

ITALIANATE

With the renovation complete 'The Towers' is restored as a local landmark.

The Towers of Newtown

Text by **Andrew Starr** Photography by **Steve Brown & Glen Duffus** (before shots)

Just off Sydney's King Street, stands one of Newtown's most stately Victorian houses.

The house, of Victorian Italianate design, was bought in 2001 in a derelict condition by Tectonic Developments who have undertaken an extensive restoration of the property. At the time that it was bought there was no heritage listing for the property by the Marrickville Council, the State Government or by the National Trust. However, it was a building of significance and one that was important to members of the local community. Many people loved the house and were concerned about the direction of any development at the site. Most of the problems regarding the restoration of the building sprang from the passions of the local community and misinformation that ran in the local press. Murray Wood the principal architect of

Tectonic Developments when asked if there were any amusing anecdotes from the restoration said ironically, "Most of them are painful".

Problems started immediately after the auction when the local paper ran an inaccurate story that the house was threatened with demolition. This was an option that hadn't been considered by the new owners. It was Murray's intention to renovate the house in a method that retained as much of the original fabric as possible. The local community initiated a campaign to save the house even though it was never threatened. They sprang into action. Meetings were held and letters were sent to the local council, newspapers and the State Government.



TOP LEFT: The verandah features a tessellated floor. Some missing tiles had to be replaced. The floor suffered like most of the house from weather damage. **MIDDLE:** The house was in a near derelict condition when it was sold to Tectonic Developments. The house had been poorly maintained for a number of years before it was left empty. It suffered from vandalism and weather damage. **TOP RIGHT:** The front entrance has been restored to its original condition. Some of the stained glass panels had to be replaced. They were copied from the surviving fabric. The house has been painted in colours appropriate to its period of construction.



TOP LEFT: The rear wing of the house has undergone extensive renovation. The balcony, with its cast iron balustrade and fringe, had to be reconstructed. A modest extension was built at the rear. **TOP RIGHT:** The rear service wing had lost its balcony. The rear service areas of homes built during the Victorian period often featured inferior construction to that at the front of the house, as this part of the house was occupied and used by servants. Deterioration to these areas of a Victorian houses are usually compounded by the short cuts taken by the original builders. **BOTTOM LEFT:** The interior of the house also suffered from weather damage due to its leaking roof. However, the stairs were still in good condition. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** The modern addition's scale means that it does not compete with the original fabric of the house.

At the local government level, questions were raised. How could such an important building be left off the register of local heritage items? At State Government level the case was used in debates about the inadequacies of the State Heritage Act. The local community asked for the building to be classified by the National Trust.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that the house was next to another block of land also purchased by Tectonic Developments where the building of a modern terrace house was proposed. Some members of the local council claimed that this land must be preserved as part of the curtilage of "The Towers". The land was held under a different deed and was not part of the two lots that the house was built on. The issue was used as political grandstanding by some councillors and caused the owners some problems when they went to auction the vacant block. The auction was disrupted by a Marrickville councillor, who distributed leaflets printed on council letterhead. The leaflet

contained inaccuracies and misleading statements but the auction had to be abandoned.

Despite the political infighting at the council, work on restoring the house began, with frequent consultation with the council's heritage advisors.

'The Towers' was built on the Holmwood Estate. 'Holmwood' was a colonial Georgian villa with extensive grounds. The estate was acquired in 1859 by the politician and trader James Dickson from William Fanning who had built the house 18 years before. 'Holmwood' is believed to have been designed by James Verge, one of the most famous of Sydney's architects. The estate was sold in the 1890s and subdivided into 213 lots. 'Holmwood' was demolished and 'The Towers' was built in the 1890s by Josiah Gentle a local businessman and owner of the Bedford Brick Works in St Peters, which was at that time one of the largest in the state. Mr. Gentle was the first in New South Wales to use dry pressed brick manufacturing, a process which both



TOP LEFT: The Lounge features marble fire places. The original floor has been retained. Rotten floorboards were substituted by boards from the kitchen area. **TOP RIGHT:** The stairs to the tower, after the renovation. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Before the renovation.

produced a more durable brick than sandstock bricks, and lent themselves to mass production. The site of the brick works is a part of Sydney Park, some chimney stacks remain as relics of its industrial past.

‘The Towers’ gets its name from a tower at the front of the house from which Mr. Gentle had a spectacular 180 degree view over the southern suburbs of Sydney, including the brick works, the source of his wealth.

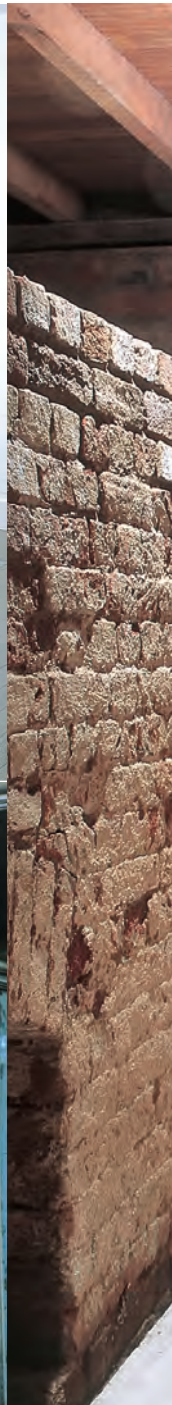
Mr. Gentle lived in the house for about forty years until he sold the house to a herbalist. The Cross family owned the property for the next seventy years until 1998 when the last member of the family was moved to a nursing home. The house had gradually become derelict as the aging members of the Cross family lacked the income and energy to maintain such a large house. It lay idle and unwanted until purchased by Tectonic Developments.

The house was in an extremely poor state and Murray Wood’s vision was to restore it to its former glory in a way that ensured

it would be used again as a house. Essential to this vision was the retention of as much of the original fabric as possible. Emphasis has been placed on the repair of existing fabric rather than replacement.

Suffering badly from water damage due to the leaking roof, many of the floorboards and joists had deteriorated beyond repair. The upper floor was in a particularly poor condition. Large areas of the cast iron balustrade were missing from the balconies and verandah. The floors of the balconies had been totally destroyed by rot. The paint on the exterior of the building was peeling away, revealing the cement render underneath. Many of the windows were smashed and there was weather damage to the frames. The paintwork and the wallpaper inside had deteriorated and had been darkened by age and dust. However, the basic bones of the house were good and some excellent details remained such as the fireplaces, cast iron work, and some stained glass.

A further complication to the heritage issues occurred after



TOP LEFT: The front door had to be renovated. As much of the front door as possible was retained. Can you spot which panel of stained glass was replaced? **TOP RIGHT:** The kitchen is modern and practical. The clean lines and smooth surface contrast sympathetically with the texture of the original brickwork. **BOTTOM LEFT:** A heater in the kitchen dining room has been retained as a decorative feature. **BOTTOM MIDDLE:** The new bathroom was built with emphasis on Victorian character. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Termite damage in the front door.

restoration work had begun. The foundations of 'Holmwood' the original house on the estate were discovered when work was being undertaken on the kitchen. The site gained archaeological significance and work had to be suspended while an investigation was carried out.

The initial work was the securing of the house and the repair of the roof. Floorboards were repaired wherever possible, at the rear of the house all had to be replaced but the few intact lengths were used as replacements to the damaged floorboards in the living and dining rooms.

After the initial work was undertaken, work could begin on the restoration of details. A great deal of attention has been given to the restoration of these features. Colormark Design were contracted as Colour Consultants. Paint scrapes informed the colour scheme of the exterior of the house. Interior paint scrapes were also undertaken and these inform some decisions of the interior colours. The colours of some rooms were extremely dark

and compromise was necessary to suit the needs of modern living. Small sections of the original paintwork are displayed behind glass in the hallway by the stairs. A back room was nicknamed the gelato room by the builders, as it was painted, pink, green and yellow. During the restoration process, Murray was approached by a woman who claimed to be a descendent of Mr. Gentle. She gave much unsolicited advice, particularly about the colour scheme.

The fireplaces were in good condition and only needed to be cleaned. They have marble mantelpieces, and the original iron grates and fittings and the tiles have beautiful glazes. There were more problems with the windows and doors, which needed extensive repairs, as they had been damaged by termites and damp. Some sections needed replacement. An example is the front door that had to have one stile replaced. The front door also featured stained glass panels, one of which was missing. A replacement panel was made by the Coffs Harbour Leadlight Centre, and the original work and the copy are flawlessly matched.



TOP LEFT, TOP RIGHT & BOTTOM RIGHT: A cellar was discovered under the floor of the kitchen. This cellar features the foundations of Holmwood, the original home built on the site. The cellar is partly lit by a glass section in the kitchen dining room floor. The room has a number of functions such as a site for a wine cellar and venue for children's parties among them. **MIDDLE RIGHT:** The fireplace in the lounge room prior to renovation.

Other panels of plain stained glass were purchased from Paul Storm Coloured Glass. Interesting decorative features that were retained are some transparencies, which were placed on clear glass panels in the living dining room. They are not part of the original house and were probably applied in the 1910s. They feature birds and plants and have a distinct charm. Their retention shows a broader approach to heritage issues, and are evidence that the house was modified over time. Wherever possible the original fittings have been retained. The original light switches have been rewired. The surviving light fittings have also been retained. Those that were damaged beyond repair have been replaced with Victorian style fittings from Chippendale Restorations.

There were some large sections of missing iron lacework. Replacement pieces were acquired from a local second hand building supplier. These pieces appear to have been salvaged from the site when it was in a derelict state. Copies of sections of the balustrades and fringes were made by the Terrace House Factory to

complete the balcony and verandah. There were also missing chimney pots. Their replacements were made by Fred Mashman.

The bathroom upstairs had to be completely remodelled. It features a claw footed cast iron tub and tap ware from The Restoration Centre.

One of the more unusual features of the restoration was the creation of a cellar, which features the foundations of 'Holmwood'. The cellar is illuminated by windows in the floor of the kitchen dining area and accessed by a spiral staircase. It is both a functional and decorative feature.

The restoration of 'The Towers' was the best possible outcome for the building. It restored the features of the house to their former glory while adapting the house for modern living. The trials of Tectonic Development in its restoration shows how some of the more emotive issues of heritage conservation can be overcome with a sympathetic and flexible approach. It is once again a local landmark.