

The Woodland House by Ben Law

Contributed by Treacodactyl

A review of the book about the house that Ben built, as featured on Channel 4's Grand Designs.

Ben Law's new book "The Woodland House" describes how Ben builds his own woodland house out of local sustainable materials, many sourced from the woodland the house is built in. I enjoyed Law's previous book "The Woodland Way", and subsequently saw the construction of his new house on Channel 4's Grand Designs in 2003, so I came to the new book with interest. After reading the book, I made a special effort to watch the Grand Designs Revisited programme.

The book starts off with Law explaining his background, his interest in woodland and building various homes. It then focuses on the building of his house in Prickly Nut Wood. Law guides the reader through all stages of the build from planning, design, construction and finally to living in the property. There are some useful comments provided; for example the problems and extra costs of having to meet building regulations that don't take account of traditional building techniques. The book also contains many inviting and decently proportioned photographs that help explain the build process.

There are many other useful details, such as the strength of timber when used for in-the-round construction, the planning involved with straw bale construction and the use of lime and earth plasters. I was surprised to see quite a few man-made materials being used, such as non-toxic particle board in the floors, and Onduline (a tough, lightweight corrugated roofing and wall cladding made from organic fibres) for some of the roofing and membranes used for weather-proofing. There are also some useful comments on working with volunteers as most of the labour was provided by volunteers in return for learning skills themselves.

The book is more detailed than the programme; for example it mentions that not all the sweet chestnut roofing shingles were made by Ben and how the windows were made by a local craftsman. I found the book more inspiring than the TV programme, as it came without the distraction of Kevin McCloud, the narrator from Grand Designs, trying to find problems everywhere! Although the book is closely connected to the TV programmes it more than stands on its own and I would have found it more valuable if I had not seen the programmes.

When I finished reading the book I was a little disappointed by the lack of general information it contains for less experienced readers. Perhaps I expected too much and in fairness, Law does provide a very useful list of further reading. The book is very specific to Law's house. I also felt there could have been even more detailed descriptions of the materials and the decisions behind using them. For example, the roof is capped with copper and uses copper guttering and down pipes - I assume copper is used rather than lead because the water is used for household tasks - but I would like to know if there were other reasons.

The book is certainly more detailed than the latest Grand Designs programme and will answer some of the questions people may have. If you are considering building a low-impact house you may find it an interesting read, but not as detailed as you wish. However anyone who missed the programme or who would like a permanent record of it should enjoy the book.

To learn more about managing woodland in a sustainable way I can highly recommend Law's other book, "The Woodland Way. - A Permaculture Approach to Sustainable Woodland Management."

The Woodland House, ISBN 1-85623-031-7 UK Price £14.95

The Woodland Way, ISBN 1-85623-009-0 UK Price £16.95

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