

# Forever young

A LANDMARK CONCRETE BUNGALOW RECLAIMS ITS ORIGINAL CHARM THANKS TO ONE CAMBRIDGE COUPLE

**THESE PAGES** The 1920s concrete two-storey bungalow renovated by Bernard and Wendy Hilhorst and originally designed by English immigrant James Thomas Douce, sits serenely on a rural property near Cambridge and is framed by mature trees including a cedar, left, and a massive liquidambar; the house opens to a large flat lawn that was possibly once a tennis court.

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Wendy and Bernard Hilhorst may have felt the weight of Waikato history when they bought their landmark 1920s two-storey concrete bungalow near Cambridge.

Their gracious grande dame is set well back from a busy rural road, amid trees and generous gardens, and it is “one of those houses” that everyone from around these parts knows. In its earlier life, many Cambridge girls learned to dance at a ballet studio on the property, the perfectly proportioned billiards room was in regular use and local legend has it that the house provided a discreet refreshment break for Queen Elizabeth II on her coronation tour, ahead of a civic reception in Cambridge on January 1, 1954.

Verifying the Queen’s stopover is still a work in progress but just in case it’s true Bernard has cheekily placed a decorative sign, found on Trade Me, over the front door that says Royal Visit 1953-54. “It makes a good story,” he says.

Wendy and Bernard are former dairy farmers from Pukeatua, west of Pūtaruru; they came across the concrete house in 2017 when their three adult children, Maria, James and Laura, had left home and they were considering a change. Wendy saw it advertised and thought, “I like the look of this”. The house was intriguing, albeit tired and run down, and there was plenty of land to build stables for her and Laura to pursue their shared interest in horse riding.

The couple bought it, despite the scepticism of their children who were worried about the amount of work needed. “Sceptical would be understating it,” adds Wendy. As Wendy and Bernard researched the property, it became more apparent that they had bought a special house. It is one of a number of imposing Cambridge concrete bungalows designed by English immigrant James Thomas Douce in the American craftsman style, inspired by the English Arts & Crafts movement. Douce practised as an architect in the fledgling township from 1910 to 1945 and his significant body of work is detailed in a 2014 masters thesis by Jennifer Gainsford, entitled *Cemented in Time*.

The thesis records the 15 major concrete homes designed by Douce, including the Hilhorsts’ newly restored beauty. Theirs was built for farming couple James and Mary Fisher, it was sold to Wallace Sinton and family in 1952, and there have been several more owners since.

It was constructed on a rectangular footprint and Douce combined American bungalow elements with Arts & Crafts style including deep porches, columns, casement windows, leadlight windows, panelled doors, board-and-batten ceilings, dormer windows and window seats.

Earlier renovations had seen a number of unsympathetic changes and the interior was a collection of small rooms that didn’t relate well to each other. Wendy and Bernard’s first project was to turn the ground floor billiards room into their bedroom. Now, a partition wall behind the bed conceals an en suite and walk-in wardrobe. The bedroom became their haven during many months of renovation work.



**FAR LEFT** A porch and patio were added as an outdoor living area handy to the kitchen and dining room; the oak refectory table was spotted at an auction – it was covered in black paint and glitter so Wendy and Bernard stripped it back, polished and waxed it; the comfy cane chairs are a long-ago purchase and Bernard made the light fitting from deer antlers found on their dairy farm at Pukeatua. **ABOVE** Wendy and Bernard on their entranceway steps with Bernese mountain dog Fergie and schnauzer-fox terrier cross Maple; the vintage doors, complete with leadlights, were relocated from a property in Timaru.





**ABOVE** Wendy and Bernard designed and created the formal northeastern garden next to the new porch, inspired by gardens they have visited in Europe; the ground is laid with Waikato Gold pea metal and Bernard made the fountain from an earthenware urn from Mitre 10 and an old farm trough; the buxus-edged garden, at left, is planted with white hydrangeas, including 'Limelight'.

PHOTOGRAPH Amanda Aitken





**ABOVE** Wendy loves the Fendi herringbone oak floor from VidaSpace in the dining and kitchen area; the kitchen was made by Fine WoodWorking in Te Kūiti, the island is painted in Resene Marshland and the rest of the cabinetry in Resene Half Linen; the Feiss Angelo pendant light is from The Lighting Centre in Auckland, the oak table was an auction find and the chairs are from Notting Hill Interiors in Tirau; most of the walls in the house are in Resene Half Joanna. **FAR RIGHT** In the sunroom, the concrete walls and beam are in Resene Mangrove, the cane-sided suite was bought on Trade Me and Bernard made the circular side table out of leftover tin from the kitchen splashback and some unused floorboards.

Bernard was hands-on throughout the project with the team from GD Pringle Building, while Wendy worked on the plan with Lee Turner, director of local design studio Turner Road Architecture, developing a better layout and more connection with the outdoors while honouring James Douce's original style. The front entrance porch was recreated, removing an earlier renovation, and it transitions into a family living room that flows to a lounge on one side, with dining and a contemporary kitchen and scullery on the other. The dining room and adjacent sunroom were opened up to a new north-facing porch and patio.

There is also a small office, a laundry and guest bathroom on the ground floor and upstairs Wendy and Bernard removed a "gin deck", a more recent addition, and reworked more small spaces to create three big bedrooms and a luxurious bathroom. Reconfiguring the spaces required extensive engineering to support the concrete structure, and the house has also been reroofed, rewired and replumbed. "We did the lot," says Bernard.

He looked for alternatives to the random mix of doors that had replaced many of the originals, finding some beautiful period pieces with leadlight panels on Trade Me, along with several sets of suitable windows. The only snag was that they were in Timaru. So he and Wendy took a trailer to the South Island and returned with nine precious doors and multiple windows, all intact.

The garden has also been extensively redesigned and the stables that were part of Wendy's early dream have been built. The couple's family and friends are no longer sceptical.

The painstaking work by GD Pringle Building won the company a national renovation award in the 2024 Master Builders House of the Year competition, and the house made the national Top 100 list.

Nowadays visitors sometimes ask, "What a beautiful house, was it always like this?". Well, yes, and no, but Wendy and Bernard say it's been a privilege to restore this property. "It's a classy house that deserved the effort. It will be enjoyed by many generations to come."





**RIGHT** The stained-glass interior panel of a Dutch girl in traditional dress is an old favourite, bought at Demolition Traders in Hamilton – it had been an exterior window in the couple's Pukeatua property and they rehomed it in the Cambridge renovation; the wooden rocking horse is from an Auckland auction house.



**LEFT** An upstairs guest bedroom has a board-and-batten ceiling, a feature wall in Morris & Co Golden Lily wallpaper, and the bed quilt, throw and cushions are from Wallace Cotton. **RIGHT** The sturdy oak refectory seat was bought for the entrance hall at Antiques in Thames and is dressed in some of the cushions Wendy has collected from various sources; the wall sconce is from The Lighting Centre and the floor is laid in Oxford & Dot tiles from Cambridge Tiles.







**LEFT** The main bedroom is in the former billiards room so has an original fireplace and distinctive ceiling; the wardrobe and en suite are tucked behind a partition papered in Morris & Co Pure Acorn, the other walls are Resene Half Grey Olive, while the rustic steel chandelier was an exterior piece found at Early Settler and the painting above the bed is of The Church of the Good Shepherd in Tekapo by Anne Rayns bought at an op shop in Morrinsville; the pale grey quilt and cushions are from M.M Linen and the velvet throw and cushion are from Wallace Cotton.

**RIGHT** Fittings for the guest bathroom were bought through Mico, including the Newtech Charlton corner bath, Newtech Liberty washstand and an Organics hammered copper basin; the floor is in Twenties tiles from Cambridge Tiles.



**LEFT** Another guest bedroom is furnished entirely from Wallace Cotton, including the padded headboard and chest, the linen, cushions and quilt; carpet throughout the house is Rhino New Orleans in Royal Street.







**ABOVE** The entrance view of the house has been enhanced by a new porch that mirrors the one on the northern side, as well as the Timaru-sourced front doors, and installation of upstairs leadlight windows, also from Timaru – it's hard to tell the original features from the recent sympathetic additions; the bungalow is painted in Resene Half Surrender with Resene Grey Friars trims and roof; Bernard made the copper fig leaf wall hanging and built the window boxes based on a photograph of some that Wendy admired when they visited Austria; formal planting includes buxus, potted conifers and topiared port wine magnolias.

PHOTOGRAPH Amanda Aitken



## Q+A

with Wendy &amp; Bernard Hilhorst

**BEST RENOVATION TIP:** Go in with an open mind and an open bank account. *(Bernard)*

**OUR BUILDERS:** Were patient and respectful, especially as we were living on site during the renovation. They had the craftsmanship and ability to ensure the character and detail of the house were retained. *(Wendy)*

**TOP DECORATING FIND:** The engineered oak herringbone flooring from VidaSpace in Auckland used in the kitchen/dining area. Absolutely love it. *(Wendy)*

The black lacquered sideboard in the lounge from Trade Me – exactly the size we were looking for. *(Bernard)*

**FAVOURITE SEAT IN THE HOUSE:** Depends on the season – the cosy family “fire” room in winter. *(Bernard)*

The sunroom for coffee in the morning. *(Wendy)*

**BEST TRADE ME PURCHASE:** Definitely all the stained-glass windows and doors that have been a perfect fit with the era of the house. It meant a very nervous road trip to pick them up from Timaru but it was well worth it. *(Bernard)*

**RECOMMENDED CAMBRIDGE DESIGN STORE:** The lovely women at Odell Home are wonderful to deal with and have a great eye for detail. They are only too happy to help out or source a product. *(Wendy)*

**FAVOURITE LOCAL CAFE:** We are a bit spoilt for choice but In Stone Cafe is a favourite and The Bikery at the Velodrome is close by. *(Wendy)*

**AT THE WEEKEND:** We enjoy our hobbies – mountain biking for me and horse riding for Wendy – and catching up with family and friends. *(Bernard)*



**ABOVE** Bernard says the fountain he built in the northeastern garden from a concrete farm trough and a large urn is now a watering hole for abundant bird life, including tūi. **RIGHT** Wendy, photographed with grey gelding Cooper and chestnut mare Torrin, both show-jumpers, has plenty of space on the property to enjoy her love of horse riding which she shares with daughter Laura.

