Transcript of House Planning Help episode 375

Ben Adam-Smith 00:00
This is House Planning Help - episode 375. Hello, I'm Ben Adam-Smith, and this is the podcast for you if you're interested in creating a fantastic home, be it a new build or a retrofit. I'm exploring what houses we should be building in the 21st century, and trying to break down the major roadblocks that may get in our way.

Ben Adam-Smith 00:20
Coming up in this session, my guest is Mike Whitfield. We're going to find out what a day in the life of a builder might entail. This is obviously local builder scale, small team, but Mike has been on the podcast before and brought a lot of value, and I've wanted him back for a long time, but particularly as I learn that he's at the stage of life where he's starting to step back a bit more. And why not. So we definitely need to engineer a chat.

Ben Adam-Smith 00:44
So Mike is a Passivhaus builder, so I thought as a resource for today, we ought to link that in, the Passivhaus Trust. It's the first stop, really, if you're interested in low energy building. And it has news, it has guidance, years and years of interesting guidance. You can dig deep in their events that they put on. So we always like to support them, if we can. They're a non-profit, and it is highly likely, I should think, that some of the case studies on their website, a few of those projects, will have had Mike's fair hand or involvement in them somewhere. So we'll link that into the show notes today if you want to find out more about Passivhaus building, start with the Passivhaus Trust.

Ben Adam-Smith 01:25
So let's get to our featured interview with Mike Whitfield. Last time, we asked for some tips on how to find a good builder. This time, we're going behind the scenes to understand what a builder has to deal with day to day. However, I started my chat by asking Mike how he first got into construction.

Mike Whitfield 01:43
I always wanted to be in carpentry, and when in my early 20s, I ended up working overseas in America, Canada and Australia. And I really got into timber frame. I learned a lot about timber frame, carpentry erection there. When I came back, I was doing more oak framing, the oak framing resurgence, revival had started. I was doing that in the 90s. Then with a friend in Shropshire, we worked on an energy efficient building, the first one that we'd done that was properly thought out. Actually, there were some details in it I'd remembered from when I was in Canada, although in my early 20s I hadn't understood them then, but anyway, I'd realised this was something I was really interested in, so carried on with that theme. And with the AECB in the late 90s, early noughties, we moved things on quite a lot with energy efficient building. Then when Passivhaus started, we were already ahead of the game, a bit. It wasn't a great leap for us to start doing Passivhaus.

Mike Whitfield 01:48

And was it easy to find work all the way through your career? Is it always the next job coming up? How do you find work?

Mike Whitfield 03:21
It is patchy, and it does take a long time to get a name. But I actually was doing, I wouldn't say I was taking on anything, I was concentrating on energy-efficient building, but I would take on other stuff as well, and I was still doing a bit of oak framing. But then when the recession hit in 2009, I started tendering. Well, we were doing a big barn conversion, and it carried us through a lot of it. But then when that finished, there really was very little work at that time. So I was taking anything on. We did nine months or so where we just did any general building. And at the end of that period, I realised that I might as well have spent the nine months fishing, except that I haven't got a fishing rod! And so I just decided at that point I'm not going to compete in the big wide world any more, and would just focus entirely on Passivhaus. That was about 2010 so Passivhaus, the first one was done in 2007/08. And I say it's loosely Passivhaus. We have done plenty of extensions and retrofits which haven't made the Passivhaus, EnerPHit standard, but we've applied those principles to everything since then, and since then, we've, I wouldn't say we've always had work. We do have gaps in the programme. You can often be in a situation where you've got quite a bit of work coming up, but for reasons beyond your control, you've got nothing to get onto at the moment, but we've kept going pretty steadily. We bought a couple of plots over the years to have as a fallback if we do get gaps.

Ben Adam-Smith 05:20
So this is quite common, isn't it, that you can have staff that you want to keep going, so you have these plots. Are they easy to set up and leave alone? Or how do you work it? Do you have to get to a certain stage before you can leave it alone?

Mike Whitfield 05:35
Yeah, you've either got to finish the groundworks and then leave it, or finish the shell and then leave it. Ideally you want to finish it in one go, but that does take quite a bit of resources and quite a bit of time. I mean, last year, we had three jobs totalling £1.5 million, probably, in the pipeline, but we couldn't start any of them, so we had to fall back on a plot that we'd already done the groundworks on. So we did that, but now that's been sitting there with the shell finished, and all the neighbours saying there's a perfectly good house there, why haven't you finished it? Because we've been so flat out since we started these jobs.

Ben Adam-Smith 06:22
And does the business size change at all? Are you constantly having a core team and then bringing on others? How does it work?

Mike Whitfield 06:31
Well, I've always had people on the books. I don't really agree or subscribe to the typical British builder model of having subbies who are effectively self-employed or not working for anyone else. They're really on a zero hours contract without realising it. And in our type of work, it's not a good thing, really, to have people coming and going. You need to know... It takes people quite a while to get their head around it. And you need to have a proper team going, but that does make you very susceptible to the

random chemistry of the different members of the team. You can go for years when you've just got people who don't have quite the right chemistry in the team. But we've been very lucky the last few years, it's really come together in that sense. Suddenly there's 10 of us now, or 11 including me. Yeah, everyone just gets on really well. There's no one trying to pull the wool over anyone else's eyes or annoy anyone. So it's quite good, really.

Ben Adam-Smith 07:53
And how is that structured? Are some of the staff in the office, and then you've got different levels of builder on site, and someone overseeing things.

Mike Whitfield 08:03
At the moment, we're in a transition period, really. It's a little bit unrepresentative to speak to me now, because I'm 67 and I'm trying to step back, and I've had various schemes over the last six or eight years, trying to step back, but for various reasons, it hasn't quite come together. But at the moment, we've got the right people, and it's coming together quite well. So to answer your question, we've got two site foremen, one of whom has taken on more responsibility for actually liaising with the clients, and the other one just concentrates on getting the work done. And we've got someone in the office who does all the office management, and she orders all the materials as well. And so, yeah, it's pretty good. I mean, I have actually stepped back quite a bit. We've had a few hiccups along the way, but it's good, really.

Ben Adam-Smith 09:09
Because it's interesting. One of the reasons I wanted to chat to you was because of all this experience that you do have, and just to again, like we did last time, see what I could learn from a chat. So I don't know whether, for looking through what you might do on a day-to-day basis, whether you almost want to go back in in time? Or is this actually a better situation, that as you step back, you can oversee the team in a different way? I don't know how you contrast that.

Mike Whitfield 09:37
Yeah, for me, because I've been effectively a sole trader, I'm basically a bloke who likes joining bits of wood together who got out of control. And when that happens, you do end up doing two or three jobs really. Most builders would understand this. You're wearing a lot of hats. In our transition period now, we're trying to go into employee ownership, but I won't go into that because we're in such an early stage that I'm not a representative person to speak about it, but that's our goal. And with a view to doing that, I've been quite clear that I don't want to have one person stepping up and trying to take it all on. We've got to spread the load in a more sustainable way between two or three people, so they do their existing jobs, plus a bit of my job. And yeah, that seems to be working. But for people to understand the life of a small builder, I don't know I can speak for everyone, really, but there's a lot of times you have to do office work evenings and weekends just to get enough peace to do it. It is quite demanding, really.

Ben Adam-Smith 10:54
So before this transition, you mentioned all these extra things that you are having to do, are these almost growing pains of any business, or is there something that's very important as a builder to keep

track of all these elements that you really do want to be involved in the finance you really do want to be on site to monitor quality, etc.?

Mike Whitfield 11:20
I think I can only really answer that from the last 20 years or so of energy efficient, Passivhaus building, in the sense that it requires more supervision, more attention to detail, the margins are tighter, and, yeah, it is a harder business to run. I don't mean that in the sense of putting people off, because there's so much potential here for builders' businesses, who want to specialise in it, but they need to understand that they have to put more into it. If we were building to building regs, the whole process, in every way, is much, much simpler. It's much easier to find someone to supervise on site really well. Nowadays you can give the drawings to the builders' merchant, and they work out the materials and give you a quote. There's no way we could do that. So, yeah, I've used a QS (quantity surveyor) once, just as an experiment really. The price came out okay, but there was no way we could have used the materials lists or anything else for our own purposes. So I've always had to do my own pricing, whereas in mainstream building, you wouldn't have to do that. You could easily use a QS or the builders' merchant to do your pricing for you. So I think it is harder, but it's also more rewarding.

Ben Adam-Smith 13:02
So how would it work, then, at the beginning of the design process? When would you get involved?

Mike Whitfield 13:08
Well for instance, the client might ring us up and say, I'm interested in building a Passivhaus in your area. I'm looking for a plot. We would put them on to the architect we work most closely with then they would speak to each other. We might all meet up, and they would come up with a design. But we can be involved in the process, because I'm quite an obsessive record keeper, and we price from our own records. We don't just put a finger in the air or try and think how much we can charge for that house.

Ben Adam-Smith 13:44
So what does that mean? Does that mean you've done it in the past and that will be the cost plus your profit?

Mike Whitfield 13:50
Yeah, well, we have outputs. We have a very detailed record of the outputs of each part of the process. In other words, how many man hours it takes to build a square metre of this type of wall. And so we would price it up like that, so we're pricing from our own records. So we can be involved in the early stages. We call it a collaborative procurement, rather than doing a tender or some other method. It's hard for people to understand, but a lot of architects, and a lot of the Passivhaus world anyway, they will accept now that by far the best thing to do is find a builder you like and trust and get on with, and just work up the price with them, if you can involve that builder early on in the process, and they've got good records to price from. We just did this today. We met a client on site who first contacted me two years ago, maybe more. He was looking for a site in our area. We met a few weeks ago with the architect on site. He did a sketch drawing of the house, the sort of house he thought the client wanted. We priced that up last week with lots of details missing and a very basic sketch, but we can still have a pretty good stab at it from our pricing programme. So he's told us what his budget is, which is

something else I would say is really important. It is really challenging when you're dealing with clients who aren't open about their budget. It's so much better for everyone to trust each other. If they say they've got X hundred thousand pounds, they need to know that we're not going to try and build it for £1000 less than that. In this case, we priced it up, and we have no idea what the external works, the site preparation, excavation, is going to cost. That's a bit of a stab in the dark without proper drawings, but it seemed like we'd have enough money left within the pot to do that and pay the architects fees and so on. So yeah, that's fairly typical of the way we get most jobs. We're doing another job at the moment where the architects produce the drawings fully. I think we went to one meeting, but it was already drawn, and none of our suggestions got included.

Ben Adam-Smith 16:33
But is it a case then that they know how you work, so it doesn't matter quite so much that if you're working with an architect who you've never worked with before, that could be a very different story.

Mike Whitfield 16:46
Yeah, it is a different story, but most architects are just relieved to find a builder who's on message. It makes their job so much easier. That's why it is hard for people to understand how important it is to have a team from the groundworker, we have groundworks contractors, they're independent contractors, but they work with us pretty much full time. Then there's us. We've got regular subbies. There's an architect we usually use. We've got consultants we usually use. It's just so much easier to do it that way.

Ben Adam-Smith 17:25
So you mentioned that you had this chap who got in touch a couple of years ago. Do you have quite a lot of conversations like that, where you can see there on the process, but you're not quite sure where it's going to go to or whether it will follow through?

Mike Whitfield 17:40
Yeah, as part of helping the younger people take over, I sent them the email chain so that they could understand, and it goes back two or three years, which shows the whole relationship. The guy didn't have a plot. It was a couple, actually, but we've mostly been dealing with the man, but they didn't have a plot. They were looking for plots. Then they were thinking of doing a retrofit. Then they decided not to, then they found a plot. It's a long process.

Ben Adam-Smith 18:13
I've done it as well. I know what it's like. So do you try to engineer it that you have a big project that is the sole focus of what you're doing for a considerable amount of time, and then you're onto the next big project. Is that the ideal scenario? Or is it some other set-up?

Mike Whitfield 18:31
That is the ideal scenario, yeah, that the groundworkers will have started the next project. We'll be on the main project, and we'll maybe have one or two people second fixing the last project, but basically, we want to have one main project. That is much simpler. With what I was talking about earlier, with the three jobs last year getting piled on top of each other. That was out of our control. We ended up with

two jobs running in parallel. But we were really lucky in that they were only a few miles apart, because we work anywhere within an hour of Hereford, really. We have had jobs which have been an hour and a half apart in one direction, you know, maybe to the south and then in the north, and if we'd had that situation, the last six months would have been really challenging. So that was lucky, but, yeah, you can't really control it.

Ben Adam-Smith 19:08
So you mentioned one thing that you did in your day today. Does anything else stick out? Lead us through how you've spent your time today. We know this is a transition period, but we're still interested.

Mike Whitfield 19:45
Yeah, well, it's not a typical day. I have actually, genuinely been stepping back. But today I was in the office at six, and I did an hour's work, mostly catching up on materials orders.

Mike Whitfield 19:57
Is this almost a daily, weekly job?

Mike Whitfield 19:57
No, normally it wouldn't happen. That's why it's not really a typical day, because we got a really good person in the office who's on top of all that stuff. But I went on holiday. We got back a couple of weeks ago. We got slightly out of step with things. Anyway I had some stuff to order. It was a really annoying website, and it kept failing and doubling my order, and that took me an hour. So then I went out to an extension site that we're working on. I was there for a couple of hours. Then I went on to a meeting at this new site, and I came back to the office again. Yeah, did some invoicing.

Ben Adam-Smith 20:50
So when you're on your site, are you just setting everyone up for the day, or do you have a sense of how much is going to be achieved on that site during the day?

Mike Whitfield 21:02
Well, at the moment, I'm not really setting people up. The sites are being run by the two site foremen, and they're doing fine at that. I got involved in the extension because we had too much work on and I just said, I'll take that off them. But in my previous life, yeah, I'd be on site at half seven, getting people going. Then I'd be in and out of the site hut. I would fantasise about actually doing some work with them, and probably be walking around with a nail bag on, but I might only achieve an hour or two's work in the whole day, then I would come back, maybe leave a bit early at three, come back, and do two or three hours in the office. That was a typical 'day in the life' till we changed the system recently.

Ben Adam-Smith 21:57
So it's interesting, you said you'd fantasise about doing some work. When was the last time that you could just have a full day of work? Did you have any of that three years back in time? Or not really, it was always going for the paperwork?

Mike Whitfield 22:11

No, I would have had the occasional day, yeah. I mean recently I have, because I haven't been having to run the business, on this extension I have done, within the last couple of weeks, I have done probably four or five full days where I've been there all day.

Ben Adam-Smith 22:28
And when you look at these foremen, I've met one of them at least. You know, what are you trying to instill in them from the years that you've been doing this?

Mike Whitfield 22:38
It's not really up to me as to how they continue the business. I don't really want to do it from a point of view of ego, but it's just we've got a valid business which has got a good order book, and it seems like something that's worth doing. So if they can carry it on in the same vein, I think I do have quite a bit of experience that I can pass on to them, and they are quite good at taking it on. I've been really impressed with the way they have taken it on, actually, and they bring their own different ways of doing things. And it's not a question of me really breathing down their neck and telling them what to do all the time.

Ben Adam-Smith 23:25
So what is your new role going to be, if anything? It might just be sitting on the beach again! What would you like to be doing in these next few years?

Mike Whitfield 23:35
Well, I would like to step back a lot. I'd like to have a lot more freedom. They also want to take it on, so we need to respect that. But what I would like to do is work part time on site. I think that would be useful to them if I covered for people's holidays or whatever. But ultimately, I don't want to work forever. I haven't had that much freedom, but I don't mind. I just do what I what needs to be done.

Ben Adam-Smith 24:04
Have you watched other builders retire and what might happen in their scenarios?

Mike Whitfield 24:09
Yeah, I do know some who've retired, but I also know some who are older than me, who are still working. I've got a close friend who's just turned 70, and he says he's on his last job, but he said that at least two or three years ago.

Ben Adam-Smith 24:26
So just going back to our list of things that we might find you doing, what is happening for the rest of the week? Can you pick out anything from your diary? Any other different tasks that we haven't talked about?

Mike Whitfield 24:39
The extension I'm doing is really a microcosm of the previous business. It's just a question of keeping the materials flowing to it, making sure our office manager knows what's going on and our office management system is working well. And, yeah just helping the guys on site. They are two less

experienced people on site, but they're coming on really well. And, yeah, I'm just helping them out really.

Ben Adam-Smith 25:11
And is there anything else about the work that you are doing that's worth mentioning at this point?

Mike Whitfield 25:18
I do think that once people have committed to an energy-efficient house or a Passivhaus, let's say Passivhaus, they are people who've thought about what they want a lot, and you need to give them a better service than a lot of builders are used to having to give to other clients. They expect more. They're looking for more. And the worst-case scenario is, in the early days, we used to hear lots of stories of people taking on the wrong builder and halfway through the job realising they actually weren't going to get a Passivhaus. These things do happen, they're not exaggerated. And we do know an architect locally who tried to do the first EnerPHit barn conversion in Britain, and got what he thought was a keen young builder. He asked me to go and speak to him and set him up and I did my best in one visit, but they pretty soon fell out. And it turned out the guy hadn't done the airtightness properly behind the floor frame, so he put the whole floor frame in, and that meant that they couldn't get the airtightness down to one (1 ACH at 50 Pascals), because there was this gap. Without taking the whole floor frame out, they just couldn't get to it. So that was, you know, his dream of having an EnerPHit house just went and there was no way of fixing it, really. So the point is, in our world, the clients do want to know that you can deliver the goods. And that's really why we're in a strong position, because we've done so many Passivhauses.

Ben Adam-Smith 27:11
And do you favour new builds over retrofits? Because retrofits are a lot tougher, I think, for everyone. But do you feel you should be doing them?

Mike Whitfield 27:22
Yeah, I think the answer is yes to both questions. A new build is much easier, and especially if we're working with the architect we normally deal with, where we've got structural systems which make it all fairly straightforward, but we do retrofits, and some of the young people are really interested in it. One of our guys has done, not an EnerPHit but a really good attempt at a retrofit on his first house. He's in his mid 20s, just bought a house, and seeing him go through that whole process, the penny has really dropped with him. We've got two whole house retrofits coming up in the next six months, and it'll be interesting to see what they think by the end.

Ben Adam-Smith 28:16
The ones that I have seen, I think the builders have learnt something about costing them from going through the process. That's one of their challenges.

Mike Whitfield 28:24
Well, I can't quite remember how many we've done. It's either four or five, but I know the fourth one was the first one we actually made money on.

Ben Adam-Smith 28:34
And you're experienced. That really says something. But well done for getting to number four and not thinking, oh, I can't we bothered with this!

Mike Whitfield 28:43
Yeah, so it is tough to price them. You could argue it's better to do them on a cost-plus basis, which is safer. And I think there is something to be said for, actually. I've always preferred to have a fixed price, in the sense that you get it all out the way before you start. Once you get going, then it's up to you. You're not constantly reporting to the clients and worrying them with emails and negotiating with them about things. Just get on with it. It seems a much simpler way of doing it.

Ben Adam-Smith 29:20
What happened when all the costs went up? You know, like you're saying, the risk there, we had the materials rise. Did you find yourself in any difficulty on any projects, or were you just finishing them quick enough that the prices hadn't climbed too much?

Mike Whitfield 29:33
I think we did do a couple of jobs that we should have made a lot more money on. We didn't lose money on them, but we made a very fine margin on them, and if I'd been more hard-nosed, they were ones that we'd priced just pre-inflation, and then by time we finished them, things had gone up a lot, and we should have priced them higher, really, but we didn't.

Ben Adam-Smith 30:00
Is there anything that we as clients could be doing to make your life easier or encourage more Passivhaus builders?

Mike Whitfield 30:09
I think if you're somewhere in the country where you haven't got a Passivhaus builder, if you get a sort of interested builder, just someone who likes a bit more of a challenge, now there is so much more information out there, and also you can Google everything. I don't really agree with that. I don't think that's the right approach, but you can read a lot of stuff. You can go to conferences, you can go on training courses. There's a lot of stuff you can do now to move things on, but I do think if we were able to look statistically, there's a lot of people who do one or two Passivhauses and then don't do any more. There are quite a few builders who, you know, do one then tell everyone they've done one, but actually they're not really doing any more.

Ben Adam-Smith 31:06
Sorry, why not? What has changed?

Mike Whitfield 31:08
I think it's just a lot of hassle. The margins are tighter, and it's a lot more work for people, and they have to have higher quality labour force, higher quality subbies. You've got to manage the whole thing better. And it's hard enough being a building regs builder.

Ben Adam-Smith 31:27
Have you found it easier to get jobs, though, because you've been recognised as being a decent, Passivhaus builder, and we're all searching for people like you. Has it been easier in that way?

Mike Whitfield 31:40
Yeah, I think so. I mean, that's what we said at the beginning. We have done enough jobs to get a reputation, and people come to us because of that. On the other hand, if you get a reputation for being too busy, you can miss out on jobs. People say I didn't bother asking you, because you're always busy.

Ben Adam-Smith 32:04
Oh, for goodness' sake. And we started by asking you how you got into building. So let's finish with a different question. How have you enjoyed a life as a builder?

Mike Whitfield 32:16
Oh personally, I've loved it, and I think I would say I was very much boosted, my wife's Australian, and we got married in Australia, and we lived there for about six years, and that was a fantastic experience for me in terms of rekindling my interest, almost. And I think in many ways, the business we've ended up with is an Australian type business with much better energy efficiency detailing, in Britain. It's a nice job to have, and I've really enjoyed it, I think it's great. I've loved every minute almost, although, you know there are some really tough aspects of running a business, especially on your own. Seeing these young people doing it with the potential for a team and supporting each other, that is so much easier. If there's any young people setting out in business, I'd say, find two or three people to work with, not all blokes. And yeah, it's so much easier. But then I had a partner when I was in my 20s where it didn't work out, because we had different goals. It is really hard to find the right people, but if you can, and you're all working together, it's much easier.

Ben Adam-Smith 33:50
Well, Mike, I always enjoy our chats. Thank you very much.

Mike Whitfield 33:54
That's okay. It's a pleasure.

Ben Adam-Smith 33:57
Head online to take a look at the show notes for this session - houseplanninghelp.com/375. You can review the key points in our summary. We've also got some photos of various projects that Mike has been involved with. Maybe you've got a comment, or you'd like to ask a question, you can either head down to the bottom of the show notes and get interactive there, or on social media. We'll provide links. And, of course, a link to Mike Whitfield Construction - houseplanninghelp.com/375.

Ben Adam-Smith 34:28
My call to action is to check out The Hub, and this is our membership community. It's a great place to hang out for inspiration and advice, particularly in those early days when you're beginning your research, where we can shape you! And maybe you've watched TV shows on building houses before and you've been frustrated that they haven't gone into any detail, or maybe they've just built something

utterly ridiculous. Well what we do is in-depth video case studies, so we spend a lot of time on building sites, trying to follow that process to make it useful to you and interesting as well. So I'll give you two examples. We had a new build that was probably built very similarly to a lot of Mike's projects. It's the I-joists, it's cellulose being blown in as insulation, lots of lovely materials. That's the PH15 system that was being used there. And we also followed a retrofit project of a mid-terrace Victorian property, which was brought up to EnerPHit standard. And you saw how the building was gradually transformed, and the amount of work, there's a lot of work that went into it, and very careful detailing of that property. So that's what you can watch. You can go through in your own time, as with a lot of the material. We've got other things we can get interactive, ask the expert, you can chat to me in office hour, or we have these live trainings as well from different guest experts. We're trying to do everything we possibly can. So come and find out more about Hub membership - houseplanninghelp.com/join.

Ben Adam-Smith 35:56
Next time, what is WUFI? Pet lovers, nothing to do with dogs! Toby Cambray is my guest from Greengauge, and he will explain all. Thanks for listening. The House Planning Help podcast is produced by Regen Media - content that matters.