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WEEKEND

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At home with the Tudors

Can modern and medieval ever mix?

One couple have built a new house among wattle, daub and wonky timber.

By Grant Gibson. Pictures by Mel Yates



When Christopher Ash and James Soane bought their first car in 1998, rather than head abroad as usual, they decided to take a UK holiday.

"It was our first ever break in Britain," Ash says. "We rented a house in Lavenham, Suffolk, for the week – I used to holiday there as a child." They fell in love with the village and decided to build their

own home there. It's easy to see why: Lavenham is picture perfect, its streets filled with timber-framed buildings, built when the town thrived on the wool trade under the Tudor monarchy. Today, virtually the entire place is listed, which means getting planning consent for anything – let alone a new-build house – is virtually impossible.

So how did they manage it? "Finding the site was pure chance," »







Christopher Ash (below, right) and James Soane knew a home in Lavenham (left) would have to

blend with local buildings. The kitchen (right) uses similar materials to those outside



he says. "We overheard a neighbour in the local pub talking about that was part of her garden, in the heart of the village, off the main square. She was about to new the planning consent secured 15 years earlier." The pair, both architects, pounced. At planning restrictions had become much stricter since the first received consent. They were told this was a site not of special interest, nor national importance, but one of international importance," Soane says. As a result, the pair had to "explore the vernacular of local buildings" and grapple with the conundrum of how to design a contemporary house that was sympathetic to the surrounding Tudor buildings –

all wattle, daub and wonky timber.

It took two attempts before their proposals got the green light. The height of the new house matches that of its neighbour farther up the hill, and the roof pitch echoes the town's existing architecture, which is brimming with pointy rooflines. The pair worked with a local builder who "understood traditional types of construction" and has renovated many houses in Lavenham, and with local materials that chimed with those used in the town. Though constructed from a modern, steel-and-timber frame, the house is finished in a combination of traditional lime render and local brick, and the doors and window frames are made from oak that has been treated with boiled





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linseed oil and will grey with age.

Inside, the house has a pared-down feel, with a sense of warmth and space that is distinctly Scandinavian – Ash cites Finnish architect Alvar Aalto as an influence. Windows run floor-to-ceiling and the ground floor is split-level, dominated by an open-plan living area with a whitewashed brick fireplace and a kitchen that uses a similar palette of materials to those used in the building's exterior. The softwood beams in the ceiling are visible, as are the supporting joists. The floor is made from brick and conceals an underfloor heating system that, by removing the need for radiators, "helps rooms feel much less cluttered", Soane says.

Up a winding staircase are two large bedrooms; a further bedroom, bathroom and office are on the top floor within the gables, where the pair work. The furniture comes from a range of sources: the cane chairs were found in a local antiques shop, a vintage table is a family heirloom, other pieces were bought in a modern furniture warehouse sale, and the textiles for the cushions in the kitchen came from eBay.

There are touches of luxury, too, such as the en suite in the master bedroom. With a marble bath and walk-in shower, it nods to the couple's hotel design work, but is softened by more quirky, personal touches, such as a rococo-style mirror. "We didn't want to design a show home," Ash says. "It had to be a house we wanted to live in." ●