

Wraxall Yard - Press Release

November 2022

1.0 Project Description

Overview

Clementine Blakemore Architects has completed the sensitive restoration of a series of derelict agricultural buildings into inclusive holiday accommodation, a community space, workshop and smallholding. The site forms part of a 250-acre organic farm within the West Dorset AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty), and the renovation is part of a visionary project by the owners to improve the biodiversity of the landscape, as well as provide universal access to it.

The completed buildings are available to rent either as five individual holiday lets, or as a whole site, which includes use of the community space. Since it opened as a not-for-profit Community Interest Company in July 2022, roughly 60% of the bookings have been families with a disabled member. In partnership with local charity Green Island Trust, they will be used in the coming year to provide a series of supported holidays to local people living with a disability. The community space has also been offered free of charge for events such a gathering for isolated elderly people, and this month a volunteer scheme is being launched with the Dorset AONB as part of a drive to get young people with mental health and/or addiction issues engaged in the countryside.

In these ways, the restoration of the buildings has been a catalyst for a series of holistic social and environmental endeavours aiming to improve people's quality of life and the natural world.

Site Strategy & Inclusivity

Dating from the mid 19th century, with some later additions, the stone and brick dairy barns are located at the edge of the hamlet of Lower Wraxall, adjacent to the Grade I* listed Church of St. Mary's. The earliest buildings are arranged around a courtyard, extending to the south to create a more open farm yard, which is flanked by a steel Dutch barn.

In addition to working closely with the Centre for Accessible Environments, CBA held design consultations with disabled people to better understand their experiences, and accommodate their needs as elegantly as possible. There are no special routes, ramps or handrails for wheelchair users; instead the topography and layout of the pathways have been designed to create gently sloping access. A pivotal decision was to use the southern driveway as the main entrance, and to tuck parking away at the rear - leaving the elevations adjacent to the church uncluttered. From the car park, the buildings are reached along a curved pathway surrounded by a coppiced nuttery, through the 'breezeway' (a roofed passage through one of the barns), and via the planted courtyard. This calm, enclosed space is connected to the wider landscape via a boardwalk, where a number of regenerative agriculture measures have been implemented, such as the introduction of wild honey bees and the creation of woodland pasture.

Internal Accessibility

Arranged on one level, the layout of the accommodation is designed to ensure easy circulation with generous turning circles and clear access to windows and doors. Carefully specified to avoid feeling institutional or clinical, bathrooms and kitchens have a number of accessible features such as sinks with integrated grab-handles, and rise and fall worktops that can accommodate a wheelchair below. Each of the accessible bedrooms has height-adjustable and profiling beds, with bespoke solid Douglas fir surrounds to match the joinery and the rest of the timber furniture. One of the bedrooms has hoisted access to an en-suite bathroom, with a track discreetly recessed into the bottom of the exposed timber truss and a detachable motor, meaning it's hardly visible when not in use. Switches, handles, hooks and hanging rails are at an accessible height, door handles contrast with the frames for increased visibility, and vibrating fire alarms are available for those hard of hearing.

Structure

The structural approach to the buildings was guided by a desire to retain as much of the original fabric as possible, while sensitively adding or replacing material where needed to extend the lives of the buildings. Many of the existing timber roof trusses were retained and repaired, and where required, new ones have been fabricated from UK-grown Douglas fir in a sawn finish. The new birch plywood roof sheathing has been left exposed as the internal ceiling finish, with insulation above, allowing the full depth of the truss beams to be visible. The roof was re-clad with red clay double Roman roof tiles, with bat access points integrated in a number of locations.

The majority of the external stone and masonry walls have been retained; they are underpinned with 50% GGBS concrete and have been repaired with salvaged or locally sourced stone including field flint, Portland, Purbeck, forest marble, and chalk, set in lime mortar. The courtyard walls were in a particularly bad state of repair, with some recent alterations, and so these were replaced with a new timber-framed wall clad externally with recycled stone from the site. The rhythm of the original walls, punctuated with brick piers, doorways and high-level clerestories, has been retained in the new elevations. Internally the junction between the columns and truss tie-beams are exposed, expressing the modest craftsmanship of this type of agricultural building.

Environmental Performance

The environmental strategy focused on the envelope of the buildings; by optimising the fabric and using passive design measures to make full use of natural light and ventilation, the energy and carbon impacts of the buildings' active systems have been reduced dramatically. The existing walls are insulated internally with cork, applied directly to the stone walls with an adhesive lime plaster. A renewable material made from harvested bark, the high vapour diffusivity of cork allows moisture to move through the envelope, preventing interstitial condensation. The roofs are insulated with wood fibre, another naturally derived low-carbon material, which mitigates solar heating by virtue of its increased density and thickness compared to more traditional insulants. Heating and hot water are supplied via a high efficiency wood-chip biomass boiler, using locally sourced wood chips, keeping the carbon footprint to a minimum.

Fenestration & Materiality

Existing openings have been reused as far as possible, with a combination of operable steel windows and doors, selected for their longevity and ease of use, as well as fixed timber windows, again formed from Douglas fir. Large expanses of glazing, installed in the place of barn doors, have been subdivided by deep timber mullions to filter direct sunlight, minimise light pollution at night, and create privacy. Within the courtyard, views are also filtered through the naturalistic layered perennial planting. While most of the fenestration is set back within the depth of the walls, on the eastern elevation, two new timber windows are set forward, reflecting the ad-hoc and incongruous nature of the original openings along this wall, whilst also creating a deep shelf and desk space internally. The top course of masonry on the front elevation of the farm workshop, which was originally poor quality blockwork, has been rebuilt in brick with a decorative 'hit-and-miss' pattern, inspired by the ventilated brickwork of traditional barns.

New interventions have been formed from a robust and agricultural material palette used internally and externally - including galvanised metal rainwater goods, precast lintels and sills, larch cladding, spruce plywood and brushed stainless steel kitchen surfaces. The floors are exposed GGBS concrete, treated with a dark grey dry shake and buffed to create a matt, earthy and patinated surface, and the walls of the domestic areas are clad in painted timber panelling at low level, providing a sturdy datum which can easily be redecorated if scuffed by wheelchairs. The interior design, also by CBA, evolved around a range of oak furniture by Another Country - with a number of pieces from their Hardy collection, which is made locally in Dorset.

In the community space and farm workshop, which are harder-wearing areas designed for group activities and workshops, the brick walls have been left exposed, with windows and doors in an unpainted galvanised finish. Internal timber cladding and a stair with continuous balustrades from mezzanine to the floor echo the simple vertical 'Yorkshire boarding' found on the restored Dutch Barn on the other side of the Farm Yard. This elegant steel structure has been refurbished to house animals and wood chip, with the Biomass boiler located in an adjacent lean-to.

Landscape

In contrast to the open farm yard, which provides a flexible space to be used by the local community as well as allowing holiday guests to engage with animals, the courtyard garden provides an intimate and secluded visitor retreat. An informal path arrangement through naturalistic perennial planting provides a setting for guests to meet or relax privately in their own space, with a natural sense of enclosure being provided by an informal structure of trees and shrubs. Once mature, these will also provide dappled shade to protect the south-facing elevations from over-heating.

The selection of plants and materials was driven by the ambition to retain the vernacular character of the existing site, and celebrate a sense of place. Only native species have been used in the wider landscape setting with a more ornamental palette of perennial herbs, fruit trees and a productive beds within the site. To improve the connectivity of the site to the wider landscape, the courtyard garden provides a rich nectar source for pollinators, and the surrounding coppice nuttery creates a woodland edge habitat opening out to species-rich meadows.

2.0 Quotes

‘Driven by the belief that everyone should have the opportunity to engage with farming and wildlife, the brief called for an ambitious renovation of the derelict site that would provide exemplary standards of accessibility and sustainability, without compromising the unique historic and agricultural character of the existing buildings.’

The principle established with CBA from the outset was to create a beautiful and peaceful place for people with disabilities who are invariably short-changed in the environments they are provided. The results have exceeded our expectations and great credit must be given to CBA for their creative and project management achievements.’

– Nick Read, Wraxall Yard (Client)

‘We were delighted to work on Wraxall Yard. Accessibility has been improved where practically possible to meet with current standards, and our aim was to incorporate it in a manner that wouldn’t damage the aesthetic of the existing building. We know there is a lack of choice and location of accessible holiday homes in the UK and with the spending power of the UK’s more than 14m disabled people, and their families, we know the holiday homes will be in high demand.’

– Corinne Keany, Inclusive Environments Specialist at CAE (Accessibility Consultant)

‘We loved staying at Wraxall Yard - it is so refreshing to find accessible accommodation that really is what it claims to be, and so much more. Such beautiful design and attention to detail; our only problem is wondering how to incorporate some of these fantastic design features into our own house! Many thanks to Nick and Katie for making us feel so welcome, and particularly for our wildlife ‘show and tell’ and guided walk. We will return soon...’

– Keith and Cindy Jansz (Guests, August 2022)

‘It has been a privilege to work for an organisation whose values align so closely with our own, and to have an opportunity to create a project with well-being and equality at its heart. It has benefitted from the attention to detail and level of quality that a client might apply to their own home, alongside an admirable ambition to have a wide-reaching social and environmental impact.’

The setting, character and materials of the original buildings offered a rich and inspiring starting point for the design, which was defined by a series of simple moves to open up the site, upgrade the fabric and create a tranquil environment from which to explore the surrounding landscape. It has been deeply rewarding to hear the feedback from the guests who have already visited and we hope that it will bring pleasure to many more families for years to come.’

– Clementine Blakemore, CBA (Architect)

3.0 Notes to editors

Project Data:

Address	Wraxall Yard, Lower Wraxall, DT2 0HL
Start on site	May 2020
Completion	April 2022
Site area	4600m ² (approx.)
Gross internal floor area	800m ²
Cost	Undisclosed
Cost per m ²	Undisclosed
Client	Wraxall Yard CIC
Architect	Clementine Blakemore Architects
Structural Engineer	Structure Workshop
Services Engineer	Ritchie+Daffin
Landscape Designer	Hortus Collective
Below Ground Drainage Designer	Genever & Partners
Quantity Surveyor	Align Property Consultants
Accessibility Consultant	Center for Accessible Environments
Interior Designer	Clementine Blakemore Architects
Identity & Wayfinding	Smiths Studio
Contract & Procurement Route	Traditional (JCT Standard 2016)
Main Contractor	Stonewood Builders
Photographs	©Lorenzo Zandri, ©Emma Lewis

Estimated Environmental Data (for accommodation):

Airtightness at 50Pa	6.17m/h/m ²
Overall area-weighted u-value	0.27 W/m ² K
Heating & hot water load	89.36 kWh/m ² /year
Annual CO ₂ emissions	20.59 kgCO ₂ eq/m ² /year

Select suppliers:

Cork & wood fibre insulation	Ty Mawr Lime
Douglas fir	East Brothers Timber
Steel windows & doors	West Leigh
Rooflights	The Rooflight Company
Timber windows & internal joinery	F Cuff & Sons
Timber furniture	Another Country
Accessible bedframes	Bakare
Rise & fall kitchen counters	Ropox
Accessible bathroom fittings	Hewi
Biomass boiler	Dunster

Clementine Blakemore Architects

www.clementineblakemore.com

CBA is an emerging London-based practice committed to producing buildings that are inventive, inclusive and have a positive impact on the wider community. Founded in 2016 by Clementine Blakemore, the practice enjoys making architecture rooted in place and shaped by context - in terms of local materials, climate and craftsmanship. In 2020 the practice was included in the Architects' Journal prestigious 40 under 40 list, and in 2021 was featured in the Architecture Foundation book New Architects 4.

Having self-built a number of their early projects, and led a series of design/build workshops, including for the Architectural Association at Hooke Park in Dorset, they take great pleasure in the process of transforming design ideas into built form. St. John's Music Pavilion, completed in 2019 for a state primary school in Buckinghamshire, was shortlisted for the Wood Awards, AJ Small Projects Awards and the RIBA MacEwen Award. Other clients include the Design Museum, the Dorset Wildlife Trust, and the UK Green Building Council.

The practice is currently working on a number of projects, including a low-carbon music studio and dwelling on an infill site in Hackney.

Wraxall Yard

www.wraxallyard.co.uk

Established in 2021, Wraxall Yard is a not-for-profit organisation run by father and daughter Nick and Katie Read, which provides holiday accommodation, rural experiences and education to people, including those with disabilities. The farm land around Wraxall Yard has a number of historic and newly-created features which are managed for the benefit of wildlife.

It has a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Site of Nature Conservation Interest and the owners manage these under plans developed with Natural England and the Dorset Wildlife Trust. These areas support a wide range of invertebrates, reptiles, small mammals and birds. The farm's rivers and ponds are host to some rare plants and wildlife including, White Storks, Kingfishers and Otters.

The grazed areas of the farm are all permanent pasture, meaning there is no ploughing or reseeded, which encourages a species-rich sward. Wild flowers are abundant in the spring and summer and there is a programme of wildflower meadow creation around the farm, alongside hedge-laying and planting. Complimenting areas of ancient woodland, in 2021 a 10 acre plot was planted with 800 trees and shrubs to create a low-density, grazed woodland known as 'silvopasture'. This is a mutually-beneficial system for plants and grazing animals which also helps to mitigate flooding. It's part of a wider drive to transition to a regenerative agriculture system to help restore soils, water cycles, and biodiversity, and reduce atmospheric levels of greenhouse gasses.

Nick and Katie see themselves as custodians rather than landowners, who want to invite anyone with an interest to share in their love for the work they do, the animals they care for and the land they look after.