2004, first tearing through the hedge up in the top corner and laying a road down and over a ditch to gain access to the building. Thirteen months later they moved in.

A couple of major beams were broken, which had to be removed, the roof was as wavy as the North Sea and literally everything needed to be done. It wasn't exactly what he had learned at university. "But a lot of things in building you learn as you do it," said Ed. "Apart from the construction management side, I have just learned everything since. Everything you do is a learning curve. The principles of building are the same but a big frame timber thing is not straight and you just have to learn to adapt round every single bit of the building."

"Some people might tear their hair out and say this is not level but a timber frames move. If you are on clay it dries out in the summer and contracts and then it gets wet and expands and the building has to move with it."

"On the whole the barn was really sound but it was sod's law that we started work in October, it ended up looking like the battle of the Somme. We had 150 pallets to line the ground, you couldn't walk up here, it was just mud up to your knees!"

'We want to develop a resource for people who live in barns and create a barn world community.'

Not a pallet in sight today, we're sitting outside in the sheltered courtyard, with their Black Rock hens, Tikka, Mayo and Curry ("I love them," says Ed, "they are the best layers, three eggs a day!"), Badger the terrier is fast asleep with his head on his paws and a couple of moorhens haughtily strut past.

The burgeoning garden is fully landscaped, their two horses are grazing in and adjoining meadow. It's a little corner of barn heaven.

As for proportions, the room sizes are vast. It's also on the market with a price tag of just under £685,000 making this Ed's first venture into estate agency, which is what he wants to diversify into. "I got into barns first because of the building side but I realised there isn't an estate agency who deals with this niche market solely and that's what I want to do."

With offices at Ilkeshall St Lawrence, near Beccles, Barn Masters, as the business is called, has developed a website which is building a complete database of all things 'barn'. "It's a bit like a barn forum," said Ed. "The guy who developed it christened me The Barn Man and though it's in its infancy, the website is expanding. In the Barn Life section, for instance, we are already adding specialist businesses. If anyone has any good ideas or knows a great specialist then you can let us know."

"This is what we want to do, not just the estate agency side but also to develop a resource for people who live in barns and create a barn world community. The feedback is that people say it's great that somebody is doing this, making a barn world."

"I was 30 when I moved out of London," said Ed, "and I don't miss any of that. It was the best move of my life – well that, and getting married of course!"

Ed Masters can be contacted at www.barnmasters.co.uk, by email on office@barnmasters.co.uk or on 01986 781484.

ECO DREAM PROJECT

With the environmentally friendly thing on everybody's lips, Ed Masters is working on his first eco-friendly barn project in Wash Lane in Saxlingham Nethergate – which should become his home next year. He has actually tried to buy this particular barn three times and ended up clinching the deal several years later for £17,000 less than it would have cost first time around. "With prices going up that's quite strange! But this one is in a stunning location and very close to Norwich."

"When I tried to buy it four years ago, it went to sealed bids. It was on the market for £185,000 and I over-ambitiously put in an offer of £207,000 but it went for a more than that. Then I think after spending months trying to sort things out the farmer got fed up and sold it at auction for £160,000. Those buyers spent something like two years getting plans and planning permission sorted and anyway they put it back on the market. I was sitting in my truck back in December looking at the property pages and just happened to see it and I phoned the agents and put in an offer of £190,000 straight away and they said 'but Mr Masters you haven't even seen it...'"

So the Masters are a two-barn family at the moment. Having signed on the dotted line on the second one in May, work began in July. "We are aiming to provide a totally carbon neutral home in what used to be a pig farm. It is situated in a



delightful little bowl just outside Shotesham. You can't see anything for miles around and it is about a mile from the nearest farmhouse. It is really beautiful.

"It's our dream project really and should be completed in March or April next year."

"It had sunk about 18ins in the middle and we have managed to straighten it up. The timber frame is being restored and as this is an eco project we are trying not to buy new and using reclaimed stuff instead. We are even recycling the concrete. We have a great lady who drives a digger, who has a mini concrete crusher with these great jaws. After we break up the old concrete she loads it up and it comes out on a conveyor belt and this recycled concrete is mixed with sand – we have used it to make all the

foundations.

"Then we are buying recycled bricks and the wood is from some trees that were culled and seasoned from Saxmundham. We set a target that we wanted to get all our material from within a 50-mile radius, so the whole project is a little triangle of costs, aesthetics and ethics and we are trying to be as cost-effective as possible. You don't want to make a massive carbon footprint by buying Indian sandstone or travertine flooring from Italy."

"I don't see why people can't do this all over the place. I have been flabbergasted at how many people have phoned up already who are not shy of the eco-thing. Particularly people of my father's age, they are not afraid of turbines and things."

"We are having solar panels and an air-blown mini-treatment plant for sewage and apparently you can drink the water from that (though I have never met anybody who has!). And that's going right the way down the plot because that's where our bore-hole is."

"Solar panels will provide hot water and solar photovoltaics, will be producing electricity. They are like solar panels but work on light to create electricity."

For regular updates on the barn project don't miss Ed Masters' new column in EDP Property starting next month.