

'My mother thought I was mad, spending £121,000 on an uninhabitable tower full of pigeons'

A J BARRETT



my tower

ELSPETH BEARD

I'd been looking for a building to do something with for four years before I found the tower. A friend was riding his motorbike to Godalming one day and noticed this tower with a big 'For Sale' sign on it. He rang me up and I thought: a water tower? A concrete tank on steel legs? I forgot about it. But three weeks later I was in the area and thought I might as well take a look. I drove around the hilltops until I spotted it. As soon as I saw it, that was it.

Thames Water was selling it as part of the process of putting its house in order before privatisation. It had been on the market for six weeks, and sealed bids were being invited – Thames didn't really know how to price it. Its problem was that all the bids were being made subject to planning permission, which it didn't want to hang around for, so in

October 1988 it held an auction. I bought it for £121,000.

My mother thought I was mad, spending that on an uninhabitable tower full of pigeons. It was basically a void from the ground to the fourth floor, with an old timber staircase up three sides of the octagon. There were large cracks down the sides. It's made of very hard engineering bricks, but it's been stuck up on a hill for 100 years with the rain driving in; the brickwork was knackered.

It was listed, and it took me a year to get planning permission, during which time I battled to get rid of the birds. I blocked the windows and stuck a plastic owl on the roof. That worked wonders, although it mysteriously disappeared after a while, I don't know how.

I didn't have a clear idea of what I was going to do; I only knew it was

Elspeth Beard, an architect with David Clark Associates, lives in a 40m-high water tower which she converted into living accommodation herself. The tower, near Godalming in Surrey, was built in 1898. The conversion has won an RIBA regional award and the Downland Design Award

possible to do something. I only qualified in 1988, and hadn't done any large live projects. I didn't have a clue, to be honest, how much money and work it would take. There are things you don't think about – like £10,000 on scaffolding. It was a nightmare just trying to get it dry. I'd owned the place for two years before I even had a waterproof shell. I tanked the living room upstairs, just as you'd tank a cellar. I had all the brickwork pointed and sprayed with silicone stuff, although it hasn't been that successful. I've got a one-hour fire-protected staircase, smoke detectors, doors linked to the fire alarm and emergency lighting. In total, I've probably spent £100,000 over six years.

The entrance hall is at the bottom, then three bedrooms, then kitchen, then living room at the top; which has 28 windows and is flooded with light. People think it must be dark in here because the windows are narrow, but it's not at all, and the light comes in through shafts.

I did 40 per cent of the work myself; I laid the timber floors and built some of the walls. Otherwise I used local builders – but nobody came back to work on it a second time. Building a wall is one thing; building it 80 feet up is another.

Really it was just one thing after another. There's no way I'd do it all again – unless I had a lot of money, somewhere else to live during the work, and someone to do the work for me. I did it while living here with a young baby, nowhere to wash, no hot water and no walls, while doing a full-time job in London.

Before coming here I'd always lived in London and never thought I could live in the country. But I love it, and hope to be living in the tower for a long time. On the roof you can see for miles around and it's very peaceful. Everything I've done here, I've done for myself. And it's nice to have something no one else has lived in. Of course the stairs are a pain at times, but it's a small price to pay to live in something unique.

It was great to get the awards, although I haven't got any work as a result. What I did get, after a piece in *The Times*, were 15 phone calls asking where to buy a plastic owl. I should've gone down to the shop and bought the lot – I was a bit slow there. □

Elspeth Beard was talking to Marion Hancock