

Episode 218

Stopping and later restarting a self build - with Alex Baines

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/218

Ben: This is Alex Baines' fourth time on the podcast. His self build project 'Long Barrow' is one of the in-depth video case studies in The Hub. That means we check in with him from time to time.

Unfortunately he hasn't finished his build because work had to stop when he finished his full-time job and had to go freelance, so today we find out what the journey has been like starting everything up again.

First of all I asked Alex how he was doing.

Alex: Not too bad, thanks. Feeling good that things are moving, finally, on site. Professionally, things have gone well, work wise. But it's taken a while on the whole self-build side of things. That has been a struggle. But it's looking as though it's moving forward now, which is good news.

Ben: Let's talk about this today. First of all, just some context because we haven't talked about this for a little while. What is the Long Barrow self-build project?

Alex: In brief, it's an ICF – insulated concrete form – semi earth-sheltered build. In plan, viewed from above, it is just a straight rectangle. It is two floors with the lower floor and about a meter of the upper floor below ground level. It's sunken into the ground.

The roof is the only bit which is slightly different, and that is arched over the top of the building in a gentle arch from ground to ground. So, from probably about twenty-five metres outside the building on either side.

Ben: Was ICF a good choice in the end, to go down that route? It's interesting, as I get more experience, I look at our own masonry

build and think about that, and the timber frame systems that I've seen, all of these in detail, and I'm getting more of a picture.

So, having been building with ICF, what do you think of it?

Alex: I slightly reserve judgement on that for the moment. The reason I say that is purely until we've done the airtightness test. That's the bit that really matters to me.

In terms of its construction and what it's done, it's been superb. And in retrospect, because we had to shut the site effectively for two years, great, there's been no degradation on it at all. It's just sat there. It's concrete and EPS. Nothing much can happen to it. And when it gets to the render stage – actually the render, they've just done last week, the base coat – they just do a little rasping of the outer layer and then apply the render straight to it. So, it's had very little effect in terms of leaving it.

If that had been a timber frame construction, then I'd have been concerned at leaving it open and exposed for that amount of time. But with ICF, it hasn't been a problem.

So, in that sense, fine. But I hold my final comments until we do the airtightness test.

Ben: Understandable.

Take me through just before things came to a halt. What was going on? How did things come to that stop? What were you feeling?

Alex: I left my previous company of permanent employment and went to a period of self-employment. That meant that I then didn't have the ability to get the mortgage that we were looking at to finish the build.

Originally, planning for the build, that wasn't a problem because the build would have been watertight and airtight with the finance that we had, but there was a complication with our excavations and the extra costs involved at that point, which meant we didn't have that money available towards the end of finishing the airtight/watertight structure.

So, in essence, we stopped much earlier than when that money ran out, before the windows went in and before the render went on, on purpose, even though we could've afforded the majority of that – ninety-odd percent of that. We stopped at that point because we knew that there would be no degradation of those items that were left on site for whatever period of time it was.

If we had put the windows in and we hadn't finished the render, they would've been subject to water getting in and destroying the internal timber frame of the windows. If we'd done the render and not completed the windows, you'd have had water coming in through the window reveals and being locked into the building behind that render.

Obviously, for us, we needed to just let water go through and then straight back out again.

Ben: What do you have to think about when you're stopping a site? You tell your contractor – do they just take everything away?

Alex: With our contractor, we setup at what point we were going to stop at. We effectively did a sign-off of all the bits of work that had been done to that point and we went through a checklist of saying this was agreed, this part of the contract was complete, this part of the contract was not complete, and a step-by-step sign-off of those items. So, they knew exactly what they could deal with.

If there were damages to those items that had been signed-off whilst they were away, that would've been my particular problem. Those items that hadn't been done, not an issue.

There's an extra complication later on when we restart for the damage, a slight issue, but essentially, you agree all the points to where you are and then they leave site. So, you say 'yes, we feel this is completed.'

Because we had the money to complete various sections, we stopped at exact points. We didn't just stop half-way through doing the insulation or half-way through doing this. We had very finite stop points.

Ben: Are they under any obligation to start back up again, or when they stop and you sign everything off, that's it?

Alex: We were very lucky – that's the wrong word – we had an experienced architect who drew-up a pretty good contract for us. And actually, we used a JCT contract.

There was very little in there in terms of timing, because when you're working on a site and you're doing anything, my experience has been that you've got one thing that can give out of time, cost and quality. To me, quality and cost were non-movers so, I always had to accept that time was going to be a mover. So, we specifically didn't have items in that contract regarding time. It was regarding completion, quality and cost.

So, they had to finish the job. They were contracted to finish it. What I'm not sure about is what the pause contingency was in there. I don't think there was much because we paused at a particular point and not half-way through any particular item being done. We paused in between specific contract items. So, it was just a question of, 'don't start the next contract item. You start that when we ask you back on site.'

Ben: Anything else that needs to be shut down on site, or does that pretty much have it covered now?

Alex: I suppose the only other thing to consider is those items that I was responsible for myself, outside of the contractors.

In my particular case, I was responsible for doing the scaffolding. That stayed on site for another four months because they were expecting to come back and I was expecting them to come back in that period of time. It didn't happen so, after four months, I had to take the hit on a bit of extra cost on the scaffolding and then got that off. Then we had the extra hit in terms of setting it all up again when they restarted.

That budget has been quite nasty. That has hurt us, the scaffolding.

Ben: It wasn't the case that when you got your job, you could then start straightaway? Because you'd think that that would then allow you to secure the mortgage. How did that work?

Alex: That's been slightly different. I'm in a very lucky position. My parents were able to – well my father and mother separately – managed to get mortgages on their property to fund this to finish, with the aim of me getting a mortgage when it gets to the right stage, to be able to pay them back.

So, we've been extremely fortunate in that position, but we are that amount of the way through that actually, most of the costs have already been done on this particular project.

Ben: That didn't happen straightaway, did it? There was a bit of toing and froing, wasn't there? How long did it take to sort that out?

Alex: Initially, that was never an option with my parents. That option came to the table after we had been off site for six, seven months. We discussed it and it probably took about a month from discussing and agreeing terms, to actually having the cash available.

Ben: What does that feel like, to have that contract almost, with your parents, at this stage in life?

Alex: To be honest, I don't like it. But then, it's the same way as I'd have a contract with anyone doing a mortgage. I don't particularly want that if I can avoid it anyway.

I've got to treat it on a professional basis. It has meant that when things are not happening on site – and again, we'll touch on that in a minute – that things have been stressed in the whole family, not just in my particularly small area of myself, my wife and my kids. It has affected the wider family because they all have a stake in it.

Ben: And also, you're building next to your mum's house, aren't you?

Alex: Yes, absolutely. That's a separate issue as well. We are right beside her. Well, not right beside her. Thankfully, there is probably a hundred yards between us and she's got a barn in the way. But she can still see the house.

Ben: There's no legal case of 'get your house finished' from your mum?

Alex: No. There's a lot of emotional case about getting the house finished.

Well, she has to drive in. Whenever she comes here, she's driving past it. So, what's played into our hands is actually that my brother has had children over the last year, based in London, and so she's spent a lot of time up there. The child has a minor impairment and so, my mother has been there helping out a lot, because they now have three children. So, she's almost taken on the nanny role and she's there a lot more than she's here.

That's not really an excuse for me to say sorry, we're taking that little bit longer.

Ben: What can you do in this period where you're trying to gear things up? What tasks are happening, or not much?

Alex: It depends how much you've prepared beforehand in terms of your design and completion details. It's also what do you want to do.

Because we were very unsure, I didn't want to progress on any design. There was no point getting in to any contracts with utilities, ventilation, whatever it happens to be, because most of those contracts have ninety days on them. Because they're supply contracts of materials. And at the same time, my focus is squarely on professional life, family life and getting the money to do the build. So, there's no point doing anything else until you know that you've got the finances in place.

Then it's a question of getting everything started on that level and then looking at what other items need to go in place.

We couldn't do, for example, any of the backfill around the site to get the utilities in because we've got to do the waterproofing to the lower part of the building once the render's on. So, at that point you decide, is there any point in doing the utilities? No. We've made an enquiry, I've got an original quote, I can now go back to them to say, 'please update this quote.'

Ben: Have you noticed any changes in prices as you've started to get going?

Alex: I haven't gone back to the utilities because we haven't finalised the aspects here on site, so I don't know what period that will be, whether that will be in the next two months or not. I'm waiting for us to have the air test on the building and to get the confirmed finished waterproofing details. I'm still waiting on that final bit of waterproofing details for the lower level. That's purely a technicality.

So, what has happened in our time off is that the company that were doing the build reviewed the waterproofing when they came back to site, and we discovered that the original plan for waterproofing wasn't robust enough for the below-ground waterproofing. And that's because exactly the same had been done on another site and it had failed after a period of time.

Ben: Well, it's better to know this now, before you've covered it up. I know you probably hate the fact that you've been delayed.

Alex: Yes. We hate the fact that we've been delayed, but yes. Having an issue with below-ground waterproofing when we know that we're actually slightly below the water table because that's what we were forced to do with the planners and with the local plan, I'd much rather the building was waterproof, and we get that detail right.

So, that's why I'm not rushing the other details until I know that is absolutely done and confirmed and exactly what we are doing for it.

Ben: What has the process been like to bring things back into motion?

Alex: I will be careful about what I say about that. It has been extremely painful getting it restarted.

We tried to restart – we had the finance available in July 2016, to restart on site. That was about six, seven months after we'd finished on site. So, we got ready July to August, thinking about it.

In August, the company that had done the build were invited back. They reviewed the site, they worked out what they needed to do and then they needed to work out when they could get their teams on site. Because obviously, those teams that were working on the build were now working elsewhere. So, I knew that we wouldn't start up straightaway again. It might be one month, one week if I was lucky, or it could be three, six months. I just needed to know.

However, getting those answers was taking a bit of time. It got to about the end of October, beginning to push, and they sent the main waterproofing guy back to review the site, to now work out if there were any damages, any issues around the site that we had to deal with contractually before they could start again. And there weren't. He wrote a report.

Then keeping on pushing through November, not much happened, and it's December. We kept on trying to follow it up, and then in the week before Christmas – and we're trying to get a start date of January, hoping at this point, and we're beginning to think this has taken us now five months, I took a call from the head guy who's been to the site a couple of times to say that their company was being closed down by their parent company.

So, suddenly at that point, I am now very concerned. But there was not much we could do. They were trying to get out of the contract, but I knew that we had the contract in place in such a way that the parent company – in this case is Aggregate Industries – would still have to honour the contract. They'd still have to complete the contract, even if the team that were doing the building and the company responsible for the building was no longer in existence.

Ben: This contract has saved the day, in a way. What would've happened if it hadn't been there or the technicality had allowed them to come out of it?

Alex: I'm not sure. It would've turned into a much more expensive build, because then it would've been a question of the waterproofing. I would've then had to look for what was going to happen with the structural warranty because they were doing that side of it. We would've had to have gone and found an entirely new team to deal with this build, because how many people actually know the detail?

Ben: People don't like that, do they?

Alex: They don't like taking on other people's work. They don't want to feel responsible for other people's work. The current team have

difficulties anyway because they have none of the original details of the project from the previous company.

So, everyone is searching a bit. The company that closed didn't leave any of its data with its parent company.

Thankfully, they were able to re-employ the original site manager to come back and work on site. Unfortunately, rather than having a team of three or four, it was just him and one other person helping him a lot of the time. So, suddenly, when they did come back on site, which was actually five, six months later – it must've been July 2017 by this point – at least we had somebody who actually knew the site and knew what had been done beforehand.

But I'd ended up negotiating with almost a different company at the level above, for them to then work out what was going on, for them to then get back to the original project manager, for him to go back on – that process took months. I started speaking to them in January, after the previous company closed in December, and they came back to site in July, August time. You can see it took a long time and we're still spending money on rent.

Ben: Any other factors that someone in this situation might not appreciate? I'm sure every case will be different.

Alex: Yes. So, the cost of finance, the cost on ancillaries like rent and everything else, what does your contract say.

And the other one to be very aware of and which I've had to be careful with is your site insurance, and your third-party liability insurance. Because it is likely that will have expired in that period of time. You've got to make sure that they are still in place or that they will go on through the build. Bearing in mind that if you have a site, even if it's closed and shut for a period of time, if someone was to climb on to site and fall down a hole and break their leg, you are still liable. You have to maintain that throughout that entire period. That's probably the other thing just to keep a little eye on.

Ben: When did things start again?

Alex: Last July, August. It started off by coming in, clearing up. There was a bit of damage from the previous winter in terms of there'd been flooding where the pumps had stopped and the electricity on site had stopped, and it had ripped off a bit of the external waterproofing that was originally there, at the point that we found out that obviously the waterproofing was redundant and wasn't going to be used anyway. So, actually it got ripped off even further in the end, rather than just partially ripped off by the flood.

They then had a couple of guys just gentle repairing that, smartening it up and getting it ready for the render and the final covers. They must've spent two months just doing that. We were trying to push but everything was going incredibly slowly.

Then it got to October, November and by that point, I'd been pushing on an almost weekly basis to say, 'we need the details. I want to order the windows. We're ready to order the windows.' But we knew the windows would come, it would be eight to twelve weeks, and then we'd want them straight on to site to be installed. And nothing was happening. Details weren't being confirmed. It got to November, December and I just swore and ordered the windows.

That's a complication. The windows are difficult on this particular build, with different angles et cetera. But the windows were ready and that's coming in a few weeks ago now. But actually, they stopped in November and they didn't come back until a few weeks ago because the render details and the waterproofing details hadn't been confirmed. So, it was sort of, 'I can't put the windows in until you've rendered the building. So, you need to render the building.' And they hadn't been able to find the right team to render the building. Because the render was the original requirement for that part of the building, and they needed to make it waterproof and airtight. And it was sort of, 'I'm not putting windows in until it's waterproof.'

So, it all suddenly started to happen a week-and-a-half ago. And all of a sudden, we've now got a base coat rendered building, which is all we need for waterproofing, the windows are going in this week, a fair bit's going in today and I suspect most of them will be finished by the weekend.

Ben: May 2018, just so we put a time stamp.

Alex: May 2018, at this particular stage, yes.

I suspect now that that's going ahead – I've had meeting with ventilation companies in the last couple of weeks.

I'm waiting on the final waterproofing detail because then what I'll be doing is going to the main landscape contractors I suppose, that we used originally for the dig out, to get them to do the backfill. But I can only do that once I know exactly what we're doing with the waterproofing.

That backfill will also allow us to start doing the utilities. So, as soon as I know that, I can go ahead with both the backfill and ordering the utilities, to get everything internal to the building.

Ben: Because the utilities come in above head height on that ground level, don't they?

Alex: They do, exactly. So, that part that is below ground, there's no point bringing it in at the bottom of the building. That would be four metres below ground level. So, they come in at above head height on the below ground floor level.

Ben: Since starting my own build, I really appreciate what it has meant to you to dig down this far. It's crazy. You're in open countryside here.

Alex: It's slightly ridiculous, it has to be said. It's the requirements of the planning. It was the design aspects of what the local village wanted.

Ben: Was that a good route? Oh, that was the only way to get planning permission. We've been here before, haven't we?

Alex: Yes, we have, exactly. It was the only way to get planning. It was an interpretation of, at the time, the new National Planning Policy, which I disagreed with. Because they said it was an extension of a previous policy which meant you had to have a large building for the plot of land. Well, that is mad. But as such, we weren't allowed to build a normal sized three bed house/three-and-a-half bed house, which is what we were looking at.

Ben: How far are you looking to take this now? We know finance is an issue, we know you've got finance, but it's a big house and there's still a lot to do. Those windows are going in nice and speedily. What next?

Alex: What next versus how far? What next I can answer. As we've said, that is the waterproofing, the backfill, the utilities, the ventilation systems to the inside. So, suddenly, we've got a working building.

After that, we'll work on, to a certain degree, the first fix. That's going to be only the upper floor at this stage.

Because of the delays and things like rent, there's going to be a discussion about damages on the site, liabilities ...

Ben: I thought there weren't any damages?

Alex: The damages from the flooding. There was a bit of that and the clean-up process that the company had to do from that. They could theoretically charge me for that, although my argument is, 'hold on, when you first came to the site to verify this, there weren't any and you have verified this yourself. You were meant to come on site and instead, you came to site seven-and-a-half months later with no

excuse as to what was happening. And you told me that the waterproofing was going to work. It didn't, and you've proven that it's not going to work on other sites. So, most of that delay has been you coming up with waterproofing details.' That's why we've been sitting around from when they first turned up on site over a year ago, to why the render and stuff is only being done now. That was not my delay. I've had that finance in place for a year-and-a-half, now.

But there may be a discussion of costs there, and there are other items that are going to potentially cost more. As we've said, utilities. My original quote for that is from two-and-a-half years ago. So, all of those items could cost a bit more.

Plus, we've had two years of rent. That's a significant hit. We've had the extra hit on the scaffolding that we discussed earlier, with it being taken down. So, there's the extra rental for an extra three or four months. Then the scaffolding having to be put back on site. That's a whole new cost of scaffolding which wasn't in the budget. That's four-and-a-half, five-grand of scaffolding at least.

All of those things, how far we're going to go? I don't know. So, the aim is at minimum, get a certain amount of first fix upstairs, get a bathroom in place, get the ventilation system in place, get the kitchen to a certain degree in place, make it a usable building.

Ben: When you say 'first fix,' will that have a level of partitioning and so forth as well? Because you haven't mentioned that you're sorting out your rooms first.

Alex: When I mentioned first fix, you'll know where the partitions are and depending upon the type of partition and the location, if it is timber frame, some of those timbers may be in place. If there is an option of maybe using a slightly different system, only some of them might be in place, not all of them.

When I say first fix, at the moment we are looking predominantly at making sure we've got the electrical lines, the control lines, the water lines, the heating lines into the right place. Not necessarily connected up, but in the right place.

What we do have to do on the upper level is create the false floor. So, we will put in this flooring system to allow us to do that. But in order to do that, we want all the wiring that goes underneath, and all the electrics in place underneath, and all the pipework in underneath. So, also the waste pipes and that type of stuff we would want to get in at this stage.

Ben: How do you feel about the project and your home?

Alex: I've had to split it up emotionally now, and I think that's also what's happening with the rest of the family. The process has obviously been very, very challenging. So, we are now looking at and trying to mentally break the process being awful and not associate that with I hate the whole thing, and I hate the building.

It's definitely caused a bit of love loss for the building as it stands. But it's in a wonderful location, we do love it. I've lived here for twenty-odd years. So, thankfully I've sort of got that to fall back on. The hope is that once the building is there and we are in, we look back on the period as it was difficult, and the love lost was the process and that methodology, rather than the end game is a disaster.

Ben: I want to thank you again for being open about all this because I know it's going to help someone who's either heading for this and just thinking, 'oh my goodness.' You've dealt with it really well. I know there have been some low moments which you don't need to tell me, but you'll come out the other side. Just keep on going.

It's lovely to see the progress. That must give you a bit more inspiration? Because I've noticed your confidence levels and your energy, they're down a bit. They're not normal, Alex. I need them back.

Alex: Yes, hold on. The energy levels are not to do with the build. That's to do with the kids waking me up the last three nights at four in the morning.

Ben: Me too. Every two or three hours.

Alex: But the emotions are definitely up now. We've been talking about what's happened in the intervening period. If we put that aside and we talk about this week, the emotions are fundamentally different. We've had render go on this week, windows go in. Suddenly you can see huge changes.

So, this is probably the quickest change of anything that we're going to get to see probably over the next period until it's finished. Because once you go inside, it's a lot more difficult to see that progress. You'll see wires going in and you'll see internal partitions going up. But this affects the whole fabric of the building, the look of the building. The difference between walking in to something that's watertight and airtight.

So, this week has made an enormous difference. It's just that there is two-and-a-half years before that which is slightly more challenging.

Ben: Have you learnt anything about either the process or yourself during this time?

Alex: I suppose it's still too close to really see what I've gained from it at this stage. I think once I look back on it and have a look at it ...

The reason I say that is I'm working on a lot of different Passivhaus sites all the time, and I get to see situations and challenges on all of those sites regularly. So, how much of that has come from learning on those sites? How much has come from learning on these sites? How much is it about learning about what I can emotionally deal with? I think when it comes to that final part of what can I emotionally deal with, I'm not going to know that until we've finished.

You've got to be realistic about it. Thankfully, because I see the other sites, I get to see what there is, and I can be a lot more realistic about it. I suspect it's ten times more difficult for my wife seeing it from the outside, who's not involved in the industry, who's just seeing things not really going forward, who's always coming up with, 'you've just told me there's another problem.' Because being Passivhaus, I've got to find the issues and then resolve them. But that means finding issues. And then if I then mention there are problems, that's a negative thing. And with a Passivhaus, until you are airtight, watertight and you've been told by your airtightness expert that actually, that first item is airtight, you haven't got anything tangible to say, 'yes, we've got a success.' Up until that point, it's detail.

Ben: Good luck with the test. We'll catch up again. How have the kids been through this, or has it not really affected them?

Alex: The kids are three and five. They run around all over the place. It hasn't touched them in the slightest.

Ben: That's something at least. Alex, thank you very much.

Alex: That was cool, Ben. It was good to see you again.