

The Guardian - February 2001 A plan that turned to mud...castle\

By Craig Goodman.

Back in April 1990, Kevin and Glenys Johnston looked at a triangular-shaped, geographically 'unfriendly- to-work-with', single hectare of gorse-covered clay gully on the Neudorf Saddle.

"Just perfect," they agreed.



This was the first and last piece of land the couple visited with a view to building their dream home - a magnificent castle based in clay mud and straw construction.

Today, you can 'bed and breakfast' in this impressive mansion, surrounded by many features of medieval style - chandeliers, arch-shaped castle doors with bold external hinges, a dungeon which serves as a bar, plenty of mud, straw and exposed timber, and even a coating of ox blood to seal the pantry floor.

But 'The Mudcastle' as it has been aptly named by Kevin and Glenys, hasn't come cheaply - neither in terms of money nor wear and tear on the bodies who formed it from the ground beneath.

Like his dad, Clive the bricklayer, who helped construct the first storey of adobe blocks, shaping The Mudcastle and its landscape has left Kevin with a hernia (part of an organ protruding through the muscle wall of the abdomen), adding to previous conditions he suffered due to physical overload.

And Glenys has a bad back from performing the dual roles of a forklift and a crane.

"It's nearly wrecked us at times, but you can't convince a pair of workaholics to take it easy," say the couple who also run a business, 'Creative Occasions', in Nelson which caters for decorating the venues for parties and special functions.

In the early days of The Mudcastle's construction, day-to-day living for Kevin and Glenys was almost as old-fashioned as the theme of their home.

A single, uninsulated garage placed on a gravel bed was home for two-and-a-half years - no running hot water, two hotplates and an oven that couldn't be used at the same time, a long-drop toilet and a predominantly unskilled workforce of up to 12 WOOFERS (Willing Workers On Organic Farms) to feed three meals a day, and provide a bath under the stars, with water siphoned overland after two hours of boiling the old copper.

The land was cleared with bulldozers, pigs and goats, the building site excavated, the plans drawn up, the on-site clay sieved and the back-breaking construction of over 10,000 adobe blocks began.

This project was interspersed with the production of birthday cakes and endless pavlovas for the non-kiwi helpers - and making home-brewed beer, which certainly wasn't Kevin's first experience in the manufacture of alcoholic beverages.

Remarkably, as a 14 year-old Motueka High School student, Kevin learnt the basic rules of the fermentation process in his third form chemistry class (he won't divulge the name of his teacher) and discreetly produced an assortment of wines from a shed at his Lower Moutere home.

These included beetroot (which he says turned from deep red to golden yellow after a two-year chemical reaction), rose petal ("that's quite a nice one"), carrot, parsnip and even grass (I didn't go for that so much"), as well as the conventional ingredients of berries, pipfruit and grapes.

Kevin says "...one day, somewhere down the track" he looks forward to building a small winery in accordance with the original plans of their grand estate.

But other ideas are taking priority and becoming realised in the meantime.

With its remote rural situation, and perhaps suitably-shaped to accommodate a blood-thirsty Austrian Count, The Mudcastle's appearance would support any suggested rumours... of spooky or sinister 'goings-on'.

Looking up the driveway you might imagine Norman Bates' mother, (from Alfred Hitchcock's 'Psycho'), watching from the top window.

The Mudcastle is an ideal venue for the Murder Mysteries which the Johnstons are now promoting as alternative entertainment to complement a unique dining-out experience.

A minimum of 35 and up to 64 people, often corporate groups travelling by bus, are invited to search for the isolated restaurant location using cryptic clues before an evening of suspicion and suspense unfolds.

Kevin says a recent group of 'dining detectives' thought they had reached their final destination at the cemetery in Upper Moutere.

Once at The Mudcastle, guests are taken on a guided tour, before enjoying a meal with fully licensed bar facilities, while following a special murder-mystery script written exclusively for the venue and their particular group.

Kevin says only the culprit and the organiser are aware of the villain's identity before the case is solved, but as resident host he is able to distinguish a number of red herrings and false evidence from the deliberately planted clues.

"At a recent event one player brought my old mountain bike in from the long grass in the paddock, presenting it as a possible getaway vehicle, while a pair of fibrolite cutters, which dad had left behind after doing some work for us, were submitted as a tool, perhaps used to dismember the corpse," says Kevin.

The Mudcastle is perfect for such an intriguing event as this because, as a private home and set in a remote location, a group of friends, workmates or family doesn't have to put up with distractions from other guests.

Kevin and Glenys admit that although making The Mudcastle has "burnt us out at times", they still have a lot of work to do before their plans are completed.

They shudder at the thought of ever having to start again and even declined generous offers from American and English guests inviting them to oversee the construction of similar homes abroad. The Mudcastle, so far, is the evidence of Kevin and Glenys' ambitious pursuit, so the blood, sweat and tears they have together poured into its development over the last decade, don't expect to find it featured in any real estate agency window in the foreseeable future. It will take more than a bad back, the odd hernia and a fat cheque to persuade this perseverant couple to quit the palace they built in a gorsy gully which challenged the surefootedness of the goats... and the ingenuity of the Johnstons.