

Best Rural Property Conversion Consultancy 2025 – UK

BUILD Excellence Award in Sustainable Heritage Restoration 2025

Ecovril Ltd

The story of Ecovril Ltd begins, albeit in a somewhat roundabout way, with the author Edward Bulwer-Lytton and the meat extract Bovril. In the author's seminal work, 'The Coming Race', he presented a mystical electrical power called 'Vril'. This inspired the name of the paste launched a few years later. He extended a cottage in the heart of Knebworth Park woods as a writing retreat - the property that was once Bulwer-Lytton's is today home to the aptly named Ecovril, a sustainable design and planning company co-founded by Chau Lee and Andy Singleton. We caught up with them for more.

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Ecovril's ethos of renovating and converting buildings to get the best out of a space and maximise an asset is reflected through this aforementioned cottage, which was built from Knebworth oak, extended by Bulwer-Lytton, and restored by Andy Singleton using timber from the same woods. It is also reflected through its name – 'Eco' for ecology and 'Vril' for that spark of energy which was introduced in the book of the property's former owner – and is today embodied through the sustainable services delivered by the team here.

Founded in 2011 from this historic location as a way to renovate and convert buildings both old and new in an affordable and sustainable manner, Ecovril prides itself on tackling some of the most unusual and challenging projects the market has to offer, including obtaining planning permission on those rural and heritage properties where many others have given up. Examples include barn conversions in the Yorkshire Dales National Park, green belt and listed buildings, and even an upwards extension on a row of 3 terraced houses which was rejected 3 times in attempts by others before Ecovril were recommended.

However, the most perfect project the company has ever had the pleasure of working on was the Roundhouse, which Chau and Andy stumbled across accidentally as they were passing through their local village. There behind an overgrown plot stood an abandoned, semi-submerged, circular water tank. As they climbed onto the lid and looked out over the encompassing fields, they knew they could do something special. They ended up building a pioneering sustainable home originally designed for themselves, but was sold on and completed in collaboration with the new owners. The outcome is a beautiful open unique building which can be appreciated by all.

Diving deeper into their magnificent Knebworth Roundhouse, the couple explained: "The Roundhouse is inspired by the Trulli houses in Italy where conical stone roofscapes purposefully have no gutters and instead direct rainwater to an underground tank – perfect for the lack of water they are used to and that we are now experiencing more and more." Aside from this, the house is simply beautiful – honest and in keeping with its surroundings thanks to features such as a hat-like roof and a large, glass-curtain wall for the view.



"The Roundhouse embraces the most up to date technologies – such as solar panels and a computerised, dried hardwood, log-burning boiler – but also uses low tech wherever appropriate, such as a UK-manufactured range cooker and glass in the floors to allow natural light to bathe the central stairwell."

This build is just the tip of the iceberg, and the duo have upgraded everything from Grade I listed buildings through to new builds of both a domestic and commercial nature. Across every project, the team strive to use local traders and building materials, as well as repurposing materials where possible to cut down on waste and give character. As reclaimed material becomes scarcer, the team have found new ways to be creative, even reusing the cast iron posts from the Roundhouse by shortening them and inserting a sleeve.

Regardless of whether the project is their own or carried out on behalf of a client, the ethos is the same: if a job is worth doing then it is worth doing properly. Ecovril's commitment to this can be seen through many of its clients becoming friends during and after their project, and it is this level of service – combined with the expertise Chau boasts in industrial design/technical materials and which Andy possesses on the back of being in the building industry since he was 16 years old – that really sets the company apart in this landscape.

As for the future of the company, Ecovril is sad to announce that its lease for the 400-year-old thatched cottage it calls home is due to expire next May, but excited to reveal that they have found a new holding in Louth, Lincolnshire, which Chau and Andy have fallen in love with. Comprising a Grade II listed farmhouse and a four-storey warehouse, this is the perfect location for this talented duo to continue to pioneer and realise their vision of sustainable planning and design for properties across the UK.