

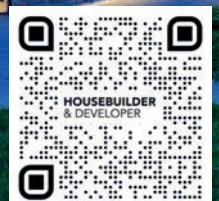
HOUSEBUILDER & DEVELOPER

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2026

RURAL CHARACTER

A development on the Kent/Sussex border by Q New Homes retained and transformed a group of former dairy buildings into nine luxury homes, while making room for occupants

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James Parker

ON THE COVER

HOUSEBUILDER & DEVELOPER

AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2026



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FROM THE EDITOR

Prime Minister Andy Burnham is returning from his summer holiday to a wake up call, in terms of the bulging to-do list he has already assembled. One of his first utterances, even before officially confirmed as PM was to reinforce his commitment to a council homebuilding programme that would be the 'biggest since the post war period.' This is the cornerstone of his aim to cut welfare and fund all his other plans.

Burnham championed social housebuilding as the way to redistribute wealth from private landlords to local authority coffers, as "the fair and sustainable way to bring the welfare bill down and meet our fiscal rules." It does sound like an awful lot is hanging on this.

However there's no detail yet on this massive council building programme, such as likely funding streams. Instead, some well-meant promises on how better homes will mean savings for the whole country: "We will help people to live well, building a more preventative state, investing in people's success, rather than paying for failure."

The issue, as well as – ironically – part of a solution, might emerge with Burnham's parallel mission to devolve decision making to the regions, following his moderate success building homes, among other achievements, in Manchester. The new, clunky buzzword, 'Manchesterism' is thought to have resulted in over 18,000 new affordable homes across the region between 2017 and 2025, however they only managed 2,368 homes specifically for social rent.

The PM might want a "place first, not party first" strategy across the UK, but the bottom line is that achieving major numbers of council homes for social rent is probably unlikely without huge levels of Government subsidy. The Section 106 route of requiring developers to deliver a proportion of social housing is declining in popularity, and something else is needed. Namely, a national council housebuilding strategy with compelling incentives for developers.

Burnham said his Government would "use vacant public land to reduce costs," and promote higher density residential development in towns. But achieving the (just under) 200,000 council houses we built in 1953 is going to take a lot more intervention than that. Planning reform has to include some form of legal, possibly draconian requirement for social housing allied to funding, if we are going to really make this much more than a set of aspirations. And as others have said, that is going to pull away from the local decision-making which planners have long practiced, to more regional oversight. It will be messy.

With the relentless heat this summer pointing to a worrying future, we also have to ensure that swathes of new council homes do not create uncomfortable, and potentially unsafe, overheating. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) produced an "interim heat mortality monitoring report" recently, which showed there were 2,877 "heat-associated deaths" in England during May and June 2026. Shockingly, this is almost double the figure they reported for the whole of 2025.

This has to be a 'wake up call,' as the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) says. Representing Environmental Health professionals working with councils, does such a body have the clout to go beyond Part O, and ensure that new homes are designed with future resilience. Could we finally see inward opening windows plus external shutters rolled out across the UK, as they are in southern Europe, as our climate changes forever?

James Parker

Managing Editor
James Parker

Publisher
Anthony Parker

Account Director
Midge Myatt

Account Manager
Steve Smith

Digital Marketing & PR Account Manager
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Shelley Collyer

Editorial Contributor
Roseanne Field

Event Coordinator
Amy Madigan

Studio Manager
Mikey Pooley

Production Assistant
Georgia Musson

Digital Production Coordinator
Kimberley Musson

Feature Coordinator & Publisher's Assistant
Kim Neville

Finance Director
Simon Reed


An Employee Owned Company

Cointronic House,
Station Road, Heathfield,
East Sussex TN21 8DF

Advertising & Administration
01435 863500
info@netmagmedia.co.uk

Press Releases
editorial@netmagmedia.co.uk

Registration & Circulation Enquiries
info@netmagmedia.co.uk

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LUXURY DEVELOPMENTS PROJECT REPORT

Pastures new

Working closely with architects, Q New Homes transformed a redundant dairy farm on the Kent/East Sussex border into a high spec, highly sustainable development, within strict constraints. Roseanne Field reports.

A development on a disused dairy farm littered with dilapidated buildings, within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, under a local authority with strict agricultural building reuse policies, was never going to be straightforward.

And yet developer (and main contractor) Q New Homes working with architects Nissen Richards Studio not only achieved it, but have built a development of nine homes that considerably surpass typical sustainability and specification standards.

The 40 acre site in the village of Cowden had been owned and used by several generations of the same family of dairy farmers, until the death of the last farmer in 2017 also saw its agricultural use cease. By this point many of the site's buildings – which included ageing dairy buildings, Dutch barns, sheds and lean-tos, accumulated incrementally over many decades – had already fallen into disrepair.

The site subsequently gradually fell into further disrepair, before Q New Homes – a London-based private developer founded in 2012 by brothers Damien and Michael Wynne – bought it with an existing planning consent in place for a residential scheme, granted in January 2021.

The developer appointed Nissen Richards Studio in May 2021 to replace the consented scheme with a “more ambitious architectural proposal,” explains Nissen Richards Studio director, Jim Richards. However, the development was also subject to Sevenoaks Council's strict planning policies regarding the reuse of agricultural buildings.

A COMPLICATED SITE

Any new homes on the site had to retain the existing structure of 10 of the buildings – nine former agricultural buildings and the farmhouse – while some of the smaller additional buildings could be demolished.



It was therefore essential that, while Nissen Richards Studio updated the planning consent to a more ambitious scheme, they also “retained the approved building footprints and agricultural forms,” Richards explains. Their revised scheme was submitted and approved in November 2021, ahead of an extended period of pre-commencement work that included archaeology, ecology and environmental investigations.

Planning consent included 25 conditions, of which 12 had to be discharged before works could commence, “covering archaeology, ecology, environmental matters and extensive ground investigations,” Richards says. “There was a considerable amount of work before construction could begin.”

The existing consent had already identified which buildings should be retained and that the smaller, newer buildings should be demolished, which Nissen Richards Studio decided to leave unchanged. “We agreed with the approach because the larger barns were the buildings that gave the farmstead its identity,” Richards says.

“By selectively removing secondary lean-tos and ancillary buildings we were able to open up a generous central courtyard, improve circulation across the site and reveal long views into the

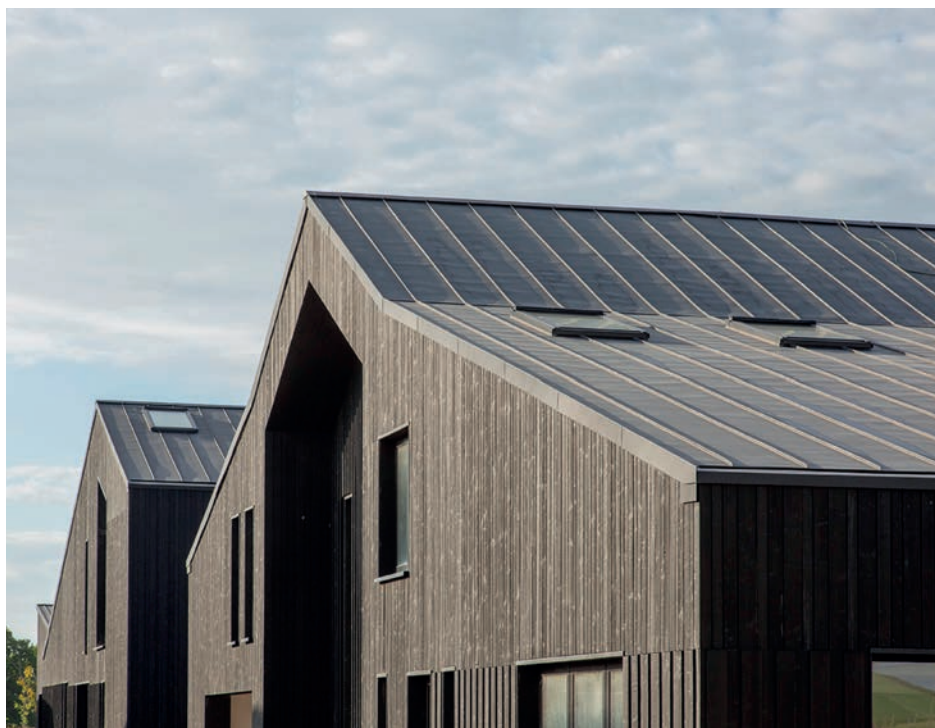
surrounding Wealden landscape,” he adds. “Sometimes the most significant architectural intervention is deciding what not to keep.”

Serving as both developer and main contractor meant Q New Homes had a “high level of control throughout the construction process.” As well as leading the architectural design, Nissen Richards Studio coordinated the consultant team including structural, landscape, environmental, ecology and whole-life carbon specialists.

The number of homes remained unchanged from the original consent, which had been established based on what could “comfortably” be accommodated within the AONB and Green Belt setting. Creating quality homes was always the ambition, rather than squeezing as many units on to the site as possible. “The generous spacing between buildings, the relationship between architecture and landscape and the character of the original farmstead were all fundamental to the success of the project,” says Richards.

The homes range from three bedrooms up to six, with the largest approximately 6,500 ft². To avoid visual repetition, each property is unique in the way it responds to its “inherited form, orientation and surrounding landscape,” explains Richards.

NISSEN RICHARDS DEVELOPED THE EXISTING CONSENTED SCHEME INTO A “MORE AMBITIOUS ARCHITECTURAL PROPOSAL”



CHARACTER & HISTORY

From the outset of the project both Nissen Richards Studio and Q New Homes shared a vision to “retain the memory and character of the former farm while creating contemporary homes for modern living,” Richards says. “We wanted the new homes to evolve from the existing site. The project became an exercise in interpreting and extending the site’s agricultural history, creating contemporary architecture that remains firmly rooted in its landscape and past.”

While working with the confines of existing buildings was in some ways a challenge, the ad hoc jumble of buildings that had amassed on the site was also an exciting prospect for the practice. “What attracted us wasn’t simply the opportunity to redevelop redundant buildings, but the richness of the existing farmstead,” Richards says.

The existing planning consent “inevitably introduced constraints,” says Richards, “but they proved surprisingly productive.” With the approved footprints already agreed upon, and the requirement to preserve the agricultural building forms, the team were able to focus on rethinking how the internal layouts of the homes would work. They also looked at the exterior architecture, which is where most of the “visible” changes came about.

Original designs featured pale timber cladding, which Nissen Richards Studio opted to swap out for charred timber, dark brickwork and black standing seam zinc roofing, “creating a more contemporary yet contextual response,” Richards explains. “Internally, we reorganised the layouts to create generous vaulted living spaces, maximise natural daylight

and frame views across the surrounding Wealden landscape.” He also emphasises that these openings were only used where appropriate, and that “more restrained openings” were used where the building overlooks a shared space.

Richards describes the project as a “delicate high wire act,” in regards to the balancing the aims of retaining the agricultural forms, creating generous and inspiring living spaces, meeting high sustainability targets, and ultimately ensuring the buildings “remained rooted firmly in their landscape and history. In many ways those constraints made the architecture stronger.”

A MATERIAL IDEA OF LUXURY

The site was viewed by the team to be of such high quality that it “demanded an equally ambitious architectural response.” Both Q New Homes and Nissen Richards Studio wanted to demonstrate that modern rural housing could achieve not only high design standards but also high sustainability standards, but with each holding equal importance.

This shared ambition was a key driver in the project, with Damien Wynne of Q New Homes describing it as an aim to create homes with “their own special architectural moments,” demonstrating attention to detail and a “willingness to embrace design excellence,” adds Richards. “Having a client who genuinely valued architecture allowed us to push much further than would normally be possible on a speculative residential development.”

Rather than deciding to ‘add-on’ sustainability features to a luxury development, the two were deliberately

“WE AGREED, BECAUSE THE LARGER BARNs WERE THE BUILDINGS THAT GAVE THE FARMSTEAD ITS IDENTITY,” JIM RICHARDS, NISSEN RICHARDS STUDIO



integrated from the outset of the project. Richards indeed believes that the two aims naturally go hand in hand: “Better insulated buildings create more comfortable interiors, generous glazing brings exceptional natural light into the homes, and carefully selected materials provide longevity as well as beauty,” he explains.

The approach is well received by clients, he says, particularly in the south east. “There continues to be strong demand for homes that combine exceptional design with genuine sustainability – Hartdene Barns demonstrates that buyers increasingly value architectural quality, low running costs and a strong connection to place alongside more traditional measures of luxury.”

For Nissen Richards Studio, luxury is about more than just “expensive materials or finishes.” Richards explains that generosity of space, natural light and a meaningful connection with each home and its surroundings are “fundamental” to achieving the result. For this project, the character of the original buildings meant vaulted ceilings, “carefully framed” views across the surrounding landscape and open plan living spaces were almost natural. These coupled with other features such as full height Crittal-style glazed doors, bespoke staircases, crafted timber joinery, quartz worktops and detailed fireplaces create spaces that feel “refined without becoming overly formal,” says Richards.

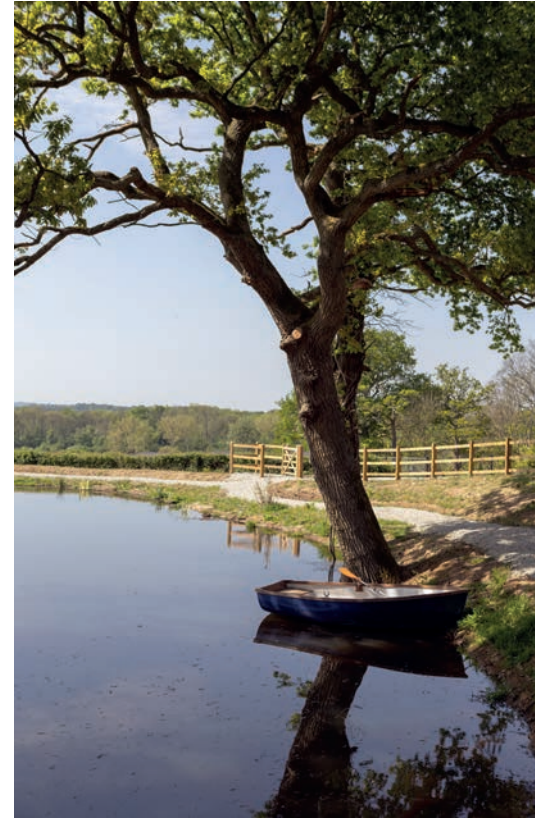
Playing an “important architectural role,” fireplaces help keep the desired open play layout while also creating more intimate living environments, as well as adding a luxury feel.

Inside the homes, materials are “deliberately restrained,” says Richards, to allow the light, views and proportions of the spaces to become the “defining features.” Elsewhere however, materials played an essential role in meeting the brief. “Every material was selected because it could satisfy several objectives simultaneously, such as reducing embodied carbon, improving operational performance and delivering high quality architecture,” he explains.

Structural insulated panels (SIPs) were chosen to form the basis of the construction thanks to their ability to create an extremely well-insulated and airtight building envelope, while also reducing embodied carbon by around 40% compared to masonry construction. The build quality, amount of waste and construction time onsite are also all improved by their prefabricated nature.

Wherever possible, the architects used glulam timber over steel, not only to again reduce embodied carbon, but also to “allow the structure to become part of the architectural expression of the interiors,” explains Richards. “Lightweight timber framing and offsite manufactured metal web joists further reduced material use while simplifying the installation of building services.”

Elsewhere, existing concrete from across the site was crushed and reused as hardcore, and any additional concrete required was low carbon. “This circular approach reduced waste and transportation impacts,” says Richards. “The greatest challenge wasn’t any individual material but ensuring that structural systems, sustainability targets, construction sequencing and commercial



**THE CONSTRAINTS OF
THE EXISTING SCHEME
“PROVED SURPRISINGLY
PRODUCTIVE,”
SAYS RICHARDS**



realities all worked together.”

Externally, materials were chosen to “reflect the robust character of agricultural buildings while expressing them through a contemporary architectural language,” explains Richards. “One of the themes we embraced throughout the project was that agricultural buildings are often more industrial than romantic; we wanted to celebrate that honesty rather than produce a nostalgic interpretation of rural architecture.”

A palette of black is used throughout the development, found in the anthracite zinc roofing, charred spruce cladding, dark brickwork and black powder-coated aluminium windows. It helps create a visual coherence while allowing each building to achieve its own identity through subtle differences in form and cladding pattern.

In particular, the charred timber “became a defining material for the development,” says Richards, reiterating the physical benefits of reducing movement, weathering and maintenance over the building’s lifetime. This means that while a larger investment upfront, it’s longevity makes it the more sustainable choice in the long term. Balancing longevity and the robustness required to sit within the agricultural setting with the “quality and refinement expected of a contemporary luxury development” was “the greatest challenge,” says Richards.

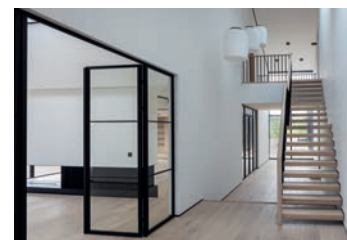
TACKLING THE RIBA CLIMATE CHALLENGE

Hartdene Barns is Nissen Richards Studio’s first project to adopt the RIBA Climate Challenge – a set of targets set by RIBA in relation to operational energy, embodied carbon, potable water use and health and wellbeing. Their shared ambition with Q New Homes to prove low carbon housing can be delivered without compromising on architectural quality and commercial viability meant this was the perfect opportunity to “test how far we could push environmental performance within a live residential development,” Richards explains.

This began with the fabric first approach taken, focusing on reducing the homes’ energy demand through the use of SIPs, “exceptional” airtightness, and eliminating thermal bridging. Embodied carbon was reduced through the construction material choices and recycling of materials onsite. Building services and renewable technologies were then used to meet the remaining requirements.

Every home includes air source heat pumps, solar PV panels, battery storage, MVHR, EV charging points and “high performance” glazing, which has resulted in operational net zero performance and EPC A ratings.

“Working to the RIBA Climate Challenge was both rewarding and demanding because it required us to consider operational and embodied carbon



together, rather than treating them as separate issues,” explains Richards. “It fundamentally changed the way we approached design, procurement and collaboration across the consultant team.”

While Richards believes there has historically been a perception that sustainability involves compromise for occupants, he says the architects are finding that to be increasingly challenged by projects. He cites the facts that better insulated homes are quieter, healthier and more comfortable, better daylight improves wellbeing, durable materials age more “gracefully,” and lower running costs providing lasting values for homeowners.

“The challenge isn’t balancing luxury against sustainability,” he says. “It’s integrating both ambitions from the very beginning of the design process. When sustainability becomes an inherent part of the architecture rather than something added later, the two reinforce one another remarkably well.” While he acknowledges that the initial cost can be higher, he believes the lower operational costs, durability and overall improved performance repays that cost.

The team felt it important that independent validation was sought for their sustainability efforts. Whole life carbon assessor Darren Evans concluded the development performs 10-15 years ahead of most new build housing in the UK in terms of its whole life carbon

performance, describing them as “among the most environmentally friendly houses in the UK.” For Richards and the project team, it was confirmation that they’d made the right choices: “It provided real evidence that the design decisions we had made were delivering measurable environmental benefits,” he says.

That’s not to say they don’t believe there’s room for improvement on future projects. Hartdene Barns successfully met the RIBA 2025 potable water targets “through careful specification of fittings and appliances” but to meet the more ambitious 2030 targets certain elements – such as rainwater harvesting and site-wide water recycling – will, says Richards, need to be factored much earlier in the design process. “Those lessons are already informing how we approach subsequent projects,” he says.

Richards believes that the housebuilding industry as a whole can be “more ambitious” when it comes to high end, sustainable homes. While he acknowledges that a single approach will never work, due to each site’s unique planning, commercial and environmental constraints, he says that Hartdene Barns proves that architectural quality and environmental performance don’t have to “compete.” He adds that with the right team, it’s “entirely possible” to create desirable, environmentally responsible and commercially successful homes.



“The biggest lesson from the project is that sustainability shouldn’t be viewed as an additional requirement or marketing feature,” Richards adds. “It should be embedded within the design process from the very beginning. When that’s the case, it improves every aspect of a development.”

LANDSCAPING AS ARCHITECTURE

Richards explains that the landscaping of the development was another element “considered an integral part of the architecture” as opposed to an add-on. Given the site’s location within an AONB near the Ashdown Forest, the landscaping needed to “respect and enhance” the existing local ecology.

Native planting was used to not only support but strengthen biodiversity across the site. Each home has a private garden and its own allotment, and elsewhere a large balancing pond – formed from a World War II bomb crater – enhances the site’s “unique character and ecological value.”

Removing some of the later agricultural buildings allowed for the original courtyard arrangement to be re-established. “Overall the landscape strategy reinforces the relationship between the homes and their setting, creating a development that feels embedded within the landscape rather than imposed upon it,” Richards says.

Construction on the project progressed well, beginning in September 2022 and completing in April 2026. The challenges with this project were not with the construction itself, says Richards, but rather balancing the ambitious objectives with the “practical realities of construction and constraints of the existing planning consent.”

“Much of the learning centred around material selection, construction sequencing and ensuring that sustainability objectives

were considered throughout the procurement as well as design,” he adds. “Meeting the RIBA Climate Challenge also required us to think beyond operational energy and consider the whole-life impact of every design decision.”

Collaboration was key to ensure the complex targets were met. But rather than viewing the challenges as ‘obstacles’, the team saw them as “opportunities to develop new knowledge that has informed subsequent products,” says Richards.

The response to the project, says Richards, has been “extremely encouraging,” generating “significant interest” not just from the public but also within the industry, particularly in regards to how it combines design quality with measurable environmental performance. “It demonstrates an alternative approach to rural housing, one that respects agricultural heritage without resorting to pastiche,” he explains.

“The forms and silhouettes of the original dairy buildings give the development a strong sense of place and a tangible connection to its past, while their contemporary reinterpretation provides buyers with homes that are future-ready, low carbon and uncompromising in terms of design quality,” he adds. It’s this absence of compromise that he believes has garnered the positive response – and that makes the whole project team immensely proud of what they’ve achieved.

The whole project team are immensely proud of what they’ve achieved with Hartdene Barns – and what it shows is doable. “The most rewarding outcome is that Hartdene Barns challenges the idea that sustainability and luxury are opposing ambitions,” Richards concludes. “I hope more developers will see projects like Hartdene Barns as evidence that sustainability and luxury are not opposing ambitions, but complementary ones.” ■