

Creating a rural legacy

Mary Clark is developing a conservation reserve and legacy building in the Avon Valley.





Photo by Chris Root

Grass snake

When I first meet Mary Clark at her cottage in Topsham Bridge, she explains she's been up all night feeding a litter of black Labrador puppies. I'm quick to realise that at the age of 72, Mary (a farmer, bat carer, pilot, sculptor and wildlife enthusiast) is quite an amazing woman with unstoppable determination.

Mary and her husband, Cyrus, are working hard to gain planning permission to create Link House, an eco-house and conservation area in the Avon valley. Combining innovative design with sound ecological principles to improve biodiversity, her plans don't fit the usual criteria, so she's fighting against all the odds. Mary's proposed site is outside the standard limits for planning permission, so she needs to develop a design that has exceptional qualities in order to secure special planning permission.

Mary and her husband Cyrus jumped at the chance to buy 50 acres of land above their cottage after they were badly affected by severe floods in 1999. "Waves of water

came into the house; it was a disaster," recounts Mary. "The previous landowner had ploughed the fields above us and removed the hedgerows and woodland, so water flowed faster down the valley." Mary and Cyrus wanted to reduce the flood risk on their house, and since they bought the land in 2000, their plans to create a wildlife haven have evolved.

"I've always dreamt of living simply in a sustainable, low-impact way," says Mary, a country girl who has always lived in old houses with a big carbon footprint. She sees her proposed design as a "contemporary version of a Devon longhouse".

The Link House project will be the highest energy performing Oak framed House in the UK, it will be a zero carbon house, with a biomass heat source, reed beds to filter the sewage system, and photovoltaic's contained within the triple-glazing set into the thatched roof. It would form an exemplar project for stimulating the local economy as the project will bring about the restarting of harvesting and use of Devon sourced water reed as a sustainable building material.

Mary explains that the house will be made almost entirely made from locally-sourced materials from less than 50 miles from the site." If the house burnt down, only a few utility pipes would remain," says Mary who plans to be as sensitive to the site as possible.

The Devon Wildlife Trust have revealed that the site lies close to a rare greater horseshoe bat colony, a bat roost has been designed as part of the house to re-create a cave like environment where the entrance of a cave is warmer passing through to the deeper parts of a cave which has a cool temperature to suit the bats needs during the year.

Mary has no plans for formal managed



Mary Clark

Photo by Yancy Hillton

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Eco-friendly materials and methods

Highest energy performing oak framed house in the UK
 Pioneering water reed thatched roof: sourced from Topsham, Exe Valley
 Zero carbon house

Local timber: Douglas fir and larch from Aveton Wood (1km away) plus oak from North Devon
 Local rural skills eg thatching
 Biodiversity and habitat improvements
 Reed bed water treatment, biomass, heat recovery, 100% low energy lighting with

daylight linked controls blinds, photovoltaic integrated within glass roof
 Bat roosting cave to be excavated under the proposed building, ideal for horseshow bats
 Use of British post-consumer waste recycled vehicle surfacing.

flowerbeds or patios - her garden would be the 50 acres of woodland, a traditional Devon orchard, hedgerows and wild landscape surrounding the house where native plants and animals can thrive.

Li-Li Williams, Devon Wildlife consultant ecologist, is excited about this project's potential to increase biodiversity. She has been involved in ecological surveys of the site to make sure there are no adverse ecological implications. "Link House conservation project would create new habitats for protected and notable wildlife in the area, such as rare greater horseshoe bats, barn owls, dormice and reptiles." She explains that, "new wildflower areas with less intensive grazing will increase insect biodiversity, and more traditional hedgerows and cattle-grazed pastures would attract bats feeding at night."

Architect Gavin Woodford knows that it is rare to get planning approval for anything in open countryside. "Mary wants to create a ten-acre woodland and increase biodiversity, and she has been working closely with Devon Wildlife Trust and Avon

Valley Partnership to raise the ecological value of the land." Gavin's designs for the house take a holistic approach. "The thatch roof contours reach down to the ground to become part of the landscape, and we have planned an integrated blind system so blinds close automatically and bats won't

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be confused by light from the house when they start feeding at dusk."

"Beyond the boundary of the house it would be pure ecology - but it is a very unusual proposal in terms of planning permission," says Gavin, director of Ashburton-based firm, Woodford Architecture and Interiors, who has designed this eco-house to touch the landscape lightly.

Mary is adamant the house must sit quietly at the top of the proposed site. "I like the clean, simple lines of the design," says Mary, who has a strong sense of shape as a sculptor. "To me the curved contours of the house represent the silhouette of the Moors and South Hams."

Mary's Link House conservation project has captured the imagination of landscape architect Caroline Curtis. "Link House is

special because it uses traditional techniques and skills to restore the landscape and the health of its habitats, whilst ending up with a very high-tech, green, forward-thinking, low impact building of the future," says Caroline. "Our challenge is to communicate this to the planners. We must prove that it is innovative - its specialness lies in learning from the past and using and adapting this knowledge for the future."

Caroline feels passionately that this is a building for life. "In a landscape setting, the building has to become an integral and natural extension for it. My job is to read the historical landscape and look from the site to read the contours and lie of the land to find the best solution," she says.

Many people want planning permission for commercial developments or their own personal gain but Mary's vision is quite unusual because it stems from her emotional connection to the land. "I want to develop the land in a positive way for the environment so that this project enhances the landscape. I want to recreate the biodiversity that should have been here in the first place had it not been overgrazed, and for this work to continue after I'm gone."

Others might have given up trying to get planning permission by now, but Mary is serious about making her dream come true and opening up this conservation area to the community: "It has great education value and huge scope for community projects - people will be able to walk through the land and enjoy it," says Mary. ■

