

A CH' TITE house of straw with Montfarville  
54 bis rue des Hougues 50760 MONTFARVILLE CHANTIER  
OUVERT AUX VISITEURS Wednesday, Thursday, Friday of  
16:00 to 17:00 Saturdays of 10:00 to 12:00



H.R. and his wife M.A., originating from Haumont in the north, after a long search decided to settle in Val de Saire. What mattered was to be near the sea. " Why are you emigrating far from your friends now you are retired? What are you going to find in that remote part of France? " were remarks from their friends and relations.

For a long time the idea of building a wooden house had been developing in Hugues' head. Then his son, an ecologist, suggested to him that he could build a straw house. The northern couples' first reaction was negative. The straw would burn, animals would get in, it would be damp.

However, the advice of their son plus their reading and research on the web showed them their reactions were mistaken. The bundles of straw, pressed together and plastered with clay would not allow oxygen to pass through and so they would not catch fire.

Before going into the adventure, father and son attended a 5 day course in Brittany where they learnt how to build a straw house. This course was very physical. Multiple tests made on the earth (clay) gave them an idea of the difficulties of such a job.

Although the origin of the Straw-house is American, such houses have existed for a long time all over the world. In Nebraska for example, a cold and wet State in the centre of the USA, they were used in the 19th Century to house the itinerant workers.

But let us come back to our Northern friends, their main concern was to find a building plot. The Notaire (solicitor) of Barfleur found them their actual site and transactions were quickly conducted by telephone.

For them, the building of such a house is a human adventure as building sites of this sort are meeting places. Their daughter, an architect, drew the plans (175 square metres), the framework was produced by Scouts in Belgium. The DDE ( direction of the equipment) demands a slate roof. Their son learnt how to lay slates on a concrete garage where Mrs R.L. will give lessons as a Calligrapher which is her job. The flat roof of the kitchen

will be made by Northern friends, and the foundations by professionals. The toilets are ecological, like the washing machine, they use rain water collected in a tank all of which is authorised by the Town Hall.

The foundations, framework and roof are completed within three weeks, then it is the 'obstacle course' to look for straw in rectangular trusses (bundles). They were finally found at a Contractor of Agricultural Works, whilst the earth comes from the area of Lieu Saint.

The straw gives an acoustical comfort. The trusses of straw are pressed vertically and horizontally and are held in the thickness of the walls by a batten every two bundles with the last bundle squeezed in place by a jack. As the land is close to the embankment a part of the basement is made of bricks to avoid dampness.

" For me this house is an experiment... ", says H.R. The straw must be covered inside as well as the outside of the house with an appropriate mix of clay, sand, hay, cuttings of straw and straw and fermentation of maize. What proportions will make for the best adherence? The clay must not be too watery, nor too thick to blend with the other components which are then all mixed in a machine. After a few researches, the best percentages are found for the mix which contributes to the thermic resistance which is 6. >The walls will be airtight and yet aerated. <

" We will only have one or two radiators and a wood burning stove ... " says M.A. The outside will be covered with the same mix as the interior in a thin cover. Hugues' desire for a wooden house is not so far away as the strawhouse will have wooden cladding. The search for the wood is in progress. " I do not want to have to keep repairing it ... " says H.

The adventure goes on. Their volunteers still help them every Sunday, the interested people asking questions. " What is great is the welcome given by the inhabitants of Montfarville. We think we will have finished by the end of 2010 and we will then participate in the life of the commune. "

H. is a musician and has made a record. He interprets sea songs. Here is a link and documentation for the specialists.

The clay mix is prepared in a large drum. Each component is prepared in advance - not too watery clay, sand, hay, straw cuttings, a little fermentation of maize.

A bowl of maize fermentation is necessary in the clay mix. Here is the preparation.

Carpenter friends have come for a few days to build the flat roof over the kitchen. Well equipped with tools they work joyfully and readily consent to photo taking.

Michel 1, Michel 2, Paul and John Pierre all know this job quite well. Panels (OSB) are positioned and used for watertightness. Under these will be wooden-wool and another insulator.

Work to the flat roof of the kitchen will soon be continued. A protective agricultural sheet is placed until final watertightness is completed.

Awnings are put on the outside to protect from rain and running water. The boarding will be put on later.

The east gable is now closed in by OSB panels.