

# Saving Marlborough's historic buildings

The Marlborough Express | Wednesday, 18 April 2007

## QUAINT BUT NOT SO QUIET:

Riverlands Cob Cottage faces the future in the form of State Highway 1.

## Fate is fickle when it comes to old buildings, writes Trefor Moss.

The line between preservation and obliteration can be nail-bitingly thin, as the forces of nature and bad judgement conspire to erode, undermine and flatten our historic landmarks.

Official protection comes in the form of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, which includes 93 places in Marlborough on its register of heritage sites. However, getting places on the register is only half the battle, as Barbara Murray, secretary of the Marlborough Historical Society, explains.

"There's very little financial help except for Category One buildings like the homestead at Langley Dale," she says, "so we work very hard to get the public on side, to educate people to respect and care for these old buildings."

Identifying and safeguarding places of historical interest is a race against time. "There are a lot of (unregistered) buildings out there," Barbara believes. "A lot of buildings have already been lost in Marlborough with the advent of grapes - but that's progress for you, you can't stop it. We just want to preserve at least one of each type of building."

The Marlborough Historical Society is planning to distribute a questionnaire to its members in the hope of identifying some of those valuable buildings that remain unlisted. The aim will be to preserve our history for subsequent generations - history in the form of rare buildings like these, which look set to be part of Marlborough's future as well as its past.



WARWICK BLACKLER/The Marlborough Express

## St Mary's Church

Between the 90-foot Gothic spire, the distinctive red and pink paintwork and the location right in the middle of Blenheim, St Mary's Catholic Church has always been one of the area's most noticeable historic buildings. Familiarity, though, is not necessarily much of a guarantee.

"There was a serious debate about 14 years ago on whether to tear the whole place down," recalls caretaker Chris Fredericks. "It had a Historical Places Trust rating on it, but that was irrelevant to some people." With rickety floors, not enough room for the modern congregation, and high maintenance costs due to its wooden structure, St Mary's was in danger of being bulldozed in the name of progress.

From a historical point of view, it would have been a tragedy. Built in 1878 on the site of a previous church that dated from 13 years earlier, St Mary's is the oldest church in Blenheim, and still features all its original stained glass, its bell tower and timber. "There were even services held here long before there was a church," Chris explains, "the priest used to come over on horseback from Nelson."

Fortunately, it was decided to renovate rather than replace. The transepts were widened by three metres on each side, pews replaced with chairs, and a lobby area added on the front. But the essence of the original church remained.

Only one of the original buildings at St Mary's, the convent, is no longer in situ, having been moved to Rapaura Rd where it is now a boutique hotel. "It was a sign of the times,"

Chris explains. "It was big enough for 20 nuns, and they only had about three in the end, and it was a big, draughty old building. It was no longer feasible." Ultimately, he says, it was better to let the convent be moved than for it to be left empty and fall into disrepair. All the other buildings remain, including the Mercy Room, the small chapel which originally sat on the convent's second floor, although "we condensed the area they were in and consolidated them onto one side of Maxwell Rd".

With the benefit of hindsight, Chris is convinced that renovating was the right decision.

"Our forefathers really provided for us here," he says. "The pioneer families gave us a lot of what we have today."

But he is proud, too, that the modern congregation ultimately did its bit for posterity.

"Some people think the Catholic Church is wealthy," he says. "I don't know about Rome, but here it's the ordinary people in the pews who put their hands in their pockets."

### **Langley Dale**

The Langley Dale homestead tucked along the north bank of the Wairau past Renwick not only predates Marlborough - it was arguably the place where Marlborough was born.

Built in 1857 by William Adams, formerly a solicitor from Herefordshire who decided to emigrate here in 1850 when a new railway was driven across his land, Langley Dale played host to Governor Gore Browne as he and Mr Adams discussed Marlborough's separation from Nelson province. "They were paying large rates over here, and they would use it all to build bridges in Nelson and they would never get anything here," explains Anne Davis, William Adams' great-granddaughter, who has lived in Langley Dale for much of her life. When Marlborough became a province in its own right in 1859, William Adams became its first superintendent.

Langley Dale is precious because all of the original buildings are still intact, not just the main homestead. The dairy, for example, is still full of pails and churns which Anne recalls using to make butter during the war years. Next door is the storeroom which is crammed to the ceiling with wartime goods. "Of course in those days you used to keep everything," explains Anne, surveying the old tea chests, tins of corned beef and wine bottles from long-gone vintages.

A Maori fort also sits near the homestead, atop which William Adams and his wife Martha are buried.

What is most striking about Langley Dale, however - and what recently prompted the Historic Places Trust to spend \$67,500 on fixing the roof - is that it feels like the 1850s when you walk inside. The ceilings still have their original metal plates, the dining room its original wallpaper, the kitchen its fireplace. It's as if modernity never managed to get a foothold here, with shelves of antique books and pedal organs still providing the entertainment.

As the Adams extended the house over subsequent decades, it acquired a rabbit-warren feel. Of the 11 bedrooms, the most intriguing is perhaps the 'ghost room'. "We'd find cats in here," Anne explains, "but the door would be closed and we could never figure how they got in."

Among the many other treasures are an ancient Ericsson telephone, antique furniture, and a Royal Doulton toilet, of which Anne jokes, "I always hope Prince Charles might come and buy it from us, I think he collects them."

Between damp, woodworm and resident bees, the public money for Langley Dale has arrived in the nick of time. The repairs to the roof will quite literally stop the rot, and it is hoped that subsequent funding will enable renovations to the outside, which badly needs repainting, and later the interior. "There are lots of things we want to do, and they will be done," Anne says.

"It will be open to the public," she adds, "because wooden houses are so expensive and we need the help of the Historic Places Trust." That help should ensure that this historic gem endures the next 150 years as well.

### **Ugbrooke Country House**

William Clifford had grand plans when he came to the Awatere Valley in 1885. Venturing out from his family seat of Ugbrooke House in Devon, he not only intended to build a new Marlborough version of his old country manor but also to replicate the nearby village of Chudleigh as well. However, he only got as far as building part of the new Ugbrooke before he ran out of cash.

"Then Henry and Bertha Vavasour took the place over in 1903," explains Alex Stowasser, who assumed the management of Ugbrooke with her husband Peter last year. The Vavasours completed the house, giving it 28 rooms - which was not so excessive given their 12 children and small army of servants - and the family went on to occupy Ugbrooke for three generations before finally leaving in the 1990s. After that, the house began taking in guests.

"This was originally the homestead of a huge 20,000-acre estate," explains Alex. "Over the years it was all whittled away, sold off to the wineries; now it only covers 18 acres."

Unlike many of the area's other historic buildings, which are made of wood, Ugbrooke, with its triple brick walls, looks as good as new. The bricks were all fired in an onsite kiln which can still be seen nearby. "There's a whole forest in this place," Peter says of the inner walls which contain remu planking. "It would be horrible to try to rebuild it. They were using the same methods as they used in the old English stately homes; they were way ahead of their times in some ways."

Fortunately, much of the house remains in pristine condition. The conservatory, for example, still contains its original coloured glass and the mechanisms for the skylights. Ceilings retain their zinc plating, original flower murals decorate the walls, a low-slung Art Deco chandelier awaits the return of the card table underneath, and one of the bathrooms has an old shower with an enormous head like the rose from a giant's watering can. When the Stowassers assumed the management of Ugbrooke last year it was a dream come true, Alex explains. They plan to have the newly renovated Ugbrooke open for business in August with nine guest bedrooms. The original tennis court, which vanished decades ago, will be restored, there will be croquet on the lawn, and guests will also be able to take a dip in the pool. Most importantly, one of Marlborough's best preserved historic country homes will be back in mint condition.

### **Riverlands Cob Cottage**

As trucks and cars thunder past on state highway number one, the Riverlands Cob Cottage harks back to a time when life around Blenheim was altogether more peaceful.

Early pioneer Charles Redwood built the cottage in 1865, and this time capsule makes it easy to envisage what life there might have been like. The small, homely kitchen includes its original fireplace and a small metal tub in which they used to bathe the children. Behind is the dairy on the cool, south side of the cottage, with its large cream-skimming pan and a yellow swing churn from the US - then the cutting edge of technology. Even in the 1800s, the old water pump outside must have looked quaint in comparison.

Steve Austin, chief executive of the Marlborough Museum, explains that the Riverlands Cob Cottage is fairly typical of buildings of the period, but that this cottage's easy accessibility a stone's throw from the state highway has raised its profile. While similar cottages are still occupied, the Riverlands Cottage has been extensively restored and opened up to the public by the Marlborough Historical Society.

"Caring for old buildings is really challenging," Steve explains, and preserving the Riverlands Cottage has proven doubly complex. Cob cottages, built from a relatively fragile mixture of earth, sand and straw (or tussock grass in this case) in places where sturdier materials were scarce, are notoriously vulnerable to water damage and earthquakes; and the Riverlands Cottage has its own permanent earthquake to cope with in the form of the state highway. "Those vibrations contribute a lot to its deterioration," Steve says. In addition, cob cottages "require regular, specialized maintenance" even without these added vibrations, he says, explaining that the owners of cob homes would have to perform routine maintenance every summer.

Maintenance was a headache even in the cottage's early life, Steve reckons. "We believe that the Redwood family moved out because there was a damp problem," he says. After the family moved out, the cottage went on to house the Riverlands School, and one of the main rooms is now given over to a recreation of an old schoolhouse, complete with desks, blackboards and a ladder running up to the loft and its 14 bunk beds.

What's most amazing about the Riverlands Cob Cottage is that you would never know that its preservation was such a complicated and ongoing challenge - because if you stand in front and turn your back to the road, you can almost feel yourself walking in the pioneers footsteps.