STACKING UP

Chimney, walls of Cummings home set in place

BY STEVE LANDWERE Staff Writer

EPISWICH — A buzz of ticked-off house. That's what you would have thought moved into Mat and Sarah Cummings' new home a couple of weeks ago if you had only your ears to inform you. Actually, the loud buzzing was a crew installing bluestone on the interior walls of the house. Those guys work fast and don't usually bother turning off their screw guns, the specialized electric drills they use to attach sheets of bluestone to the studs.

They just luck the trigger in the "set position and leave it there," even when they drop the guns into a pocket on their work belts when they need both hands free.

Conversation is near impossible, but there's still a buzz with each other and move quickly. To install bluestone panels on the ceiling and the upper half of the walls, one installer walks installer walks on a pair of aluminum stilts, negotiating the hazards on the floor with as much ease as you do in a snowshoe. Bluestone is more expensive than the average drywall but has a smooth surface that easily takes a coat of plaster and is easier to paint later.

All those screw guns have extension cords attached, and catch in a potential trip wire, but they're seemingly ignored.

Some phases of this project have grown astonishingly slow to the layman's eye. Even when carpenters or electricians had completed a hard day's work, it was hard to measure their progress. That's not the case when "rockers," the guys who hang sheetrock, roll in.

Before they started, you could stand in any corner of the house and see clear through to the opposite corner. Within hours of the first sheet of bluestone being hung, a closed takes shape here, a bathroom there.

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MEASURING PROGRESS

The Cumminsnes begin making their dream a reality. Here are the highlights so far.

- September 2005: Chimneys and fireplace completed. Interior walls covered and plastered.
- October 2005: Heating stoves and windows installed.
- April 2006: Spring installation completed.
- May 2005: Dining room window frames and doors.
- November 2004: Weather vanes installed, rough plumbing and wiring completed.
- April 2006: Framing stages and windows installed.
- October 2003: House on site, concrete foundation poured.
- November 2003: Floor joists and floor joists completed.
- April 2003: Through floor of new home.
- February 2003: Couple buys land with plans to build.
- September 2003: Mat and Sarah Cummings buy three-family house in Ipswich.
- June 2004: Second building permits from town of Ipswich and approval of licenses.
Masons Ron Dussault, left, and Stefan Chlypawka place an 18-by-24-inch flue on a ladder to move it up to the roof of Mat and Sarah Cummings' new house.

HOUSE: Walls and chimney stack up

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As soon as walls and ceilings are done, a veneer coat of plaster is spread over everything, turning the inside of the house a bright white.

In a few days, nearly every room in the house is defined, and only the living room with its barrel-vaulted ceiling awaits completion.

That's because Frank Mack and his team of masons are just finishing the fireplace and chimney and their scaffolding dominates the room. Mack is down to the finishing touches inside the house, using a brush dipped in dilute hydrochloric acid to wash down the bricks and the limestone mantel.

Outside, his crew prepares to top off the chimney. “Might as well do the worst part first,” mason Stefan Chlypawka says.

That would be setting the last two pieces of the rectangular ceramic flue in place, nearly 40 feet in the air.

There's some good-natured bantering about how heavy these tiles are as the guys pick one up to set it on the platform that will haul it up a ladder to the top of the scaffolding.

“Three hundred pounds,” Chlypawka says. No, he's told, 175. “Might as well be 300 after you've picked up a dozen of them,” he says.

Getting the load to the top of the ladder is actually easy. A gasoline-powered winch winds up the steel cable attached to the platform and hauls it skyward in seconds.

Getting it off the ladder and set in place is another matter and takes all four guys, but soon the back-breaker is in place.

“Anybody got a bottle of champagne?” Chlypawka asks with a grin.

“Looks good, doesn't it?” Mat Cummings says with a smile as he looks at the nearly completed chimney.

It does.