



# Rural Rootz: *Sustainably Self Built*

■ WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY SANDRA J. HOWE

**“A**S YOU CLIMB THE HILL AND ROUND THE BEND, the long lane takes you deep into the woods. There, sheltered by tall trees, stands ‘the last homely house,’” writes Dee Ashman poetically when asked to describe her house. “It sits humbly on a little rise, blending into its forest setting. As part of the landscape, it has evolved to meet our needs. What began as a workshop with living quarters has become a unique home.” ▶





The house at Rural Rootz Nature Reserve has been handcrafted with love out of salvaged materials.



Like J.R.R. Tolkien's "last homely house" in his work *The Hobbit*, this one offers a hidden refuge and a warm welcome. Dee and Tom Ashman have handcrafted their beautiful dwelling with loving care and creativity.

In 1975, Dee and Tom fell in love with and purchased 100 acres of bush land near Warton. At the time, it was

trees and rocks with a few trails. No lane, no buildings, no services. "We brought in a dowsler to search for water," Tom recalls, "and we chose the building site accordingly. We're on a high point of land but we got potable water at 68 ft." They began with a woodworking shop on the main level and accommodations above, keeping their ecological

footprint small. The Ashmans value thrift, self-sufficiency, and living lightly on the land.

Forty years later, their home has changed and evolved to reflect new priorities and circumstances but their values remain consistent. Their home is entirely self built, using reclaimed materials wherever possible. Much of the lumber for construction was salvaged

from old buildings. Tom describes the source of various timbers and sidings with a pioneer's pride. The windows, too, were mainly second-hand.

► The south wall of windows makes the house seem bigger, lets in warmth and offers wonderful opportunities for bird watching.

▼ Hardwood trees let in light during winter and their leaves shade the house in summer.











▲ The neat-as-a-pin kitchen is actually used for home cooking. The cupboards originally were part of a display at Wiar-ton's Home Hardware Building Centre.



▲ Dee Ashman at the moveable desk unit/room divider.

► Tom and Dee Ashman in the laundry room near the household mechanical systems that provide on-demand domestic hot water and back-up heat through in-floor heating.





▲ A brass rubbing of The Bishop of Ely, given to the Ashmans in 1967 by friends, holds a place of honour housed in a special church-window-like cabinet lovingly built by Tom.

Both Dee and Tom have developed carpentry and masonry skills, have an eye for beauty and functionality, and think about sustainable design.

“We had a dry compost toilet system for 36 years,” Dee explains. “It worked great! When we began to travel more, we switched to flush toilets because dry compost needs regular use.”

### **Southern Light**

Other changes to the original structure include extending the south wall of windows and moving the workshop to an outbuilding. The light is what strikes one first on entering the house.

“Optically, the place feels so much bigger than it is because of the full wall of windows,” says Tom. “When the Wiarthon Sash and Door went out of business, I picked

up all this glass for cheap. I knew it would be useful for future possibilities. Now it is!”

Because so much of their building was done by hand and small scale, they were able to keep the forest close. The hardwoods let in plenty of light during the winter while the leaves provide summer shade and protection. In the living and dining areas, it really feels like you are standing in a forest.

While the window wall provides light and beauty, it also adds to home heating efficiency. Sunlight heats the indoor air through the day. Heavy blinds roll down electrically to trap the heat overnight. Also, a lovely wall built of quarry-salvaged local stone acts as a heat sink, collecting sun heat daily and releasing it slowly to provide warmth overnight. This kind of ingenuity is evident



throughout the Ashmans' home and furnishing design.

"We have learned to change, adapt, evolve, rather than move." Dee says with a smile. "Versatility is essential!"

### Creativity

Dee started a career in teaching, became one of Wiarnton's first woman carpenters, designed and installed kitchens, and now works as an artist, gardener, and healer. Tom's expertise is equally varied: scientist, carpenter, stone mason,

designer, Summerfolk staff, artist, and general handyman.

"We like to express our creativity," notes Tom. "We have learned to live with this house, not just in it."

The upstairs living area is open concept with high ceilings and wonderful acoustics.

The Ashmans have hosted everything from house concerts to weddings to yoga classes to essential oils trainings. Most of the furniture is mobile and multi-functional. A great example is the desk unit which

acts as room divider, single desk, double desk, or can be pushed back out of the way entirely. The small and large dining tables are also interchangeable for intimate lunches or group dinners. No matter the function, the light, trees, and wildlife close by add to the event's charm.

The kitchen is a cozy, working space in the northwest corner of the upper level. This location maximizes early winter morning light. Specially designed windows and mirrors bring in additional light to

make the room warm, bright, and cheery. Delicious fragrances of home-cooked food tend to waft from this corner of the house. The cupboards were part of a display kitchen at the Wiarnton Home Hardware Building Centre but found a new life with the Ashmans. Dee did the layout, and they worked together to complete installation.

The lower level, originally the workshop, now houses the master bedroom and bath, and a beautiful healing and meditation room. Mirrors used in the hallway add light and spaciousness. The artist's touch is everywhere in colour and details. The engineer's hand is also apparent in fixture designs such as the large diameter bathtub plumbing to fill the huge tub quickly.

"We live a conserver lifestyle but use technology to our best advantage," Tom explains. "It allows us to live this wonderful life!"

Gratitude shines through in conversations with the Ashmans. They are clearly happy with their home, their land, and their lives. Spirituality also shines through, and Tom credits "The Bishop" for watching over them like a guardian angel. This rubbing of an ancient brass was given to them as a gift in 1967, and finally found a place of honour when Tom built a special window for it. Art and sculpture reflecting First Nations' spiritual traditions are also evident in home and gardens.

"We want to live gentle on the land, and to share what we have learned," both Dee and Tom reflect. Their home, and surrounding property, Rural Rootz Nature Reserve, are indeed a hidden and welcoming refuge in beautiful Escarpment country. **NEV**

*Sandra J. Howe's last piece for Niagara Escarpment Views was "Birds on the Bruce," Autumn 2016.*



▲ Built-in storage offers neatness as well as display space.



▲ The woodstove helps to heat the house.



▲ Next to the main house is the Tree House or Summer Kitchen which is used seasonally for guest accommodations, workshop space, and dinner parties.

# Georgetown's Legendary McGibbon Hotel: A Hollywood Favourite!



Celebrants gather in front of a festooned Hotel McGibbon. COURTESY OF ESQUESING HISTORICAL SOCIETY

There are many hidden gems in and around downtown Georgetown, but nothing beats the legendary McGibbon Hotel. Providing lodging and libation for over 160 years, the McGibbon has been host to some of Hollywood's most

famous A-list celebrities, including Richard Burton, Michael Douglas, Orson Welles and Jim Henson, creator of *The Muppets*.

When word got out that glamour would soon return to the old hotel with the

help of a new luxury condo development, people started to share their memories about the hotel, and as past owner of the McGibbon, Nick Markou sure has some good ones to tell.

His fondest memory was during the filming of *Follow That Bird*, a full-length movie with Jim Henson filmed inside the hotel in 1985, almost 30 years ago. The plot follows the Sesame Street gang on an exciting quest to find Big Bird after he was sent to live across the country. Nick remembers Henson getting bored on set one day and stepping onto the curb outside of the McGibbon to entertain lucky local youngsters.

Two years earlier in 1983, Orson Welles filmed the movie *Hot Money* in this same hotel. Playing the drunken Sheriff Paisley, this film was a little different than the Muppets' adventures a couple years earlier, to say the least.

Welles investigates a

robbery in his small, upstate New York town, but locals would immediately recognize it as downtown Georgetown. The McGibbon façade is featured in numerous parade scenes and car chases, with police cars barreling past the hotel and screeching to a stop at police headquarters, better known as Georgetown's old post office building on Mill Street. Bar scenes, as well as the infamous basement safe bust, were filmed in the McGibbon itself.

In 1888, the original hotel was destroyed by a fire and replaced by the present brick structure of The McGibbon Hotel. While most businesses from that time have gone, this landmark hotel continues to dominate Main Street Georgetown, and with news of the new redevelopment, we're sure there will be another 160 years of amazing stories to come.

— Kate McGowan

## Respect the Beauty of The Bruce

Visitors to the Bruce Peninsula will see this green slogan posted throughout the area. Keeping the Bruce Clean & Green reminds us that the beauty of our peninsula should be respected by all who visit or live here so that it will remain healthy and friendly for all future generations.

Started as a grassroots response to the large visitor influx to the area, Keep the Bruce Clean & Green volunteers promote ecological citizenship around the peninsula. The need to support the natural environment to keep it beautiful has the people of the peninsula banding together. Look for folks wearing the white t-shirts with the slogan on it and stop to chat with them. They will happily point out places for proper disposal of trash along with directions to areas of interest.

In preparation for your trip to the Bruce it might be helpful to keep in mind that we all can help to keep the environment healthy. Plan to take along



refillable liquid containers for drinking water; there are a number of water filling stations around the various villages. Pack your picnics with reusable containers to decrease the amount of waste that ends up in landfill sites. Always ensure that you have eco-friendly disposable items and that they are placed in the appropriate container for waste and recycle.

Remember that we share our space with many other animals that forage for food in our waste areas so closing the trash containers is essential. We encourage you to plan your visit well and remember that we should "take only pictures and leave only footprints" so that not only you but all future generations will also be

able to enjoy the beauty of "The Bruce."

As you visit the National Parks on the Bruce pick up a green bag and you can support the "clean & green" spirit. Litter is the number one violation to our environment. Please use the bag and dispose of your litter appropriately in larger trash and recycle bins. In the village of Tobermory, many of the most visited areas are in residential areas. On long weekends throughout the summer you may find that there are "tomato cage garbage bins" along private property for those water bottles and pop tins that need to be disposed of on long walks. Everyone helps.

With the opportunity to visit the National Parks here on the Peninsula our hope is that you will take time to marvel at how beautiful and fragile our environment is. Throughout your travels please remember to "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Respect."

— Article and image by Keep the Bruce Clean & Green