

HEARTS & MINDS

Conserving a rambling old house
takes dedication, and this 100-year-old
Epsom arts and crafts beauty has been
fortunate enough to inspire it

WORDS JAN CHILWELL / PHOTOGRAPHS JANE USSHER

THIS PAGE In the dining room of Claire Gavin's Epsom family home, a French oak sideboard and zebra wood table and chairs, both art deco, were auction finds.

OPPOSITE "People think the wall in here is painted," says Claire, "but it's actually wallpaper" (a Designers Guild ombré design called Saraille); the fireplace surrounds are from "mixed eras," says Claire, but the mirror has been here as long as the house has, "passed down through the owners; I often wonder about all the things and people it has seen and reflected over the years".





CLAIRE GAVIN NEVER set out to find and burnish an architectural gem. House hunting in Auckland in 2010, she was more interested in finding a comfortable family home in Epsom Girls Grammar zone, with similar-sized bedrooms, so her three girls wouldn't fight to avoid some "tiny little cupboard" of a fourth bedroom. And the house that eventually ticked these boxes was on a street she'd always loved, lined with graceful old houses and puriri trees.

Nor did the house seem much in need of burnishing. Designed in 1909 by English-trained architect Benjamin Charles Chilwell (the writer's grandfather) its arts and crafts lines were graciously intact, despite some unsympathetic alterations over the years. The family moved in with ideas of "just tidying up a bit" – step 1, a swimming pool, step 2, modernising the kitchen and bathrooms, getting rid of the awful upstairs carpet...

But lovely old houses have a way of laying claim to the hearts and minds of their occupants. Claire, her then partner Glen and their daughters, Sophie, now 18, Isla, 16, and Rosie, 12, found they had inherited several items of interest from previous occupants. Among them were exterior photographs of the house from its earliest days (showing the original semicircular arched entry porch and two levels of open verandahs that were now boxed in) and a 1991 letter from Guthrie Stewart, the first owner's son, born in 1921 and an occupant off and on until 1950. >



THIS PAGE The kitchen, designed by Helen Wilcock and Anita Maes, was Highly Commended in our 2015 Interior of the Year awards; Claire's favourite feature is the splashback, made with 27 different patterns in a tile range from European Ceramics: "The girls and Glen and I spent several evenings laying all the tiles out on the dining table to choose the patterns and layout we liked."

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left) Claire and Dougal; note the original architect's heart/circle/diamond cut-out motif on the island corner posts. The pantry/laundry, one Claire's favourite spaces, is in an original lean-to off the kitchen, which was widened by an extra metre stolen from the kitchen. Sophie and Dougal in a favourite corner of the kitchen. The alterations have made for an easy, open flow between the kitchen and living room, with its panelled glass bifold doors.





DESIGN NOTE

Interior designer Helen Wilcock chose light fittings to match the ample proportions of the living room and its coved ceiling. These large-scale pendant light shades were custom-made in linen with metal strips. "They're enormous," says Claire, "but it's a big room."

THIS PAGE (clockwise from right) A skylight above the upstairs landing illuminates architectural detailing designed to match original features. Isla's window seat looks out over the front garden. Each of the girls was allowed to choose wallpaper for their room, but Isla's pixelated butterflies were deemed a bit too busy, and successfully confined to these batted panels. The girls' bathroom features a custom-mixed Dulux shade; Claire loves the bath's leafy view of the back garden.

OPPOSITE In the living room, light shades custom-made by Eunice Taylor hang from a coved ceiling designed by the architects, Salmond Reed, to match the era of the house and photographs of the original architect's interiors; the walls are in a soft grey Porter's Paints distemper.

Guthrie provided an entertaining rundown of what was where in his youth, as best as he could remember it, which was surprisingly well for a man looking back over so many decades. Apparently he spent his childhood sleeping on the upstairs verandah off his parents' bedroom. "It was then open at the end," he wrote, "but glazed well past the area of my bed; I can just remember canvas blinds." No doubt breezy sleeping quarters were considered good for developing lungs in those days.

By the time Claire and her family arrived, both verandahs were long since boxed in, taking with them some of the charm of the exterior; the stairs had been "modernised", panelling and ceilings removed, rooms added and removed, and an ungainly conservatory built out from the living room, obstructing views and access from the kitchen to the side garden.

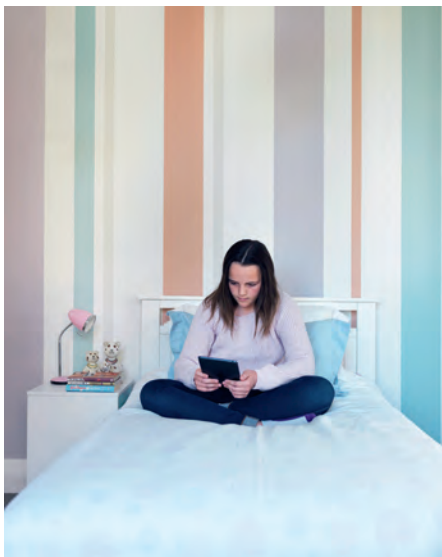
Intrigued by what they'd learned of the house's history Claire and Glen approached Auckland University's School of Architecture for more information and gathered pictures of other interiors from the same era by BC Chilwell (who designed many houses and buildings in Auckland between 1909 and 1950). The family had decided that, after all, bigger changes would be necessary and approached heritage architecture firm Salmond Reed for advice.

"We wanted to make it back into what was originally designed," says Claire, "though not to the point that we live like it's 1909, of course. >





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THIS PAGE A custom-made rug by Sf Design sets off the entryway, with the reinstated original porch beyond; the panelling, balustrade, newel post and finial were all copied from Chilwell originals or designed by Salmond Reed to be sympathetic to the house and era. **OPPOSITE** (clockwise from top left) In the master bedroom, the Her Majesty wallpaper by Élitis “has a texture like silk,” says Claire; the green grey ombré curtains are Black Edition Fresco Jasper by Jessica Zoob. In Sophie’s room, the Élitis Kandy wallpaper is called Brit Pop. Two storeys of verandahs boxed in by previous owners were opened up in the renovation; this lower balcony shows BC Chilwell’s heart/circle/diamond cut-out motif on the central balusters. Rosie’s “wallpaper” is actually stripes hand-painted by a specialist in shades of Rosie’s favourite colours.



“We feel like honoured custodians of a great building with all this history. We wanted to do it justice.” Architect Rosalie Stanley helmed the project for Salmond Reed, with the expert help of builders KD Construction.

“We’ve been so lucky with the people we have worked with,” says Claire. “Rosalie really listened to what we wanted to achieve and knew how to combine that with the original architecture. You could have faith that she would do what was right for the house and the era. And the builder, Mark Duff, was amazing. He was so interested in the story of the building and he would save any useful fragments, like bits of old wallpaper, or any architectural details he uncovered that would help with the reconstruction.”

During the course of the nine-month renovation (during which the family lived in the self-contained loft space and garage next to the house) the original porch was reinstated, the verandahs opened up, the entryway and stairs re-panelled, a skylight installed on the second floor to bring more light to the lobby and landing and the offending conservatory removed.

Among the architectural details added or reinstated was a beautiful coved ceiling in the living room (based on other Chilwell interiors) and board-and-batten ceilings copied from the house’s two remaining original ceilings. The kitchen, pantry, bathrooms and bedrooms also got their “tidy-up”.

Perhaps the most striking restored detail is the recurring cut-out motif of a heart, circle and diamond. It was found on original balusters and now, faithfully copied, can be seen on the reinstated stair, landing and verandah balustrades and even as a cut-out on the island in the smart new kitchen.

Helen Wilcock of Design.spec worked with Claire and Glen on the interior scheme. “It’s not really me,” protests Claire, “hiring an interior decorator and having custom paint colours mixed for me, but Helen’s advice has been so useful; she saved us so much time and found things we would never have thought to look for. We ended up using her far more than we expected.” Helen helped to devise a palette of white with various greys and greens, punctuated by knockout feature wallpapers. >



THIS PAGE A magnificent oak sets off the front view of the house with a specimen michelia closer to the entry; some of the 1909 house's most distinctive original features were copied from contemporary photographs and reinstated, such as the distinctive semicircular entry porch and the open verandahs to the right of the house.

Q&A

THE MOST DIFFICULT THING ABOUT RENOVATING A HERITAGE HOME IS: Making it work for you without removing too many historical features.

AND THE MOST REWARDING: The privilege of living in a place that was designed so beautifully for the people who lived here so long ago.

THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE I RECEIVED WAS: It's worth paying for an architect, good builders and an interior designer.

MY FAVOURITE PART OF THE HOUSE IS: My bedroom – lovely views, trees, birdsong and sunshine.

THE BRAVEST THING I DID AROUND THE HOUSE WAS: The kitchen splashback.

ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS ABOUT FURNISHING A PERIOD HOME IS: You can choose furnishings from a range of ages.

LIVING IN THIS HOUSE HAS MADE ME REALISE: You have a responsibility to try to preserve things that will have ongoing value.

Claire Gavin

As in any other house, there are favourite corners: the sunny sitting area at the western end of the kitchen “where the kids and I gravitate” and the sectional couch in the “library” (really the TV room, says Claire), where the family hang out of an evening with Dougal, a retriever/poodle/border collie cross. But for Claire the most successful spaces in her new-old house are the small spaces: the curved porch, the pantry cum laundry (“Love it!”), and the downstairs loo carved by the architect out of a bit of living room and what Guthrie described as a music alcove.

Perhaps we can add to that list the upstairs balcony – now a serenely beautiful open space looking out over the garden, framed by snowy white balusters. It adds a little something extra to know that it was once the scene of a small boy's dreams. ■

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