

FINDING AN ARCHITECT

IN HAMPSHIRE

HUW THOMAS has taken to Hampshire with a passion, becoming a champion of its historic towns and villages, and building in red brick, stucco and knapped flint. ‘However,’ he adds, ‘with the right client I’d love to put a spaceship in a field.’ His first love affair was with the traditional Hampshire barn: ‘Coming from West Wales, I’d never been into an oak barn before, and didn’t realise what wonderful interiors I would find. These are the cathedrals of the countryside.’ Mr Thomas soon worked out a strategy for sympathetic barn conversion, putting the windows in the cart entrances and beneath the eaves of the end gables. ‘That way you can get light coming in from four directions without interrupting the grand sweep of the roof, which is the great feature.’ Several of his conversions are illustrated in English Heritage’s recent study, *The Conversion of Traditional Farm Buildings: A guide to Good Practice*.

His work brought him to the attention of Hampshire landowners with decaying farmhouses to restore. One of his most successful new houses in the fashionable Candover Valley makes brilliant use of traditional knapped flint with red-brick trim and a steep-hipped roof covered in handmade clay tiles (right). The house has a wonderful texture—at once new and harmonious. It’s a simple but well-proportioned design with large arched windows on the ground floor. The red brick is used for the corners and the door and window frames, with bands of brick giving the house a simple but



Sympathetic to the vernacular: one of Huw Thomas’s recent Hampshire creations

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smart livery. The flint work was done by R. W. Armstrong & Sons, a firm specialising in restoration work.

‘I think of myself as a tailor. Most people buy houses and adapt them. With a new house you have to get to know how your clients live. It’s a game of tennis, batting things back and forward. I do it by hand, using watercolour sketches. I draw quickly, showing a client a room as it might look, putting on a colour wash as we talk. People don’t always think of the angle of the sun, or of opening a ceiling to the roof.’

In Winchester, he has designed a compact villa for a chocolate-maker, in traditional brick with bands of mullions on the first floor subtly reducing the apparent height of the house. Here he has used French-style ‘guard-balconies’ instead of the projecting balconies more familiar in England. These are balustrades placed directly in front of inward-opening French windows. ‘This way the whole room becomes the balcony.’

The extremely modern interior is an ingenious response to an oblique site, with light streaming in from every

angle and vistas opening up on either side of a flying stair into the hall.

Gully Farm is a rebuilding of a run-down farmhouse on a large estate. The owner wanted a Classical design. Mr Thomas provided him with a pretty stucco front with double-height bay windows either side of the front door. Inside, it incorporates a 17th-century panelled room and a sweeping stair. An orangery has been created from an outbuilding and a new barn with queen post trusses serves as a children’s room.

Mr Thomas believes the first generation of eco-houses was often ugly because technicians designed them. He is working on a modern extension to a traditional gate lodge near Alresford. ‘It had an ugly sixties extension. I am restoring the original thatch and building an energy-saving extension sunk into the hillside, connected via a glazed link, and which will house two bedrooms, a kitchen, sitting room and study. The design is simple—glass walls with a grass roof laid on concrete. The great thing about a concrete roof is that it can be any shape you want.’

With Footstep (www.footstephomes.com), Mr Thomas is developing a blueprint for an eco-house that will be both practical and handsome, using deep blue photovoltaic roof slates to convert sunlight into electricity.

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