



Going Green: is it worth it?

Eco-fitting your country house has many rewards, but may not necessarily boost its value or make you money, so do it primarily for yourself, says Pippa Cuckson

MANY of us will have contemplated eco-friendly fittings in the past few years. Sometimes, it's because we genuinely want to do our bit to reach Government energy targets. Perhaps we face the brutal necessity of reining in utility bills. Some people simply fear a poor showing on the Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) you have to produce for a buyer.

But when it comes to enhancing property sales, the jury is still out on Green features. 'It's a bit like finding there's a room over the garage—handy if you've got one, but no deal-breaker,' says Mark Wheeler of Hamptons. On the other hand, in June, major research by the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) showed that houses EPC-rated at A/B sold for 14% more than houses rated G.

The economic uncertainty of recent years has fuelled in many buyers the desire to save a few thousand pounds on running costs, even when millions have been spent to purchase the property. Independent property finder Colin Mackenzie notes that concern about costs has almost reached the level experienced in the 1973 oil crisis. 'At 67p to 76p per litre, the price of oil has nearly doubled over five years, electricity prices are rising by 7% a year and few country houses are on mains gas.'

This can make Green features rather appealing. One COUNTRY LIFE reader has found a solar deal that even absorbs their telephone bill, and in one of the two substantial properties where Hamptons have highlighted eco-fittings, 10,000sq ft Beechwood House, in Dippenhall, Surrey (£5.25 million, 01483 572864), air-source heating services contribute to energy bills of only £3,000 a year.

However, Beechwood House is a new-build and this makes a difference, because renewable-energy installations should ideally be accompanied by foolproof insulation, which is only partially achievable in older properties. The DECC says only 6% of dwellings built before 1900 have an EPC rating of C or better; in dwellings constructed since 2007, it's 92%.




Even if spared the legion of listed-building constraints, country houses rarely have walls capable of being 'cavity filled' so as to benefit from local or national government initiatives such as the Green Deal. Picture windows are often so tall and deep they can cost thousands of pounds to double (or even secondary) glaze.

Plus, notes Mr Mackenzie, 'with the average buyer only expecting to live somewhere for 10–20 years, some renewable alternatives hold less appeal. There is also a suspicion that many eco-friendly solutions are not yet fully developed. Committing to the expensive installation of an unproven form of efficiency, often using a relatively recently established company, can take a leap of faith'.

Even buying a property that's already been fitted with Green features requires some prudence. 'We would advise anyone purchasing a house with solar power to check what warranties remain, as well as asking to see an approved solar installer certificate,' warns Kieran Crowe of Strutt & Parker's resources and energy department. 'It's also important to see how long is left on the feed-in tariff, to insure any increase on the property valuation due to the solar system is justified.'

Perhaps the most important consideration for prospective eco-fitters is the Government's habit of reducing, at short notice, the feed-in tariffs—the fixed, long-term price for selling your energy

back to the grid, which dictates when your installation will pay for itself. Rates for installations below 50kwh pv were reduced on July 1, 2013.

However, this is not an entirely cautionary tale: the cost of hardware often adjusts alongside feed-in tariffs so that new customers don't lose out. In the next few weeks, COUNTRY LIFE will investigate the pros and cons of the more popular installations, but the key message for property owners right now is to go ahead with eco-fitting your house—as long as you put in a system that primarily appeals to *you*. 

At new-build Beechwood House, in Dippenhall, Surrey, air-source heating services contribute to energy bills of only £3,000 a year (Hamptons, £5.25 million, 01483 572864)

A developing theme

Green themes featured prominently at the Janine Stone Young Interior Designer of the Year Award last month. Many of the projects—including the winning one, Helene Forrester-Wood's 36, *Queen Street*, and runner-up Abdi Ali's *The Lisson Gallery*—explored ways to repurpose existing buildings, and three specifically focused on clean air (runner-up Michael Lau's *Herbal Remedies*), global warming (Shona Cairns' *The Epicentre Project*) and regenerating tired high streets through recycling (Jennifer Leach's *Meta Atelier*).

'The Green element was present at various levels—in the projects' materials, processes and eventual usage,' says Janine Stone's design director, Anthony Bevacqua.

Winner Miss Forrester-Wood, whose project highlighted the dark side of bankers' lives, was chosen because she demonstrated 'extraordinary visualisation and hand-drawing ability'. She will receive a £10,000 cash prize from Janine Stone and a six-month paid internship with the company. Her university, Canterbury School of Architecture UCA, will also receive £1,000 for books and equipment. CP