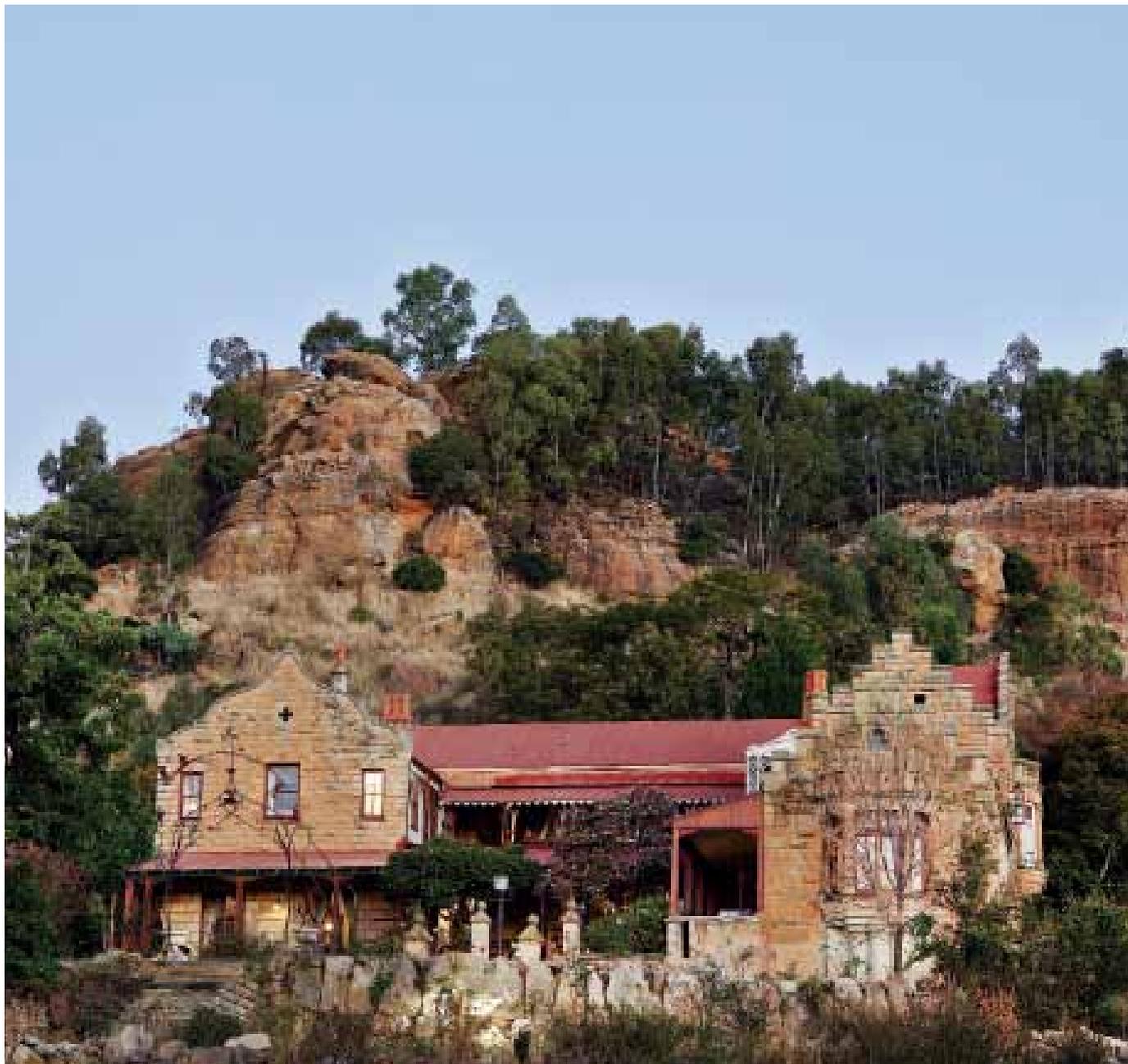


CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT FAMILY PORTRAITS DECORATE THE WALLS OF PRYNNBERG; CATTLE WALK PAST ST SAVIOUR'S CHAPEL EACH MORNING; POLO GEAR AND SUE MELVILL'S GARDENING TOOLS ARE KEPT IN THE TACK ROOM, THE REAL HEART OF THE HOUSE; ONE OF THE ORIGINAL ESTATE CARS; MORNING LIGHT ON THE FRONT VERANDAH; DETAILED FRETWORK FRAMED THE ORIGINAL VERANDAH AND UPSTAIRS BALCONY; RESTORED LEADED GLASS IN A BAY-WINDOW SEAT IN THE BILLIARD ROOM, ADDED IN 1902; LUNCH IS OFTEN EATEN OUTSIDE THE LIBRARY WING, WHICH WAS THE LAST TO BE RESTORED AND NOW LEADS OUT ONTO THE WEST GARDEN OPPOSITE PAGE AN ECCENTRIC VICTORIAN DOUBLE GABLE IN LOCAL STONE MARKS THE FAÇADE OF PRYNNBERG, SET AGAINST A WOODED KOPJE





estate of grace

WHAT STARTED AS THE HUNT FOR A QUAIN FARMHOUSE TURNED INTO THE DISCOVERY OF A CRUMBLING MANOR HOUSE IN THE FREE STATE – AND ITS PASSIONATE 15-YEAR RESTORATION INTO A HOME FOR MODERN LIVING

TEXT JOSEF TALOTTA AND MICHELLE SNADDON PHOTOGRAPHS ELSA YOUNG/PERFECT HIDEAWAYS

There's a tangible madness that permeates the story of Prynnsberg. But it's more divine madness, mad genius perhaps – and one that attracts, rather than repels. In the foothills of the Maluti Mountains, Prynnsberg forms part of a string of gentleman's

country estates established for British ex-servicemen in the eastern Free State – few of them grander than Prynnsberg, the century-old home of Charles Newberry, a carpenter who immigrated to South Africa in 1864, before making his way to Kimberley where he made his fortune.

Never one to waste time, Charles cashed out, fell in love with the daughter of a Lesotho missionary and became enamoured with the natural charms of the district. He soon set out to build an English-inspired country estate, complete with manor house, outbuildings, two

came its current owners, Johannesburg couple Rick and Sue Melvill, who were simply looking for a 'quaint sandstone Free State farmhouse' before walking into Prynnsberg. It was love at first sight: no furniture but throughout a collection of plastic buckets collecting rainwater. Rick, grimacing at the memory, claims there was 'not even a bath plug' and so they got to work restoring and furnishing it over the years with period pieces. But modern living calls for modern solutions. While the homestead originally offered 10 bedrooms with three bathrooms, not all of them were indoors. By losing two bedrooms and adding two conservatory-style bathrooms off the bedrooms downstairs, they were able to create eight bedrooms with bathrooms en suite, six of them with working fireplaces. And then there's the phenomenal folly of a Victorian bathhouse with four baths, all in a row.

While its interiors are impressive, they're not overwhelming. The space

THE SPACE IS SOFTENED BY A RICH COLOUR SCHEME AND FINE PERIOD ARCHITECTURAL DETAIL

churches, gamekeeper's lodge, vicarage, stables and workers' housing. The 20-room sandstone homestead was smartly furnished by James Shoolbred & Company of London's Tottenham Court Road, with virtually everything shipped in: a sprung floor for the ballroom, Persian carpets, ivory billiard balls, silk wallpapers, a grand piano, cookbooks, cutlery, monogrammed crockery, Royal Doulton lavatories, crystal chandeliers – right down to staff uniforms.

The estate attracted famous visitors, including a neighbour, the Duke of Westminster, as well as Lord Milner and Rudyard Kipling who, it's alleged, painted a Noah's Ark frieze still visible in the children's nursery. While many of the surrounding farms were torched during the Anglo-Boer War, Prynnsberg remained unscathed because it was owned by an English family. It enjoyed a golden era throughout the early 1900s, before sliding into gradual decline under the care of the dwindling Newberry descendants.

Once alive with the cacophony of generations of a single family, Prynnsberg's halls fell silent and the buildings on the estate fell into disrepair. That is, until along

is softened by a rich colour scheme and fine architectural detail, including pressed-leather panelling, gilded cornices, stained-glass windows and ornately tiled fireplaces. Traces of earlier madness still remain though: the advent of electricity in the sixties saw complete disregard for heritage detailing. 'Conduits were installed all over the place, flamboyantly showing off their new status,' recalls Rick. Through its modernisation, the many mysteries of the estate, such as the smoke that used to seep out from behind the saddles in the tack room, have been resolved as simply faulty wiring and structural decay.

Even though it may be a 'new' Prynnsberg, Rick and Sue have really focused on returning it to its glory days. 'We want to get the Gin Palace back into the house. The place just sparkles with people in it,' says Rick, while pointing to the hand-painted frieze in the billiard room that bears testament to its defiant spirit: 'Away dull care: today we will be merry!' ■ **For rental, contact Perfect Hideaways** 📞 perfecthideaways.co.za



THE INDULGENT VICTORIAN BATHHOUSE BEHIND THE FARMHOUSE KITCHEN HAS SEEN SOME WILD PARTIES THROUGH THE YEARS. WATER IS STILL HEATED IN THE DONKEY BOILER UP THE HILL



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT SLEEPING IN THE OPEN ON THE COVERED BALCONY UPSTAIRS IS AN ADVENTUROUS OPTION; PRYNNBERG; ORIGINAL, DELICATE WOOD DETAILING FRAMES THE ARCHWAYS IN THIS GRAND INTERIOR; THE ELIZABETH ROOM'S EXQUISITE CEILING SUFFERED DAMAGE DUE TO A LEAK; THE WEST GARDEN; ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE AND EGYPTOLOGIST WINIFRED BRUNTON PAINTED THE EXTRAORDINARY SCENES FROM EGYPT AND THE LOTUS FLOWERS ON THE BILLIARD ROOM WALLS, WHICH IS DOMINATED BY A PRESERVED CURVED CEILING; THE ORIGINAL ENTRANCE TO THE CONSERVATORY

