

# history RESTORED

BY SHELBY HILSON // PHOTOGRAPHY BY SANDY MACKAY



If these walls could talk, they would tell the story of Owen Sound through the past 120 years. It would begin with its builder John W. Redfern, a local hardware store owner who sold the house to Police Magistrate David Creasor in 1909 for \$6,000. It would go on to tell of the home's most famous year as a U.S. consulate, then of the next 52 years as the residence of Colin Russel of Russel Bros., a prominent boat building company when Owen Sound was an important Great Lakes shipping port. Tales of Billy Bishop would also be heard as he grew up right next door in a house that is now the Billy Bishop Heritage Museum.

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**OPPOSITE:** This large salon with original mouldings is what convinced Michael Leeper this home was the right fit for him and his family. **TOP LEFT:** Family and friends can get cosy around an original coal-burning fireplace on a reupholstered, antique salon suite. **TOP RIGHT:** Michael enjoys playing guitar in this salon corner beneath some of his own Marilyn Monroe paintings. **RIGHT:** The tower of this historic home takes centre stage as it extends beyond the roofline to offer a spectacular view.





The ending of this home's story has yet to be written and if its current owners, Michael and Marcella Leeper, have anything to do with it, the story will never end. They have spent the past seven years restoring the huge, red brick Victorian back to its original glory and have also had the city designate and protect the house under Ontario Heritage Act legislation.

The Leepers "fell in love" with the Georgian Bay area after spending weekends at an old stone schoolhouse they bought in Griersville and finding themselves wanting to return to the city less and less. The prospect of buying a huge Victorian home is what prompted Michael to end his career as a stockbroker and move his family north.

"I didn't want my kids going to school in Toronto either," says Michael, who sites the opportunity to be around his kids "in the most important time in their lives" as the determining factor in leaving a very busy work schedule and city life behind.

Michael's lifelong infatuation with antique collecting and historic architecture is what has given this mature home its youthful appeal once again. The front entranceway leads into the lowest level of the three-storey tower, which is arguably the home's most alluring feature. A nature-inspired stained glass window welcomes guests and lights the way to the main staircase.

To the right is the salon, the room that won Michael over. "When I walked into this room I freaked out! This is what made me buy the house," he says. It's outfitted in a 10-piece Napoleonic salon suite that was featured in "Suez," a 1938 20th Century Fox film starring Loretta Young. Adorning the wall, next to the coal-burning fireplace, is a framed poster of Young sitting on the sofa before it was reupholstered.

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The parlour is used as a family room and features more contemporary flair with a sofa upholstered in leopard-print cowhide with pillows to match. **OPPOSITE TOP LEFT:** The parlour leads to the wood-panelled office through this narrow doorway with detailed mouldings and header. **OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT:** French doors in the salon open to the parlour across the front hallway. **OPPOSITE BOTTOM:** A powder room off the recently added sunroom ties new and old together with an exposed brick wall.





The sunroom accents the rear of the house beautifully and grants an unobstructed view of the backyard. **LEFT:** The large sunroom off the kitchen gives the Leepers more room to entertain guests in the summer. **ABOVE:** The home's character extends into a bright, intimate kitchen with a handcrafted wood range-hood.



The upstairs hallway fills with light through the windows of the tower's second storey. **TOP RIGHT:** Two of the upstairs bedrooms open to one another through double doors. **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Michael's Harrison Park painting hangs in a small enclave in the front hallway.



The original mouldings, representative of High Victorian-era, frame the wooden French doors and windows, and create two trey ceilings in this living area, or the party room, as the Leepers' son Robert calls it. At the far end of the room is a collection of Marilyn Monroe paintings that Michael did himself and below them is a spot for him and Robert to jam on their guitars. Century-old, quarter-cut oak floors, refinished and recoated by **Wright Hardwood Floors**, are seen throughout the home and lead across the front hallway into the parlour. Used as a family room, this space boasts a more modern look with a sofa upholstered in a leopard-print cowhide (**The Upholstery Studio**). What used to be two separate doors leading out to the front verandah are now used as large windows. Michael framed a large, beautiful painting using old white trim he found in the basement and set it above the dark, Eastlake fireplace, which features original tiles. Off the parlour is the office. It can also be accessed directly from the verandah through a door marked "office," that's been labeled that way since the home housed former American Consul, Augustus G. Seyfert. Hand-painted oak panelling and ceiling beams are what really set the room apart from the rest of the house.

The kitchen is fairly small and features cabinets, countertops, subway tile backsplash and trim all in white – offering a brilliant contrast to the neighbouring office. Michael constructed the wood range-hood himself after finding plans on the Internet. What was once a servants' staircase is now used as a pantry, but it was one of the previous owners who removed the staircase and installed an elevator next to it, which, believe it or not, is still in working order. Two French doors lead out to a large sunroom addition (**Devitt Uttley & Company**) that offers a panoramic view of the big and beautifully landscaped backyard. This area is often used as a dining room when hosting guests. "We have a major Christmas party each year," tells Michael. The second storey is separated into two areas – one being the former maids' chambers. Each room has a transom window above its door, but when the Leepers purchased the home they were not evident. Previous owners had shortened the doors, attached plywood over the transom windows and then wallpapered them. Restoring them without visual evidence that they'd ever been hidden away was no easy task, but is another example of Michael's incredible workmanship and dedication.

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In the tower, the large Palladian-style windows with original shutters create a second sunroom area in the upstairs hallway – a great spot to lounge and read a book.

The Victorian-style bathroom features crisp, white honeycomb flooring along with the original claw-foot tub with freestanding shower and solid pedestal sink, both recoated by **Bathtub King** in Owen Sound.

A second staircase leads to a full-sized attic that Michael uses as a painting studio when his son isn't hanging out with friends. Light floods the space through a small, fantastical doorway that opens to the stairway to the tower lookout. Round-topped windows on all four sides offer a rare view of the historic neighbourhood and city beyond.

The Leepers hope to share the fruits of their labour with others and have plans to turn their incredible home into a bed and breakfast in the near future. **OH**



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