

A little heritage wonder in Woodanilling

From crumbling ruin to cosy sanctuary, the renovation of a stone cottage in Woodanilling has been a labour of love for Nigel Oakey and his family.

“The decision to take on the project, like many good things in life, was somewhat whimsical. The property was advertised in the newspaper back in September 2005 and I decided to take the family for a drive to see it,” Mr Oakey said.

“I guess it was a perfect time of year to fall in love with a property like this, as ruinous as it was. The fields were green and bursting with patches of yellow canola and the afternoon sun reflecting on the house made it look like a little piece of Tuscany.

“We bought it on the spot. Perhaps we were a little naïve, as I had no idea what it would take to fix the old lady up. After all, it was close to being what one might call a ruin.

“There were huge cracks in the building, there was no floor, the mortar on the stonework had been washed away and the white ants had been enjoying what was left of the old glassless window-frames.

“Sheep had obviously used the house as a shelter for many years, as I came to realise when digging up tonnes of manure from what is now the sub-floor!

“When we were on-site pondering what we had just got ourselves into, a local farmer drove up and told me that no-one had lived there for 60 years. He assumed we’d be knocking it down and putting up ‘something decent!’”

Despite any initial concerns, the Oakeys threw themselves into conservation works and soon began discovering the history of the little house, which is perched on the side of a hill overlooking the township.

“The house was built by a local builder ‘Buzz’ Adams around 1901 or 1902 for a chap by the name of Ernie

Pittelkowe. At the time, Woodanilling was home to over 1,000 people and Ernie was a figurehead in the local community,” Mr Oakey said.

“Woodanilling was a railway town and Ernie was one of the first superintendents of the Local Roads Board, the precursor to the concept of a local shire.

“Ernie was a prominent member of the local Freemasons lodge and ran the Woodanilling Hotel, now known as the Woody Tavern. He was also busy overseeing the local trotting track and administered the first motorised motorcycle mail-run in the Great Southern!

“Ernie’s wife Mary was a schoolteacher and together they lived in the cottage on the hill.”

The building itself is a classically simple cottage made of stone, mud-brick and a few clay-fired bricks, which were scarce at the time. The rooms are fairly large and evenly proportioned, with fireplaces in every room.

The first stage of the project was to save the building from collapse, so urgent conservation works included replacing the roof and windows, completely re-mortaring the stonework and bracing and pinning walls to prevent further movement.

Mr Oakey said the Heritage Council were able to provide him with advice on how to tackle the restoration works in a way that gave integrity and respect to the original structure.

“It was important to have an expert guiding the works, so I commissioned Ian Maitland to come up with an engineering plan,” said Mr Oakey.

“The team from the ‘Roof and Wall Doctor’ and a couple of guild-trained carpenters also played important roles in the transformation of the building.



The cottage during restoration works.



The cottage as it looks today.

“Restoration of the sash windows was a real challenge, so we enlisted the help of Simon Free, who has worked with sash windows in heritage-listed buildings in the UK for many years.

“Simon firstly played the role of archeologist, digging in the soil to find all the broken original piece of joinery and the lead weights from the sash windows, and then restored them all, complete with draught and weather seals.”

The conservation works to the stone cottage were assisted by the Heritage Loans Subsidy Scheme. This program is a partnership between the Heritage Council and the Western Australian Local Government Association. The scheme offers a subsidy, currently set at 4 per cent, on the interest rate on loans for conservation work.

“The Heritage Loan Subsidy Scheme allowed me to get onto the conservation works right away and allowed me to get the building weather-tight and ready for internal love and care with out fear of it collapsing,” Mr Oakey said.

“In fact, so good was the quality of all the solutions applied that the house proudly shook and rumbled its way through the recent earthquake in Katanning without damage!”

With so much work already behind them, Nigel and his family have great plans for the future of the cottage.

“Firstly we have to finish the internal works this summer. At least there’s now a flushing toilet and hot water, which encourages longer visits from the girls in my family!” he said.

“We’re looking forward to having cosy log fires this winter with it all completely finished.

“The aim is to keep it forever as the place where friends and family can connect, free from the hassles of modern-day life.”

While Nigel admits that there were hurdles and struggles in this project, he says he wouldn’t hesitate to recommend the experience to others.

“The joy of heritage restoration is seeing every challenge and then finding the people, tools, resources and time to overcome them,” Mr Oakey said.

“We have been less focused on the destination of completing the house but more the journey itself of seeing it transform.

“The joy that my wife Lucy and I have got from seeing our young kids enjoy the process is immeasurable. From carving out the new driveway to their painting doors and just generally being part of the process has made them feel as though they have achieved as much as we have as adults!

“We know that it will become a place that is not home, not work, not school but a simple place for simple pleasures such as conversation, drawing, reading and contemplation – all the things which seem to become an ever more scarce part of modern day life.

“Next winter we look forward to planting trees that hopefully our children’s grand-children will be climbing and picking fruit from. We’re looking at a veggie patch and also building a shed following the same stone construction that “Buzz” Adams followed to build the house all those years ago.

“The house restoration just gives a base for lots more journeys to come!”

