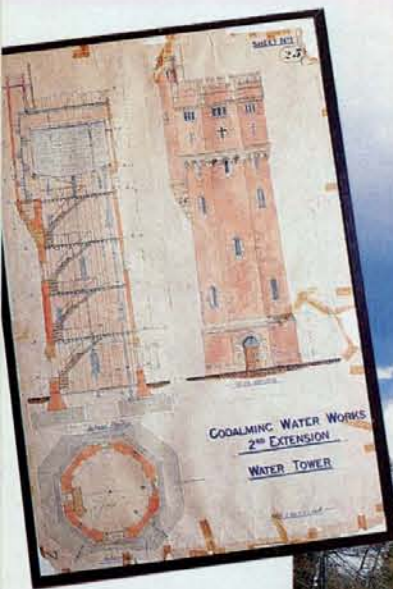


A complete conversion - from top to bottom

When Elspeth Beard decided to create a home from an old water tower, she didn't realise quite how much work she was letting herself in for. *Kenric Hickson* went to see the unique result



The plan drawing of the original water tower (above) is dated 28 April 1898. It has now been framed and takes pride of place on Elspeth's living room wall

Photos: COLIN POOLE



When architect, Elspeth Beard, decided to leave London, she began to search for something different to make into a home. She eventually found it in a 130ft high, Grade II listed water tower in Surrey. 'I spent two years looking,' she says, 'I knew I wanted a place which had never been lived in before and it had to be an interesting building. When I saw

this magnificent brick-built water tower, I knew I was home. 'I asked my father to bid at the auction and it was knocked down at £120,000. At that point it was just a shell but I could see it had great possibilities, although I didn't realise quite how much work I was letting myself in for!' says Elspeth. 'Water was running down the walls and it was full of pigeons. It took several months

of hard, back-breaking work just to clear away all the mess.' After Elspeth had taken possession, work was delayed for 12 months while she waited for planning permission, and another two years was spent making the building waterproof. The 62 cast-iron windows were rusted and rotten and all had to be replaced with specially made frames at a cost of £15,000. The

steel beams to support the floors and staircase cost another £25,000. With such an unusual building, it isn't possible to buy standard fittings, and everything had to be custom-made - the doors, for example, are three metres high. Elspeth built the maple staircase, which runs around the octagonal walls, on to the basic steel structure, securing each tread with four brass bolts. She ▶



ABOVE The ground floor, with its two sets of magnificent custom-made double doors, acts as reception hall. An oriental rug softens the Belgian stone floor which leads, up two steps, to the staircase

LEFT The living room, where new building materials sit happily next to old, is painted a warm salmon pink. The room is both a place to relax and a work-space, where Elspeth keeps her draughtswoman's desk, and a collection of photographs - showing stages of the building development - is displayed proudly on the walls. The spiral staircase, an original feature of the building, leads up to the roof

BELOW Like everything else in the house, the kitchen was designed by Elspeth. Polished Cumbrian slate worktops, with sink and disposal unit, occupy three sides of the room. The big square table and the railway station waiting-room clock are family treasures



RIGHT Each of the bedrooms has its own open-plan bathroom, situated on a mezzanine floor. The warm maple flooring has been used throughout the house



BELOW Seven-year-old Tom's room, which reflects his interests in music and mechanics, has its own private study area



What I love about my home...

'It's worth the climb to the top of the tower for the amazing all-round view. On a clear day I can see the North and South Downs'



LEFT Elspeth's bedroom has a simple elegance. Light floods in on all sides and highlights the plain white walls, which are enlivened with framed prints and paintings. The mezzanine floor supporting the open-plan bathroom is also a perfect display area for special items. The carved horse was a present and came from Africa

further set of magnificent double doors to the staircase linking all the rooms, which are stacked up, one upon another. The walls are painted white, as they are throughout the house, except for the living room, 'I like white,' says Elspeth, 'It's crisp and makes the rooms lighter.'

The guest room is on the first floor and, like the other bedrooms, has its own open-plan bathroom, with toilet, wash-basin and free-standing bath, on a mezzanine floor, reached by maple steps.

Elspeth's room is the next level up. 'None of the windows have curtains,' she says, 'but I'm going to have shutters fitted in my room because the morning sun wakes me too early.'

Seven-year-old Tom's bedroom comes next and, from here, stairs lead up to the kitchen where, as elsewhere, a great deal of thought has gone into the design. The worktops are magnificent slabs of Kirkstone slate mounted above black glass-fronted cupboards. 'The square oak table belonged to my grandmother,' says Elspeth.

From the kitchen it is a mere 26 steps to the living room – a light airy room about 30ft across with warm salmon coloured walls. A spiral staircase against one wall, an original feature of the building, leads up to the roof.

'That means climbing another 34 steps but it's worth the effort,' says Elspeth. 'From the top we have an all-round view which is quite amazing. On a clear day you can see the North and South Downs and, with 3ft high walls, I have complete privacy. It's great for sunbathing.'

The water tower house is unique. The whole concept is a tribute to Elspeth's architectural skills and has been recognised by several prestigious awards, including the coveted RIBA Award for Excellence in Architecture. □

BELOW The stairwell, which runs around the octagonal outer wall, boasts plain white brickwork and maple stair treads. The Rolls Royce Silver Lady figure on the window ledge is from the family car



is understandably proud of her hard work. 'At the time that all this was going on, I was living in London and coming down here every weekend,' she remembers, 'and, in the middle of all that, my baby, Tom, arrived!'

The entrance to the house is through double doors opening on to the stone flagged hall which takes up the whole of the ground floor. Two stone steps on the far side of the room lead through a

LEFT The striking candelabra is made from motor-cycle parts and was given to Elspeth because of her enthusiasm for motor cycling. Some years ago she spent three years travelling around the world on a BMW