

The Press, Christchurch - October 2004 Couple build mud-brick home

Kevin and Glenys Johnston used clay on their land to build their dream, writes Helen Murcoch.

Kevin and Glenys Johnston have carved out their living from Tasman's clay hills. During the past 14 years the couple have transformed steep gorse-covered 1ha clay-based land at the head of Neudorf Valley into a magical location crowned by their own clay-block home-cum-business.

The mud castle is the dream-in-progress for the couple, who say they don't have hobbies but instead have on-going tasks.



In 1990, six weeks after they met, the couple bought the neglected triangle of land not even sure if a viable building site lay under its mantle of gorse.

A tin roadside garage served as home while they cut the gorse by hand, pushed in a driveway and building site and turned to the surrounding clay to provide them a home.

A builder friend introduced them to clay-block building.

Armed with an Australian library book on the subject, and aided by a one-day practical course, the Johnstons started making the 10,000 17kg clay blocks their home would eventually require.

"It was always going to be a big house," said Kevin, "but it became bigger because the labour was ours and the building product was free."

Excavated from the house site, the sun-baked clay blocks for the 500 sq m home were formed, dried and laid with the help of 100 Wwoofers (willing workers on organic farms).

The labour-intensive textbook foot-stomping method was used for the first batch, but, with a pitiful batch of 70 blocks and fast running out of friends, other options were explored.

The refined cake-mixer method, using a customised rotary hoe, produced 300 blocks on a good day. Three rotary hoes and one front end loader later, the required blocks were produced.

The blocks were baked in wooden molds, with covers to moderate temperature extremes.

The completed two-storey home - the top floor is built of Lawson cypress and macrocarpa - promotes solar heating and valley views.

The couple had 10 - 12 Wwoofers living in the house at any one time during the construction phase, while they lived in the garage.

The private restaurant aspect of what is now called The Mudcastle started with an approach from the women's division of Federated Farmers to look through the home.

Murder-mystery evenings took off after a local bank wanted something a little different in way of a work function.

Themed weddings and functions began after the couple's own nuptials and conversations with brides stressed from organising their own receptions.

The Johnstons are now building stage two of their dream: three turrets.

The first is a function room attached to the front of the house, the second, connected to the main house by a castellated wall, is a two-storey honeymoon suite. The third, to be built on the eastern side, is to be the couple's private living space.

They expect to start building the final turret in two year's time.

The construction is following the mud-brick theme, but is using a clay-based mix developed by Kevin's father, Clive.

The breezeblock-style bricks are as strong as concrete and only a quarter of the weight. They also do not require weather protection as is needed by traditional clay bricks.

It is the first time the new bricks have been used in a building and will eventually be patented for sale.

The Mudcastle story... .. it interests people from all over the world.

The Nelson Mail - July 2001

Kevin and Glenys Johnston bought a one hectare triangle of undulating gorse and scrub in April 1990, six weeks after meeting!

It was the first and only piece of land they looked at; they proceeded to turn it into what is now The Mudcastle.

Today you can stay overnight in this quality bed and breakfast, take a group to a private dinner party, experience their murder mystery dinner evening or get married and honeymoon in the dream venue Kevin and Glenys are still creating.

Guests are frequently caught up in the pioneering magic of The Mudcastle story - a single, uninsulated garage sitting on gravel was the home of this enterprising, energetic couple for two and a half years. There was no running hot water, two hotplates and an oven which couldn't be run at the same time and a workforce of up to 12 WWOOFERS (Willing Workers on Organic Farms) to feed three times a day. They bathed under the stars and trees (and birds) with hot water siphoned off after two hours of boiling the copper - add to this a long-drop toilet and you have accommodation as far away from their current home as you could ever get.

But, the story is the legend here. It is part of what makes The Mudcastle so interesting, so wonderful and so homely.

Kevin and Glenys now live in a home they created - their dream turned into a reality and a place where they radiate their vitality.