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THE SUNDAY TIMES

My basement extension horror

When a Windsor artist tried to add an underground studio, he ended up with a money pit instead. He relives his nightmare

Emma WellsPublished: 21 April 2013



Johnson, with McLean, says he was deserted by builders and left to live amid chaos (John Lawrence)

To most visitors, Ian Johnson's home appears glossy-magazine beautiful, a serene space on a quiet cul-de-sac in the heart of Windsor, just a short walk from the castle. His converted 100-year-old sawmill, set over three floors linked by a £26,000 modernist spiral staircase, has golden oak flooring, contemporary art and art-deco furniture. Light filters softly in through a glass extension and the courtyard garden blooms with spring flowers.

Yet for Johnson, 57, who bought the house in the late 1990s, and shares it for some of the week with his Oxford-based girlfriend, Fiona McLean, 47, a PR consultant in education and publishing, serenity is the last thing he feels. "I don't see it the way strangers see it," he says. "I see all the anguish. How it all looks now has come at a high price." He looks around the sleek sitting room, with its ultra-modern fireplace and delicately patterned wallpaper, and sighs. "Fairly recently, this space was just a great big mud and money pit, and a death trap. I was extremely depressed."

As a self-employed artist and buy-to-let landlord — he owns eight properties in the Windsor area — Johnson is no Roman Abramovich, wanting to carve out a cavernous subterranean space in a grand London home. But he did want to create a studio space for himself. So, in 2007, after doing some research, he set himself a budget of £80,000 to create a 540 sq ft basement room (with another £20,000 set by for decoration and unforeseen costs), and easily obtained planning permission from the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.

He was prepared for some upheaval, of course, and moved his best furniture and his own artworks up to the third floor, where there are two bedrooms, for safety. But he had no idea that the next three years of his life were going to be thrown into complete chaos, spiralling him into deep despair. Only after three sets of builders, a cash outlay of £200,000 and selling off a flat and a garage in his portfolio was he able to complete his project. And, when you've read his story, you may well join the ranks of Rachel Johnson, Ruby Wax and Viscount Astor, who are up in arms at the devastation and disruption that a basement excavation can create.

"My first big mistake," he recalls, "was not asking my structural engineer to carry out extensive tests to see what was underneath the house." As his first set of builders dug down to the depth of about a metre, they struck water. "They had a panic attack and said it wasn't possible to go any further. They filled in the hole, covered it with cement and walked off the job." Having taken legal advice, he paid their bill of £10,000 for a few weeks' work. "But I had nothing to show for it except bare concrete floors."

Although Johnson is still not entirely clear about the source of the water — there may be a small stream, or it may just be a naturally occurring gravel pit beneath his home, drawing in moisture — he decided to press ahead with his plans, hiring another building firm at the start of 2008. He won't

name names, but they showed him an impressive basement project that had featured on *Grand Designs*, for which they took the credit, and another in a bijou London mews house.

He was convinced he had found the right people for the job: "It was all very inspiring, and the guy seemed to really know his stuff." Yet by Christmas that year, this set of builders had also walked off the job. "I only found out later, when everything went completely pear-shaped," Johnson says, "that the head guy had never actually been in overall charge of a basement excavation, just the digging. But he had seemed unfazed about the water, and had even signed a contract saying that he was prepared for it."

The water had been rising, though, and the smallish pump had been replaced with a far more powerful diesel one. "The situation was escalating," Johnson says, looking haunted by the memory. "The guys were working in full angling clothes, with waders and everything."

Although he had agreed a fixed fee with the contractor, he was continually asked for more money than the agreed £80,000, as costs were getting out of control. And by the time the whole team abandoned ship, there was an even bigger hole than the last time. "It was full of water," he says. "The ground floor was just a big pit, and the only way upstairs to the bedrooms was across duckboards over the middle of the pit and up a huge ladder. It was like being on the Somme."



The artist finally has his studio, but it cost him a fortune (John Lawrence)

This was the second freezing winter that Johnson had to endure, with a harsh wind whipping through the exposed, unsecured house and his budget totally blown. Mould was growing all over the kitchen and up the walls. In the meantime, Thames Water had demanded that he pay for a £100 test to check the quality of the water he was pumping into the mains sewer. (It turned out to be drinkable.)

Inevitably, he also had to deal with complaints from neighbours. So much water was being pumped out of Johnson's excavation, it had backed up in the loos of eight flats behind him. Another neighbour called him over to show him a huge hole in his back yard — the size of a bomb crater — where the boundary fence and garden had collapsed because of all the digging. "Understandably, they had complained to the council," Johnson says. "As I had planning permission, there wasn't anything they could do."

To appease his neighbour, he hired a crane, complete with operator, and with the help of 10 friends and more helpful neighbours, shifted a huge amount of soil from his own dig over the roofs, dumping it into the garden to fill up the hole. He also bought a barrowful of topsoil and plants to finish it off.

Just when Johnson thought he couldn't take any more, in the spring of 2009, the man he describes as "my salvation, my saving grace" turned up. "Derek, from Darqs building contractors, had only ever done one basement, in Poland," he says. "But not only did he finish the job, he was kind beyond the call of duty." Even better, he did it at a bargain price.

The basement was underpinned metre by metre using a special concrete mixed with an eye-wateringly expensive BASF waterproofing solution that is normally found in sea defences. "I am fairly sure Ian's basement would now be the best place to be in case of a nuclear attack," McLean quips.

Yet Johnson finds it hard to smile. After the huge expenditure, he has to live more frugally — his monthly budget, he says, is very tight — and he has flashbacks to those dark days. Even though the basement is finished, a pump still works 24 hours to keep the water out, and he has a backup battery pack in case the power fails.

There is some light in the whole bleak experience, though. He now has a fully functioning artist's studio, filled with light and his portraits and crucifixion scenes, which he will soon be exhibiting at local galleries and in London.

Three years ago, Johnson had the house valued and found that there had been a considerable price hike — up to £750,000. "It did add value, as I decided to have an ensuite bedroom down there, as well as the studio," he says. So, was it all worth it? He seems unsure. "At least I've got something to show for it," he concludes.

Top tips

DO let your neighbours know your plans before starting work, and warn them about any possible disturbance you might cause

DO find out if any neighbours have already completed basement excavations, and whether there were any stumbling blocks

DO get your structural engineer to conduct a full survey of what is underneath the house before you start any work

DO check any prospective contractor's credentials and ask for references from past clients

DO ensure they are fully available to oversee the job and won't just be popping in now and again to oversee less experienced builders

DO line up somewhere else to stay as a respite from the chaos in your own home

DO consider how you can maximise your basement space — for example, creating an extra bedroom — to add value to your home

DON'T assume that anything will be straightforward. Prepare to be flexible with your budget, problems that might arise and how long the work will take

DON'T pay in instalments, if you can possibly avoid it. Try to agree on a figure up front, payable on completion of the work

DON'T go ahead without a legal contract with your builders, highlighting any problems you know of



A pump still works 24 hours to keep the water out of Johnson's basement (John Lawrence)

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