

Particulars

Location
Surrey

Age
1898

Building
Grade II listed
water tower

Rooms
Entrance hall,
living room, office,
kitchen/dining
room, 2
bedrooms with en
suite bathrooms,
roof terrace,
garden, plus
garage building
with flat above,
built in the style
of the tower

Special features
Octagonal-
shaped rooms
with ceilings at
least 15ft high; 62
windows; original
cast-iron spiral
staircase leading
from the living
room to the roof
terrace; the base
of the old water
tank has been
restored as the
kitchen ceiling

Moved in
1991

Purchase price
£121,000

Restoration costs
£100,000



Tall order

When Elspeth Beard bought a derelict water tower, she never imagined that it would take six years of hard work to turn it into a home

Elspeth Beard thinks she must have been mad to undertake her six-year project to convert a Victorian water tower. 'But I don't regret it,' she says. 'An architect friend originally told me about it and when I saw it, I knew straightaway that I wanted it. I'd been looking for a while for somewhere that hadn't been designed as a house. I wanted something that gave me a lot of scope – a large, empty space that I could put my mark on. This was ideal because it was a void from the ground-floor up.'

Just two months later, she became the owner of a derelict water tower with no planning permission or listed building consent. Huge cracks down two sides of the brickwork were letting in water; the roof leaked like the proverbial sieve and the original cast iron windows on the exposed sides had rusted and been replaced with makeshift timber ones. The inside was even worse. 'It was disgusting,' grimaces Elspeth. 'I got a whole skipload of bird-droppings out of the place.'

Planning permission was granted after a year, an appeal and some compromises due to fire regulations, one of which resulted in the kitchen being built above the bedrooms. This means that the tower is arranged with the bedrooms on the first two floors and the kitchen and living room on the fourth and



1 Elspeth in her office; everything in the tower was specially made because of the sheer scale of the building. The doors, for instance, are more than 10ft high

2 The fourth floor kitchen is simple and stylish; the green slate worktop had to be commissioned to fit Elspeth's templates and cost £2,000



The 130ft high red brick water tower stands on a hill surrounded by beautiful countryside. From the roof terrace the 360° views are breathtaking

1 Tom's room has a mezzanine bathroom. The steel work was done by a contractor, but Elspeth laid the maple floors herself – with a little help from some friends

2 & 3 Elspeth built the curved stone steps that are a feature of the entrance hall, and also laid the wooden treads of the 116 stairs from the ground to the fifth floors

fifth. But Elspeth insists that this is the way it should be. 'The view from the living room would have been wasted in a bedroom.'

The only restriction posed by the listed-building status was that Elspeth couldn't alter the external appearance, so the brickwork was repaired, the roof made watertight and replacement windows constructed. 'After two years, I had a watertight brick shell, but I hadn't done anything to the inside. I wanted everything that was obviously new in the building to look modern, so you could see clearly what was original.'

One job she couldn't do herself was the steelwork, including the frame for the staircase. Elspeth designed it, but it caused some sleepless nights. 'It was a nightmare to work out, even for an architect.'

After three and a half years of punishing physical work, the tower was beginning to take shape, and Elspeth decided it was time to move in. 'The floors were in, but not completed and there was no kitchen, but I ▶



The living room, the only room to be given wallcolour, has been painted in Dulux Heritage Salmon Pink. The cast iron staircase is one of the building's few original features

‘I did the designing on site and learned a lot that way’





had a toilet that worked.' By then, she also had a two-month-old baby, Tom. 'In the space of two months, I'd become a mother, lost my father and moved house, and I was living in a building site while still commuting to London. I can't believe I did it.'

Over the next year, she concentrated on getting the heating system and the bathrooms installed. She also had to pay £1,500 to have gas supplied to the tower, which involved digging up a quarter of a mile of road. 'People always think the tower must be impossible to heat, but once it's heated it stays very warm. And I designed the system with thermostats in every room, so I can shut off any part of the tower I'm not using. My gas bill's about £1,000 a year, which probably isn't that different to a large semi-detached house.'

Between the years 1993 to 1995, the tower very slowly became a home. Even hanging pictures and placing furniture took months. 'Imagine hauling a piece of furniture up to the top floor and then deciding it doesn't look right! But transforming the tower over a long period meant I was able to change my ideas - I did most of the designing on site and I learned a lot that way.'

It's hard to imagine wanting to move from



such a place, but Elspeth says she'll probably sell up in the next five to ten years. 'I'd quite like to build somewhere from scratch - a totally modern house. If I come across some land, I'll probably do it. I don't tend to plan. Remember that in the August of 1988, I hadn't even seen this building, but two months later I owned it!'

1 & 2 Elspeth didn't want to create the feeling of a room within a room by partitioning off the bathrooms, so she designed mezzanines to hold them instead. They have been partly cut away to increase the feeling of light and

space. Elspeth can be contacted for architectural commissions on 01483 860342. Most of the antique furniture was inherited from her father and sits comfortably with its modern surroundings

Good idea...



The bright rugs in Elspeth's home sit well with their more minimalist surroundings. It can be difficult to find rugs of this size, but J W Jennings, Tewkesbury (01684 292033), have over 1000 handmade rugs, carpets, runners and kelims to choose from. They also encourage you to try before you buy, ensuring your rug looks great in situ. Pictured is an Indo-Persian design, measuring approx. 10ft x 8ft, which costs around £2,000.

