

# ‘We built an island paradise in the Cotswolds’

A British family were so inspired by the Yukon wilds, they transformed a Gloucestershire lake into their own version, complete with log cabins



photopia photography

The Edmondson family have built an oak-framed house on their 130-acre lakeside property in Gloucestershire

Hugh Graham

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**Y**ou can take the boy out of Canada, but you can't take Canada out of the boy — even if he's a Brit. In 1975, when the Kent-born Anthony Edmondson was only 17, he took off for the Yukon. "I was looking for adventure and fell in love with the place," says Edmondson, now 66, who worked in a silver mine and as a lumberjack.

"It was so wild. It was like going to the moon. You almost felt like you were the first person there. There were bears, wolves, beavers and birds of prey. You could hear the wolves howling at night. I went out for a gap year and ended up staying three and a half years," he says.

"Dad's always been happy grafting by himself and living a pioneering lifestyle," says his son, James, 33. "He was attracted to the romance of it"



Anthony and James by a campfire in the Yukon



Father and son on a 2008 trip to the Yukon

When Anthony returned to the UK and became a tree surgeon, he yearned to recreate that rugged lakes-and-forest feel. In 1980, when looking to start a fish farm, he came across a desolate 90-acre lake near Kemble, Gloucestershire, that resembled a moonscape: there were no trees, services or roads. It was an abandoned gravel pit that had been dug up in the 1960s to build the M4 and M5. He bought it and spent four years living in a mobile home on the 130-acre site, planting 42,000 trees and reed beds to purify the water.



Once a gravel pit, the Edmondsons' lake near Kemble is dotted with 15 islands

“I was trying to replicate the feel of the Yukon on a smaller scale, so that people could get a taste of living in the wild,” Anthony says.

He eventually opened a fish farm, met his wife and built a log house, Mayo Landing, named after a village in the Yukon. It was an idyllic place to grow up, James says: he planted reed beds for pocket money, trapped eels and camped on Survival Island, one of 15 on the lake, where he and his sister told each other ghost stories by the campfire. “It was a very Swallows and Amazons childhood.”

Anthony took advice on conservation from Natural England. When the fish farm changed the chemistry of the water, for example, he closed it. By 1994 the site had become such a haven for bird life it was designated a site of special scientific interest (SSSI).



Pete Helm for Border Oak

James Edmondson has built an oak-framed home on the site trimmed with Cotswolds stone

The Edmondsons needed income, however, so started hosting corporate retreats. In 2008, when that business collapsed during the financial crisis, they opened Log House Holidays, comprising eight Finnish-built timber cabins where Brits can go wild swimming then warm up beside fire pits.

He may have grown up in paradise, but James yearned for the bright lights of the big city. In 2011, after finishing university, he moved to London to work as an investment banker in the City. "I quickly realised it wasn't for me. I enjoyed the energy and excitement, but it wasn't a healthy lifestyle. So I came back after a short time. Having gone away, I realised how special this place was."



Pete Helm for Border Oak

James and his wife, Sophie, with their daughter, Aubrey

James has since got married, had two children, Aubrey and Bernie, and now runs the family business. He and his wife, Sophie, started married life in a Portakabin, but in 2020 built their own rustic homestead, a four-bedroom, 3,700 sq ft oak-framed house constructed using timber pegs, handmade clay roof tiles and Cotswold stone, perched on an isthmus surrounded by lake. On a sunny autumnal day James drives me through a thicket of Norway spruces, maples and flaming liquidambar trees. As we pass log cabins and approach his own home, clad in Douglas fir and larch and fronted by a walnut tree, I can hear the theme song for Little House on the Prairie in my head.



Pete Helm for Border Oak  
Life in the slow lane

Inside is similarly rugged, with chunky beamed ceilings, animal skin rugs and distressed timber furniture. “I wanted an oak-frame house: they have character and look like they’ve been there for a long time,” James says. “We asked the company [Border Oak] to deliberately leave the oak unplanned for that rustic look.”

James and his father sketched ideas for the house and gave them to Border Oak. James wanted an “irregular” structure of two intersecting barns. “I like old houses where you have buildings from different periods joined together. That gave me the idea of two barns. I wanted it to look like a sprawling farm.”

The ground floor has an open-plan kitchen/living/dining room with a wood-burner and picture windows overlooking the lake, and a sliding door opening onto a shaded terrace.



Brent Darby for Border Oak

The open-plan kitchen/living room

One staircase leads up to two bedrooms, where the couple can see the lake from their bed. The other staircase, at the other end of the house past a ground-floor third bedroom, leads up to a separate first floor, with a fourth bedroom and snug. “Having the two barns is fantastic because when guests stay they have their own separate space.”



Pete Helm for Border Oak

The view James and Sophie wake up to every day



Brent Darby for Border Oak

A window seat in the first-floor snug



It's irresistibly cosy: you can imagine Pa entering on a snowy night laden with firewood (the wood-burner is fuelled by logs from their own property), and the Edmondsons are also self-sufficient in water, as Anthony drilled a bore-hole. Underfloor heating is powered by a water source heat pump at the bottom of the lake; solar panels cover half their energy bills; solar glass reduces heat; SIP panels and an airtight membrane keep things warm.

It's a tranquil existence: James starts his day with a coffee on the lakefront terrace in his Adirondack chair, keeping an eye out for otters, 17 varieties of dragonfly, bitterns, starlings, ospreys, kingfishers and egrets. He ends the day with a dip in the lake, even in winter.



Pete Helm for Border Oak

The woodburner is fuelled by logs from the property

Although it's hard graft too, James spends his days managing woodland, clearing scrub, sowing and maintaining wildflower meadows, and running the holiday-let business, which is booming. Apart from Covid shutdowns, the eight cabins have been booked solid for nine years straight. What's the appeal to Brits?

"People like coming back to something that's a bit old-fashioned," James says. "Log cabins exude life in the slow lane. To have this seclusion in the south of England is a rare thing."

Guests say they feel like they're in Sweden or Canada. Indeed, Gucci shot a campaign here set in an American summer camp and Barbour did a shoot with fake snow on the cabins.



Jonathon Watkins

One of the holiday cabins

James prefers not to reveal the budget for his house, but Border Oak, which built it, says a typical price for a full-build, four-bedroom house is about £500,000-600,000. They started the build in August 2019 and James moved in in October 2020.

Anthony is busy planning a new oak-frame house on the site, but that will be the last. “We have planning permission for a couple more, but I’m happy keeping things as they are and focusing on conservation,” James says. “The next generation might have a different take on it.”



Brent Darby for Border Oak

Roof overhangs provide sheltered nooks

He won't pressure his children to take over the business. “But it would be lovely to think the trees planted now will be enjoyed by generations to come. If the site was sold, I'd feel quite lost without it. It's my whole world.”

In troubled times it's certainly a haven from turmoil. James says: “If we can provide a happy place for people to escape to, all the better.”



Pete Helm for Border Oak

James designed a house that resembles two barns joined together



Brent Darby for Border Oak

Cotswolds stone was also used in the interior



Pete Helm for Border Oak

The mud room



Brent Darby for Border Oak

The wall in the study with drawings by James's great great aunt



Pete Helm for Border Oak

You can see the lake from every room in the house