

Actor Ricky Tomlinson is building a riverside retreat with a flat-pack chalet from Estonia

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This sounds like the perfect pitch for a property TV show, in which stand-up comedy meets DIY: Ricky Tomlinson, the country's most lovable couch potato Jim Royle, buys a flat-pack timber chalet house from Estonia, plonks it down on the banks of the



River Dee and then gets his celebrity Scouser mates to fit it out.

'I've already asked three of my pals to help me: Craig Phillips, who won the first Big Brother in 2001, is a carpenter and brickie, Syd Little was a painter and decorator before Little and Large, and Stan Boardman, the comic, was an electrician,' says Ricky, himself a plasterer before he found fame.

It's a surreal image, but Ricky is serious, although the project

has already seen its fair share of farce since he paid out £20,000 for the chalet, which comes with a galley kitchen, bathroom, sitting room, double glazing and a veranda.

Built in a day: Ricky and Rita Tomlinson paid just £20,000 for their flat-pack chalet from Estonia, which includes a kitchen, bathroom, sitting room and a veranda

The packs arrived a year ago and were stored on the riverbank while Ricky waited for planning permission to replace a tumbledown shack.

But during torrential rain last summer the packs were swept away, although they were retrieved downstream virtually unharmed.

The chalet has now been erected on brick piers on the river bank close to the village of Farndon, in Cheshire, and within an hour of Ricky's native Liverpool.

'When I go down there, I just sit by the river and enjoy the wildlife,' says Ricky, who married his second wife Rita six years ago.

The riverside retreat is the latest addition to the couple's expanding property portfolio, but it is unlikely to have a huge value as they rent rather than own the land on which it stands from a local farmer, paying a peppercorn rent. But Ricky did not buy it to make money.

As well as a five-year-old detached house in the Aigburth suburb of Liverpool, the Tomlinsons own a two-bedroom townhouse in Albir, near Benidorm, and a three-bedroom pent-house at Altinkum on Turkey's Aegean coast, where they have also ordered a second, to be finished next year.



Not bad for a radical socialist whose politics are slightly to the Left of those of Bobby Grant, the Brookside shop steward whose character made Ricky famous when the Channel 4 soap launched in 1982.

But Ricky's journey up - and down - the property ladder has been far from straightforward.

Ripped off by a business partner and repossessed by a bank, Ricky has also served two prison terms: three days for physically evicting tenants who refused to pay him the rent three weeks after moving in, and two years for affray and conspiracy when trying to bring the British housebuilding industry to its knees in the Seventies.

As a plasterer he had worked on local pubs and hotels as well as Liverpool's Catholic cathedral, but in 1972 he was a trade union convener on a new housing estate in Wrexham and was travelling around building sites with coachloads of flying pickets drumming up support for a

national strike.

Growing portfolio: The couple also own a Turkish pent-house apartment, a detached house in Liverpool and a townhouse in Benidorm

Five months after a demonstration at a site in Shrewsbury, Ricky and a union colleague, Des Warren, were arrested and accused of violence and intimidation. They were jailed for two years, and Ricky later learnt that MI5 kept a file on him in which he was listed as a 'political thug prone to violence'.

After 35 years he is still trying to clear his name. Warren has since died, but Ricky went to Westminster in March to call for a public inquiry into their convictions.

His time in prison was no holiday, but Ricky says the worst feeling of his life was being repossessed.

'I was ill, I couldn't work and I couldn't pay the mortgage,' says Ricky who suffered a breakdown in 1990.

Business debts mounted and he eventually lost his two-bedroom cottage on the outskirts of Wrexham. Bailiffs would also have taken a caravan he kept nearby, but it was swept away by storms the night before they arrived.

'All I was left with were two banjos and a sideboard,' he says, although those went shortly afterwards when a Liverpool nightclub he owned, Limelight, was raided by creditors.

'It makes me so angry when you hear of ordinary working people losing their houses under this Labour Government. Nobody should lose their home if they lose their job,' he says.

Ricky acquired an interest in overseas property when he bought a caravan in Benidorm in the early Nineties, an experience he revived for Ricky's Place In The Sun for the BBC.

Many happy family holidays later, it collapsed, so 18 months ago, he and Rita bought a modern, two-bedroom terrace house in Albir, a quiet town about eight miles from Benidorm, where average house prices are £110,000.

'We thought about moving there, but I never want to leave Liverpool because this is where our family is. Best of all, it's where my grandson Louis is. He's four years old and has opened up a new world for me,' says the 69-year-old, who divorced his first wife Marlene, with whom he has three grown-up children.

Home now is a four-bedroom house in Aigburth, which they bought new for £285,000.

'Before that we lived in a converted warehouse flat on the waterfront at Liverpool Docks,' says Rita.

'But Ricky didn't like it because there was nowhere outside to walk about.'

However, it did give them privacy at a time when The Royle Family was bringing unwanted attention. At their old house, near Stanley Park, kids would ring the doorbell and yell Jim's catchphrase 'My a***!' at least twice a day.

Ricky bought his first house at the age of 21 - young by today's standards and unheard of among working-class Liverpoolians in 1960.

'My mum Peggy, a pub cleaner, and dad Albert, a baker, instilled in me the idea of buying a place.

'Mum wanted her sons to be independent. I didn't smoke and I've always been a workaholic so I put away a few quid every week until I had £250 for the deposit,' says Ricky, who made extra cash playing the banjo and telling jokes in local pubs.

'I bought a three-bedroom house in Salop Street near Stanley Park, for £800. I skimmed every wall and ceiling myself and converted one of the bedrooms into a bathroom, but by the time I'd finished I had no money left for furniture!'

That was almost 50 years ago. Ricky's most recent purchase is a £46,000 three-bedroom penthouse with two bathrooms and a roof terrace in the Turkish resort of Altinkum.

'We always have close friends and family staying in our place in Spain and we knew we'd have to get somewhere else 'cos there wasn't enough room and we both have big families.

'A friend told us about the property in Turkey. We went out last May with two sets of friends for a weekend and when we saw the flats at Apollo Village, we couldn't believe the quality or the prices. We all bought one.'

Ricky is unsure when he and Rita will get out there again this year, not least because so many friends and family have already booked it up, but also because he is so busy.

He is touring the UK with his own show, writing a children's book and researching a documentary on the life of former Liverpool manager, Bob Paisley.

And the BBC is making two special episodes of The Royle Family for Christmas. Sounds as if he may not have much time to enjoy his riverside chalet.

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<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/property/article-1187692/Actor-Ricky-Tomlinson-building-riverside-retreat-flat-pack-chalet-Estonia.html>