

FORGOTTEN CRAFTS

# Making MUD HOUSES

On the Devon/Dorset border, two women are helping to elevate the ancient craft of cob building into the eco-friendly architecture of the future

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Master cob-builders: Charlotte Eve (left) and Kate Edwards (right)

**F**ourteen years ago, Kate Edwards was working in art psychotherapy in Norwich when she spotted a magazine advertisement for a ten-day cob house-building course in Ireland. "I'd done up properties in the past but yearned to do more than just plastering and painting. When I saw the ad, instantly I knew I'd found my calling. So I quit my job there and then, and went along."

Dating back some 10,000 years, the primitive craft of cob building has a global heritage – and to this day, around one-third of the world's population live in an earthen house. The 'cob' – a mixture of sandy sub-soil, clay and straw – is traditionally sourced from the surrounding countryside. Historically, it would have been mixed by farm animals, who would trample it with their hooves, but today it is largely done by hand. "That was the big appeal for me," Kate says, "the fact that it's here, it's local and it could not be any more environmentally friendly – there is no transportation or manufacturing

involved in the process and your bare hands really are the only tools you need."

## GETTING OFF THE GROUND

Returning to Norfolk after completing the course, Kate quickly secured her first commission (a small garden studio) and, through word of mouth, her client base steadily began to grow. However, it soon became clear that her new-found passion needed some commercial nous to really help it take off – which is why Kate's partner, Charlotte Eve, also left her job in local radio to help turn what was essentially a hobby into a profitable business. "I take care of the marketing and the money; without me, Kate would happily just do it all for free," Charlotte says, laughing.

Soon they were making everything from cob porches and pizza ovens (see box on page 72) to brand-new home offices from the ground up. But they both felt it was time for a project of their own, and so in 2007, they bought a 400-year-old cob house on the edge of the Filby ▶





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Kate and Charlotte's former cob house in Norfolk; the workshops are attended by people of all ages from across the globe; traditional, low-impact methods are used to create cob buildings; the materials used allow for quirky design elements, such as round windows



*"We want people to leave ready and able to build their own homes from scratch"*

Broad. Using straw from the neighbouring farm and a clay mix from their back garden, they set to work building a 70 square-metre cob and straw bale extension to the house, more than doubling the size of the property. It cost around £10,000 to build – even the staircase and fireplace were made of cob. The finishing touch was the roof: a mixture of living sedum, stained glass and thatch from the surrounding marshland, another traditional craft Kate had mastered after attending a six-week thatching course.

### MOVING ON

Both originally from the West Country, Kate and Charlotte eventually decided to sell their Norfolk home in 2016 and relocate to the Devon/Dorset border to be closer to family. They now live near the coast, with six-year-old son Wilf. Determined to keep this ancient skill alive, they started running four-day cob house-building courses from their historic stone and thatch property, quickly discovering that people would be willing to travel from as far as Australia to learn the craft for themselves. "We've had everyone from young couples choosing to build an annex in their parents' garden after struggling to get a mortgage to retirees hoping to build their dream home in warmer climes," Charlotte explains. "Others simply come along for the experience."

All of Kate's students must understand each stage of the building process. Beginning with a gravel trench, which acts as a capillary break to stop the moisture sucking up through the walls, they will then lay a six-inch breathable limecrete floor before starting on the walls, learning how to incorporate windows, doors and staircases. "The only slightly technical part is separating the clay from the sand in order to achieve the right proportions of the two," Kate says. "You need just enough clay to ▶



FROM RIGHT Learn how to make your own pizza oven; Kate and Charlotte relocated to a historic cottage on the Devon/Dorset border six years ago

bind it together but not so much that it cracks. But no one goes away thinking, 'I can't do this', Kate promises. "Unlike the straight lines of modern-day building methods, cob is an extremely forgiving, instinctual and creative process. It's like Plasticine - if it isn't quite right, you just chop off a chunk and carry on."

### BUILDING A NEW FUTURE

Kate and Charlotte's ambition, however, runs deeper than simply teaching a new skill - the pair are determined to make a difference to a very real problem. "We want people to leave ready and able to build their own homes from scratch - we also ensure they understand the basics of planning applications, building regulations and drainage. With houses becoming increasingly unaffordable, we hope more people will consider a self-build."

Cob building is currently experiencing something of a revival (the Heritage Crafts Association describes it as 'viable'), and it offers a more economical alternative for self-builders. Cob homes cost around 20 per cent less in materials than conventional properties and are 20 per cent cheaper to heat due to the high thermal mass of the walls. There are health benefits of living in such a house, too: "Together with being pollutant-free, the natural materials mean that every part of the property breathes, so there is never any damp," Kate says.

With around half of her students to date having gone on to build their own homes, their mission statement seems to be working. Keen to help mould a new generation of cob builders, the couple spend time, too, in local primary schools, showing children how to make their own Iron-Age roundhouses: "As they can see the fruits of their labour at the end, it can be an extremely rewarding and grounding experience."

And it's this therapeutic effect that inspired Kate and Charlotte's newest venture, The Earth Retreat - two-day experiential workshops designed for people who simply want to get back in touch with the earth and themselves. Some day, Charlotte would like to take this a step further: "My dream is to find some local land and, together with my neighbours, build a community church - not for any particular faith but just as a space for celebration and gathering." For these two pioneers, work is not only about reviving an ancient skill but also building a better future.

**FOR MORE DETAILS**, see Edwards & Eve Cob Building's website at [cobcourses.com](http://cobcourses.com). A four-day cob building course costs £580.



### Build your own PIZZA OVEN

If you're not quite ready to invest in such a big project, Kate and Charlotte also offer a one-day workshop in building a pizza oven from cob. Rather than spend thousands on a ready-made brick oven, you can learn all you need to know about constructing an authentic, affordable and sustainable version with your bare hands. A world away from shop-bought or takeaway varieties, pizzas cooked in cob have a deliciously smoky wood-fired flavour - and are ready in minutes. The next workshop - which involves plenty of pizza tasting - takes place on Saturday 5 October and costs £160. Visit [cobcourses.com](http://cobcourses.com) to find out more.

