

THE DAILY NEWS GARDEN Lifestyle

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Home sweet Home



BIG PROJECT: Alison and Barry Rumball began their building project in 1976, when the church was moved on to the site, and moved in nearly nine years later.

Alison Rumball's home has history and a very big heart. Writer DENISE TUTAKI and photographer PIP GUTHRIE visited her special place



WARM WELCOME: Alison Rumball at the front door to her home on the outskirts of New Plymouth.

concerned, it was a challenge for Alison to open her inner sanctum to the crowds that deluged her home over one weekend recently. But it was all in aid of a good cause. Alison's home was one of nine that were transformed via the spirit of Christmas to benefit the Taranaki Women's Refuge. The elegant home is found at the end of a tree-lined, one-laned country road, and it is not hard to forget that this was once the domain of hymn, sermons and prayer. This may be a family home but a peaceful energy is permanently etched in the whole being of the house. This old church could certainly tell some stories, but Alison has enough fond memories to pad out this story. The converted church presented a challenge for interior designer Diane Phillips, who was helped by sister Bethne Hooper and cousin Nerida Halcombe in creating a refined Christmas setting.



IN HARMONY: The soft browns and curved arches of the old church give the Rumball home a warm ambience.

"The house called for a certain style and decoration, and once I got here and observed the ambience and saw how the house flowed through, I saw it was more than just about doing up one room," Diane recalls. SHE set about capturing the essence of the building and its serene ambience, sourcing Christmas decorations that would reflect the personality of the home. The transformation was stunning and moved visitors into an awe-struck silence that would normally fit with the solemn reverence of a church. "Christmas has its links with Christianity and I felt an element of that had to be presented in the decorations, and that was also Alison's wish," says Diane. "This worked well with the house. It was obvious we could only use subtle, classical Christmas decorations – not the bright, glitzy tinsel colours usually associated with festivities.

The building has a great mellowness and the old world ambience of the decorations has reflected this. An old Bible rests on a piano stool, small dainty crosses adorn chains and a small prayer table in the entranceway give subtle Christian overtones. Christmas trees are a ubiquitous feature throughout, right from the front door. Old Father Christmas and lace decorations are teamed with a violin perched on a chair, its case overflowing with a floral arrangement. Stairs are draped with swags festooned with drop pearls, pine cones and lights. The detail is precise, right down to the white chifton tied into bows on the backs of chairs in a formal dining sitting, in which mother-of-pearl crosses nestle. Another bow is filled with pearl beads and chains, and camels dot one mantlepiece in front of a log fire. An elegant nativity scene graces one table and an old hunting horn

HISTORIC RECORD: The old church has not been separated from its original foundation stone – the Rumballs placed it in the floor of their home.

on a wall inspired Diane to place a jaunty little fox alongside. "Although I had a design idea in place, there were a few little things that evolved, like the hunting fox on the ledge," she says.

The former altar room has been transformed into a dining room and its table is reminiscent of a more festive last supper. Red wine lies still in long-stemmed glassware and traditional Christmas fare awaits those with a keen appetite. Yes, it's real, but it has been there a few days now.

"We set the table as if people were sitting there having a real meal, albeit the food is a little... limited now," Diane smiles, grasping for the right word.

A huge window sets off the scene, leading the eye from the decorated table to the outdoors. "We decided to bring the dining table in here to make the most of the windows themselves and created height with the use of the flowers to balance the height of the windows and ceilings."

The huge floral piece gracing the table features Christmas lilies, palm and ferns, which combines simplicity and understated elegance to the setting.

"It really called for something tall and elegant," says Diane, "but it needed to be strong for such a strong room."

The feedback has been incredible, Diane and Alison admit. Nine hundred people visited the home over two days and were captivated by the ecclesiastical theme adopted for the Christmas fundraiser.

"It was something a little different for Taranaki and there was that definite wow factor," Diane says. "It's taken a huge amount of hard work but everyone has been so supportive of the whole event and so generous."

EVEN without the extensive decorations, Alison believes the former church is "just a lovely house". She is pleased at how the integrity of her home has been maintained with the decorations and feels they tone in with the decor.

"But it's just a lovely environment in which to live," she says. "It has an ambience of peace, I like to think of it as my sanctuary."

To get the former Bell Block church from scratch to the home as it is today has been a labour of love, and intertwined with the toil and sweat is a rich tapestry of memories and stories.

"I purchased the church for \$250," Alison recalls. "We moved it on to the site on February 29 – Leap Year Day – 1976 and finally moved in Christmas Eve, 1984."

The original foundation stone has found its way into the home, resting at the foot of the piano. It was laid by Archdeacon Govett on September 26, 1901, and if you couldn't feel the history already, this is solid proof of the home's past.

Alison and husband Barry independently sourced all the materials for their new home, becoming regulars on demolition sites.

"We physically picked these pieces up and brought them here on our trailers. We put up the big beams with block and tackle. It took a long, long time," she remembers.

Continued on next page

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PERFECT SETTING: The Rumball dining table, set magnificently for a Christmas feast.

A house built with love

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"We had three daughters, I was teaching and we had a town milk supply. We lived in an old house, which we eventually sold, and it stood where the garages are now. It was hard at the time but the end result has surpassed our expectations and there are so many wonderful stories. I love this house with a passion."

But some things were still not right. Shortly before the family moved into the home, Alison had doubts about whether she could live in such a dark house.

"I came home from work and, where the altar had been, Barry had chainsawed a huge hole in the wall."

Problem solved? "Well, then we had to design a window that would complement the house and make a statement. We certainly achieved that."

History seeps from the arteries of the house and every door can claim a stake in a colonial past. Solid church, prison and convent doors have their past intertwined with the Rumballs' own family history and future; old beams have come from demolished cool stores and hardwoods from the old Borthwicks freezing works at Waitara. The huge stone fireplace has been built with locally-sourced andesite stone, reinforced with steel from the interior of power poles from the city's electrical department.

Barry had hauled the power poles home on a four-foot trailer, Alison recalls. The poles were laid over timber and broken apart until the thick, tortured steel was exposed.

"Our friend Jim Boon said you could have an earthquake with a

richter scale of 10 and the fireplace still wouldn't fall down. This house is really a Taranaki demolition site — in a funny way," she laughs.

But laughter occasionally gives way to quiet reflection as those aforementioned wonderful stories are recollected.

"One year, before my birthday, Barry said I would be impressed by his gift. It would be like the pyramids of Egypt. And then a fortnight before, he told me it compared more to the Great Wall of China. The big day arrived and he put a blindfold on me and took me up to a track and told me to walk where my eyes took me. He had made a 300-metre walk into the native bush while I was out each day teaching. I thought it was the most, the most..." and words fail her.

Barry died two years ago but his energy still pervades the home. His slippers are out by the old fireplace, as if any moment he will stroll in through the door with another demolition find.

"Barry always said our house had an element of public ownership because it used to be an old church. I often think about that comment he made. I didn't really agree and to hold this event in my home left me feel considerably out of my comfort zone," Alison reveals. "But a friend reminded me that we learn from every experience — it's all a part of the tapestry of life."

Barry would have considered the experience character-building, and in some reflective moments after the hectic weekend, she has wondered how he would have felt about it all.

"I'd like to think that he would be saying with a gentle smile... well done Alison." □