

# VANISHING ACT

A modern extension tacked on to a period cottage could have stuck out like a sore thumb, but a clever trick or two have created a little piece of magic in Clackmannanshire

Text by **Emma Leask** Photography by **Keith Hunter**



## DETAILS

**Brief** A contemporary extension (with space for a dining area, an en-suite bedroom and a living room) for a traditional semi-detached cottage

**Location** Clackmannanshire

**Architect** Watson Burnett Architects

**Timescale** Planning permission granted May 2006, building started May 2007 and completed December 2008



**When they returned from** a 20-year stint working around the globe, Gordon and Allison Smith realised their traditional semi-detached cottage would no longer be big enough. Their family had expanded to include a brood of three children, and an extension to the house was urgently required. Watson Burnett Architects had expanded the tiny wooden add-on kitchen nine years previously – and, as the couple had been delighted with the result, the architecture firm was their first port of call.

"We hadn't lived in the house since 1985," says Allison, "but when we got back we realised we needed a lot more space, as well as an area for entertaining. The idea of the extension was to create an extra bedroom, more living space and a dining room."

The cottage, which dates from 1860 and once belonged to

Gordon's aunt, sits amid the Clackmannanshire hills in almost total seclusion. It is built over two levels and is surrounded by a sloping garden. "We had a very loose brief to start with," says project architect Allan Corfield. "The Smiths' idea was to knock down a derelict coal room and extend the existing cottage out the side. But because of the ground levels, it just wasn't going to be possible to build a traditional extension. After a site visit, we quickly realised the original idea didn't make use of all the natural daylight and beautiful landscape that surrounds the house. Nor was there any real link to the garden, which was something the couple wanted to utilise.

"Very early on we saw we could do something special here. The cottage sits quite high up and proud over the garden, so we came >



up with a design that was organic and fitted into the topography.”

The Watson Burnett designers collaborated on the project, bringing drawings, 3D models and sample boards to the site to aid the design process. One of these early images was exhibited in the Royal Scottish Academy 2006 Architecture Exhibition and is almost identical to the finished house – evidence of the creative control the couple entrusted them with.

“We told Allan only what we wanted room-wise,” confirms Allison. “We wanted an en-suite master bedroom, a dining room and a big entertainment area. Gordon wanted a dining room that would be able to accommodate a round table for 12 people – it’s more sociable. We also wanted the outside and inside entertaining area to blend together so that if we had a barbecue people could flow in and out of the house easily.”

“When Allan and the team came back with this design we just looked at it, looked at each other and were absolutely amazed. We were initially shocked and thought, gosh, no. Then we looked at it again and thought, actually, it looks lovely and it does blend in with the countryside. So we decided to go ahead with it.”

The proposal meant the house would look like a traditional

cottage at the front but with a hidden modern glass extension at the back taking full advantage of the spectacular scenery. Clackmannanshire Council approved the plans straight away without conditions and there were no objections.

The striking contemporary exterior with its smooth curves stands in stark contrast to the traditional stone cottage. “We contrasted the architecture but tried to tie it back in with materials that matched the existing building,” says Allan. “We used reclaimed Scottish stone from a local steading that had been demolished, untreated larch from a sustainably managed source, a sedum roof and a sustainable white lime render that doesn’t need to be treated for 25 years. When it came to the roof the one thing we didn’t want was a big expanse of zinc – sedum gives the feel of what was there previously, which helps the site and the landscape.”

What is particularly clever is how the extension folds unobtrusively into the hilly landscape over three levels. Factoring in so many retaining walls and curves, Allan says, was “a real challenge” for the project team and builder, MacGregor Building Services. Inside, the smooth curves are echoed in bespoke handcrafted furniture and fixtures.



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On the left as you enter the extension is a WC (where the original utility room was), then four steps down it opens out into a light-filled mezzanine space with seating and a curved glass balustrade overlooking the open-plan dining and living spaces below.

A passageway to the left leads to an en-suite master bedroom. The en-suite has a classic minimalist décor with double wall-hung basins, sleek Dornbracht mixer taps, a wall-hung WC, wet-room shower and stylish sunken bath with recessed LED lightwells. It's Allison's sanctuary. Next door, the master bedroom continues the minimalist theme, with the couple's belongings hidden behind a wall of frosted glass and mirrored wardrobes. It's a look that allows the drama of the landscape to take centre stage – maximised by corner floor-to-ceiling windows and echoed in the paint hues inspired by the heather-clad hills. Outside is a decked terrace with a hot tub.

Back in the main part of the extension, five steps lead down to the circular dining area housing a hand-crafted circular oak and walnut dining table with two semi-circular rows of bespoke light installations above. This steps down again into the living area where specially designed curved glass doors slide into a recess >

Travertine tiling and lots of glass make the extension feel light and bright; the dining table was hand-crafted from oak and walnut (above left); the final building scarcely deviated from the initial plans (above)



## ARCHITECTURE

to reveal 180-degree views of the hills beyond. Travertine tiling inside and out allows the area to open up into one big space for entertaining.

Altogether, the house now has two living areas, a dining room, five bedrooms and four bathrooms. "I was initially worried that the modern architecture would take away from it being a country cottage, but I don't think it has," says Allison. "I think it has got the best of both worlds now with ultra-modern areas as well as traditional areas."

Although Allison originally intended the new extension to be a blissfully clutter-free 'quiet' space with no television, Allan persuaded the couple to check out the high-tech sound systems at Edinburgh's Home Entertainment. "When we saw what they offered it just made sense," she admits. "I imagined there would be wires and cables everywhere, but even the speakers are recessed into the ceiling – it's not obtrusive at all. Gordon likes the surround sound for rugby matches – you feel as if you're at the game. For me, it's more about listening to music in the bath."

Another challenge was finding specialist contractors and suppliers willing to push technological boundaries to make the bespoke curved glass doors – normally only found in commercial buildings. Unfortunately, the original curtain wall contractor unexpectedly turned down the job at the last minute, resulting in a delay of six months finding a replacement. However, the Smiths stuck with the original design and took it on the chin. "We weren't going to spoil the ship for a ha'penny worth of tar," says Allison. "We wanted to make sure it was going to turn out the way we'd intended it. And we're really happy with it."

The end result is a product not only of a talented team's collaboration but the willingness of these extremely laid-back clients to put their trust in their architects and see the project through without compromise.

"It was fantastic to be able to do this project – we're very proud of it," says Allan. "The Smiths were a joy to work with and we're glad they enjoy the house. It was great to work with people who were so keen and enthusiastic about modern architecture." ■

**Watson Burnett Architects, 0131 556 5545, [www.watsonburnett.com](http://www.watsonburnett.com)**



The master bedroom is light, airy and clutter-free thanks to floor-to-ceiling windows [top] and frosted-glass wardrobe doors [above]; the fireplace in the living area [right]; the new en-suite bathroom has smart, minimalist finishes such as Dornbracht taps and a sunken bath [below]; the façade makes the most of reclaimed local stone and untreated larch [bottom left]

