Roundhouse Living in Wales

One of Tony Wrench’s roundhouses appeared in our book Tiny Homes: Simple Shelter (2012). Depicted here is Tony’s own roundhouse, similar to the one shown in our book, along with 18 years’ feedback based on his experience with these earth-based structures.

18 Years’ Experience with Earth-Friendly Living

Tony Wrench

“It is based on the type of roundwood frame and turf-roofed houses used by Celtic, Mandan, Miwok, and Pomo peoples…”

Den for guests

For guests, we built a den in 2006, using all local resources and volunteer labour. It cost £300 (≈$400) in materials and was done within three months. It has a wooden suspended floor, wood stove, and is silent. It is about 8 sq. yards from our main house. We would much rather have two small dens than one big one.

Things we can’t change:

We love about quarter of a mile from where we park our car, and about half a mile from the road.

Advantages:

No road noise, lots of birchwood, strong legs, and an expertise in the use of wheelbarrows. You can get twice as much on a wheelbarrow if you have a good selection of stretchy bungees to hold stuff down with. If one of you pulls a wheelbarrow with a rope, and the other pushes, you would be amazed at the size of sofa you can carry for a quarter of a mile.

Disadvantages:

One-day our bodies are just not going to be able to handle such much donkey work. The solution? A donkey, maybe. In truth, we will have to handle this challenge in the next ten years.

Things that work well and we don’t need to change:

Plant grape vines in the ground and train them over the south side of your turf roof. Everybody wins.

A wood stove with a back boiler really works. We have hot water when we need it and are warm when we need to be. The simpler your compost toilet, the better it works. Ours is a twin chamber, no separating pee from urine, no sealed floor. It cost us £6, eightieth years ago, has given us nine barrow loads of excellent compost every year, and run on wood shavings from my workshop, so the wood goes back into the ground. The only thing we would change is not to build it fifty meters from the house.

Wind turbines and LEDs

Each day we have about four sacks of this around at any time. For kindling and occasional bursts of good heat we have sticks, twigs and the raspberry canes from two years back.

There are logs proper, cut and stacked, ideally for two years.

In addition, we have found that this gravy lifestyle requires a lot of storage for working clothes and for drying out wet working clothes. If you are designing a small home, build this all into your design. Then double it.

Workshop and porch

At the start, tools were everywhere. Then I built a little shed onto the back door of the house, about 20 ft. (6.1 m) by 6 ft. (2 m) floorspace, with a little bench and shelves and dozens of hooks on the walls. All our tools are now in one place. If anything needs mending, it goes out there. When we come in with dirty boots on, they stay there. The workshop is also an airspace for wind and rain and has been very useful.

Similarly, at the other end, we had a problem with the front door opening out directly onto the road. We have built a porch that stops the wind and contains boots, coats, sensitive plants, and seedlings; it is also a great place to sit and catch the evening sun on a cold day. Everyone should have one.

Disadvantages:

Our cat does not like it, but the dogs like it.

Rats

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Learning from nature

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The cobwood “front” wall is now coated with a layer of chicken wire, then lime plaster, which looks good, keeps out draughts and also prevents rats from getting in. We keep all our food in metal boxes. Of course rats can burrow, and are intelligent. They learn what is available, what is possible, what traps look like, and whether it is worth the bother. In a certain extent you can educate a new generation of rats to leave you alone, or just live in one zone near you, or to only take food from outside, for example from by the bird table.

Storage space

We have found that if you want to live simply and not keep buying fuel, you need to have a coping system for your trees, and you need space to store wood, kindling and shavings whilst it is all drying.

We started out with a funny little woodpile of about four meters by three (10’ by 12’), and we still have this, but only for stuff we have brought in from the woods waiting to be processed. I do wood turning for a living, so we have a good supply of dry wood shavings to start the fire in the wood stove.