

# LEARMONTH & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc



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326 High Street. Learmonth. Victoria

## NEWSLETTER Winter 2014

**Presentation for the  
Learmonth and District Historical Society  
11<sup>th</sup> July 2014  
Annual General meeting  
Held at the Learmonth bowling club**

Good Evening! Firstly, I would like to thank Lois, David, Desley and all members of the Learmonth & District Historical Society for inviting me to speak this evening.

My name is Ailsa Brackley du Bois. I'm here to present our background story on why and how we set about restoring Keith Hucker's old 1880s bakery as well as the adjacent 1860s blacksmith stables and the remnants of the old cart-wheel making business. I'll also talk about what we preserved exactly.

My husband and I genuinely respect and treasure built expressions of history. A large part of the reason we chose Ballarat as the place to bring up our daughter, and relocated here from Melbourne a decade ago, was because we love the heritage aspects of the area.

That is basically why we have invested so much time, energy, money and emotion into turning what many might regard as 'an ugly bunch of old sheds' into a family home. We know that many people thought we were crazy to attempt to do such a thing, and on reflection, I would not entirely disagree with this assessment!

It has been a very long and difficult journey for us. However, we have learnt a lot in the process. And the fact is that we were willing participants. Whenever people start their spiel with "Oh, so you would have had to deal with heritage... Hmmm..." I immediately say "Yes, but we share those values, so it's OK." That generally puts a lid on the conversation. We were recently honoured to be the category winners of the 2014 Ballarat Heritage Awards, for 'adaptive reuse of a heritage place'. This meant a lot to us, as while we believe strongly in preservation of historic buildings wherever possible, we are also great advocates for adaptive reuse, in situations where new uses really do need to be found for old spaces. We see adaptive reuse as the middle ground – an approach that enables retention of significant places, while allowing considerable creativity in how to bring buildings into the present and for the future and ensure a longer lifespan for them.

When we first saw the 'For Sale' sign in February 2011, the place had been left derelict since Keith closed his business in April 1990. I had been looking out for a heritage home on a country acre, for about five years, and so by this stage, I'd basically given up on ever finding anything suitable. So, when I saw the sign, the truth is that I approached it as simply a block of land, albeit one with an amazing view. There was something about the site though that really grabbed me. Laurie and Jemima felt the same.



Laurie, Ailsa & Jemima.

It was only once we'd purchased the property that we began to discover how precious the memories of this site really were to so many people across this region. With this growing awareness, our perspective on 'the ugly old sheds' changed quite rapidly.

Before we really knew what was happening we found ourselves viewing the place through rose colored glasses –a romantic haze took hold of us.

It's true that we had renovated three other heritage type properties in the past, in a very hands-on sort of way, but none of them were in such a desperate state as this one. And none of them involved anywhere near as much work as this. We were daunted by the idea, but as we are also genuine dreamers, we couldn't help but imagine how amazing it could be, one day, if given some love.

For me personally, it's been a life-long dream to escape to the country some time in my forties and create a characterful home for my family.

As a kid, I grew up in a sand-stone faced cream brick home that my Grandfather built for us in Adelaide's western suburbs, and I cherished it. I never met him because he basically died of an exhaustion related heart attack a few years after finishing the job, in the mid 1960s. I'm sincerely hoping this doesn't happen to my husband, Laurie!

It had taken my Grandfather, Eric, seven years, working nights and weekends, on top of his day job as a builder's foreman, and brickie's labourer, building the John Martins department store in Rundle Mall. My Grandma was a full-time nurse, and they also had a big glass house and a

great big brush house out the back, where they grew gladiola's and various flowers to sell to markets to make money to help fund the build. So anyway, this idea that you can put all that physical and emotional effort into something special and unique to house your family, and descendants, obviously made a real impression on me. I used to pore over Grandpa's old architectural magazines as a kid, and I've been drawing building designs ever since I was about eight or nine. I have hundreds of these plans – it's a weird hobby of mine.

So, as I grew older, I watched with great interest as my Uncle Brian converted a church into a honeymooners bed'n'breakfast in Riverton in the Clare Valley. Soon after that my Uncle Don began meticulously restoring the rather grand Mintaro Manse in the Clare Valley, and he still runs it today as a successful b'n'b. Even my older cousin, Heather, converted a Victorian bandstand into a two-story home for her family, where they still live today, in the heart of Hahndorf, in the Adelaide Hills.

So you see I developed this idea that normal people can do these ambitiously creative kind of things, if they really want to. Both my parents grew up in council trust homes, so none of us had any money behind us, but we all worked hard. So, I took hold of this idea that we could also do these amazing type of things, so long as we worked out a way to do most of the work ourselves.

Then I married Laurie who just happened to be an extremely handy, self-taught carpenter and had spent decades repressing a secret desire to be a builder. He's also worked many years in maintenance and in tool shops, and still does, so he has a huge amount of useful knowledge and practical skills. It also helps that he's a bit of a dreamer like me!

So that's the part about why we did it, basically. I suppose I should also add that I've really watched far too many episodes of 'Grand Designs' and 'Escape to the Country' and taken that all far too seriously, obviously!

Now for the part about how we did it, and that's a bit of a saga. Initially we thought we could afford a building designer, and a builder to supervise the whole job. Ha! How wrong we were... We learnt the hard way that every building industry person that eye-balled the place simply saw dollar signs for themselves, and seemed to assume we were rolling in money.

We also found that no one understood our basic vision for the place, despite my hand-drawn sketches and incredibly earnest and detailed floor

-plan drawings. The only person that seemed to understand what we were hoping to do was the Heritage Architectural Officer for the City of Ballarat, Brian Benson, and he was so helpful and so inspiring that really, industry and affiliated trades people we've had the most trouble with. However, when we've found some good people, and we have found them, they have shone.

Where possible we have used local heritage specialists such as Paul Britt, a heritage chimney maker, who also teaches that skill-set at SMB, and



**Laurie with a helper**

Paul Wilson, a Smythesdale restumper who specializes in older buildings, and has a personal connection to this immediate district. We also employed one of Victoria's strongest heritage engineers, Ken Macleod, for initial advice on the existing structure.

The level of difficulty, complexity and stress involved in sensitively modifying the Bakery has been quite significant, as we found it very hard to secure builders and trades people that really understood what we were trying to do, let alone why it was important.

This is really why we ended up having to do it as owner-builders, in terms of overall building design and building labour management. And we believe the process of working on the site has, in several cases, proven to be an educating experience for building professionals, and has opened some people's eyes to heritage sensitive possibilities.

It took us two full years to get to the building permit stage. That's because I ended up having to do all the detailed drawings myself, and the project planning, in every detail. And I had to learn a huge amount of things about all sorts of aspects of building that I previously knew nothing about. Elevations and really technical stuff that was all new to me.

In February 2013 we finally got our building permit, and we started work immediately. So, though we never intended to, we embarked on this huge project as owner-builders – We didn't have any other option, by this stage, as we had a lot less money to throw at it than we'd originally hoped and ultimately couldn't find anyone to do it for us anyway.

Laurie was out there every day, with just one friend to help him, a bit; more in terms of company than anything substantial. **Continued page 8.**

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING  
11th JULY 2014  
HELD AT THE LEARMONTH BOWLING CLUB**

The guest speaker was, Ailsa Brackley - Dubois, who spoke about the reason on why she and her husband Laurie, bought and renovated the old dilapidated "Hucker's Bakery," and converted it in to the now delightful home that they live in.



Left—Ailsa Brackley—Dubois  
Guest speaker

Right—David Draffin who present the society with some records from Winderemere, with President, Desley Beechey



Left—Display board with photos of  
the renovated bakery.

Right—Desley Beechey with Reg Kinnersly who presented the society with some memorabilia from the days when he was a councillor and Shire President.



## THE GUESTS



Laurie did all the structural stuff personally including preservation decisions with the existing frame wherever possible. This close range engagement with materials was really important, because the unacquainted eye would generally see many features as useless or rotten, whereas in fact we saw many of these elements as important to preserve.

So, once that careful deconstructing part was done, clearing the real decay and debris away, the building was stripped back to bare bones, and Laurie did the rest of the work all on his own. It was filthy work.

He worked full-time on-site for 15 months, and is still working on the finishing touches most days now. We obviously got professionals in to do the key things – like stumping, electrics, plumbing and roofing.

So anyway, what are the heritage aspects involved in our journey?

Well, from our perspective, the property is an excellent example of the evolution of humble colonial commercial enterprise, and community life, within a rural setting. The building fabric was appropriate for its past needs, but completely redundant and unfit for contemporary commercial use. When the property was placed up for sale, the general consensus was that it would have to be demolished as it was in such a shocking state of disrepair, the roof cladding was hanging off or missing, and the whole place was rotting, damaged by fire and water and infested with large vermin and intense insect and bird life. We know that. We've witnessed it and experienced it.

Despite this 22 year period of decay the site retained significant cultural and built value.

So what have we actually done with it?

**External features we have retained:**

- The precise physicality of the structure from streetscape view
- Exact footprint and elevation in every aspect.
- The distressed corrugated galvanized iron cladding on Blacksmith's building.
- All existing wall cavities have been retained in their exact dimensions,





and custom made windows and doors have been installed in each.

- Entry verandas has been inset to allow for the visible history of when this structure was used to shelter a delivery cart.
- We have retained the very distressed ‘Open 7 days a week’ sign across the front entry. We will preserve it further with clear lacquer in due course, to protect it from the elements.



**LEFT - Laurie with his daughter, Jemima in their newly renovated lounge room.**  
**BOTTOM LEFT - Paul Britt, June 2013 standing next to the reinstated fireplace.**

**Internal features we have reinstated:**

- Retained the original framing
- Exposed rafters in the Stable
- Exposed original weatherboard along the entire length of the former stables – which was once the exterior of that building.
- Roof shingles on front road side of first bakery building
- 1860s brick Chimney – Employed heritage brickie, Paul Britt, to do it right.
- We reinstated the brick fire retardant wall that used to sit behind the baker’s oven.
- Grain store Baltic pine panelling in it’s entirety
- Bakery tongue’n’groove wooden walls
- Two attic hatch openings on SE side

- The old stable has been retained as one enormous, open plan room.
- All volcanic boulders found holding up the house have been reused for landscaping
- We've resurrected the large late 1800s farm gate at the front, to be permanently attached to the large concrete fence post at the front.
- Internally we've also used pre-loved doors that we've found at demo yards around Ballarat and/or within the original Bakery.

**Things that we've added to the site that we think are complementary to the history include the following: the site**

- All windows and doors are hardwood, as per the traditional standard.
- We've added a row of simple, traditional picket fencing across the front, in a heritage approved colour.
- We've fenced the side and rear with simple post and rail, as suited to a rural environment.
- We've retained the 'through view' on the right from the highway to the lake, as we know this is one of the few main windows onto the lake from the roadside in all of Learmonth.
- We've tucked our new addition to the original building almost out of sight at the back. It is barely visible from the street front.
- We've set our out-buildings back so they do not dominate.
- All three new outbuildings (garage, double carport and out-building at the back of the block) have been built with a (now non-standard) 27 degree pitch to ensure harmony with the pitch of the original buildings.

In terms of landscaping we have reused many materials from the site for display at the front, such as the enormous volcanic boulders.

We have retained everything we realistically could, and far more than most people would have dared to. Our actions have had minimal impact on the most significant heritage fabric of the place.

A case in point is our retention of the door cavity to what was the Bakery shop front (on the right). We have turned this into a door sized (fixed glass) window. This was the entry point to the Bakery, so we have retained that as it was, in tribute to the community's recollections.

We believe we have been very considerate and creative in the way we have approached the site. We have treated everything very gently and

with great respect. We do feel it was a real honour for us to win the adaptive reuse category award for this year's Heritage Awards.

And at the end of the day, the whole experience has influenced me in even more ways than I could ever have imagined three and a half years ago, because... this coming September I'm actually starting study for my PhD on the topic, because I love it so much. I'm enrolling at Federation University's Centre for Regional Innovation and Competitiveness, otherwise known as CRIC.

My research topic will be 'Cultural Transformation and Built Heritage Regeneration' and my starting point will be looking closely at the UNESCO HUL (Historic Urban Landscape) pilot program in the City of Ballarat. I'll then move on to look at issues around adaptive reuse in relation to city planning, place-making and tourism aspirations.

So anyway, we like to think that we have made a tangible contribution to Learmonth, by treating this humble old colonial property with utmost respect, and ensuring that it can live on for future generations to look at and learn from.

We've also made what for us was a major investment, on all levels, and we've done the very best THAT we could. It means a lot to us. And I just hope that the local community 'get it' and think it's OK.

So, that's more than enough from me, I'm sure. Thanks for listening!



What a tremendous job you have done to restore what we will all fondly refer to as "Hucker's Bakery."

People can still drive past this building and walk back down memory land.

**WELL DONE**

LEARMONTH & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

**Meetings:** Every third Tuesday of the month. 8pm

**Where:** The Old Shire Hall  
High Street, Learmonth.

**Time:** 8 pm

**2014—15 Dates**

**21st October 2014**

**18th November 2014. Ladies please bring a plate.  
No meeting in December or January**

**17th February 2015**

**17th March 2015**

**21st April 2015**

**19th May 2015**

**16th June 2015**

**To be advised — AGM Learmonth Bowling Club  
18th August 2015  
15th September 2015**

**The society is now open on the 4th  
Sunday of every month.  
Or by appointment,  
phone the secretary below.**

**Membership**

Single \$15.00 — Family \$20.00

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS FOR 2011\12**

**President:** Desley Beechey. Ph 5343 2318

**Vice President:** Ruth Nelson. Ph 0447 088 131

**Secretary:** Lois Keating. Ph 5338 4361

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