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At first sight it looks like Noah's Ark, a beautiful wooden house nestling among the trees. But there is nothing old-fashioned about Michael Winter's new home. Inside it looks like a modern apartment with four bedrooms, three bathrooms and two studies. But more than that, it's an eco-friendly, solar-powered paradise, with bills so small you could fit them on the back of a postage stamp. **DOMINIC NUTT reports.**

Warm welcome from the wonky wooden house

MICHAEL Winter is an architect and here is his house. He designed it and he's proud of it.

The Boundary House sits in splendid seclusion among the trees behind the Neville Cricket Ground, Tunbridge Wells.

Despite its size, you can't see the house until it's almost upon you. Then suddenly it looms up – it's quite a shock at first.

It's built on stilts and it's kind of wonky.

Michael said: "My partner, Elizabeth, and I wanted it to fit in with the environment. We built it on stilts so that when you arrived you looked up at it. It makes it more welcoming.

"Also, we wanted to avoid digging foundations. They would have cut across the tree roots and killed them and we wanted to be in sympathy with our surroundings, to work with them, not against them.

"We built the house around the trees, that's why it's crooked."

They only had to chop down three to make room for the building, which is surrounded by greenery.

Michael said: "That's intentional. The house faces south and the south side is open with lots of triple-glazed windows to trap the heat in the winter.

"In summer there are leaves on the trees and this shelters us from the heat.

"The back of the house, which

faces north, is solid. It's designed so that the temperature inside only varies by a few degrees from summer to winter."

The only obvious heating in the house is a wood-burning stove in the middle of the open-plan living area and electric towel racks in the bathrooms.

Michael's £300,000 house recently won The Daily Telegraph's Individual Homes Builder of the Year award for its beauty and energy efficiency.

On the roof are solar panels which cut water heating bills by a third. The walls and roof are insulated with shredded newspaper, an eco-friendly alternative to traditional insulation specially treated to make it fire retardant and vermin proof.

The house is built out of soft wood (hard woods tend to come from endangered Brazilian or Indonesian rainforests) and the wooden floor inside is secondhand, reclaimed from a school in Dartford.

But perhaps the most innovative addition is the water system.

"We collect rain water and have installed a purification system," said Michael.

"Most of our water comes from that. We are attached to the mains as a back-up and we have a water meter but we hardly ever have to use that.

"The system cost us about £9,000 to design, build and instal, although we now know it could be done more cheaply, and we reckon we'll save about £1,000 a year on water bills. You do have to spend money to save it.



The house that Michael built

"And, as far as possible, we avoided using poisonous substances like solvents and preservatives. We researched this in great depth."

But he denies being a lentil-munching hippy.

"We are not a charity. We only went for eco-friendly materials when they cost the same or not much more than traditional materials."

Michael claims he and Elizabeth, an accountant, rarely argued about the design of the house. "Over technical matters I took precedence because of my training.

"Elizabeth kept my feet on the ground financially and she had an

equal say about the design. I wanted to grow grass over the top of the house but I lost out to Elizabeth on that one. She said I would look ridiculous mowing the roof."

THE Boundary House, caused quite a stir locally.

"When it was being built British reserve went out the window. People would come up to us all the time asking to be shown round.

"I was happy to do it. Elizabeth and I are quite proud it."

Afraid of inquisitive neighbours queuing up for cups of sugar and a quick nose round, Elizabeth and Michael held an open day. Seventy people turned up.

ACCORDING to Michael it is easy to add energy-saving devices to your home.

"Solar panels only cost about £2,500 to install and will cut water-heating bills by about a third, although you may need planning permission if your house is listed or in a conservation area.

"If you are having an extension built why not use eco-friendly insulation and have the windows triple-glazed?"

"And I would guess you could install your own rainwater system for about £5,000 which I think will be a real investment in Kent with its water shortages. I believe water rates and charges will go up and up."

For more information about Michael's house, where he got the materials and how to improve your own home ring him on 01892 539709.



The open-plan living room with wood-burning stove

'We built the house around the trees, that's why it's crooked.'