

## savouring the past

When a dilapidated cottage with a riotously overgrown garden came up for sale in 2011, interior designer Bronwyn Thoms saw the chance to fulfil a dream.

Words **Kim Newth** Photos **Danielle Colvin**

**A**karoa's history as a French settlement lingers on in its old streets, such as Rue Balguerie, where heritage roses bloom in abundance by shady cottage verandas. Wood pigeons flap and crash in tall walnut trees.

English settlers shaped this area, too. Not far from the main street is the 1864 Anglican Church of St Peters. One of Akaroa's grand old homes, Blythcliffe (1857), is also tucked away down this road.

On family camping holidays in Akaroa over the years, interior designer Bronwyn Thoms often spent a leisurely hour or two on walks around the town, admiring its many pretty homes. One particular memory from about 20 years ago, of stopping to chat with an older woman working in her cottage garden on Rue Balguerie, has stuck with her.

"She talked about her shell path and how the house was really old and historic. It was a really interesting property."

In 2011, when Bronwyn's partner, Michael Goomes, came across an old Akaroa cottage for sale, she instantly recognised it as the same cottage from all those years ago.

"Without even seeing it, I knew I wanted to buy it immediately. We camped in Akaroa for years and I used to walk around and look at the old cottages, thinking 'that's what I would like one day'. I never thought it would become a reality."

Bronwyn now knows the woman she met that day was Jessie Mould, who bought the cottage and its surrounding land in 1960 and made it her home from 1967. Jessie was a local identity with a love of history and old roses. Appropriately enough, the cottage – Banksia Cottage, built in 1858 – is named after a rose that still vigorously scrambles along the front veranda, intertwined with sweet honeysuckle. The rose is named after Lady Banks, wife of the botanist Sir Joseph Banks (after whom

Banks Peninsula is named).

Jessie did not live in Banksia Cottage for the last 10 years of her life, so by the time it was put up for sale, it was virtually derelict and the garden completely overgrown.

"But, for me, it was perfect," says Bronwyn, who co-owns Cashmere's Plane Tree Antiques and Interior Design with Michael. "I could see it was in need of repair, but it was the most original house I had ever seen. Nothing had been butchered. There was no seventies plaster archway or anything like that. I panicked when I saw it for sale, thinking someone else would beat me to it. But when Michael saw it, he said, 'relax – you'd have to be certifiable to buy this!'"

Bronwyn went ahead and signed the purchase papers, under no illusions that serious work lay ahead. Jessie's old bedroom at the front of the cottage had a hole in the ceiling; as local lore has





it, Jessie awoke one morning to see a possum tail dangling through the hole. A possum or two, along with quite a few rats, were still in residence when Bronwyn took ownership.

Before she could even think about getting started on tidying up and restoration, Bronwyn had to consult heritage specialists about the consent process.

"I knew there would be limits to what I could do and that any changes would need consents."

Once she had drawn up plans and had these approved, builders were able to start work and the initial phase got under way in January 2013. The first jobs included having the floors relevelled and an old water cylinder and a 1960s coal range removed. A wall near the entranceway also had to go to open up the main living area. A thin partition wall between Jessie's old study and a dingy lounge – the oldest part of the house – was removed so the space could be converted into a master bedroom. A wooden plywood floor was installed over an uneven concrete floor in the dining area and a kitchen installed in the home's 1960s-era lean-to.

The past has not been forgotten. One of the downstairs walls was left in its

original duck egg blue-green, as was the old dining table. In fact, this colour has been replicated elsewhere. An original staircase – much steeper than the one used now – has also been preserved, with old treads now used as shelving. The original bathroom has been kept, along with its old bath and hand basin, although the floor, roof and walls have been replaced. A new log burner with slate surrounds has been installed, but an original mantelpiece has been retained.

"I have not changed much at all ... I did not want to spoil it."

The ceiling above the current staircase has been raised and a rope handrail and recess lighting added. Upstairs, two small rooms have been opened up to create a spacious gabled guest room, still with its original wardrobe.

"I think the first owners must have run out of money when they were building upstairs, because it was lined with all sorts of wood from different buildings."

Old wallpaper and newspapers still line the back of the bedroom door, one bearing the date 1869.

Bronwyn says many of the materials used to build this home, such as doors and possibly planks used as flooring in the master bedroom, would have come from

France. Rammed earth walls provided insulation in the bedroom; a section of this is visible through a framed display window in one of the walls. Another frame shows a fragment of the room's original wallpaper.

Bronwyn has also saved scraps of old wallpaper from the cottage and plans to donate a book of these heritage samples to the local museum.

One of the downstairs rooms has been left in near original condition and Bronwyn believes this was once used as a shoemaker's shop; in later years, the space was rented out to a dentist.

Banksia Cottage's first owner, Thomas Parsons, was a shoemaker from England and traded from the property. He and his wife, Maryanne, had six children. Their eldest daughter, Mary Elizabeth (Lizzie) lived on in the house until she was 99 years of age. After that, a family owned it for five years as a holiday house before it was sold to Jessie.

"The little shop room had a bed in it when I came and it leaked like a sieve," Bronwyn says. "The original floor had rotted out completely and another floor had been added on top. It was really grotty!"

The garden, too, was in a neglected state. Bronwyn has devoted many

weekends to clearing paths and opening up areas choked with growth. A substantial retaining wall had to be put in at the back of the house. There is still much to do. A rare yellow flowering buddleia is growing rampantly in the back garden, alongside pink fuchsias and tangled areas overgrown with weeds and creepers. Beautiful heritage roses grow in abundance.

Bronwyn hails from Southland originally and suspects her affinity for older homes comes from her grandmother, Dorothea McIlwain, who used to live in an old cottage with a rambling garden by the sea in Riverton. Bronwyn's father managed a Guthrie Bowron store. At 15, Bronwyn got an after-school job there selling paint and wallpaper. This was to set her future course.

"By 18, I was the manager of the wallpaper department at Smith and Smith in Lower Hutt. After I had children, I wanted to study and become qualified so I would be able to draw my own plans. I did a Bachelor of Design, majoring in interiors, at CPIT."

Having the degree has been a useful complement to Bronwyn's natural flair for being able to visualise a room and its design requirements.

"As a teenager at Guthrie Bowron, I used to go through a house plan and tell people how many rolls of wallpaper they would need for the house. I thought

everyone could do that!"

Starting Plane Tree with antiques specialist Michael in 2001 has proved a fruitful collaboration. Both share an interest in fine interiors. As well as stocking antiques, Plane Tree is an interior design specialist.

"I do everything from a one-and-a-half hour consultation for a colour scheme through to a whole house where the clients want everything done – wall coverings, paint, furniture, lamp shades, cushions and curtains."

Some Plane Tree favourites have found a home at Banksia Cottage. Bronwyn papered the upstairs guest room with hummingbird-patterned wallpaper from Thibaut, the United States's oldest wallpaper firm. The gorgeous white wisteria wallpaper in the main living area, from renowned British wallpaper firm Colefax and Fowler, is a design used at the Plane Tree shop for years.

"I was delighted in springtime to see white wisteria flowering along the veranda. It just felt so right."

Anaglypta wallpaper was used on the lounge ceiling to lend an antique feel – a vast improvement on what had been an ugly pinex ceiling. An antique china display cabinet was purchased from Plane Tree for the cottage.

There is a certain wry humour in some of the retro touches, such as the "Enchanted



### Bronwyn's design tips

**What are simple ways to refresh a room?** Pick flowers and lots of them! Paint is the cheapest and quickest way to transform a room. You can do it yourself in a weekend.

**An old chair: reupholster or throw out?** An old chair is often better quality and often has a nice style. It is something unique. A good piece of furniture can be reupholstered many times in a lifetime.

**Is it okay to mix contemporary and antique pieces?** Absolutely, because you do not want to be living in a museum, or to be in a home where everything is brand new and modern and will only date. Good design from all eras is preferable.

**When selecting wallpaper for a room, what factors should be considered?** That you love it. Of course, you also have to be sensible about colours and whether it will close the room in. If you have a dark room, it is better to use dark colours and make it cosy. If you want to lighten a room, start with the floor.





Forest" curtain fabric in the master bedroom, adorned with forest glades, stags and pheasants.

"I'm sure Jessie would have liked it," Bronwyn smiles.

Much of the furniture at Banksia Cottage was already there at the time Bronwyn bought it. For example, a chaise longue on the home's west-facing veranda was restored and fitted with a new mattress. Bronwyn still uses Jessie's old oven and cupboards in the kitchen. Existing dressers, bookcases and tables have been supplemented with various old treasures collected by Bronwyn over the years. There is a sense of a simpler way of life here, uncluttered by any unnecessary excess.

"I'm very aware of the women who lived here before me. It is really important to be respectful; I've tried to keep it looking really timeless. That is not to say it is like a museum – it is still very comfortable.

"I reused what I could. I think the builder thought I was quite mad when I said I wanted to reuse the old kitchen taps in the laundry. They were not even a pair – one of them is a bath tap – but I liked them and wanted to keep them."

While Michael has helped with the restoration, Banksia Cottage has very much been Bronwyn's labour of love. Over the past couple of years, her weekend routine has involved working at Plane Tree until 2pm on Saturday before driving over to work on the cottage, then driving back

on Monday morning in time to open the shop at 11am. Many hours alone went into hand sanding floors to remove borer holes, before using an oil to finish them.

"Since buying the cottage, I've also had several lovely trips to London to visit my daughter, Rebecca, and travelled with her buying things for the house."

The floor rug in the lounge was bought in Istanbul. Pink floral floor tiles for the kitchen were hauled back from London.

"Rebecca found these tiles – they are pretty outrageous; I've never seen anywhere else where I could have used these, but I knew they would be perfect here!"

Rebecca was back from Britain in time to spend Christmas at Banksia Cottage, where trestle tables were set up in the garden for Christmas dinner.

Now the hard work of renovation is finished, Bronwyn is keen to rent out the cottage as holiday accommodation.

"It is so lovely to share it. The first people stayed here in November and had such a nice time."

Looking back on the renovation, Bronwyn says the whole process has been very satisfying.

"I had always dreamed of doing up a really old house. I found one that had not been lived in for 10 years. It was so exciting, so perfect. I'm still finding things in the garden I did not know were there. It has been wonderful to save an old house like this and make it beautiful again." ♪

