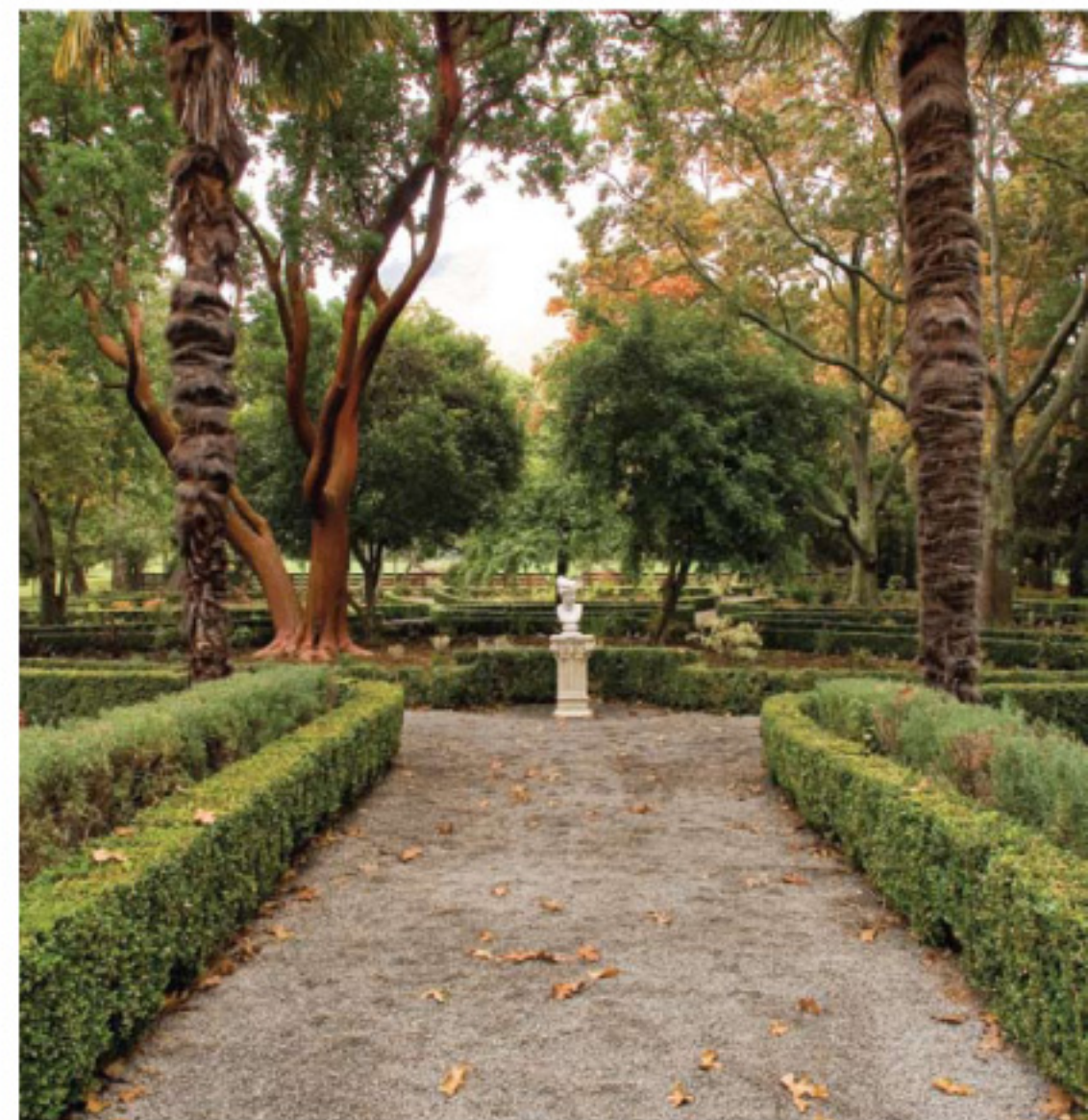
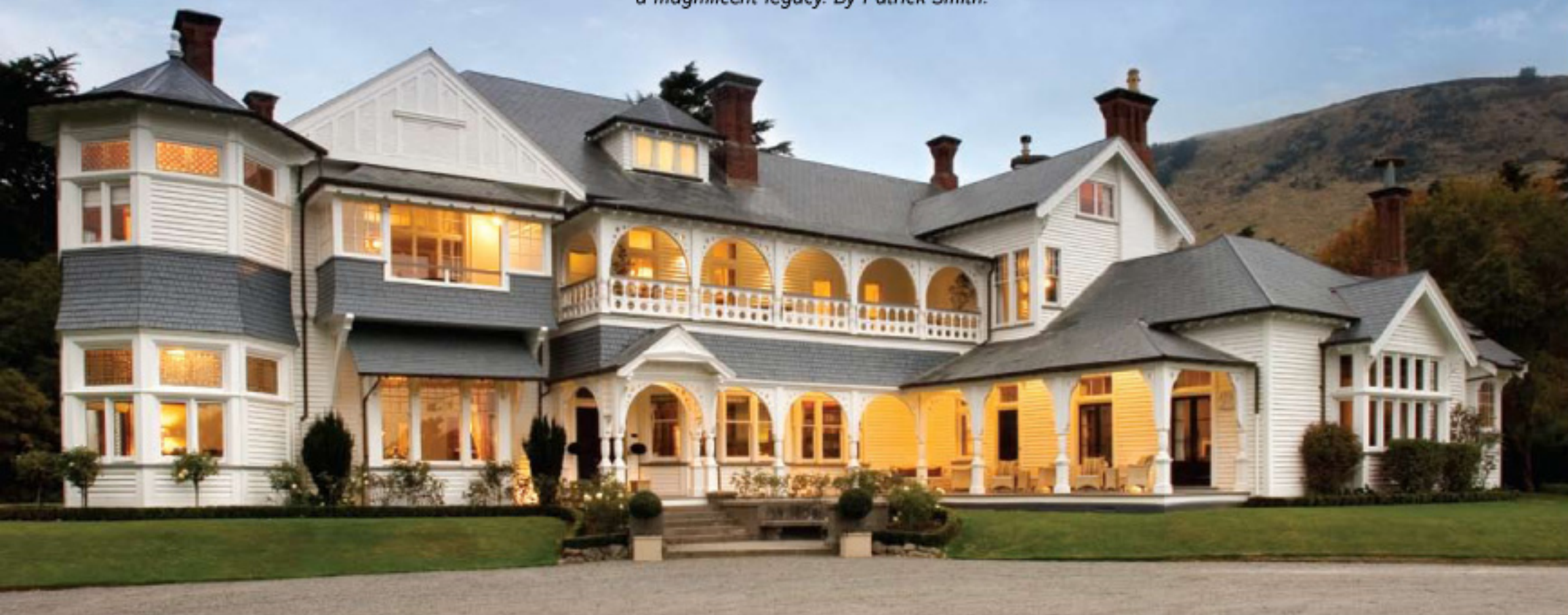


A GRAND OBSESSION

The new owners of historic Otahuna Lodge near Christchurch have become the guardians of a magnificent legacy. By Patrick Smith.



In the first weekend in September, the gates to Otahuna Lodge's exclusive 12-hectare estate are thrown open for the public to enjoy the spectacle of a million-odd daffodils in riotous bloom.

The tradition of Daffodil Days, begun at the end of the 19th century by Otahuna's original owner, parliamentarian and Canterbury benefactor Sir Heaton Rhodes, has been reinstated by its present owners, for whom the home and its gardens have become an all-encompassing obsession.

"Obsession", I hasten to add, is probably not the way former New Yorkers Hall Cannon and Miles Refo would describe their involvement with this gracious colonial homestead-turned luxury lodge. But they do admit to "falling under its spell" the first time they saw it – and to sinking upwards of \$9 million into its purchase and restoration.

As Hall showed us around after our arrival, it soon became apparent that the history and traditions of Otahuna Lodge – considered one of the finest examples of Queen Anne architecture in Australasia – are hugely important to the pair and that Sir Heaton's legacy is in

good hands.

Otahuna was converted from private home to lodge in 2003 but the business failed and by the time Cannon and Refo found it, it was in receivership. The pair bought the lodge halfway through 2006, spent six months learning the ropes and working with existing staff, then, in January 2007, closed for renovations which included the complete refurbishment of its seven suites and public areas and a major overhaul of the gardens.

For the interior the pair had called in Auckland-based designer Stephen Cashmore, who's well-known for his sensitive and stylish treatment of historic properties. Kauri and rimu panelling was brought to life with the use of new colours, fabrics and furnishings and the large ensuite bathrooms brought up to modern five-star standard.

Original 19th-century features such as the 15 ornate fireplaces (six suites have fireplaces, as do two of the bathrooms), intricately carved inglenooks and beautiful stained glass windows, were retained, while 21st-century state-of-the-art services such as open wi-fi access and Bose audio systems were unobtrusively added.

"The bones of the house are now clothed in a skin that is sensitive to the property's nature as a historic

country estate," said Cashmore at the time.

Hall, meanwhile, had been working with a Queenstown-based art consultant, Pauline Giles, to put together a collection that would, as he said, "showcase New Zealand art that combines influences from landscape, cultures and peoples of this extraordinary country".

More than 30 works were commissioned from artists such as Peter Beadle, Anna Caselberg and Craig Primrose and are on prominent display throughout the house, along with many historical photos of Otahuna's past. A large portrait of Maori warrior Rewi Maniopotu dominates the entrance hall; the main upstairs landing contains an intriguing work made entirely of tiny feathers.

As a guest, it would be easy to be overawed by the scale and grandeur of such a house – once New Zealand's largest private home – and its historical trappings. But despite the faithful makeover, Otahuna Lodge is not stuffy and we quickly felt at home.

To begin with, the setting is lovely. Although it's only 25 minutes from Christchurch, the city seems a distant reality in this rural valley near Tai Tapu, on the way to Akaroa.

Large white gates open on to a long driveway lined with oaks, gums and acacia trees which winds up to the house, first glimpsed across the daffodil field and a lake.

We arrived late afternoon and a fire was already blazing in the hunter-green lobby, from which a broad kauri staircase climbs up to the first-floor guest suites. Off the lobby is a graceful drawing room. A splendid hand-carved sideboard stands against one wall, designed by Cashmore specifically for the space, and across the room is a grand piano once said to have belonged aboard HMS Renown.

Guest suites are individually named and themed. Ours was the Garret Suite – as the name suggests it sits under gables and eaves at the top of the house. It may once have been servants' quarters but now it's a luxurious eyrie, with views across Canterbury to the mountains. Richly panelled walls are hung with old hunting and fishing gear, reflecting Sir Heaton's love of the great outdoors. A super-king bed occupies one end of the suite and, past old leather steamer trunks, hat boxes and other memorabilia, is a sitting room. The bathroom, with a free-standing bath in the middle of the tiled and heated floor, is larger than some hotel rooms. In all, our suite measured 93 square metres (1,000 sq ft). None of

Top left: Otahuna Lodge is considered one of the finest examples of Queen Anne architecture in Australasia. Above: Sir Heaton Rhodes' beloved gardens have been restored by the lodge's current owners.



Left: The house in spring, with the daffodil field in the foreground. Middle: The 10m-long verandah off the Verandah Suite. Bottom: Swimming pool and outdoor entertaining area.



the suites is smaller than 65 sq m and there are two master suites, Rhodes (once Sir Heaton's master bedroom) and the Verandah Suite, with its white 10m-long wooden balcony.

That evening we went down to the drawing room for drinks and canapés with Hall and Miles and an American couple whose next stop was Kauri Cliffs: Otahuna sits comfortably within the New Zealand luxury lodge circuit.

You can choose where you want to have dinner – at the communal table in the formal dining room, in the small, cosy library, the octagonal drawing room annex, the sunken wine cellar or anywhere else you fancy. We chose the library, where another log fire was blazing and the rosewood table was laid for two.

Each day chef Jimmy McIntyre collects fresh vegetables and herbs, seasonal fruits and nuts from the lodge's gardens and orchards. There are hens for fresh eggs, and even a piggery. He describes his cuisine as "international ... but using the best local produce". The evening meal usually evolved during the afternoon, he told us, "by focusing on what's in the garden ... But whatever I make, I want the ingredients to be the best available, flavours must be honest and uncluttered and I like the presentation to be elegantly restrained".

Dinner that night was a delectable feast, a five-course degustation menu with matched wines from Waipara and Marlborough. The main course was pan-roasted Tai Tapu duck breast with shredded duck cake, fresh vegetables from the gardens and cranberry jus.

Next morning a smiling Jimmy McIntyre served us breakfast at the long table in the bright, cream-coloured kitchen. An espresso machine sat in an alcove where a wood-fired stove had once stood, and a bay window provided space for a homely window seat. Jimmy made us fresh orange, carrot and ginger juice and we ate eggs Benedict with Otahuna eggs and locally smoked salmon. We were the only guests at the table. Did Jimmy miss the buzz of a big restaurant kitchen? "Sometimes," he said. "But then I wouldn't have all these amazing fresh ingredients to work with, would I?"

We left wishing we'd been able to stay longer. Hall and Miles call this place a "destination retreat" and that's what it is. As well as the lodge's own facilities – which include a croquet lawn, mountain bikes, a small gym and massage room, swimming and spa pools and a tennis court – also within easy reach are trout and salmon rivers, great golf courses, horse-riding, wineries, gardens, ski fields and the French charms of pretty Akaroa.

"Come back for Daffodil Day," Hall said as he saw us to our car.

"It's a date," I replied, and meant it. Thoughts of spring and a field of waving golden blooms followed us as we headed back to the city. ●



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