

## Eco living: the rise of eco-farmhouses

A new breed of "eco-farmhouses" cost their occupants nothing to run.



Frugal farmhouses: Three Glens points to a new rural vernacular

By Sarah Lonsdale  
 7:00AM BST 29 May 2013

On the southern slopes of the Cairn Valley, in remote Dumfries and Galloway, lies a farmhouse unlike any of its traditional whitewashed neighbours that glow brightly against the green patchwork of meadow and copses. Indeed rather than standing out from the landscape, Three Glens is almost invisible from across the valley. Its massive stone walls link with a dry stone field boundary that seems to flow right through the building; on another flank the oak cladding merges with a small stand of fir and birch beside it.

The owners, Neil and Mary Gourlay, wanted a farmhouse that "belonged" to the land it stands in. Stones for the walls have been collected from the fields, the oak is from wind-felled trees on the farm and the wool insulation is from the Gourlays' own flock of blackface sheep. Three Glens is one of a new breed of "eco-farmhouse", costing its occupants nothing to run, an important consideration when upland farming has become such a marginal occupation.

"Upland hill farmers are extremely vulnerable financially," says Glyn Roberts, deputy president of the Farmers Union of Wales. "If living in an eco-farmhouse means not having to find £10,000 a year to pay energy bills, it could well mean the difference between breaking even or going to the wall."

As well as the helpful financial incentive, Neil Gourlay wanted a home that reflected his role as environmental custodian. "Upland farmers have a very close relationship with the land they live on," he says. "They understand the land gives them their living. That's why we wanted the house to be unobtrusive. The slope of the roof, for example, is the same angle as the slope of the valley it sits in and we have covered it with the same turf we scooped off the land to build on."

For the architect Mark Waghorn, this emphasis on ultra-local materials proved something of a challenge. "As an architect I'm inclined to look for manufacturers' warranties," he says. "You don't find them on stones or turf picked off the fields." The house combines the latest in eco-technology such as triple-glazed windows, with centuries-old wisdom such as the Continental Kachelofen, a giant clay wood-fired oven covered in lime plaster. The oven sits in the middle of the building, connected to three separate rooms, and acts like a giant storage heater.

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Many farmers have already – sometimes controversially – embraced renewables such as large-scale solar panels or onshore wind turbines. However, their homes are still mostly draughty old buildings that often have crippling fuel bills and inefficient energy sources such as oil-fired heating or energy-guzzling Agas.

"Generally, farmers live in listed buildings that they can't do much with in terms of improving energy efficiency, and often their ancient heating systems using expensive oil cost thousands of pounds a year," says Jonathan Scurlock, chief adviser on renewable energy for the National Farmers Union (NFU).

Now, Three Glens and other pioneer projects such as a wholly off-grid eco-farmhouse at Maes Yr Onn in Caerphilly, Wales, are showing how the farmhouse of the future may mean not only a whole new rural vernacular, but a way to help marginal hill farms survive. Out with freezing flagstone floors and condensation-dripping walls; in with underfloor heating and sun-drenched living spaces benefiting from maximum solar gain.

Glyn Roberts, whose Snowdonia farmhouse dates back to 1550, has done what he can to plug the gaps. He has stuffed his roof and other crevices with sheep's wool and replaced the open fireplace with a wood burner but there is little else he can do in such a historic building. "It has made a difference to my bills, but when we have winters the like of this last one, it is still crippling," he says.

Further south, the champion sheep farmer Arthur Davies is looking forward to a bill-free future at his new off-grid farmhouse in Caerphilly. The house, which has walls nearly a metre thick, collects its own water supply and solar electricity, storing it in batteries, and cost just £110,000 to build. It will save Mr Davies thousands of pounds a year. The project is supported by Caerphilly County Borough Council. Melanie Phillips, Caerphilly rural development officer, says, if successful, the project could be a template to help other hill farmers reduce their overheads.

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