

RESTORED *retreat*

Welcome to Silken Retreat. This century home in Port Elgin has been lovingly restored as a bed and breakfast that offers guests a delightful mix of country charm and modern conveniences.



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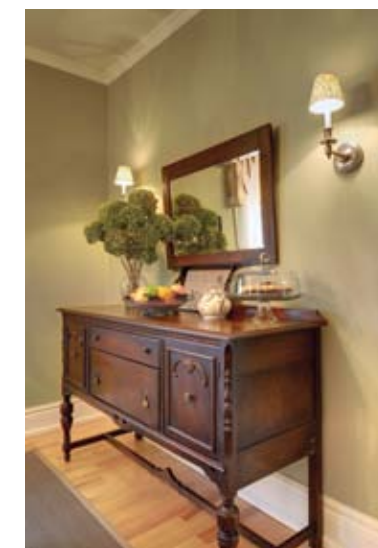
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BY LAUREL FORTIN // PHOTOGRAPHY BY SANDY MACKAY

With only four previous owners, the 1901 Port Elgin Victorian home was just the gem to convert into a bed and breakfast. Priscilla Potvin and Ken Browne knew it.

Much of the original woodwork and hardware in the house had been preserved in excellent condition. When they purchased the home in 2006, Priscilla knew that with Ken's handiwork the couple could renovate and restore the two-storey brick house into a welcoming business that they could operate through their retirement years. After five years of labouring every available weekend, holiday and vacation, the Burlington couple opened Silken Retreat – a moniker for Priscilla (“Sil” to her friends) and Ken – to delighted guests in 2011. Located blocks away from Lake Huron and just off the main street in Port Elgin, the house attracts summer vacationers. Consulting her designer

friends Sandra and Michel Paquette and Cathy McCluskey, Potvin reconfigured the four bedrooms on the second floor into three guest rooms, each with its own private en suite plus a linen closet (much of the drywall taping and mudding was completed by **PR Drywall Services** in Cargill). With the home's centre hall plan, guests have exclusive access to the front of the home and second floor while the owners have their quarters at the back of the house and basement. “If guests need me I have a buzzer upstairs that rings into my room, but at least I can feel that I am private and they can feel the same way,” says Potvin. *Continued on page 40*



TOP: The cosy and welcoming front porch is a peaceful spot to enjoy a morning coffee or late night conversation. **ABOVE:** Just off the front entranceway, the living room is truly comfortable with a leather couch and flat-screen TV. **LEFT:** The dining room is where guests are served a scrumptious, homemade three-course breakfast worth writing home about.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: (1) A warm front foyer invites guests in and leads the way upstairs to the three suites. **(2 & 3)** The Nellie McClung guest room features a king size bed that can be separated into two twin beds, and a full en suite complete with double sinks and a jet tub. **(4)** The Cavell Room is bright and sunny with charming yellow décor. **(5)** The upstairs landing glows with natural light. The built-in window bench is an ideal spot to read a good book and the computer nook offers Internet access, though there is wireless throughout the B&B.

The resulting B&B is inviting, bright and comfortable, having the charm of a century home with modern conveniences, including soundproof walls, in-room climate controls, on-demand water heating with heated towel racks (maintained by **L-Ray Plumbing & Heating** in Chesley), flat-screen televisions and wireless Internet. “To see it come into fruition, it took a long time,” admits Potvin. “We did it ourselves; two buckets at a time removing the lath and plaster. It takes forever before you see the signs of it coming together.” The couple did the bulk of the loving restoration work themselves, but say they couldn’t have completed it without help from family and friends.

Potvin enjoys the social aspect of running a B&B. Retired from teaching after 32 years, she says she misses the camaraderie of her colleagues. “Having a B&B is a way to meet people from different walks of life and different countries,” she says. “We’ve had guests whose origins are from Peru and Mumbai. I find it very interesting as they recant their worldly experiences. A photographer from Toronto, on assignment for a country wedding in Paisley, shared his photo session pictures with me at breakfast. Often, guests request that Ken and I join them at the breakfast table for conversation.” Potvin keeps the atmosphere friendly and relaxed so that people of all age groups will be comfortable during all phases of their visit at Silken Retreat.

The former teacher has a penchant for history, naming each of the three guest rooms after women of the home’s period. The Eaton room is

named for Lady Flora Eaton (1880-1970), wife of Eaton’s department store magnate John Craig Eaton. Lady Eaton was a friend of a nurse who owned the house as a summer home. In her later years, Lady Eaton would visit her friend in Port Elgin and a neighbour recalled meeting her in his youth. The room is painted Fernwood Green (all paint is Benjamin Moore from **Martin’s Home Hardware**, Southampton). It has original pine-plank flooring, a queen-size bed (**BG Furniture**, Walkerton), dressers from **Rooster’s Perch** in Clifford, and side tables from **Southampton Market** that Browne modified to add drawers. Its en suite has ample room for guest toiletries and a shower.

The Cavell room is named for Potvin’s mother’s namesake, British First World War nurse and hero Edith Cavell (1865-1915), who was known for helping more than 200 British and other allied soldiers escape from German-occupied Belgium before being arrested and executed for treason by the Germans. The Cavell room features furnishings in a sunny yellow set against walls in Delaware Putty and thin-strip hardwood sourced at **Knights’ of Meaford**. Bathroom light fixtures are from **Home Hardware Building Centre** in Port Elgin.

Nearby Chatsworth-born Nellie McClung (1873-1951) was the inspiration for the third guest room. A women’s rights advocate in the early 1900s, McClung championed successful campaigns across Canada to give women the right to vote and to run for public office. The McClung room features a king-size bed, which can be separated into

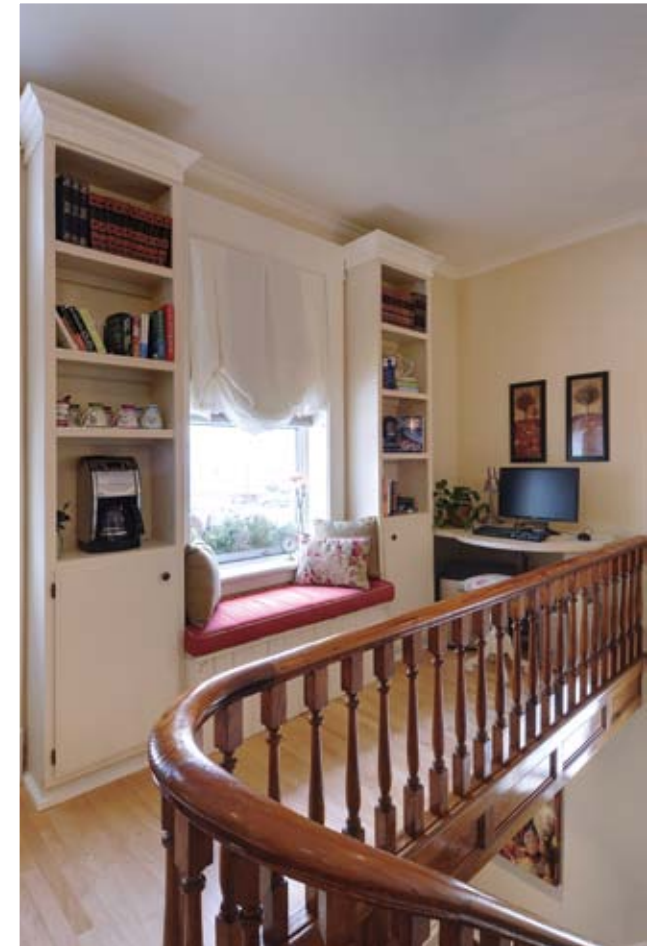
two twin beds, should guests prefer, plus a luxurious full bath with whirlpool tub and double sinks.

The guest quarters include a charming second-floor balcony where visitors can enjoy their morning coffee. A computer station on the upper landing, overlooking the elegantly restored curved staircase, is set beside a window seat and cabinets that Potvin and Browne salvaged from the hair salon the previous homeowner had operated on the main floor. Home décor accents were purchased at **Port’s Emporium**, **Cathy’s Flowers ‘N Treasures**, **August Skies Home Decor, Etc.** and **Keepsakes & Memories** in Port Elgin.

As each room of the house was renovated, Potvin gathered samples of layer upon layer of wallpaper. “I soaked off samples of each and kept them in chronological order. In the front hallway there were nine layers!” she marvels. The resulting scrapbook shows a few dozen samples ranging from delicate florals of the early 1900s, to bold graphic designs of the ‘70s, and even a few murals. The couple also found and saved news clippings from newspapers discovered in the floor and walls that were used as shims at the time of construction. A collection of artifacts found under the home’s crawl space is displayed in the sitting room. Bottles marked “Hair Vigour” or with medicine, alcohol and baby powder labels are preserved from the last century.

The kitchen is where Potvin does some of her finest work. “Before we installed the kitchen, I would stand here and think about how it was going to work,” she says. Its efficient layout allows her to prepare and serve a three-course breakfast for guests, including smoothies and coffee,

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feature

Ken and Priscilla couldn't be happier with their newly renovated kitchen. Loads of counter space and modern conveniences make preparing and serving breakfast a pleasure. Homemade blueberry muffins, fruit smoothies and gourmet French toast are just a few of their specialties.



a fruit plate and muffins or sweet bread, then French toast, pancakes, eggs benedict or other main dish. Floor and backsplash tiling were sourced at **The Durrer Group** in Hanover and installed by **Keith Gilkes** of Mount Forest.

On the exterior, the house has been returned to its Victorian-inspired finest, with a lovely garden of perennial roses and hydrangeas. Stone was brought in from **Shouldice Designer Stone** and flagstone from **Shoreline Stone & Garden Centre** in Port Elgin; garden mulch was sourced at **Bruce**

Peninsula Stone Ltd. in Hepworth. The roof was redone by **Hy-Grade Roofing Systems Ltd.** out of Paisley, a few windows were replaced, purchased at **J&J Windows and Doors** in Southampton, siding and eaves troughs were installed by **Montgomery Aluminium** in Port Elgin and the driveway surfacing was contracted to **Frank Gibbons Ltd.** in Port Elgin.

Now that guests are booking for the 2012 season, Potvin and Browne are looking forward to relaxing in their gorgeous home, working in the gardens and welcoming visitors to Silken Retreat from near and far. **OH**

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