

PROPERTY

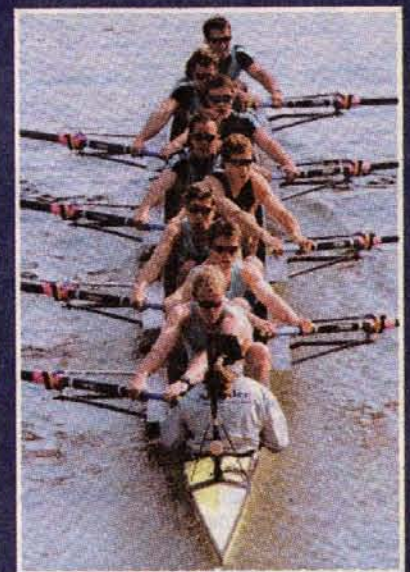
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**HOW I TURNED
THIS VICTORIAN
WATER TOWER
INTO A STUNNING
FAMILY HOME**

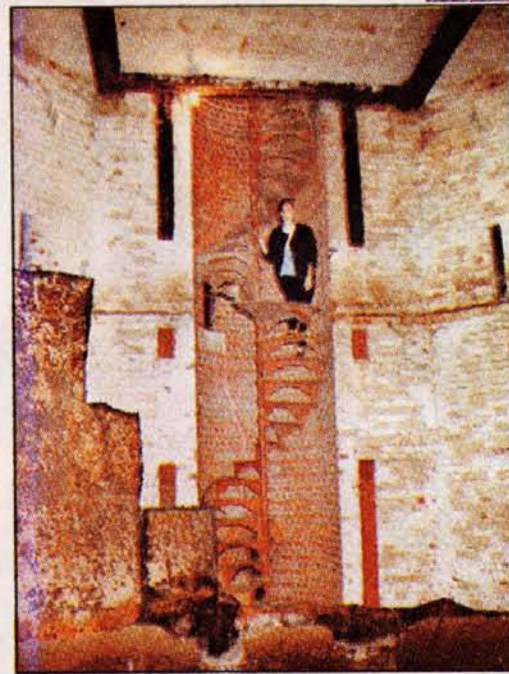


A labour of love... and towering ambition

Mary Wilson hears how one woman spent eight back-breaking years turning a 130ft water tower into a spectacular six-storey home

Of course it was madness, but the moment Elspeth Beard saw the old water tower soaring 130ft high above her she knew she had to buy it. Yes, it was a wreck, full of pigeon droppings and scarred with deep cracks. And no, it didn't have planning permission to be turned into a home. But none of that mattered. With utter self-belief, it didn't occur to Elspeth that she couldn't make a home out of this incredible Victorian building. After all, here was a 28-year-old trainee architect who had only recently returned from a two-year journey around the world on a motorbike. What was going to faze her? 'I didn't realise or see the work ahead of me. I just saw it as an amazing building - a type of construction that would never be built again,' she says. 'I had gone to see it almost by accident. A friend had told me about an amazing water tower which was for sale, but I had imagined something concrete on steel legs. I never thought it would look like it did. I had been looking for somewhere that had not been originally designed as a house for a couple of years - and I had to have it. In this frame of mind, she bid £121,000 for Munstead water tower at

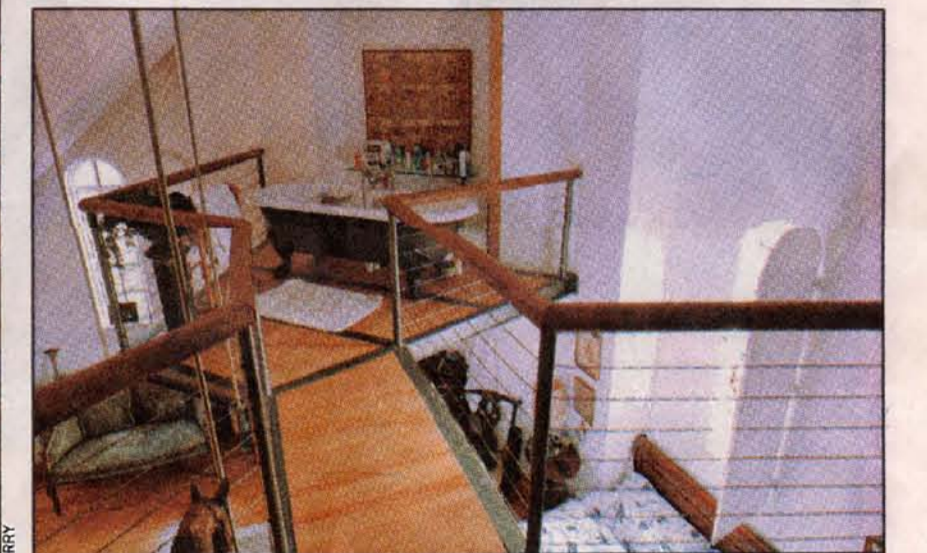
an auction. This was a lot of money for a derelict building that would need a huge amount of spending on it, but it did have a good location in one of the most desirable areas of Surrey, near Godalming, and property prices were still riding high at the time of the auction in 1988. But Elspeth's worries were only just beginning. Little did she know that an obsessive labour of love - and sometimes despair - would take over her life for the next eight years. The first problem was planning permission. She drew up plans for an 'upside-down' house over six floors. The ground floor of the octagonal building would be the hall, then the first, second and third floors would be bedrooms - two of them with en suite bathrooms and all with galleries. The kitchen would be on the fourth floor and, above it, on the top floor, there would be a vast sitting room in the old water tank. Unfortunately, the idea of converting industrial brick Victorian buildings into lofty spaces was almost unheard of in those days and planners were wary. It took her more than a year to get the consent she needed. 'It was never going to be used as a tower again,' she reasoned, 'so I felt that the planners were almost obliged to give planning permission for something. But it was all quite complicated as they were very concerned about the means of escape in the event of fire.' The Building Regulation officers turned her application down, so she appealed to the Department of Environment, which finally gave her permission to convert the whole tower in December 1989 after she proved it was possible to keep the stairs fire-proof long enough to escape. Elspeth achieved this by cleverly designing a safety feature which meant that the doors into the rooms on all the lower floors would automatically close if a smoke alarm was



FIRST STEPS: Elspeth, left, at the beginning of the project. The tower was full of pigeon droppings and scarred by cracks, but she had no doubt she could make a wonderful home from the unique Victorian building



LOFTY IDEAS: Elspeth Beard, left, has transformed dilapidated Munstead water tower into an award-winning, six-floor home. Elspeth did much of the work herself, though pregnant with her son, Tom



triggered, thus protecting the spiral staircase which runs around the inside edge of the building. The first three years were exceptionally tough. Not only was Elspeth trying to complete her training as an architect, but she also became pregnant and gave birth to a son, Tom - and all the time she had to live in a London flat she rented from her father because her tower was uninhabitable. In any spare moments, she worked on the building to keep costs down. She cleaned the outside of the bricks, did some of the electrics and rescreeding of the floors. She also put in new drains downstairs. 'We were sort of camping to begin with, moving from floor to floor as they were finished. I had a two-ring Belling stove for quite a few years, a makeshift loo on the ground floor and an outside tap. When Tom started crawling, I bought a playpen so I knew where he was.' Elspeth continued to commute to London - she now has her own practice in Godalming - and when Tom was old enough she took him to a childminder in Chiswick before going to work. Later she had nannies or au

pairs who, she says, were pretty bemused when they first saw the tower, but came to love it as she did. In the third year, she started putting in the plumbing and electricity. She also painted the wonderful 18ft-high walls in each room white. Then a lorryload of solid maple wood strips was delivered and she spent the next nine months laying them on the stairs and floors. In year five, the kitchen went in. This is made up of very smart, high-gloss black lacquer units on three sides of the room, using thick green slate for worktops. 'I sent a template up to Kirkstone quarry in Cumbria, they cut the slate to size and sent it down. It took me a weekend to carry all the slabs up,' she says. All this was bound to take its toll. 'For the first two or three years I was kept going by the momentum of the project, just trying to get it finished. Then it dawned on me just what a mountain of a task I had taken on. In years four, five and six I was fairly fed up and began to hate it. But I would never not finish something I'd started. I just wanted to live in it.' By 1996 it was completed, although 'there are still bits and pieces to finish off, when I have the time and energy'. What she has now is a unique home. It is difficult to estimate the cost of the work, but she must have spent at least as much again as the original purchase price. At the top of the tower, up 142 steps and above the treetops, there is a huge roof terrace, from which Elspeth has breathtaking, 360-degree views over both North and South Downs. All the floors up to and including the kitchen

are approached by the new staircase and each has towering, 9ft-high maple doors. 'With 18ft-high ceilings, anything smaller would look ridiculous,' she says. All those stairs keep Elspeth and Tom fighting fit, and she says she never goes up or down a floor without taking something with her. 'You just think in a different way,' she says. 'I never make a specific journey for just one thing.' An intercom links the building and she has vacuum cleaners on three of the six floors. So has it been worth all the pain? 'I don't think I'll move from here for quite a while,' she says. 'It took me so long to build this place and get it the way I like it and I am very

happy living here. I enjoy the space - and the views from the top are stunning.' Her fabulous home has earned Elspeth three architectural awards and, not surprisingly, she has since undertaken several commissions for other quirky buildings - a lighthouse in Somerset, another water tower in Norfolk, as well as less fun, but more financially rewarding work. 'I know just how determined you have to be to take on a project like this, so I never charge people properly when they are doing an unusual conversion,' she says. ● Elspeth Beard Architects, 01483 860342.

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SET YOUR SIGHTS HIGH

JUBILEE TOWER, £385,000

This grade II listed Victorian folly, built in 1897 to mark the 50th anniversary of the accession of Queen Victoria, stands in stunning scenery in the Yorkshire Dales. The tower has been beautifully restored.
Agent: Dacre Son & Hartley, 01535 611511.

BISHOP'S TOWER, £680,000

This unique, four-storey 19th Century tower at Tower Cross near Honiton, Devon, is part of a Grade II listed Georgian five-bedroom house set in two acres of land.
Agent: Jackson-Stops & Staff, 01392 214222.

MARKET TOWN, £365,000

Just outside the Leicestershire market town of Lutterworth, this striking water tower has been converted into a four-bedroom house with two acres of land with wonderful views.
Agents: Strutt & Parker, 01858 433123.