



The green dream home

Three years ago, Retreat caused a stir at the shows with its radical reinvention of mobile home design. **Philip Pond** reports on how the company and its ideas have been progressing.

ABOVE
A Retreat
'I' model in
Scotland

WHEN IS a mobile home not a mobile home? Answer: when it's a Retreat. For, at first, or even third glance, you could be forgiven for thinking that there is little shared in common between a traditional mobile home with its square-cut shape and metal, plastic or plywood-and-stucco body and what Retreat Homes describes as its reinvention of the mobile home.

And yet... Despite appearances, both have a steel chassis mounted on at least one axle with a wheel on each end. Both are transportable and can be towed from place to place. Both are exempt from Building Regulations and VAT (apart from furnishings). Both conform to the definition of a caravan as set out in the Caravan Sites Act 1968. And, of course, both provide living accommodation when sited on a suitable holiday or even residential park.

But there the similarities end.

Which is just the way Retreat designer/director Matt Yeoman and his fellow directors, Mike Shaw and Richard Buckley, wanted it.

When this trio launched Retreat in 2004, it had long been recognised in the caravan business that there was an increasingly urgent need for something radically new and different that would appeal to younger, up-and-coming mobile home owners – or rather, potential owners.

Messrs Yeoman, Shaw and Buckley have provided it.

Breaking new ground

Initially, production was focused on a single H-shaped model manufactured to the company's design and specification in Hull. Matt Yeoman had penned the initial design while incapacitated following an accident yacht racing.

What set his brainchild apart from all other holiday caravans was not just its shape and the materials used

but the way this 'H' model, as it was named, fitted together.

Transported by road as a single 40ft by 20ft load, the Retreat, on arrival at a park, divided into two halves, the uprights of the H, as it were. A linking section was then slid across from one upright of the H and secured to the other. The two uprights contained the living and sleeping areas respectively, with the crosspiece providing a hallway and storage area.

The finished item's 'unique selling point' when sited was a central open porch area at the back plus a matching decked patio offering real privacy at the front. But the Retreat boasted more than one 'USP' – it broke new ground in other ways, too.

In appearance it completely redefined the term 'caravan'. As one commentator described it at the time, wood-clad, with a variety of finishes available, it looked from the outside like a designer apartment bound for a prime location. Inside, you



ABOVE A Retreat 'J' sited on the Isle of Wight

OPPOSITE PAGE Interiors of a Retreat Lodge

experienced a sense of space and the uncluttered feel of a loft apartment.

And that wasn't all. Detailed information was contained in the brochure describing this home's technical specification – materials utilised, types of wood used, methods of construction for walls, roof, floor and windows; equipment fitted; the amount of insulation installed and overall U value, plus lots more. That itself was an innovation, the specifications of holidays homes so often having being left in the past by manufacturers to customers' imagination.

In addition, just like a traditional residential park home, the whole thing came with a 10-year warranty (25 years for the roof).

Setting new standards

Then there were the materials used. Those set new standards in being environmentally friendly, a selling point becoming increasingly important in this era of global warming. Wherever possible, the use of man-made materials, such as plastic, were avoided. Retreats were designed and manufactured with

sustainability in mind.

As the brochure pointed out, there was nothing faux about this holiday home. Where there was wood, it was solid timber; where there were windows, they were floor-to-ceiling glass (double glazed for heat conservation, of course). Even the window frames were of hardwood.

All that wood came from renewable sources, suppliers who were members of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). All FSC products have their forests of origin independently inspected and evaluated according to specific environment, social and economic criteria. And virtually the whole home was inherently recyclable.

On top of all that, kitchen and bathroom were fully equipped and bedrooms fitted with sheep's wool carpet plus underlay (other rooms had rather attractive oak plank flooring).

But the Retreat came as standard without furniture, curtains, blinds and light fittings, though a pack, starting in price at £4,650 and comprising beds, sofas, coffee tables and so on, could be provided as an optional extra.

The reason? It was in order to allow customers to personalize their

living space with the furniture and accessories they chose. To facilitate that, the interior was designed to accommodate full-size domestic furniture. So no problems sourcing dining and living room suites, etc, at High Street department stores and out-of-town furniture centres.

Still radical

Three years on, much has changed, including the method of attaching the two 'uprights' in the H model. But Retreat's radical approach to mobile homes is still the same.

To start with, the range of models has increased from one to nine, with some being offered in different lengths (33ft, 40ft and 45ft) and most available with a choice of flat, pitched or vaulted roof. That gives a total of almost 40 different models. In addition, the majority are available with alternative end-wall elevations featuring different and larger windows.

The physically disabled have not been forgotten, either. Modifications can be made to accommodate wheelchair users.

In order to cope with the increased levels of production, this year

manufacture shifted 300 miles south from Hull to Wessex Park Homes' Blandford Forum site in Dorset. There, Retreats are produced alongside Milbourne and Deckhouse lodges from the Wessex range.

They come off the production line in Dorset at the end of a manufacturing process based on high standards and high-end materials. There have been changes in the production process since the beginning. Whereas originally an Al-Ko chassis was used, Retreat now source chassis locally. Galvanising is available as a £1,300-£1,500 optional extra, but only a small proportion of customers take up the option.

Lasting a lifetime

The foundation of the homes is an insulated 18mm plywood deck mounted on a sturdy softwood joint structure, a construction method shared, like the chassis and running gear, with Wessex.

Erected on top of that are timber-clad walls – the heat-treated soft wood used, Thermawood, gives long-term durability with no need to treat or stain. Those walls are constructed

using softwood stud frames fitted with ply sheathing and containing 100mm of mineral-wool insulation. Partition walls also contain a mineral-wool infill for internal sound insulation purposes.

Another 200mm of glassfibre insulation goes into the timber-panelled roof, whether flat (with its 18mm plywood decking and butyl membrane), pitched or vaulted – the latter two having felt underlay and Metroslate steel tiles.

Bathrooms come with white enameled, pressed-steel baths in teak hardwood surrounds, limestone mosaic wall tiles and white ceramic toilets and washbasins with stainless-steel mixer taps.

Kitchens boast Iroko hardwood worktops, timber cupboard units and fired-earth tiled splashbacks. The electric oven and hob, fridge/freezer, extractor hood, dishwasher and washing machine/dryer are all by Bosch.

Windows feature high-efficiency low-E glass to conserve heat energy. As standard, water and space heating are fed from a 25 kW LPG gas-fired combi boiler.

All models comply fully with the residential British Standard BS/EN 3632, rather than its less-comprehensive holiday homes equivalent, BS/EN 1647.

That of itself means greater durability. Maintained correctly, these lodges should last a lifetime. What's more, because they are constructed as traditional timber-framed buildings, they can, if desired, be refurbished in years to come. The use of standard-size 600mm units in the kitchen is just one aspect of the design that facilitates refurbishment.

For customers, the waiting time between ordering and completion is about eight weeks, depending upon the model. On average, over the course of a year, the rate of production works out at about one



RETREAT PARKS

The following parks are among those that will be happy to discuss siting a Retreat home for you:

- **Fritton Lake Woodland Lodges**
Beccles Road, Fritton Norfolk NR31 9HA
Tel: 01493 488666, **website:** www.somerleyton.co.uk
- **Palstone Lodges**
Exeter Road, South Brent South Devon TQ10 9JP
Tel: 01364 72227, **website:** www.palstonelodges.co.uk
- **The Park of Brandedleys**
Crocketford, Dumfries Scotland DG2 8RG
Tel: 01387 266700/07813 485427, **website:** www.holgates.com
- **Ribblesdale Park**
Mill Lane, Gisburn, Clitheroe, Lancashire BB7 4UN
Tel: 01200 445227, **website:** www.ribblesdalepark.com
- **Skiddaw View Holiday Home Park**
Bothel, Nr Bassenthwaite Cumbria CA7 2JN
Tel: 016970 20919, **email:** office@skiddawview.com, **website:** www.skiddawview.co.uk
- **Stowford Country Lodges**
Stowford Farm Meadows, Berry Down, Combe Martin, Devon EX34 0PW
Tel: 01271 882476, **website:** www.stowford.co.uk
- **Thurston Manor Holiday Home Park**
Innerwick, Dunbar EH42 1SA
Tel: 01368 840643, **website:** www.thurstonmanor.co.uk
- **Trewince Manor**
Portscatho, Cornwall,
Tel: 07718 765296
- **Whitehill Country Lodges**
Stoke Road, Paignton South Devon TQ4 7PF
Tel: 01803 782338, **website:** www.whitehill-lodges.co.uk
- **Willow Farm**
Hansletts Lane, Ospringe Faversham, Kent ME13 ORS
Tel: 01795 533669
- **L'Etang Bleu**
Pare Touristique, 24340 Vieux-Mareuil, France
Tel: 0033 5 53 60 92 70, **website:** www.letangbleu.com
- **Jomfruland**
Southern Norway,
Tel: 0047 95 05 79 46, **website:** www.madi.no
- **Various sites in France**
European Leisure Homes, 1 Morris Road, South Nutfield, Redhill, Surrey RH1 5SB
Tel: 01737 823339, **website:** www.europeanleisurehomes.co.uk
- **Retreat Homes Ireland**
43 Castle Street, Dalkey, Co Dublin, Ireland
Tel: 003531 2750996, **website:** www.retreat.ie



a week. When I visited the factory, there were five under construction compared with 12 the preceding week.

Spreading its wings

A small but growing export drive has resulted in models being sited in Ireland, France, Spain and Norway. But the large majority go to plots, mainly though not all on holiday parks, within the UK.

Mike Shaw told me of one customer who ordered a Retreat for siting in the grounds of his home. Because of problems with access, it was craned in over the top of his house from the road in front. Quite a sight.

And a planned new estate will see a collection of 10 Retreats used as residential park homes.

Retreat does not have a show centre as such. But potential customers are welcome to visit the production line at Wessex. Alternatively, they can view models 'on location' at various parks around the country.

So far there are nine in the UK and one in Ireland (see page 35) and other parks are due to take delivery in coming months. A couple have models available for hire.

Worth a special mention is Portmile, a new, Retreat-only estate with eight

homes, now all sold, at Cockwood in Devon. That is unusual in being on a 125-year lease and open all year round, though owners are limited to an annual maximum of 26 weeks' occupancy – holiday lettings or visits by family or friends could fill up remaining weeks during the rest of the year.

New developments

Development of Retreat models is ongoing. For instance, since last autumn the twin sliding patio doors in the Lodge's front wall have been moved inwards to a more central position and topped with additional glazing panels.

More significantly, another new design concept is in the pipeline. Going on this company's radical approach since it appeared with a blaze of publicity just three years ago, we can't wait to see what happens next. ■

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THE RETREAT RANGE

So what exactly is now on offer and how much do they cost? Bear in mind that the figures quoted here are ex-works prices and do not include VAT.

Not included, either, are the cost of transporting a home to its chosen plot, setting up (including fitting the galvanised steel gutters and downpipes), the connection of electricity, water and drainage nor the premium your chosen park charges.

There are six main designs.

H model

The original, 33ft by 20ft with two bedrooms, one with sliding French doors opening on to the decked patio, plus wardrobes and storage areas in the hallway with access to the open porch.

Priced from £58,690



I model

Same materials and design ethos, but conventional in shape, measuring 40ft by 12ft, with two bedrooms and lacking the characteristic patio/open porch.

Priced from £50,790



N model

A variation on the H, also measuring 33ft by 20ft, but with a larger lounge/diner/kitchen and bedrooms featuring built-in wardrobes, but no open porch.

Priced from £60,320

J model

Another variation on the H theme, but larger at 40ft by 20ft and therefore more spacious. Available with a choice of two (including en-suite bathroom) or three bedrooms, all with built-in wardrobes.

Priced from £76,560



Lodge

More conventional shape, available in two 40ft by 20ft forms with two or three bedrooms (the latter having built-in wardrobes), with one en-suite bathroom in each case. No decked patio, but you do get an open porch.

Priced from £83,286



Z model

Yet another variation on the H theme, but with two decked patios as well as an open porch. 50ft by 20ft, offering three bedrooms, all with inbuilt wardrobes and one having an en-suite bathroom.

Priced from £90,190

Optional extras

These range from a shower cubicle in place of the usual bath (cost: from £700) and additional wall units (£275 each) to cedar or larch cladding in place of the standard Thermowood (from £3,000) and an outside hot tub (£6,500). In addition, there is a variety of environmentally-friendly options which, together, represent an ecologist's dream. They include a wood-burning stove (£3,750); sheep's wool insulation in place of the usual glassfibre (around 25 per cent of customers go for this option, which costs from £1,500); a moss sedum roof (from £5,875), photo-voltaic roof panels (from £5,875) and a solar-heated water system (from £4,700).

