

Episode 266

How to invest sweat equity into a project while maintaining quality – with Ajay Boardman and Nigel Bowley

The show notes: www.houseplanninghelp.com/266

- Ben: What are you building?
- Ajay: A passivhaus, two-hundred-and-sixty square metres, it's in the South Downs National Park.
- Ben: You're building with PH15 which is a system that I know very well having seen Buckinghamshire Passivhaus rise up. How did you want to do this? What was going to be the way that you were going to build?
- Ajay: We were going to go with a different company, Touchwood, but we liked PH15 and we liked Jay but couldn't find anybody. But then Nigel was recommended and once we found Nigel and he was pretty confident that he could do the timber frame then we decided to go with PH15.
- Ben: But you wanted to do a lot of this work yourself, so what gave you that confidence?
- Ajay: I didn't have a job so, I had the time and probably didn't want to spend money on someone else project managing it. And seeing as then I was going to project manage it and then I didn't have a job, I might as well labour. And I'm a practical person so it seemed a natural thing to do really.
- Ben: Nigel, when did you first hear about this project?
- Nigel: 2018, I think. July, maybe, and we had our first meeting maybe September. Normally for my projects it takes a year at least for them to start.
- Ben: What's your background? What kinds of projects have you been working on before?

Nigel: I'm a carpenter by trade. I started in 1986. I joined the Youth Training Scheme. I had no idea what I wanted to do when I left school and I just thought I'd have a go at that.

So, I started with a small builder, building quality homes, slightly different homes to normal, just with a stone type brick corbel type houses. I think we built four or five of those for about five years, I guess. Starting from everything, doing everything. I watched and the building grew from ground up, as we're doing for this home right now.

From then I started smaller jobs and the jobs have been growing in size. Extensions, kitchens, bathrooms, internals, a bit of commercial work, on-site work.

Ajay: You did the roofs in Germany.

Nigel: Roofing in Germany. That was after a short spell in the Army, Royal Engineers for three years.

Ben: Do you tend to work by yourself and just fit into teams?

Nigel: I do work by myself, mainly for the control of the building. I'll always be that lead person and I'll get people in to work with me, alongside me, subcontractors – I do everything myself; I can do everything to a quality trade skill standard. So, I'm quite competitive.

Ajay: And you get people in, don't you?

Nigel: I get people in. The bigger the project, the more people I get, really. This project here seemed to be just Ajay and I just really working together and getting the job done.

Ben: When Ajay first suggested being the labourer, not only that, the client but also the project manager, how do you size that up?

Nigel: Very doubtful if that was possible, to be honest. One, from my own previous experience of getting labourers in, a lot of them are rubbish because they're just not really interested in the job. A few guys have taken it on but it's only in their own interest to then improve their skills to go on to be something else on their own. So, that is the person you need. You always know you're going to be losing them soon one day in their lives. And the rubbish ones you don't want anyway.

So, I had my doubts, and the reason I think Ajay is very good at it is she's got a great interest in the building and so, listens and does what's asked really. And the skills are there.

- Ajay: You've got to have manual skills.
- Nigel: You've got to have manual coordination and be able to use your hands.
- Ajay: Some people do and some people don't.
- Nigel: Yes. That's the thing with a labourer. They might be good at lifting but they can't use their hands in coordination.
- Ben: How did you start off that relationship of working together? Was it very much on a, 'shall we see how this goes' basis?
- Ajay: Yes. You haven't got a contract; you just get paid weekly. So, I think it was a good get-out for you if it had all gone – because we started just with levelling the site and everything and I think you probably would've known by then and you probably could've bailed quite quickly then.
- Ben: Is that true? Would you have known in the first couple of weeks, that's the time?
- Nigel: Yes. So, whenever I've started working on site, the guy would always say, 'I'll tell within twenty-four hours, I know if you're going to be alright.' And you knew straightaway I'm going to be good at this, you'll employ me anyway, and they always did.
- So, you know straightaway if someone can do it, I think. And so, within that first week, I knew it'd be alright the way Ajay and her dad worked. That first week was quite a successful week.
- Ajay: We worked really hard for a couple of weeks, didn't we? We just got a digger in and we were just at it for a couple of weeks really, weren't we?
- Nigel: Yes. And then we both realised that it was alright, we could do this and we could work together. Just on that first week you know, kind of thing.
- Ajay: But the communication, I think we had a bit of a – it was trying to coordinate what you had in your head. We did those diagrams, didn't we? What needed ordered or doing and I didn't know what that was.
- Nigel: Yes
- Ajay: And then we worked that all out into sections of, 'this is what we need for this bit of the foundations; and this is what we need.' And

then I knew all the bits that needed ordering or doing. Because he knows that but I didn't know that.

Ben: This is quite handy because as a client, I was certainly removed from the process because I was watching it. I'm filming a lot of it. But you're actually doing it as well. So, does that give you a good level of staying in touch with exactly what – you know, nothing is going to happen if your next steps aren't ordered and arranged?

Ajay: Exactly.

Nigel: You had the skills already then to say, 'I know how to do a spider chart.' Well, I've never done a spider chart. It's kind of mind-mapping of things. And so, I said, 'we need this by then' – and so, it's just having the skills to map out something to understand your own, right version and how you want to do it.

Ajay: But also having a concept of you're talking about coach bolts or whatever and to not go, 'what the hell is a coach bolt?' Just to have a concept, and I do have a concept, I think, from having laboured for dad and doing all of that type of work.

Ben: Right. So, it's important that we mention that you're on a farm, and I think by default you probably get dragged into doing lots of stuff.

Ajay: Well, I ended up with not having a job and dad's got loads of stuff to do on the farm. So, I just ended up working for dad doing manual labour, basically. So, I have a practical ability and understand it.

Ben: But you enjoy this, don't you?

Ajay: Yes. I enjoy manual work. I quite like being strong and fit.

Ben: What about the learning side of things? Has there been a steep learning curve or is it just every job as it comes, this is what we need to do here?

Nigel: If you look at the whole mass of the job, it's quite overwhelming sometimes, for anybody. And if you break down every part of the job into three or four things, then that's all you need to know on the day or for five days or for half a day or for an hour. It's just those things that you need to know. If you think about it more than that, you'll have a breakdown pretty quick after that.

So, it's keeping it simple, always.

- Ben: And the actual system itself, any concerns coming into this? Obviously, a professional carpenter, but has it just been quite straightforward.
- Nigel: We visited a site in the New Forest, a PH15 type building, and just by seeing the building I understood what's got to be done and how it was all put together really.
- Ajay: You were very confident.
- Nigel: Straightaway you could see it's all alright.
- Ajay: But you were confident about not only just the timber frame aspect, which is obviously your thing, but you were confident about coordinating the slab with the timber frame and getting the slab as level as it needs to be, to be able to sit that timber frame on top of it. He was confident that he could do both of those things.
- Ben: As things move forward, the setup of PH15 is a lot of carpentry, but will other people be involved further down the line as we get to the other jobs? How are we thinking?
- Ajay: We might get an electrician in, but we'll probably do the MVHR ourselves, the plumbing ourselves, plasterboard...
- Nigel: Yes, taping and jointing, decorating – we'll probably end up doing it all really, just because I think Ajay enjoys that side of it as well, really doing everything.
- Ajay: If someone was to come in and do painting, that's fine, but I'm happier and you'd be happier to let that go, someone to come in and paint. But I don't think we'd be so happy for someone to come in and screw that airtight board or tape it because that's essential to getting that airtight test.
- Ben: So, is it a bit of ownership though? Because you've used subcontractors so, you're aware that other people can do that. But it sounds like you've got in the groove that you want to...
- Ajay: Control issues.
- Ben: [Laughter] okay, I didn't want to say it.
- Nigel: For both of us.
- Ajay: Yes.
- Ben: Is that good, having two people who are very controlling?

- Nigel: Luckily we only control what we need to control and we're not controlling each other.
- Ajay: No, I don't think so.
- Nigel: I've got control of the building and I will say what I think about it and where it needs to go.
- Ajay: And I don't feel any need to have anything to do with that really. I'm happy to do what he says.
- Nigel: No. And I leave the taping and things to you because...
- Ajay: I'm better at it.
- Nigel: Well, you're better at it, for sure. I do care about it but I'm not putting everything into it, which is quite important about getting someone in really. They don't care about the taping. They just lay it on there.
- Ajay: No. And some of it isn't that easy. You've got to use a little special tool and do the edges and the corners. You've got to be willing to...
- Ben: Things like that, did you get training of how to do that?
- Ajay: No. You have to have some nonce and go, 'I wonder if that...' – and so, after about two windows, I sort of got the hang of it.
- Nigel: I put my tape on wonky. I can tape; I'm not going to lie. But I put my tape on wonky, just 'that'll do' and yours will be exactly straight.
- Ajay: But it said not to have any creases. His had creases.
- Nigel: Yes, mine might have a crease or two and I got told off. I thought, 'right, you're doing the taping then.'
- Ben: In terms of being the client and also the labourer, there's an interesting powerplay going on there, that you're in charge of the job but you're also answering to quality control here. So, has that just worked out okay? Is that just in the relationship?
- Ajay: Yes. There's no conflict there.
- Nigel: For me, I feel I have to have that much control over the building. I'll say anything I need to say to get that done. And if they don't like it, they can either sack me or shut-up really. That's how I see it. Straight down the line on that one. And luckily, it just works.
- Ajay: Yes. There's not really any conflict there at all.

- Nigel: That was a worry of mine, that someone might not be able to hold back or, you know, 'this is my building. I'm delivering...'
- Ajay: Well, dad particularly. I think you were worried that he would...
- Nigel: Yes. You can get some people that know a lot and don't know when to shut-up really, be quiet and not say. But he really does.
- Ben: What would you recommend to someone else trying to replicate what you are doing here? How do you get it right?
- Nigel: Communication, listening to each other, and knowing where your boundaries are on what to say, when to do it.
- Ben: But you haven't written anything down, have you?
- Ajay: I'm wondering whether you should go on some sort of teambuilding week or at least have a bail-out. Like, say we'll try two weeks of something practical relating to the build, like we did.
- Nigel: Yes. You can't sign into a year of – then there's the financial setup that we've done really. If I was going in for a whole fixed price, then it would be more of my control. And then if Ajay wasn't good enough and I was employing her, then she'd be sacked. So, because of the way we setup financially, it works like that. But you need to know that you can work with that person. We didn't know really, did we?
- Ajay: No.
- Ben: And how much do you think you're saving? Is that an element that you even consider? Or is it just because you've got this time, you might as well be doing this?
- Nigel: I think just on the basic minimum of a labourer's wage, or semi-skilled – and I'd say you're semi-skilled because of the project management, your ordering or whatever you've got to do...
- Ajay: Yes. But the project management and ordering would've taken you away. And you're the one that costs money. You don't want to be on the phone trying to phone around for how much sand costs. You need me to be doing that.
- Nigel: But it's also anything that I do that I don't need to do – I don't mind sweeping up but if I'm sweeping up, I'm not doing something that's more...

- Ben: I was going to say, do you feel like you're going at the same speed as you normally do? [Laughter] What's so funny?
- Nigel: Well, at the start, I realised I'm going to have to slow down everything to fit into their pace of how they do things, Chris and Ajay. And actually, we do have days now where we are getting back to the pace that I used to work, which is a little bit headless chicken some days, even though you're getting loads done.
- Ajay: You just go for, like, four hours of just absolutely...
- Nigel: Yes. I'm learning to manage that by setting up for a good day now, a lot of prep work, to then go for four hours, let's go for it.
- Ajay: It was a bit stop-start because there are some things like the airtightness and things where we were scratching our heads for a while. So, it can't always be, especially for this length of time, you can't be smashing it out all the time. But I think Nigel on his other jobs, when he's on a cost basis – and correct me if I'm wrong – you basically just don't stop.
- Nigel: Well, when you price a job, you work out it's going to take me three days to do that, then you make sure it gets done in three days. And if you do it in two-and-a-half days, you've just made half-a-day's pay. So, there was always that in my mind. And actually, sometimes it's quite tiring because you might do three-and-a-half days.
- Ben: But it's also interesting in terms of quality because Jay, who has been with us today, the architect but also one of the co-founders of PH15, was saying that the quality here is super-high, above a lot of professionals. So, that's a great compliment. Do you think some of that is actually the pace, just not rushing it? Because when you are under that pressure, it is easy that you can let things slip.
- Nigel: No, not at all. If you know the quality and you know how you're going to do it, then the quality will always stay there. You just move faster.
- Ajay: If we did this house again, we wouldn't be scratching our heads about the airtightness because we know about that now. So, there was just scratching because it's a new thing that neither of us understood.
- Nigel: Yes. Once you know the process then there's no reason to talk about anything. It's just put a screw in, get the next one up, and so on, and so on. It's just repetition. So, it's not we're rushing around. It's just more of we know what's coming, let's get on with it. Why isn't that screwdriver here?

- Ajay: You just need to stay focused.
- Nigel: Yes, absolutely. Just preparation really. Good prep.
- Ben: Is there anything else that we need to know about this sweat equity and how you can make it happen? Is the PH15 system itself making life easier? If it was something more complex, might this not work?
- Nigel: If you were building a masonry building, which you can still do a Passivhaus with that, it would be still the same. Because it is only labour that you're saving on in that way. You can order bricks and blocks, whatever you decide to do. So, if Ajay could put two concrete blocks on her shoulder and carry them up the ladder, absolutely great. Which you probably could actually, couldn't you? [Laughter].
- So, I don't think it matters on the style or the type of building. It's just really if you're prepared to work, properly work. Because I don't think a lot of people really work that hard when it comes to physical.
- Ajay: Yes.
- Ben: So, a lot of this is just determination?
- Nigel: Yes.
- Ajay: Yes.
- Ben: That was actually something your dad said as well quite a lot, that you're a very determined person.
- Ajay: Yes.
- Ben: What kind of hours are you putting into this?
- Ajay: We start at eight, depending on children. Or nine.
- Nigel: Yes, eight to six some days; eight to four-thirty; nine to five – it varies really. And that's the great thing with doing it yourself. It's flexible. You can fit your hours in, when it suits around you with school runs and whatever else you need to do.
- Ajay: It's just a bit tricky – so, the idea was that dad was supposed to work with Nigel and then I could come in and do project management stuff. But at the moment, I never get to come in and do any of that sort of stuff. But there was.
- Ben: I was just going to say, are you doing that in the evenings?

- Ajay: No, I'm in bed by eight o'clock [laughs].
- Ben: You're just absolutely exhausted.
- Ajay: No, I don't. Well, no-one's open at that time so you can't. You've either got to do it during the day or it just doesn't get done. There's not a huge amount to do at the moment but there was when it was groundworks. There was quite a bit more.
- Ben: When it moves on to the fitout, is that again...?
- Ajay: That will be more again, yes. So, hopefully maybe get some people in. An electrician or someone else to do painting and all those sorts of things, so I at least get some time to do some other stuff.
- Ben: Are you working to a programme?
- Nigel: [Chuckles] Well, that was a thing at the start. Because of my previous projects, there's always a programme. It's like, it's going to be finished on that date to that day. And that's the thing that's been hard to adjust to.
- Ajay: I was about to say, you've done really well adjusting to that because your timeline was so tight and unrealistic.
- Nigel: Well, not necessarily unrealistic because maybe ten percent of the time you might have had it finished.
- Ajay: But every day we never have it finished.
- Nigel: That is the idea of pushing, isn't it? Because the more you don't get done...
- Ajay: And then you're just annoyed at the end of the day because you haven't achieved what you...
- Nigel: But then if you're under it; if you go, 'I'm going to get this done and it's only going to take half-a-day,' you're only ever going to do half-a-day's work, aren't you? So, if you say, 'let's get that done,' and if we get it done once or twice, then we've achieved something.
- Ben: Is that important for you as well, to set yourself, 'I'd like this done by the end of today'?
- Nigel: I only go really on my – because say on previous jobs, you can burn your labourers up quite quickly and they become unmotivated and they leave pretty quick. So, you've got to really manage their physical abilities, your own physical abilities, and so you kind of

have to let the job lead you in that way really. And knowing when that is going to be a physical effort, a mental effort, a slow part of the job – you've got to understand that.

Ajay: And it's a long slog. It's not like a three month smash it out extension where you could just go for it.

Nigel: Yes, and then have two weeks off because you've earned it, kind of thing.

Ajay: Yes. This is a lot more.

Ben: And does this seem real for you as a client as well, as you get through and you've got a physical building there? You're going to be living in this.

Ajay: [Laughs] No.

Ben: You're not even thinking about that, are you?

Ajay: No, not really. And to be honest I'm not really that bothered – I don't know. I'm not thinking, 'I'm going to have this lovely light fitting.' I'm not really that interested. It's more the making of it. Yes, it'll be lovely at the end and the nice thing about the Passivhaus is that it's the feeling of the air quality, the warmth, you're not going to get any cold spots. All that I'm really looking forward to. But I don't care about the light fittings or the...

Ben: You're going to have to do them anyway though. You might not care about them but they're going to come.

Nigel: Yes, a candle.

Ajay: Yes [laughter]. But I don't feel precious about I want this amazing fabulous house.

Ben: It does sound like all these practical elements that you've put in, it's totally tuned to you as a person and I think is going to make you enjoy the house so much more.

Ajay: Yes.

Ben: Thank you both for chatting to me. An interesting topic today. I wish you the best for the final few months. Good luck.

Ajay: Thanks very much.

Nigel: Or years!

Ajay: [Laughter] Yeah!

Nigel: Thank you [laughter].