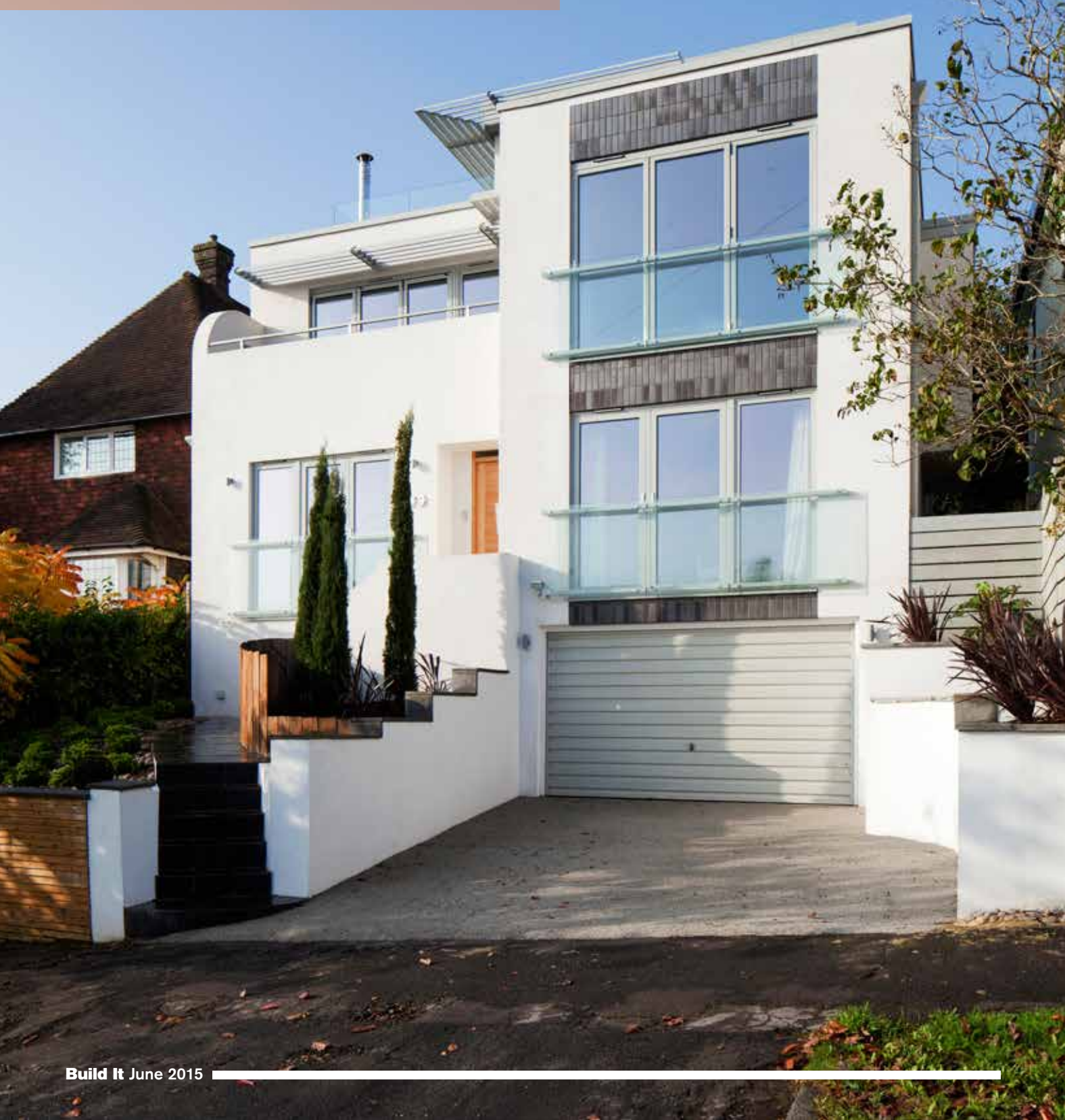


# A modern marvel



Determined to make the most of an elevated plot, **John Wignall** transformed a tired 1930s bungalow into a light-filled home that captures the wonderful outlook

WORDS **JANE CRITTENDEN** PHOTOS **JAMES FRENCH**

**Y**ou could easily mistake John Wignall's bold three-storey modern home for a new build – but in fact this unusual project, set on a street of 1930s houses in Brighton, is one of the UK's most striking bungalow conversions. John was living on his boat in Brighton marina when he decided to invest his savings in bricks and mortar. He began looking for opportunities in 2007 and came across this property in the summer of the following year. "I liked the three-bedroom bungalow straightaway,"



The three-storey house has several balconies and terraces, plus crisp rendered finish, which all help emphasise the building's geometric shape

## THE WIGNALL FILE

**NAME** John Wignall  
**OCCUPATION** Grounds maintenance contractor  
**LOCATION** East Sussex  
**TYPE OF BUILD** Bungalow conversion  
**STYLE** Contemporary  
**CONSTRUCTION METHOD** Timber frame  
**PROPERTY COST** £370,000 (including original 100m<sup>2</sup> bungalow)  
**HOUSE SIZE** 184m<sup>2</sup> (1,981ft<sup>2</sup>)  
**PROJECT COST** £310,000  
**COST PER M<sup>2</sup>** £1,685 (£156 per ft<sup>2</sup>)  
**TOTAL COST** £680,000  
**BUILDING WORK COMMENCED** February 2011  
**BUILDING WORK TOOK** 15 months  
**CURRENT VALUE** £1,100,000





he says. "It's on a desirable street close to the station with good links to London. More importantly, the plot is elevated, so I thought there was potential to have a fantastic outlook across Brighton, towards the sea and over the beautiful South Downs."

### Money matters

John gave a lot of thought to whether he should extend the existing structure or demolish it and start from scratch. "The bungalow is set on chalk so it's stable, but the site is a steep slope. I decided that building a new house could've meant spending thousands of pounds digging foundations," he says. "Also, I was happy with the footprint of the bungalow, so it made no sense to knock it down."

There was one lingering consideration: self building a new home would have made the project zero-rated for VAT on most materials and labour. John had done his homework, however, and discovered that if he could prove the property had been empty for at least two years, via a council tax exemption certificate, he would only have to pay VAT at 5% (rather than the full 20%) under VAT Notice 708. "I triple-checked to make sure I had got my facts right," he says. "The time it took to ensure I was taking the right path suited me, because I didn't want a mortgage and needed time to save up for the work."

John felt he had a good chance of getting planning consent for two more storeys, which would allow him to maximise the site's potential and take in the views from the upper levels. The bungalow was the last one left among a row of houses and the road is set into a steep hill, so the neighbouring properties seemed quite overbearing in comparison. "The planners said they had no objections to the bungalow being replaced," says John. "In fact they described it as the missing tooth in the street's smile."



An 'upside down' layout sees the open-plan living, dining and kitchen space arranged on the first floor, making the most of the house's elevated position

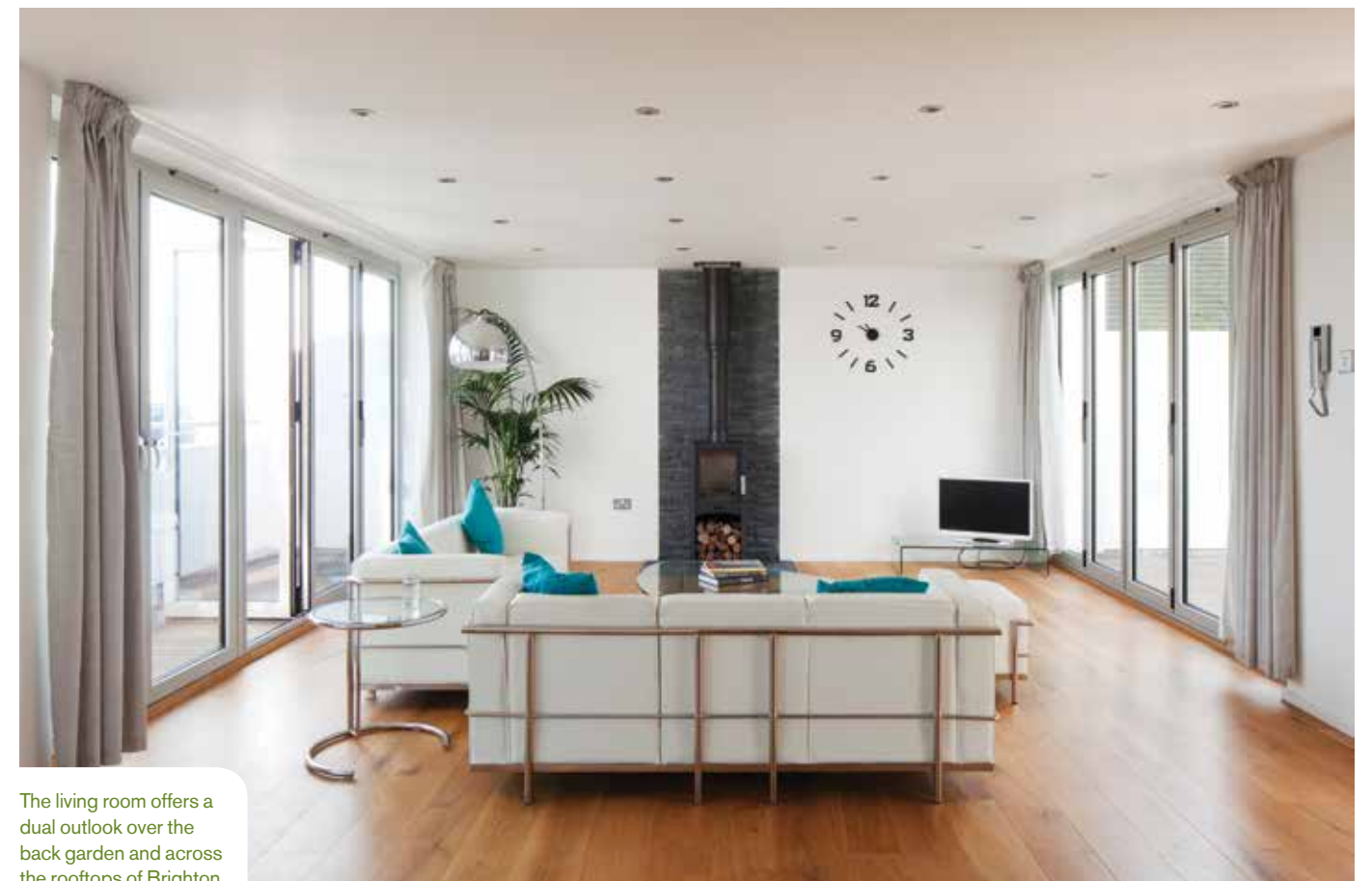
His one concern, however, was a block of flats located at the bottom of the street on a perpendicular road. While the apartment block was lower down the hill, the structure was tall – and John was worried that it might block the seaside vista he was trying to capture. "I walked up my road until I got to a point where I thought I was at the level I would be looking out of my new home," he explains. "I could see above the flats, so I was 90% certain the finished house would be tall enough to enjoy the views."

### Boxing clever

For the next few years, John worked fastidiously in his grounds maintenance job so that he could afford to pay for the whole project in one go. During that time his vision for the new house began to take shape, and he decided on a contemporary home with a flat roof. He started looking for a local architect with a similar stylistic approach and, in 2010, came across Arch Angels Architects' website, which was showcasing a 1930s-style project. Impressed, he went to have a chat with architect, Nicola Thomas.

"I gave Nicola a drawing of a white box with art deco and Bauhaus influences," says John. "I explained that I was aiming for a design that would be of its time, but that looked different from anything else. I wanted it to be built with modern materials and feature lots of glass to take full advantage of the views."

Nicola responded to John's ideas by planning an 'upside down' house that would suit the site's gradient. Her proposals featured an elevated living space on the first floor, along with floor-to-ceiling windows and terraces to the front and rear to soak up the surroundings. A second floor 'pod' would house a bedroom and ensuite, complete with a third wraparound terrace. Downstairs,



The living room offers a dual outlook over the back garden and across the rooftops of Brighton





## I LEARNED...

**GET YOUR PROJECT COSTED** before you apply for full planning permission, so you have a ballpark figure for the works – otherwise you may have to borrow more money or even redesign the scheme and submit a revised application.

**WATCH OUT** for fixed-price contracts. Sometimes builders drop their fees to win work, but add in lots of variations as the project goes along to achieve their profit margin. A quantity surveyor can confirm whether the costs in your contract are realistic.

**DON'T BE AFRAID** to use suppliers from different parts of the country. Local firms weren't interested in providing the glass for my stairs and balconies, but a northern firm proved efficient, reliable and reasonable. I even bought some of the balustrading via eBay.

the existing ground-floor rooms would become a bathroom and four bedrooms, one of which would feature an ensuite.

One thing John wasn't sure about was where to site the staircase. "Nicola came up with a great idea," he says. "She suggested making a glazed stair tower by using space in the box room and extending out at the back. It's formed one of the best features in the house."

Nicola submitted the planning application on John's behalf in June 2010. She was confident he would get planning without any problems, so they were both shocked when the project ran into trouble. "The planners were quite clear they were happy for me to get rid of the bungalow – but the main question mark was about the

Stylish monochrome cabinetry by Blue Sky Kitchen Designs makes great use of space in the culinary zone, with built-in appliances providing easy access. The planners stipulated that the window should be placed high up to protect a neighbour's privacy. A skylight helps bring in natural brightness



style and look of the new house," John explains. The design's sheer vertical facades and flat roofs created what the local authority called "an over-dominant and incongruous element of the street scene relative to surrounding properties." The planners' biggest objection was to the full-width balcony running along the front of the house, which they felt was too overt. They proposed that more height should be added above the garage – to match the rest of the house – and additional windows be incorporated to reference the bays in the older neighbouring properties. John was happy to comply: "This change has actually resulted in more internal space, and they allowed us to keep the flat roofs," he says.

The second objection was related to Brighton and Hove's local plan. One of the policies included here states that a project "will only be granted planning permission if the proposed development would not result in significant loss of amenity to neighbouring properties." Unbeknownst to John, a neighbour had indicated they weren't

happy with the position of the new design's kitchen window. They had complained that it would lead to an unacceptable level of overlooking – in spite of the fact that the unit was more or less a straight replacement for a former bedroom window. "It was unfortunate as I had spoken to all the neighbours beforehand and I could have sorted this out before we submitted our application," says John. "It was simple to fix, though. We put in a high-level window and a rooflight instead."

## Onwards & upwards

John and Nicola agreed on a budget of £200,000 for the works. To keep costs down, they planned to keep the original foundations and external walls. QED Structural Engineers was brought in to check the stability of the foundations by digging test pits, which confirmed the footings could be retained. However, with a further two storeys to be added they advised the extension should be built in timber frame – because it's lighter than blockwork, it would put less stress on the foundations.

Planning consent was given in January 2011 and Nicola put the project out to tender. The four quotes that came back varied between £200,000 and £305,000, but John wasn't convinced the cheapest builder had costed everything properly. He decided to hold fire so he could save up for longer. Nevertheless, he selected a contractor and lined them up to start towards the end of the year. However as the date approached, Nicola became concerned the team wasn't performing to its usual standards on another project, so recommended a replacement firm. "The new builder was more expensive," says John. "We negotiated and I took out the underfloor heating and rainwater harvesting system to reduce costs."

The new contract was agreed in February 2012 and the building work began in May. John continued to live on his boat and had already decided to leave them to it, so he could throw himself into work to earn as much as he could. He was told the house would be finished in eight months but in fact it took almost twice as long. "I ran into some major problems with the builders, but we also had three months of almost non-stop rain right at the start," says John. "I thought about putting a tin hat scaffold over the bungalow to keep everything dry but as it was summer, we expected the rain to stop, and then it would've been too hot under the roof."

The project struggled to get going much before August, but at least with the scaffolding up John could finally find out whether his gamble with the views had paid off. "It was even better than I imagined," he says. Towards the end of the year, however, work began to slow again, and then the builder organised a meeting and asked John for more money. "I was on a fixed-price contract and I didn't have any more room in the budget," he says. "I couldn't help but think that if the site had been better managed, or if more of the work had been subcontracted out, it would have helped make up some of the time that had been lost to bad weather and the project could have been delivered on budget. In the end we agreed to mutually terminate the contract."

## Positive outlook

John turned to a local builder, who had been subcontracted onto some of the early stages of the project, and he agreed to finish the renovation. In order to fund the rest of the work, however, John had to take out a £13,000 loan against his business. "I'd never had to do something like that before so it wasn't an easy time," he says. "I literally had nothing left in the pot, but it was the right decision."

Despite all the hurdles, John's persistence has paid off: the house is an incredible transformation from the hemmed-in bungalow it once was. The entrance hall leads into a seemingly understated ground



The main bathroom is set into the middle of the ground floor plan – the darkest part of the house – with an obscure-glazed porthole supplying light



floor and takes shape as you rise up through the glazed stairwell. The upper storeys are bursting with light thanks to the feature windows, while the contemporary glazed French doors and wraparound terrace help to make the most of the cityscape and sea views beyond.

John took up residence in August 2013 and is surprisingly accepting of the difficulties that he faced during the project. "It's hard to say if I have regrets about the builders, because if I'd have used somebody else they could've been worse," he says. "In the end, the most important thing is that I really enjoy living here. I could visualise the house before I built it and it's exactly how I thought it would look. The views are the best thing; I can see for miles."

## closer look

## The glazed stair tower...

*The stunning stairwell is the beating heart of John's home. Set into a glazed tower, it captures panoramic views across Brighton and the South Downs, offering new perspectives at every step. Its style reflects John's love of modernist design, with crisp white strings and floating oak treads. Teamed with a glass balustrade, it makes for a wonderful centrepiece that maintains the design ethos of allowing light to permeate between storeys and deep into the centre of the floorplan.*

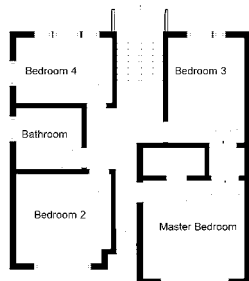


*Heart of the house*

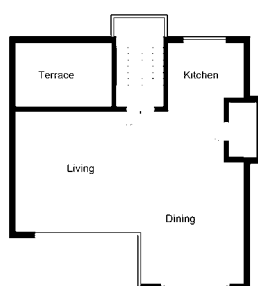


### Floor plans

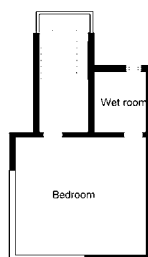
#### Ground floor



#### First floor



#### Second floor



**Elecosoft**

House plans re-created using ARCON 3D Architect Home Designer Software. [www.3darchitect.co.uk](http://www.3darchitect.co.uk)  
Tel: 01252 267788 Email: [arconsales@eleco.com](mailto:arconsales@eleco.com)



### TOTAL BUILD COST BREAKDOWN

Elements	Cost m <sup>2</sup>	Cost %	Total cost
Professional fees	£82	5%	£15,000
Strip-out & demolition	£56	3%	£10,300
Structural steelwork	£93	6%	£17,100
Timber frame walls & floors	£189	11%	£34,800
Roof structure & coverings	£100	6%	£18,400
Aluminium windows & external doors	£223	13%	£41,000
Juliet balconies & glass balustrades	£82	5%	£15,000
Electrics	£49	3%	£9,000
Plumbing & heating	£174	10%	£32,000
Internal doors & ironmongery	£24	1%	£4,400
Internal carpentry (including stairs)	£92	5%	£17,000
New partitions, ceilings & plasterwork	£114	7%	£21,000
Render, cladding & internal finishes	£177	10%	£32,500
Kitchen	£60	4%	£11,000
Bathrooms	£43	3%	£8,000
Balustrades, brise soleil & flooring	£96	6%	£17,700
External works	£15	<1%	£2,800
Driveway & landscaping	£16	<1%	£3,000
<b>Grand total</b>			<b>£310,000</b>

### Useful contacts

ARCHITECT **Arch Angels Architects** 01273 267184 [www.aaarchitects.co.uk](http://www.aaarchitects.co.uk) STRUCTURAL ENGINEER **QED** 01273 358035 [www.qedstructures.co.uk](http://www.qedstructures.co.uk)  
BRICK SLIPS **Wetherby Systems** 01942 717100 [www.wbs-ltd.co.uk](http://www.wbs-ltd.co.uk) GLASS BALUSTRADES & JULIET BALCONIES **Independent Glass** 01623 416300 [www.independentglass.co.uk](http://www.independentglass.co.uk) DIOMET **Diomet Balustrade** 0114 243 9009 [www.diometonline.co.uk](http://www.diometonline.co.uk) STRUCTURAL STEEL **PJ Steel** 01273 835738 [pjsteel.com](http://pjsteel.com) UNDERFLOOR HEATING **Robbens Systems** 0800 454569 [www.underfloorheating.co.uk](http://www.underfloorheating.co.uk) GUTTERING & BRISE SOLEIL **Dales Fabrications** 0115 930 1521 [www.dales-eaves.co.uk](http://www.dales-eaves.co.uk) DRIVEWAY **Adbruf** 01963 362640 [www.adbruf.com](http://www.adbruf.com) KITCHEN **Blue Sky Kitchen Designs** 07979 906518 [www.blueskykitchendesigns.co.uk](http://www.blueskykitchendesigns.co.uk) OAK FLOORING **Wenban Smith** 01903 230311 [www.wenbans.com](http://www.wenbans.com) DECKING **Round Wood of Mayfield** 01435 867072 [www.roundwood.com](http://www.roundwood.com)

