COVERSTORY

THE TEMPLE OF TIMBER

This judge has created a shrine to green living in rural Devon, says **Fred Redwood**

BOB MOXON-BROWNE is a man of strongly held principles, as you would expect in a QC and a deputy judge. So when it came to building his timber-framed house, Lyneham Coombe in the Teign Valley, Devon, two years ago, he had no intention of cluttering the countryside with "just another" second home.

"I had reached a time in life when I wanted to create something worthwhile," says Moxon-Browne, 61, who lives in North London and practises from chambers in Temple Gardens, specialising in the Technology and Construction Court. "I wanted to create a house that was both environmentally friendly and an ambitious architectural statement." So with this notion in mind, Moxon-Browne turned to his brother-in-law, the internationally renowned Swedish architect Bengt Warne. "I phoned Bengt and he came to Britain immediately. We talked through ideas over several bottles of wine for a whole week, and eventually he outlined rough plans for this house. It was to be my cathedral in the woods."

The location that Warne chose for Lyneham Coombe could hardly be more dramatic. You approach the house down a rough drive and it sits framed in its own wooded valley, like a giant Swiss chalet. When you go in you find a rather featureless marble-tiled lobby, but there is also a solid walnut staircase, cantilevered off a central spine and giving the impression of floating in air, which draws the eye to the floor above. Climb the stairs towards the light and you find the living area: Warne's showpiece room that gives the house its sense of theatre. Warne specialised in the use of timber-and-glass houses built in woodland, his central philosophy being that a house should be "part of nature". This room, with its high vaulted ceiling and its huge floor-to-ceiling windows looking out across the treetops, is typical of his work. From it you walk out on to decking, straight into the southern gardens that are sculpted into the surrounding slopes.

It is, at 100 sq m (1,076 sq ft), a vast living space and it prompts the question of how it

The philosophy is that a house should be 'part of nature'

could be used. "Possibly as a performance area for a musician, because the acoustics are excellent, or as an exhibition space for an artist," says Moxon-Browne. "I see this as a home for a philosopher or a writer — it may not suit your average family." Sustainability was the second thread of Warne's philosophy and the house is extremely green. The timber beams are lined with foil-backed insulating material first developed in the Nasa space programme, and the large areas of double glazing are filled with inert argon gas — another excellent insulator. The underfloor heating is fuelled by LPG gas, which is very efficient for the purpose. Overall, Moxon-Browne estimates that these measures have halved the heating bills that you would expect to pay for a house of this size.

Leading off the dramatic main living area there is a kitchen and a master bedroom. This is essentially an upside-down house, and a second staircase leads down to the four guest bedrooms. The ground floor has its interesting features, too. The comparatively modest-sized television room is a cosy contrast to the vast main room upstairs, and the decked terrace offers wonderful views over the valley.

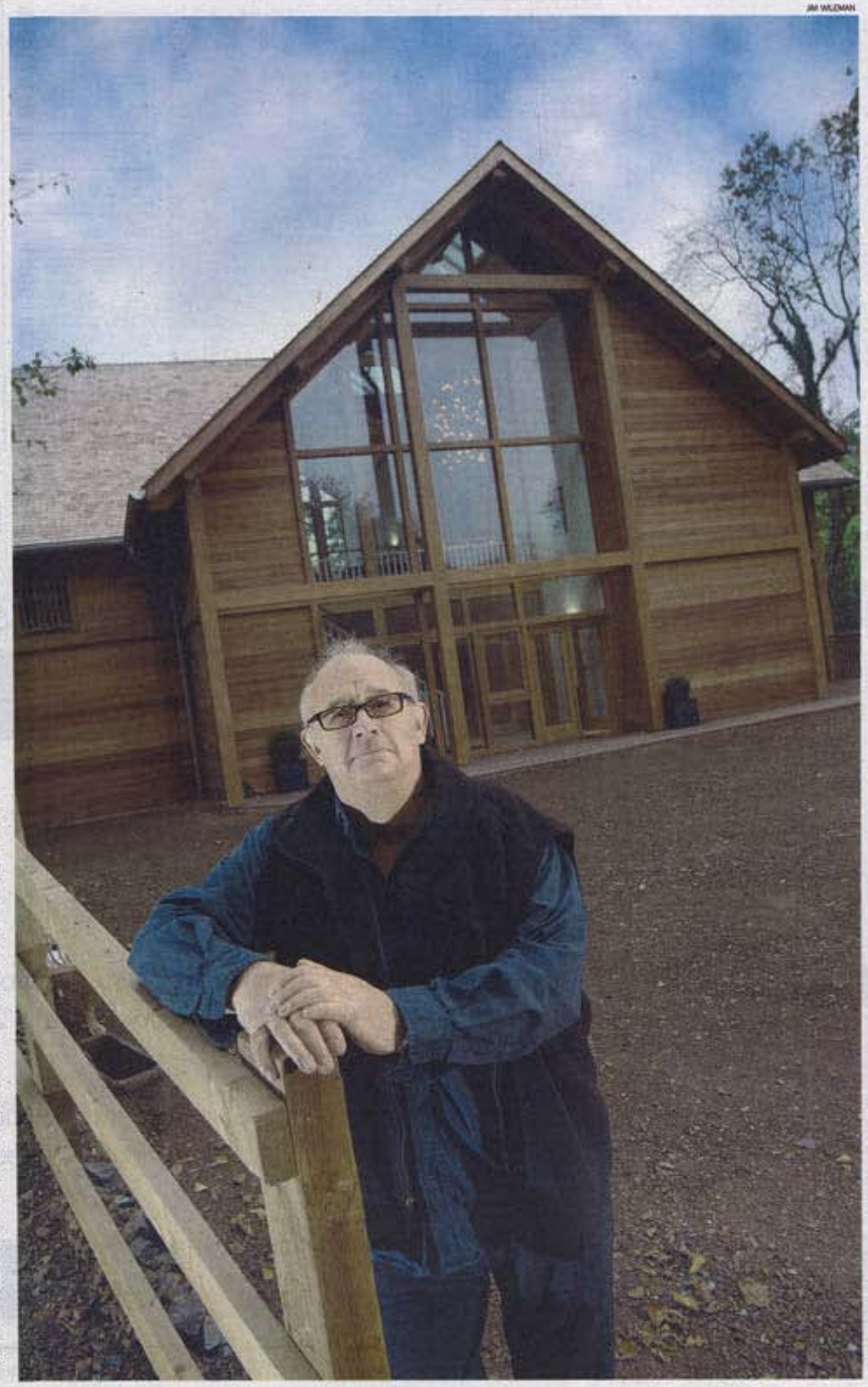
The planning that has gone into the grounds is breathtaking. At the bottom of the valley a culvert has been dug to make a "surge stream" fed by rainwater from the hillside. Rocks and pebbles have been placed on its bed, so that the stream "sings" when in flood. Then there are the two wells, one feeding the drinking water system and the other supplementing the "grey" recycled water captured from the roof. You will look in vain for signs of suburban neatness, such as closely trimmed lawns. Instead, you find acid-loving shrubs such as rhododendrons, Devon violets and camellias spreading up the valley to the meadow grass surrounding the house.

CHECKLIST

How green is your house? Compare it with the techniques and features used to build Lyneham Coombe, below:

- ☐ Double-thick Pilkington K glass, with cavity filled by argon gas
- ☐ Minimal use of concrete and cement — confined to foundations, retaining walls and floor slabs
- ☐ On-site concrete mixing was banned to prevent ground pollution
- ☐ Roof shingles are secured with stainless steel rather than copper nails
- ☐ Pipes are plastic; no lead was used anywhere in the house's construction
- ☐ Laminated timber frame and cedar roof
- ☐ All water comes from wells (no mains)
- ☐ Effluent is oxygen-treated by state-of-the-art "Titan" equipment.
- ■ Lyneham Coombe is for sale with Jackson-Stops & Staff for £1.4 million (01392 214222) and was built by John Ward of Sirius Projects (01275 837935).

JIM WILDMAN



Wood worker: Rob Moxon-Browne, left, built Lyneham Coombe in the Teign Valley at a cost of more than £1 million

Warne had cancer diagnosed just as he was completing his plans for the house and he died in December 2006. It would have been unthinkable simply to abandon the project, so another architect, Richard Webster, was drafted in to take Warne's place and building work was placed in the hands of John Ward, an expert on timber-frame constructions.

Lyneham Coombe took more than 18 months to complete altogether, and it was by no means all plain sailing. Moxon-Browne still shudders as he recalls the anxious moments when the enormous glass windows, costing £60,000, were gingerly shifted into position. It was an expensive project. The site alone cost £275,000 and the basic building costs were more than £600,000, which meant that when finance and administrative costs were accounted for the

Beams are lined with insulation developed by Nasa

house cost more than £1 million to build. So why, it must be asked, is Moxon-Browne selling? "I am still busy working and I'm not ready to live in Devon yet," he says. "Anyway, my wife, Kicki, is a city girl who comes over nauseous if she's more than ten minutes' walk from a cinema or a theatre.

"But when I do eventually retire I'm going to build myself another eco-friendly house, like this one but smaller. It will have a pool and I can see myself there, sipping endless Martinis. It's not just a dream. I'm going to do it."

For everything you need to know about turning your house green, go to: timesonline.co.uk/propertyguides