

Future is a house made of straw

Gabrielle Monaghan

THEY'RE wrestling with mud: green builders are taking their eco-credentials to the extreme by reviving the ancient Irish tradition of mud homes, which are designed eventually to disintegrate back into the earth without leaving a trace.

Due to an increase in courses showing how to build with cob — a mixture of mud, clay, sand, straw and water — more home builders are digging up the earth on their sites and using it to build 19th-century-style houses, albeit with modern conveniences.

Eschewing the McMansions constructed during the Celtic tiger, devotees of this prehistoric building material spend up to three years moulding and sculpting houses at a fraction of the usual cost.

As many as 4m Irish people lived in cob houses in the 1840s. With 2ft-thick but breathable walls, cob houses are the ultimate in eco-friendliness, using little energy

because they are warm in winter and cool in summer.

Féile Butler, an architect, and Colin Ritchie, her carpenter husband, finished their 1,400 sq ft cob home in Sligo last year after excavating soil from their site and spending three years fashioning it into walls and floors. The couple have since set up a company, Mud & Wood, to teach others.

"Our local community initially thought we were nuts," she said. "But one thing about building an unusual house is that the community gets involved — people would randomly drop in with salvaged materials. Now my brother is doing a course and looking for a site to build a cob home."

Deirdre O'Leary, a freelance clarinet player, did the same course as Butler at The Hollies Centre for Practical Sustainability in West Cork. She and her husband, actor Andrew Lummis, are now building one of three cob homes at the eco-village in Cloughjordan, Co Tipperary. Most of the first storey

Butler and Ritchie's 1,400 sq ft cob home in Sligo, which took them three years to build; inset, the couple with their two children



is made from cob, the second comprises straw bale and cob, and the roof slates are made from recycled tyres.

The couple started on the house in 2010 and have been building sporadically since. "We have been paying for it bit by bit with whatever we have,

but it will cost a lot less than a standard home," O'Leary said. "We liked the cob's sculptability, its low impact on the environment, and being able to do it ourselves."

O'Leary is organising a course next month entitled "build your own natural home

in just six days". It will be partly run by the Cob Cottage Company, an Oregon-based group of cob pioneers.

It has taken foreign experts to show the Irish how to regain the traditional skills lost when brick and concrete took over as building mate-

rials. In the post-boom era of ghost estates and mortgage refusals, the Irish are more accepting of eco-friendly homes which require less financial assistance from banks, Butler believes.

The first new cob house in Ireland in 100 years was built at The Hollies in 2004, by Rob Hopkins, the British founder of the Transition movement, which seeks to build communities independent of fossil fuel.

Just months after its completion, the home was burned down by arsonists, and Hopkins moved to Devon.

Thomas and Ulrike Ried-

muller, the couple who run The Hollies, finished their cob house at the centre in 2006, where they offer courses such as "how to build a healthy house without a mortgage".

At least 20 course participants went on to build their own cob homes, according to Thomas Riedmuller.

"People feel empowered by cob building because you don't need to be an expert," he said.

"It's relatively easy to learn. We teach people to build something small, like a one room with a kitchen, a bed and a toilet for €1,000. When you

have the next €1,000, you build another room."

Converts admit the process is so slow that it is only for the truly dedicated. They can build only in the summer months because it takes so long for each stage to dry out. Butler had to wait nine months for the walls to dry before putting in windows.

The finished product is not universally appreciated. "People who grew up in damp cottages reject it," she said. "The older generation thinks the woodwork in our house is lovely, but they'd take concrete and formica any time."