

# Environmentalist builds himself a bargain... out of straw

By Jonathan Brocklebank



Shape of things to come?: Steve James's country cottage has a distinctly home-made look, both inside and out. He insists that building it proves anyone can do the same

THE walls are made of hay bales, the roof is fashioned from turf and most of the interior was rescued from rubbish skips.

But this extraordinary home is both windproof and watertight and was built for only £4,000 - the kind of sum many would spend on a new kitchen.

The property in the Galloway countryside is the result of a four-year project by software engineer Steve James, a committed environmentalist who was determined to prove that houses need not cost a fortune to buy.

Not that this house would suit everyone's requirements. His electricity supply is a car battery that his girlfriend charges at her house and the WC is a compost loo linked to a rainwater filtration system.

But Mr James said he would soon build a water wheel to power the property.

'My attitude in building it was people need to realise that this is something they can do,' said Mr James, 52. 'I wanted to show it was possible.'

And though the property cost him only £4,000, it could have been achieved for £3,000.

He said: 'I'd cut the wood myself next time instead of going to the sawmill. That would knock off £1,000.'

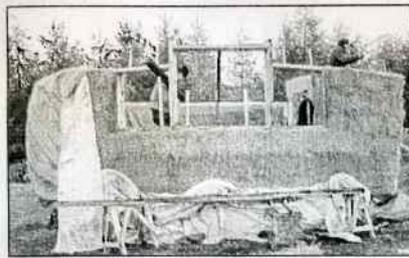
The one problem, however, is Mr James went ahead with his eco-building project without seeking planning permission. Ultimately, he could be forced to demolish it.

Although Mr James started on the house four years ago, he said it took only ten months of building time to complete.

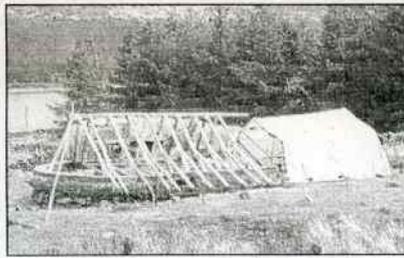
The foundations consisted of piles of rocks arranged 2ft high around the outline of the house.

Next came the wooden frame on which the floor was laid with reclaimed timber as joists.

Stage three was the assembly of the roof frame, which had to be ready to place on top of the walls as soon as they were complete.



Within these walls: Oat-straw bales were erected



Teepee or not teepee: The roof begins to take shape



Home sweet home: Reclaimed material fills the interior

## “Walls fashioned” from straw bales”

The walls were fashioned from 200 oat-straw bales which cost £1 each. And, with a little help from his friends, Mr James had the walls up in five days.

Friends were also needed to lift the roof into place. Then stakes attached it to the walls. A layer of turf was placed on top of the wooden frame. The last exterior job was rendering the walls.

Mr James said: 'I've never built a house before but I have done a bit of joinery and have done a lot of practical work.

'The initial buzz has grown into a sort of primeval satisfaction. I sit here, it's warm and quiet and there's snow flying past the windows and I think, yes, this is what it's all about.'

Inside, there is a galleried bedroom built into the roof space, with a tree trunk running through the span of the roof. There is also a Moroccan marbled shower room and the cosy living area is heated by a stove Mr James made himself.

He said: 'I made the kitchen window sills, shelves and work surfaces from a tree that blew over in a park in Glasgow.

'The Belfast sink came from a skip. I made the stove myself using old paving slabs. It heats the whole house with very little firewood.'

The biggest outlay of all was the £600 spent on supplies for his hardworking volunteers. The floor-boards came in at £400, plumbing-cost £200 and wiring only £100. A water pump cost £70 and the stove chimney £50.

However, there might be a higher price to pay.

Yesterday, a spokesman for Dumfries and Galloway Council said: 'We don't know anything about this house. We don't know where it is.'

The spokesman confirmed that, without planning permission, the owner may be forced to tear the building down.

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**PS** IF the bizarre house seems familiar, perhaps you saw one just like it in the Lord of the Rings film trilogy. With its miniature stature and curious, otherworldly architecture, the £4,000 home looks like a Hobbit house straight out of the pages of Tolkien.

