





A caveman and his Grand Design

In 2010, Angelo Mastropietro bought a cave, hand carved from a 250 million year old Triassic sandstone escarpment near the Wyre Forest in rural Worcestershire and occupied for more than 750 years until the 1960s. Angelo toiled for eight months, almost single handedly and despite a neurological condition, to sympathetically restore what *Grand Designs*' Kevin McCloud called a 'hobbit hole', resulting in a peaceful, elegant bolthole with twenty-first century comforts

WORDS AND THIS IMAGE: PIPPA SANDERSON

When you spy Angelo's cave for the very first time, set in the side of a 50-foot-high sandstone cliff, nestled in three acres of tranquil woodland on the banks of a meandering brook, you can't help but smile. It's a wonderful, other-worldly, romantic sight to behold located in an area that, many believe, provided inspiration to JRR Tolkien in his crafting of Middle Earth. A short climb up a sweeping bank brings you to the large terrace and weather-sculptured, south-facing frontage you feel drawn to touch and, as you enter your very own private escape, you're greeted with cosy dry warmth.

The Rockhouse Retreat's five rooms, making a total of 62sqm, show evidence of pickaxe marks from its initial construction more than 750 years ago and the house is one of a number in the area considered to be the oldest inhabited rock houses in Europe. Like any conventional home, it has been adapted over time by



Angelo spent in the region of £100,000 restoring the cave to well beyond its former glory.

its occupants; it's believed a vaulted ceiling, inglenook fireplace, shelving and ornamental nooks, for example, were added some 300 years ago. 'I've had visits from archaeological architects and heritage consultants, who've previously carried out work for the National Trust. Collectively, they've looked at 50 rock houses and the feedback is that this is the best example they've seen,' Angelo says.

Residential cave

The cave was lived in until the summer of 1962 and, in tracing its history, Angelo was successful in meeting several of its previous inhabitants, including a Mrs George, who lived there from the spring of 1945 until the autumn of 1948. 'She said there was an open fire in the house in the mid 1940s but, by the late 1940s, a wood



Images this spread: Pippa Sanderson

burning stove had been installed,' Angelo explains. 'I also met the man who lived here after that from 1948–1952/3; he apparently lived here without glazing until he was nine years old – curtains were probably used to stop draughts – and then I met the man who lived here from 1957 until the summer of 1962; he described the rock house as the best place he'd ever lived in and as warm as toast. He and his family enjoyed five happy years foraging from the woodland, catching trout and drinking from the brook. Further along the rock face there is a separate store and also a space for a composting loo, so even when it was last occupied in the 1960s, it was warm and comfortable, with all the mod cons of the era.' After the last inhabitant left, the cave largely became deserted, although at one stage during the mid 1960s, it was used to house pigs.

First contact

'Back in the summer of 1999,' Angelo continues, 'I was out mountain biking with some old friends from school in Hagley. We'd often ride out to Kinver Edge and the Wyre Forest, and we were nearby and got caught up in a torrential downpour. One of my friends navigated us down several tracks that ultimately led us to shelter



here. I remember being in awe of the place, but it had a kind of familiarity for me; I'd spent a lot of summer holidays playing in Italy at the family vineyard's *cantina* (Italian for cellar or vault) and I guess it was the coldness and the damp smell, but I felt really at home here.'

Life-changing event

Later that year, Angelo went to Australia to live and work, and for the next few years, he built a new life and a new business. But then, in 2007, his life changed forever. 'I was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) two weeks after my 30th birthday,' he explains, 'and the first real symptom was pins and needles all down the right hand side of my body.' Angelo was, however, determined not to let his diagnosis get in the way of an active life,



so he took his prescribed medication and carried on, and it was business as usual until he had a relapse at the end of 2008, which temporarily paralysed the entire right hand side of his body.

When this happened, he carried out a lot of research and came to the conclusion that processed food was a major contributing factor to his condition. As such, he knew he had to change his typically Western eating habits, opting instead for a paleolithic diet. 'It's essentially a caveman diet: what we'd eat when we hunted and foraged for food, so I eat meat, fish, eggs and select vegetables. I don't eat lentils, pulses, rice, pasta or bread. Since I've been on this diet, my quality of life has improved immeasurably because my paralysis has gone and I have had no relapses since.'



Image: Pippa Sanderson

Above: Angelo Mastropietro, caveman and master of the stone.

Next page top images: Tunnelling through solid rock to create a doorway between the bathroom and bedroom, and how it looks today.

Next page bottom images: The kitchen before and after.

Coming home

Angelo returned to Worcestershire in the summer of 2010. Not one for idleness, he was looking for a project; a career break and to recuperate from his MS, when he found the derelict rock house for sale in the *Birmingham Post*. ‘The auction was on my birthday,’ he recalls, ‘and I successfully bid and bought it for £62,000. I returned to Australia, sold my company, simplified my affairs and came back to the UK in March 2011 with the dream of renovating the rock house, setting it up as a holiday let and getting it on the *Grand Designs* TV programme . . . that was always the dream . . . and it happened.’

Planning challenges and getting the green light

It took two years to get planning approval. ‘I met the planning officer, and the first thing he asked was: “What makes you think it was ever lived in? Unless you can prove it was lived in, there’s nothing we can do because essentially all you’ve bought is a land title at auction.” I couldn’t quite believe it. It had three chimneys, shelves, inglenook fireplace; it even had a composting loo. So I was pretty deflated really for two or three months and, in that time, I researched alternatives, such as growing mushrooms, curing ham or turning the rock house into a mini winery. I wanted to save it in some way because it needed a purpose. Like a conventional

house, a rock house will deteriorate beyond repair if left to its own devices.

‘I’ve had structural engineering reports, rock samples taken and sent to the laboratory for deconstructive compression tests, so I’m not just some crazy guy who started to carve a cave. I followed the right process and spent £16,000 on planning alone. I am an amateur builder, but when I do something, I make sure I do it right.

‘Then I heard that the council had relaxed the planning laws in order to encourage eco-tourism in rural areas and it was this that gave me a glimmer of optimism. I eventually got planning permission in December 2014.’

Getting started

The first thing Angelo did was to tunnel through solid rock to create a doorway between the bathroom and bedroom, which took 11 days. ‘I tried to put a framework in place so, on day one, I excavated six wheelbarrows of rubble; that became the standard and I tried to push myself to do more: eight, then 10 wheelbarrows of rubble and, eventually, I was removing 20 wheelbarrows of rubble a day so that gave me a way of measuring my productivity and gave me structure,’ he relates. ‘I was here in the day doing pretty physical work and then, as I live on my own, I had to look after myself, feed myself, sit at the Internet late at night buying all the fixtures and fittings, and getting all that to site. With my MS, that was a real challenge.’

The project was not for the faint-hearted. Angelo carved out more than 70 tonnes of rock, physically lowering the floor throughout the entire house by hand, up to 500mm in places, so that he could install insulation and services such as plumbing, electrics and lighting. To maintain the aesthetic beauty of the walls, cables were threaded through them rather than being ‘chased’ out; and ambient lighting had to be subtle and hidden so that

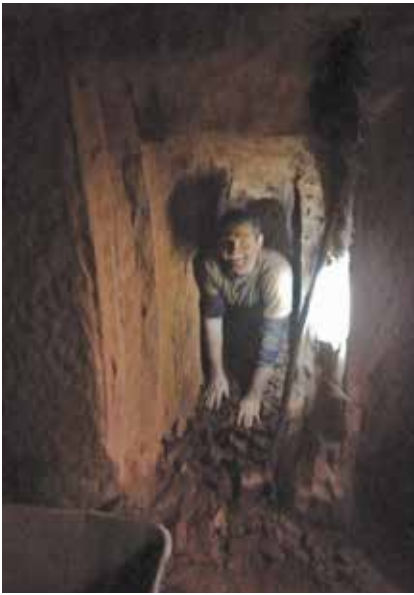


Image: Pippa Sanderson



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it didn't jar. Inspiration was drawn from a cave house village in Puglia, Italy, whose conical ceilings were replicated in the lavatory, which not only looks fabulous but gives the structure strength.

'I spent a long time researching alternative sources of power', Angelo explains. 'But I realised very quickly that there wasn't a solution that could guarantee everything. Regardless of whether I had solar photovoltaic panels, wind turbines, or a micro hydropower system from the stream, I'd still need battery packs; I'd still need a diesel generator as a backup and

Both a rare piece of Britain's architectural heritage and a one-off romantic retreat, the Rockhouse is a unique holiday getaway. Features and facilities include:

- Naturally light living and dining areas, with original features
- A luxury bedroom with king-size bed and wood fire
- Unique cave oasis walk-in rainforest shower
- Fossilised timber basins
- Underfloor heated shower room
- Fully fitted kitchen with Everhot three oven range and induction hob
- Fridge and microwave
- Large fully furnished entertainment terrace and firepit
- Complimentary WiFi
- Soft ambient LED mood lighting
- Three acres of private woodland with meandering brook
- Sweeping hillside views
- Complimentary homemade bottle of Rockhouse red wine
- Nespresso machine
- Music docking station
- Outdoor hot shower
- Outdoor kitchen terrace with gas BBQ

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what I felt was that I'd end up with all of these different solutions but none of them would have met the requirements. So I decided to plug in to the mains and dug a trench to the nearest services, which were 250 metres away. I also drilled a 200 foot well to tap into a water source, which is pumped up into a plant room – the former composting loo cubicle – which I actually plan to reinstate in the future. We also have a micro sewage treatment plant, which I've upgraded so that the effluent produced is 30 per cent cleaner than that required by building regulations. It runs into two reed beds and then into a soak away.'

Grand Designs

Angelo's project was the subject of a *Grand Designs* programme earlier this year. 'I got in touch with the production company, planted a few seeds in their minds and kept in touch so that, when I got planning approval, they came out and did half a day filming, creating a short seven to eight-minute video that they pitched to Channel 4 and the episode got commissioned. It was a fun thing to be involved in; they're a talented bunch of people and I feel quite honoured really to have been involved. They visited the site on more than 20 days and Kevin McCloud, the presenter, came for around six days.' And is he as nice as he seems on the TV? 'He's nicer really. He was charming; willing to advise and help me out. He even picked up the breaker to help me carve out the wardrobe in the bedroom.' See ▶ www.channel4.com/programmes/grand-designs/on-demand/57385-006. ■

Want to get involved?

In the short time the Rockhouse has been available to stay in, Angelo has welcomed UK visitors and those from further afield, including America, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Germany, Japan and Romania. As his business continues to develop, he's on the look out for more staff, including an enthusiastic caveman/woman to take bookings and a housekeeper to run the rock house. If you'd like to know more, please email Angelo through the website or phone on 07789 160356.