

welcome to our world

# *Pushing the* **BOUNDARIES**



A NEW PLYMOUTH COUPLE  
WITH A PENCHANT FOR  
RESTORATION BALANCES  
LIFE BETWEEN A BEACH-  
SIDE COMMUNITY AND A  
HERITAGE CITY BUILDING



WORDS JANE WARWICK PHOTOGRAPHS JANE DOVE JUNEAU



Shelley Carrington



Paul Carrington



A wide corridor runs the length of the house with tables and bureaux displaying a mix of small artworks, bowls, vases, boxes and books. The Ashby Folville sign (the original property in Leicestershire is recorded in the Domesday Book) has followed the Carringtons to most of their houses. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* tucked under the coat rack is a 1911 edition.

WHEN AN ELDERLY PASSER-BY pointed to the terracotta internal tiling of New Plymouth's former Public Trust building and told Shelley Carrington that of course she would be getting rid of all those old tiles and doors, Shelley knew she had got it right. Those old tiles were actually newly installed so Shelley was assured that her renovation of this circa 1920 property was true to its bones. But she shouldn't have been surprised. The building, now called Ashby Folville, was not the first – and will very probably not be the last – in a series of renovations undertaken by Shelley and her husband Paul.

In the 1840s Frederic Carrington, chief surveyor of Taranaki province, was paid to push boundaries. By 2012 his descendant Paul Carrington has found that, in fact, it pays to push boundaries which he has done with these renovations, culminating in the conversion of the Public Trust building. Frederic was an avid collector of specimens and curiosities and, say the history books, impressed Queen Victoria's consort Prince Albert with his collection of New Zealand memorabilia. Perhaps that explains, should any explanation be needed, Paul and Shelley's collection of contemporary New Zealand art and furniture, their extraordinary selection of books on housing and design and other whimsical and beautiful objets d'art.

Then there was Frederic's daughter, Jane. She was invited to plant the first trees in what was to become Pukekura Park, New Plymouth's pride and joy. Paul is inordinately fond of trees. And then there was... but no, enough of that. Suffice to say that Paul's very real sense of place is no doubt also his strength, which shows in the restoration and preservation of some fine old Taranaki buildings.

It's interesting that he should be so enamoured with buildings as there was a time when they were nothing more than four walls that leaned claustrophobically in on him, in grim cahoots with the corporate ties that were waiting to choke him. He originally studied law but fled to the great outdoors, landscaping and then share-milking for a time. ▶



The Carringtons' support of New Zealand art has resulted in a collection that includes most of the country's best-known names. From left: Illingworth, Hotere, Thompson (through doorway), Harrison (bust on mantel), Woollaston, McCahon (on stand on mantel), Brown, Smither, Henderson, Illingworth, Robertson, Maddox (obscured), Ngan (sculpture on chest).

IT IS ONE OF THE BEST CHRISTMAS PRESENTS  
THEY'VE EVER GIVEN THEMSELVES





Artwork in kitchen, Smither. In sitting-room, Frizzell, Brown, small canvases by Robinson, Mutch. By balcony door, Gimblett, Thompson, Henderson. On far right-hand pillar, Hotere, Peebles.  
BELOW: Elderly griffin Gus and English bulldog Winston indicate it's time they were let in from the back balcony.



QUOTES FROM SHELLEY

"People don't understand why we put ourselves through the stress of renovations. But they don't have to – it's our life, not theirs. And stress is relative to each individual. You don't know how much you can handle until you stretch yourself and then you find your level of comfort.  
"The hardest thing about a renovation is the last four weeks when you can see it finished but can't get to it yet. You can see all the furniture and placement inside your head but can't yet follow it through."

QUOTES FROM PAUL

"Monopoly relates to many aspects of life and renovating strategies can be learned from this popular board game. Everyone wants to buy Park Lane and Mayfair but they are bounded by very ordinary properties. This is the clue – buy the cheap properties that others have to pay you to move through to get to the expensive ones. That way you can't help but win.  
"Auctions are great places to buy furniture and works of art. Many people think such places are only for the rich but they couldn't be more wrong."

Paul met Shelley, married her in 1981 and subsequently found himself father to Tim (28), Anne (27) and Jackson (21), their recruitment, architect and builder children who between them combine the intrinsically Carrington abilities to design, build and humanly furnish. For them, Paul was more than prepared to exchange his gumboots for a Windsor knot.

Shelley trained as a primary-school teacher in Auckland so had already found a way to combine the indoors with the outdoors: a mix of sedately strolling the length of the blackboard and then chasing the little minxes around the playground. Teaching meant she needed to explore and nurture her creative side to feed the expectations of some of the world's most demanding – albeit short – critics. And when she met Paul she was in New Plymouth at a school beside the sea so, all in all, most of her needs were being met, at least to such an extent that there was precious little room for anything she might have felt was missing from her life.

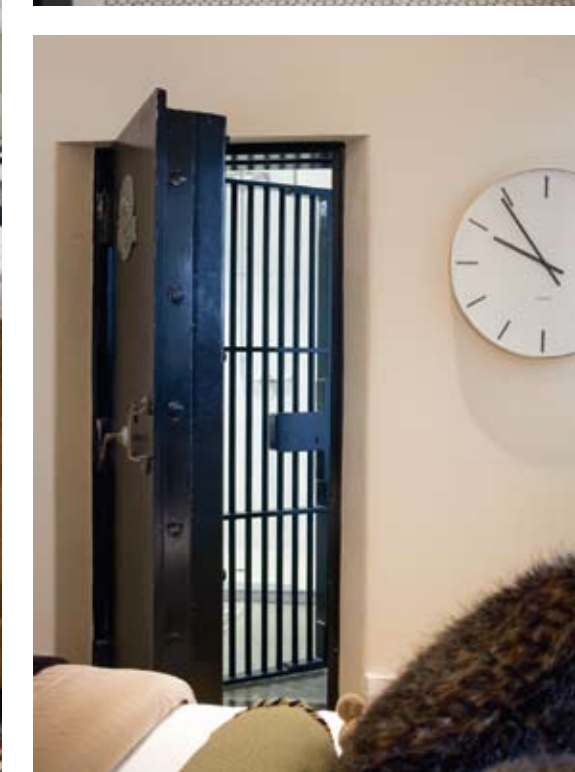
The Carringtons' journey to the corner across from New Plymouth's Govett-Brewster Art Gallery began with a find in Sequoia Grove on the other side of town. This was something that started as a means to move up the property ladder and ended as a passion and a personal delight. They renovated Sequoia Grove and moved on, to Tikorangi, Oakura, Ratanui and Wai-iti, driven by that love of old buildings and the excitement of their potential. For now they have settled in the solid, dependable building on the corner of King and Queen Streets. A previous owner had stripped the

inside, the current owner could see nothing but hard work but Paul and Shelley could see nothing but potential. The renovations, like all the best and most miraculous incubations, took just nine months, beginning in March 2008 and finishing on Christmas Eve. It is one of the best Christmas presents they've ever given themselves.

There are those, muses Paul, who believe renovators steal in and take the prize but there's always something out there that has been on the market for a long time. What renovators like the Carringtons do is see something in a particular property that no one else has yet observed. And so many are missed – churches, homesteads, cottages, baches. There have been many buildings that have slipped past and when later they have seen what they had failed to spot, says Shelley, they have thought, "Man! What we could have done with that..."

But what they have done with the properties that didn't pass by is extraordinary. One such is Wai-iti. Wai-iti is the second thread of this story, the place where the Carringtons holed up while the once very public building in town was being converted into something very private. Sometimes in television programmes a path unrolls under children's feet and as it unfurls a whole world springs up around it. This, in a sense, is Wai-iti: an ordinary-looking camping ground along an ordinary-looking country road that opens up, not in a riotous, fantasmagorical way but with quiet delight that is nevertheless as potent as the children's encounter. ▶





THIS PAGE: Shelley intends to paint the whole building with the verdigris effect of the back balcony; a Ralph Hotere is glimpsed through the banisters. OPPOSITE: Among the building's original features that have been preserved are the strongroom door, the now-pristine urinals and the tiling in the upstairs bathroom.



The low-lying cottages at Wai-iti blend with the bush and look back across the bay to New Plymouth.



The site begins with a camping ground laid out in neat rows of cabins made from old shipping containers. Perfect, of course, for a site overlooking a wild, west-coast beach piled high with flotsam and jetsam. The containers have small decks, ranchsliders, skylights and windows and reflect both the Heath Robinson abilities of which this country is so proud and the essence of the true Kiwi bach – a clean and dry spot to sleep after a hard day's beaching. There is a communal lounge, shop/café, theatre, barbecue area and a six-hole golf course wrestled by Paul out of a previously swampy field.

If Paul has a greater passion than his renovations, it would be to have a house surrounded by his own golf course, of his own design. He probably wouldn't even have to play it – he would simply stand there smiling, breathing it all in. Behind that is a gate, a simple one-pole barrier that for a lucky few really is a portal to another world. Here is the Wai-iti that Paul and Shelley planned: a quiet, contemplative retreat where even rabbits are encouraged to stay.

They began by repairing and renovating some existing baches and built 11 more, all clad in a quiet grey ply that matches the colour of the cliffs that hem in the bay from either end. The aim was to sell licences on the dwellings, offering chances of beach-house occupancy without the sometimes crippling overheads that seaside properties incur these days. They built a toe wall where the land slid onto the beach, planting flax and grasses that thrive on a coastal site. This project was hugely successful, says Shelley, with the sand returning to the beach in sometimes astonishing amounts.

Then they opened Wai-iti up to buyers. Paul sat up on the rise overlooking the project and watched a thousand people a day visit over three open days. He would never, he thought, have to work again. Nobody bought. For six months, nobody bought. The Carringtons sold their Ratanui property just outside town and shifted into Wai-iti themselves, into Lemon Tree Cottage, the bach they had kept for personal use. It was no hardship, living at Wai-iti. The cottage has views off a deck that looks right out across the bite to New Plymouth, practically invisible during the day but a string of pretty lights at night. They were all alone up on the cliff, keeping

vigil with a solitary but friendly light from an offshore rig that kept watch with them.

They linked a small bach next door to the larger cottage with a wide deck and the kids had their own space. They sat in the Jacuzzi at night under the prerequisite canopy of stars and thought – no, knew – that they had found the space where they were meant to be. The sea swished onto the beach below, crickets and the odd cicada which forgot to go home sang lustily and little blue penguins snuffled in the nesting boxes built for them around the property by the local school. The empty dwellings around them might look at them a little reproachfully but at night their needy faces were hidden in the dark.

And then, of course, they sold. It took just one buyer to step up, one person to turn up for work on Mondays looking rested and smug, and the project was a success. More baches were built, such as those in what Shelley refers to as the cul-de-sac. These three-bedroomed dwellings, away from the smaller, more adult-orientated baches, look out over a communal lawn where children can play while their parents watch from the surrounding decks. There are currently 38 baches and later more will be built even further up the hill, where access will be only by foot from a communal car park above.

Although technology is not disallowed it is not encouraged – retreat is the operative word, says Shelley. Wai-iti was and remains a retreat for her and Paul, who admit to still being country people at heart and say they couldn't stay in town if they didn't have their coastal bolt hole. Shelley does retreat even further afield at times, to her little A-frame at Oakune, but that's another story.

Like the place in town, the walls of Lemon Tree Cottage are laden with contemporary New Zealand art. On the back wall, just down there on the right – very nearly behind the sofa, in fact – is a small, almost insignificant work that says volumes about the Carringtons. Inscribed on a deep red background and leaning against the outline of a small sailing vessel are the words *It Will Always Be This Way*. Those six small words seem very solid and solid, in the sense of strong, is an apt Carrington epitaph. 