





In Edna's footsteps

THE couple knew it was the perfect home the moment they walked inside. "It was magical," they say, "and we loved the garden" - which is just as it should be because both home and garden are the work of legendary garden designer Edna Walling.

Downderry photographed soon after its completion in the 1920s and the house as it is today (main picture) extended and matured into its treed setting. Top right: Maryann and her pet dalmatian in the garden she is restoring.





.... The country style kitchen, although new, has been designed in a sympathetic manner to suit the original architecture of the house. The kitchen and dining area are a perfect backdrop for much of Maryann's collection. Old meat platters line the walls, together with Italian restaurant plates. A collection of pie funnels decorates a shelf above the windows along with an assortment of china frogs and Australian studio pottery from the 1920s and 30s.



And not only were Maryann Sporn-Fiedler and Alan McKirdy enraptured by their purchase, their grown up children also loved it so much they decided to move back home!

Downderry, as the home is named, was originally built by Edna Walling for her mother at Bickleigh Vale in Mooroolbark, an outer suburb of Melbourne at the foot of Mt Dandenong.

Edna, who also lived at Bickleigh Vale, wrote articles for *Home Beautiful* from the 1920s to the late 40s as well as designing gardens for some of Australia's grandest homes.

Passionate about romantic gardens and houses with character, she bought land at Bickleigh Vale and set about building cottages "of charm and personality, that cost no more than a conventional house". Eventually 16 cottages were built with Edna designing each one and, of course, the gardens.

The English-style cottages were made from rudimentary materials to a simple design. Chimneys were in local stone, windows were multi-pane and the

walls often made from packing cases that came from a factory owned by Edna's father.

Over the years, Downderry had been sympathetically extended so, although it still feels like a cottage, there are more rooms as well as a large country style kitchen with modern appliances, a family bathroom and an en suite.

The house was renovated when Maryann and Alan bought it two years ago, with new additions matching the old. The rooms feature English-style high ceilings with beams and delightful multi-paned casement and French windows. Walls are rough cast and the beams and windows dark stained. The original stone fireplace in the music room has been matched by a new one built in the library.

"I knew I had to live here," says Maryann, "it's just one of those houses, it's magical to live in and it suits all our treasures."

Those treasures, Maryann and Alan's amazing collection of antiques, now decorate every corner of the house. >



~ A view from the kitchen to the laundry includes Maryann's display of an old set of pharmacy drawers and chemist's paraphernalia. The wall on the right features a collection of framed black and white prints, etchings and drawings.

An enormous 1930s plaster hall light features in the bedroom. This section of the house has been added on, with all the details matching the original so it's difficult to tell old from new.





many with price tags still attached. "I move things around from shop to home and back again," says Maryann, who with Alan owns an antique centre.

"We have done small things inside," she adds, "but much more in the garden. It was overgrown when we came. I've been reading Edna Walling's books and referring to old photographs to restore the garden. The trademark stone walls are all still here, as well as the trees she planted, the copper beech, American scarlet, horn beam, sugar maple, two lime trees, the robinia copse and her trademark silver birches."

Inside the house, there is a wonderful combination of Maryann and Alan's furniture and decorative pieces to match the rough-cast walls, stone chimneys, dark stained timber and views of the tranquil garden through the multi-paned windows.

In the garden, surrounded by trees, autumn leaves and gentle puffs of smoke from the stone chimneys, there is a sense of peace and the feeling that this really is a special place.

Amid all this beauty, it is easy to understand why Edna Walling worked so hard to convince Australians there are alternatives to "stereotyped and unimaginative" houses and gardens.

Let's hope her influence can still work its magic today!

**Story: Fiona Whittle-Austin
Photography: Dan Magree**

... From the dining room, glassed doors lead through to the library. Dark stained beams and multi-paned windows give the house an English style that offers an ideal setting for the owners' antique collection.

T In the music room, the original fireplace made from local stone makes it a cosy spot in which to curl up with a book or listen to music. Maryann and Alan have covered the walls with their paintings; the collie dog painting above the fireplace is by Maryann's grandmother.

