

## IN BRIEF

**PROJECT** New build**LOCATION** Cornwall**COST** Already owned**SPENT** £350,000**WORTH** £700,000+

The Looking Glass is available for holiday rental  
 Unique Home Stays:  
[uniquehomestays.com](http://uniquehomestays.com)

# New horizons

First-time selfbuilders Christina and Jonny Brown have designed an iconic new house, inspired by the Cornish coast, nestling into cliffs above the golden sands of Mawgan Porth.

STORY: DEBBIE JEFFERY  
 PHOTOGRAPHY: UNIQUE HOME STAYS

“Building a house wasn’t something we set out to do, but circumstances conspired to make it possible,” says Christina Brown. “We both worked for the BBC in London and lived in Buckinghamshire for 10 years, during which time we had our son, Ted. When the BBC moved to Manchester we sold our house, ready to relocate, but then decided to move to Cornwall instead.”

Happy holiday memories inspired Jonny to suggest relocating to Cornwall, but Christina had barely visited the county and had some initial reservations. “Everything seemed to point to a new stage in our lives, though, and I knew I could work as a freelance edit producer in Plymouth,” says Jonny.

“After renting for six months we bought a house which was ripe for renovation in Mawgan Porth. The owners agreed our offer on the understanding that we needed to exchange contracts in just 10 days, but fortunately we found an amazing solicitor who made it happen.”

Situated on the rugged Cornish coastline, midway between Padstow and Newquay, Westward was the first house to be built on the headland in 1917. Constructed by a wealthy corn merchant as a holiday home, the property stands in three-and-a-half acres of land, part of which forms a plateau on the cliffside – originally designed as the bed of an abandoned canal scheme planned for the area in the 18th century.

**EXTERIOR**

Designed entirely to draw the eye to the sea view, The Looking Glass is a contemporary new home set in an extensive coastal plot on a tranquil headland in Trenance, above Mawgan Porth Bay.



“When we saw the stunning views to the ocean, we immediately knew we wanted to make the most of the outlook”

“There’s an acre of land above us and we own a large coastal field, which goes right to the cliff edge and is full of gorse and flowers,” says Christina. “This is a protected wildlife zone and we just loved the setting and outlook down the Cornish coastline – on a clear day you can see St Ives.”

It was the view from a ladder, set against a sheltered Cornish wall in the estate’s former vegetable plot, which first gave the couple the idea of building in this part of the grounds. “When we saw the stunning views to the ocean, and Pudding Rock on the beach, we immediately knew we wanted to make the most of the outlook,” Jonny explains.

Initially, the Browns considered building a modest annexe to their house as a holiday let, and made preliminary enquiries to the council, but were instead encouraged to design a more ambitious house with separate dwelling status.

“We like the Scarlet, which is a quirky new eco hotel and spa in Mawgan Porth, designed by architects Harrison Sutton,” says Christina. “They visited our site and started sketching – quickly producing an initial design inspired by the old stone wall.”

The resulting 167-sqm house has been designed to appear to fit inside the old Cornish wall to the seaward side and the natural cliff side at the rear, with limited first-floor accommodation ensuring neighbours’ sea views are not compromised.



#### LANDSCAPING

The landscaped gardens were designed as an extension of the coastal path, with amphitheatre style Cornish stone walling, planted succulents and banks of rustling dune grasses.



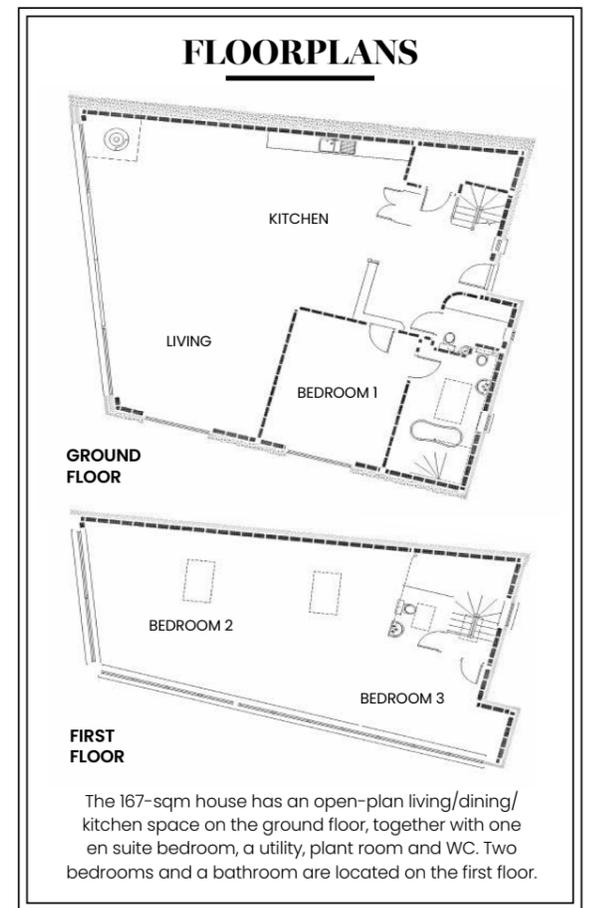


Nautical features include vaulted living spaces, three porthole windows and a curved roof, designed to soften the highly glazed building. Locally quarried stone was chosen for walling, with red cedar cladding, natural copper fascias and a planted sedum roof.

“This is designated an Area of Special Character in terms of its open and rural appearance, so we didn’t want to build something huge and chose materials which would recede into the landscape, particularly when looking back from the beach,” says Jonny. “The landscaping was as important to us as the house, and we wanted to ensure it was kept as a natural extension to the coastal path.”

**OPEN-PLAN LIVING**

Exposed roof timbers, high ceilings, limestone flooring and a wood-burning stove bring character to the highly-glazed open-plan living/dining/kitchen on the ground floor. Caesarstone worktops were chosen for the sleek, contemporary kitchen with its three-metre long island, and double doors open into a practical pantry. Blues, greys, natural wood and stone complement the Cornish coast.



**IN DETAIL**

**PROJECT**  
**Architect** Harrison Sutton: harrisonsutton.com  
**Builder/carpenter** Ash Carpentry Build: 07477 888453  
**Plumbing/underfloor heating**  
 Jamie Burnett: 07970 818334

**STRUCTURE**  
**Stonemasons, antique and cut stone walling**  
 Richard and Jake Stiles: 07796 233320  
**Stonemasons, garden landscaping**  
 Clemens Stonework Ltd: rclemens-stonework.co.uk  
**Windows/triple glazing** DSL (Doorstop Ltd), Truro: dslsouthwest.com  
**Copper fascias** A&S Roofing Systems: 07983 937260  
**Electrically-operated rooflights**  
 EOS Roof lights: eosrooflights.co.uk  
**Railings** Jays Gates Blacksmith: jaysgates.co.uk

**FIXTURES & FITTINGS**  
**Rais wood-burner** Kernow Fires: kernowfires.co.uk  
**Lighting** Amos Lighting: amoslighting.co.uk  
**Composite decking** Millboard: millboard.co.uk  
**Steel & glass entrance door** Monk Metal Windows: monkmetailwindows.co.uk  
**Kitchen & bathrooms** Future Kitchens and Bathrooms: future-kitchens.net  
**Antiques & furnishings** Gooseshed: gooseshed.co.uk and Jo and Co at Home: joandcohome.com



“The planners seemed to like this approach and the fact that we weren’t trying to be too greedy by designing an enormous house. Our case officer was particularly helpful, encouraging us to discuss the design with neighbours, and we posted outline plans through everyone’s letterboxes, inviting them to meet us on the site for coffee.”

Christina and Jonny chose to employ subcontractors to build the house and knew of Newquay-based builder and carpenter Ash Flynn, who specialises in roofing. The rafter formation of their curving roof is complex, and the couple felt that they could rely on Ash to work closely with the structural engineer, and to suggest other local tradesmen.

The house was built to Ash’s exacting standards, supported by carpenters Dave Williams and Mark Percy-Davis, with their own fine joinery skills, and Dave’s boat-building knowledge came in handy when making the sliding shutter for a porthole window.



An access track needed to be created outside of nesting season, to avoid disturbing wildlife, and mains services were brought to the site. “The cliffside rock seams were a massive challenge, but our secret weapon was ‘Monty The Digger Driver’ who didn’t even stop for lunch,” says Jonny.

Once local company LionPark Construction had completed the groundworks, double-skinned retaining walls and steel-reinforced raft foundation, the steel frame was erected and external walling could be built up in tanked blockwork, with internal timber partitions.

“We built through a pretty bad winter, including the Beast from the East, and everyone’s enthusiasm was knocked battling the elements,” says Jonny. “Our structural engineer needed to make numerous complex calculations for the wind loading, as we have such large areas of glass facing the sea.” A large box steel and smaller reinforcing steels support the eleven-metre span of triple glazing which captures the all-important view, with timber frames clad externally in robust aluminium.

“Thanks to Ash’s involvement we made a late decision to add an extra bedroom on the first floor, so additional structural steelwork needed to be hung from the main curved roof steels,” says Jonny, who worked on site during the two-year project, tackling tasks such as fixing insulation and planting out the garden.

The curved roof was formed using a single-ply system, with a Bauder membrane, internal insulation and a planted covering inset with roof lights. An irrigation system will help to keep the sedum looking good all year, and copper fascias were selected to weather in the coastal environment, alongside vertical untreated cedar boarding with shadow gaps and secret fixings.

“The rustic stone walling is such an important part of the design that I drove around Cornwall looking for

**BEDROOMS & BATHROOMS**

On the ground floor is a king-size bedroom and an en suite with a roll-top bath and large rainfall shower. Upstairs, one bedroom has an elevated double bed, ensuring clear sight of the sea, and the king-size master has crooked walls, nautical paraphernalia and an internal porthole window which was made by a boat-builder carpenter with a sliding pocket shutter. The first-floor family bathroom has a roll-top bath and rainfall shower.





a stonemason, and literally stopped with a screech in Constantine when I saw an amazing stone wall,” says Christina. “After a great deal of persuasion, I convinced Richard Stiles and his son, Jake, to fit us into their packed schedule. They are renowned craftsmen and produce beautiful cut stone walls with no visible mortar.”

Christina and Jonny visited Trebarwith Road Rustic Quarry in Delabole, where their stone was carefully hand-selected for its browner tones. “In fact, we loved it so much we also asked Richard to build exposed stonework inside our kitchen too, and later a team of stonemasons created the curved garden walling using tonnes of hedging stone, with no mortar in sight,” continues Christina.

Nine large internal doors, reclaimed from an old manor house in Bude, were chosen for their nautical panelling and after being sanded and painted were cut to size and installed in the coastal home.

“We wanted to make sure we didn’t end up with a characterless box, and love Scandinavian and French influences, particularly relating to colours which work with the backdrop of the sea views,” says Christina, who enjoyed designing the interiors of the new house and introduced an eclectic mix of antiques and artwork. “We also made it our aim to try and source locally in Cornwall.”



White paint was chosen for walls, with a contrasting grey shade for woodwork, and limestone flooring has been laid over underfloor heating throughout the main living space. Kitchens and bathrooms were sourced from a company in Truro by Christina, who visited the salesroom armed with an extremely detailed list of products.

The couple had previously renovated four houses so, although this was their first new build project, they were keen to ensure the detailing was precise, and were deeply involved until the house’s completion in September 2018. The resulting building bears testimony to their care and attention.

“We love that the sea is visible before even walking inside – with views from the specially designed glass entrance door right through the building to the coast,” says Jonny. “From the beach it’s quite difficult to spot the house, though, because the materials blend so well with the natural setting, which was always our intention.”

**DESIGN**

Locally-quarried stone was chosen for walling, with red cedar cladding, natural copper fascias and a planted sedum roof.

**FINAL WORD**

**What was the high point?**

The installation of the glazing and glass doors finally made the building site feel like a house.

**...and the low point?**

It was a long build and the budget did grow, which gave us a few sleepless nights.

**Your best buy?**

We had a local blacksmith hand-make some ‘nautical’ railings, styled to look like an ocean liner, leading down the cliff-side garden via granite steps to the front door. They’re amazing!

**...and the biggest extravagance?**

Cut stone walling is jointless, with no mortar on show, and is



a skilled and time-consuming craft – taking a day to produce one square metre of finished wall.