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ISSUE 23

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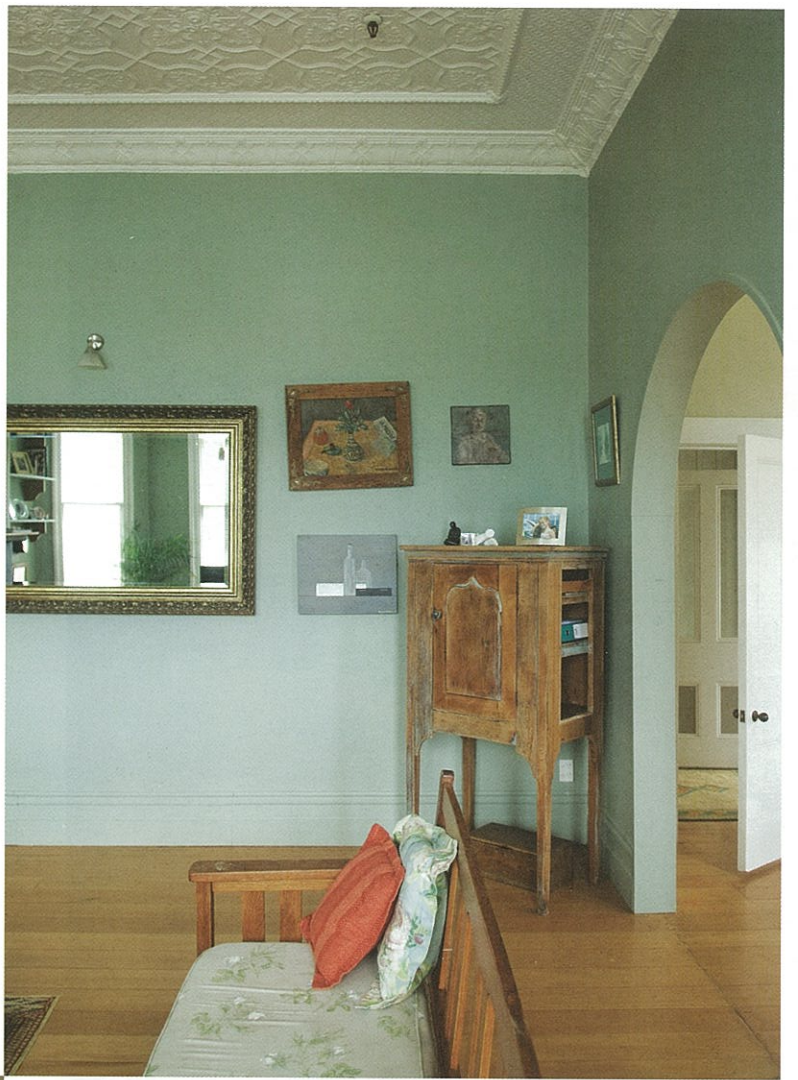
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HOME FROM THE SEA

DRIFTWOOD IS AN APT NAME FOR A HOUSE BELONGING TO A COUPLE WHOSE LOVE FOR THE SEA AND QUEST FOR ADVENTURE HAVE KEPT THEM ON THE MOVE FOR 23 YEARS

WORDS LYN BARNES PHOTOGRAPHS MATTHEW WILLIAMS





MOST PEOPLE, when you arrive on their doorstep at 9am for an interview, are flustered because they have only just seen the kids out the door and done their hair. Not Vanessa Owen – she’s been up for hours. Eighteen-month-old son Reef is playing happily in the lounge and she has a paintbrush in her hand as she opens the door. Although Vanessa and husband Richard have almost finished renovating their 22nd home, ideas are constantly buzzing around in her head and, if she thinks something would look better with a lick of paint, it’s done in a flash.

For 23 years it’s been all go for this tanned, tall, blonde couple who emigrated from England. They play hard and work hard, combining their love of sailing and diving with raising four children to achieve their ultimate Kiwi dream. It all began when Vanessa was a 17-year-old studying for her A-levels in Hereford, England, and Richard was a graduate dentist with a year’s experience. Vanessa was a friend of Richard’s brother, Chris, who was to be collected from a party by his older brother. As Vanessa says, when she saw Richard walk across the dance floor: “It was the clichéd love at first sight for us. Richard took me home instead of his brother!”

Richard was her first boyfriend and things moved very quickly. As a trade-off for marrying young and forfeiting Vanessa’s planned career as an interior designer, the couple planned to travel for two years so she could notch up some life experiences before having a family. However, the two years stretched to seven. They sailed the Atlantic three times in as many years. Richard captained yachts while Vanessa cooked for owners and crew; they worked in bars and even ran a small hotel in France. Life was blissful for the pair, living on their little red yacht, diving every day for food and collecting rainwater for drinking.

Dione (now 15) was born while they were in the Caribbean but when Vanessa was seven and a half months pregnant with Poppy (now 14), they decided another baby on a small boat would be too much. So the couple immigrated to New Zealand, having been sold the dream lifestyle by Kiwis they’d met on their travels. After an even longer journey of a different kind, they can now sit outside their house and appreciate every centimetre of their 360° views of harbour, farmland, vineyard and olive grove. “This is what we came to New Zealand for. We are living the country life on the coast with a vegetable garden and chickens running around. It just took a long time to get here.” Richard explains that back then it was easier to



Still surrounded by sea but with strong roots to the land now, the Owens have given Driftwood their trademark shabby-chic-on-a-budget look. An example is the mirror above the fireplace in the sitting-room (page 39), edged with timber and scrim salvaged from the walls, framed in skirting board and painted the same green as the room. OPPOSITE: Dione (left) and Poppy.



immigrate than it was to get a work permit – “and if we didn’t like it, we could always leave”.

“We arrived 15 years ago with enthusiasm and about \$30,000,” says Vanessa. “We had a lot of catching up to do, having lived day-to-day for years, owning nothing other than a small yacht. So we came here to empire-build.” And empire-build they did. They settled in Wellsford where Richard bought a dental surgery and they renovated houses. Vanessa describes the look back then as “stylized country”: calico curtains, stencilling, whitewashed floors and gingham. They lived in every house along the way, moving each time they sold which was within anything from two weeks to, later, five years. As they did up each house, they honed their skills and tastes. “We’d move in, lock, stock and barrel; we only owned one property at a time. We’d paint, make curtains – it was very cosmetic,” says Vanessa. During their two years in Wellsford they did up six houses, sometimes staying up till 2am laying carpet or adding the final touches, then putting the houses straight back on the market. Any profits were considered untouchable. Vanessa says the renovations were her way of working out her frustrations at not having studied design and she admits she’s learnt loads along the way. “What didn’t work in one place we’d try again differently in another.”

After two years in Wellsford, however, they were disillusioned. “We weren’t living the Kiwi dream,” says Richard. “Wellsford was, well, very rural, and we missed the sea and there was no one around our age who’d travelled.” So they packed up and moved to France. But once again they ran into a Kiwi who suggested that maybe they needed to try another town before they ditched New Zealand completely. ▶





Vanessa and Richard at the doorway to Crayfish Cottage. Both have taken a step back to reflect on what's important in their lives. Rather than submitting to the stresses of running two dental surgeries, Richard can now renovate to his heart's content during the day. Although Driftwood is almost finished, they plan to extend the back of the house and put in a more substantial kitchen.

He recommended Kerikeri, assuring them they would love it. As the French winter loomed, the temptation of a Kiwi summer beckoned. And sure enough, Vanessa recalls, when they arrived in the small Northland town with its lush green shelter-belts they felt as if they were coming home. "Kerikeri was also more receptive to our look [of house renovations] and we were back by the sea."

The couple moved 15 times more as they continued to empire-build. They'd spend around \$5000 on materials and invest vast numbers of hours of solid labour in each house. For three years Richard commuted for more than an hour each day to Kaitiā where he had bought a dental practice, before buying a surgery in Kerikeri as well. Daughter Milli-anna, who is now nine, was born at this time. When Richard and Vanessa bought their 21st home on a hill overlooking the Bay of Islands, they decided to call it a day. Enough was enough! They even gave the grand old villa a name, Morne Fendue, after a plantation house they'd worked in in the West Indies. For a couple who knew nothing about gardening after so many years spent at sea, their landscaping was so impressive they were asked to open the grounds to the public for the highly regarded Kerikeri Garden Safari. Their make-over also attracted interiors magazines wanting to feature the property. But the call from *NZ House & Garden* prompted them to put the house up for sale the next day. "I didn't want to be in a perfect house so soon. I was still young ... it panicked me," says Vanessa.

It was after they'd sold Morne Fendue and were "mucking around on a boat" in the nearby Te Puna Inlet that they spotted 26 hectares of land, complete with four beaches, for sale. Ideally, they would have liked an old house to have been included but most of the old villas were further inland. Much to their bankers' horror, they decided to relocate one of these to the site, 20 minutes' drive north of Kerikeri. They toyed with the idea of a stylish modern home but not for long: "We didn't want something polished; we wanted the country life, not something smart." So an old people's home from Dargaville was given a new lease of life on a promontory on the Purerua Peninsula. Two years later it looks as if it's been there forever.

As usual, the industrious couple planted frantically so that when the house arrived on site a year later the garden was virtually established. Poplars along the driveway are now five metres tall, banks of native flaxes form a solid display and star jasmine and gardenias flourish on terraces. There's a sizeable vegetable garden in raised beds built by Richard and a citrus garden, inspired by Vanessa's mother's home in Greece. But while the house was still barely habitable, everything came to a halt. The Owens found that on top of the demands of a young family, with a fourth child on the way and two full-time dental practices, the endless renovating was beginning to wear them down. It was taking its toll on Richard particularly who was at the top of his profession, specializing in difficult cosmetic cases, then renovating every night into the small hours.





CRAYFISH COTTAGE

Crayfish Cottage in the next bay to Driftwood was inspired by the traditional English beach hut. In time, the Owens hope to build three in a row.

The cottage was a labour of love that cost Richard and Vanessa virtually nothing. Proud of being magpies, they found a use for the little bits and pieces they'd kept from their various renovations. In many ways it's a hotch-potch of all the leftover paint, trim, roofing iron and guttering that has finally found a home.

For a year while they waited for their house to be relocated from Dargaville, the family spent most weekends living on site, planting the land and sleeping in a tent alongside the cottage. Life was simple – cooking over an open fire or on gas and washing the dishes in the sea. They loved it and still do. Keen scuba divers, Richard

and Vanessa and Richard's brother Chris (who emigrated with his family from the UK two years ago) set out early on Vanessa's 40th birthday in October. Their haul was four large crays and loads of scallops and mussels which Vanessa served to close friends and family who gathered at the cottage to celebrate the day.

"We eat like this all the time; the only thing I did differently for my birthday was to throw a white cloth on the table," she says. "This is how we live; we have a big family now and loads of friends and we love to eat here."

What's more, there's no mess in the house at the end of the evening and they still wash the dishes in the sea.

They like to celebrate in style by the beach. "Cheers" was the first word Reef learnt, not "Mum" or "Dad", so it seems as if the next generation of Owens is learning fast.





“SOME DAYS WE’D HAVE BEEN TO A GORGEOUS FARMERS’ MARKET BUT I’D JUST WANT TO BE AT HOME PICKING MY OWN VEGES”





Sibling rivalry is alive and well between Richard and Chris, as evidenced by their crayfish tallies. For her birthday party, Vanessa served crayfish with macadamia butter from the Bay of Islands Farmers' Market in Kerikeri and fresh herbs. Everything was cooked in the cottage's pizza oven and the dishes washed in the sea, as usual; Milli with her much-loved chicken, Beatrice.



They realized that something had to give so they reassessed their lives. By selling most of their land and ditching the businesses, they could afford to keep their hard-earned lifestyle. Both dental practices sold within a month. It wasn't long, however, before Richard found himself missing mental stimulation and, having never owned a share in his life, taught himself how to trade on the stock market online. Now he provides for the family by night (when the US stock market is open) and renovates during the day. "I hear the alarm go off at 2am, then Rich will come back to bed at 4am with a cup of tea and say, 'I'm done for the day,'" laughs Vanessa. They paid off their mortgage and bought a 55ft yacht in Italy. In April last year they set sail with the family, initially planning to be away for two years. But it was not easy home-schooling three children, having a baby learning to walk and managing such a big vessel alone. And, surprisingly, they grew homesick. "Some days we'd have been to a gorgeous farmers' market but I'd just want to be at home picking my own veges," says Vanessa. Later this year they may go back for another six months – the yacht is moored in Greece.

Nowadays they live more simply. They disposed of their credit cards and don't use hire purchase. "It's a decision we made when we sold the businesses," says Vanessa. "I am so much happier too. Now what we have is us; it's much more real. In the past, with the income from the dental surgeries, we just kept buying more new toys to justify all the hard work," says Richard. Rather than spending loads of money renovating Driftwood, as the children have named this house, they've given it a lightweight make-over, allowing for renting it out while they are travelling. "One day we will call in an architect. But for now, with four children, it's perfect. We wanted a place where the kids could ride skateboards inside," says Vanessa. The original kauri flooring has been sanded and sealed with water-based polyurethane to stop it from going yellow and the pressed-tin ceilings originally imported from Scotland and the old wallpapers have been given a lick of paint.

Innovative ideas throughout the house have cost very little and follow Vanessa's evolving shabby-chic look. Stencilled on to the kauri fireplace in the dining-room is a saying that was scratched into the window of Vanessa's childhood home. It has been copied into every home the couple has renovated. It reads: "May every endeavour in the cause of liberty be crowned with success." Vanessa says it's since become their family motto and only recently she learned the words were originally written by William Wilberforce in reference to the slave trade.

Somehow one gets the feeling that this will not be the last house to be given an Owen make-over and certainly not the last entrepreneurial project to be taken on by these two. But for now, this is their first summer in 15 years of not being slaves to a house and they're looking forward to enjoying it. *Driftwood offers accommodation and fine dining on the beach. See www.driftwoodnz.com*