

Journalist-author Helen Brown takes a trip down memory lane and rediscovers the enchantment of childhood in Bracken Street's

Magic Castle

The house seems smaller, but the garden has grown since Dad stalked among the growth, hedgeclippers in hand. The garden was always getting out of control in Bracken St. So was everything else.

It was a constant struggle to keep ahead of the exterior paintwork, the leaks and the bees in my parents' bedroom wall. The insects had found an entrance under the eaves and populated the wall lining.

Various experts arrived with smoke and poisons over the years, but the best they ever did was convince the bees they should reconsider taking over the world. Mum often announced the bees had gone for good.

The hassles of keeping the house were no more than a distant rumble in my ears. It was simply a magical place to grow up. The place attracted eccentrics and children in droves. It was quite usual to find teenagers singing Beatles' songs with their legs dangling over the upstairs veranda roof. Or a visiting male ballet dancer applying lipstick in the bathroom mirror.

Animals

I was always trying to grow animals and was furious the morning after one of my brother's parties when I found a women's shoe in my tropical fish tank. He had to be tolerant on a more permanent basis, however. He slept in the room under the tower where I kept a colony of white mice. I pretended not to understand why he complained of the smell. It was a homely, sawdust perfume.

Mum and Dad never really wanted the house. They had put in an offer on a tidy conventional place near New Plymouth Hospital. But a lawyer beat them to it and offered them his own house to make up for it.

That was Bracken St (circa 1911). Vast, ornate and decidedly unfashionable in the early 1950s. During the 23 years we lived there we had no idea it had once been graced with the name Glen Stuart. If anyone had known, it would have been glossed over on the grounds of pretentiousness.

There was nothing flash about the inside. The carpets were either plain or verging on threadbare. Mum was forever trailing about

Left: A small girl's magic castle, a wedding cake, or just plain spooky . . . take you pick of the descriptions applied to this Bracken St, New Plymouth house.

By HELEN BROWN

with a dripping tin can. Painting windows. In the mornings she was on the black telephone at the bottom of the stairs. Talking theatre.

Dad spent a lot of time mowing lawns. He really did love the garden. He called the two tall native trees on the front lawn The Lovers. They're getting spindly now, but their passion hasn't diminished. Their branches are still entwined.

The house seems to inspire loyalty. In all its years it's had only six owners. A photo of the first one, Charles Stuart Curtis, now stares sternly out of a frame in the entrance hall.

The latest owners, Peter and Jocelyn Rich, have tidied a lot of things up. When they bought the place in 1978 for \$50,000, they allowed 15 years and double the purchase price for renovations. So far, they've spent \$80,000. The latest exterior paint job, woodwork repairs and new decking on the verandas cost a cool \$33,000.

Gold taps

It's impossible not to feel heart-strings tug at the upstairs bathroom looking exactly as it was — hideous brown lino and all. The mirrors I found so difficult to reach are still there, but not much longer. Mrs Rich plans "the full works" for this room — carpet, gold taps and spa bath.

My old upstairs bedroom belongs to Tammy, aged 12.

Tammy seems unnerved when I tell her about the good spirits in that room, but I don't mean to frighten her. Every night I'd leave the window closed, but unlatched. Every morning, the good spirits would open it at precisely 6.50. Mrs Rich hastens to explain there's a safety lock on the window now.

The Riches have done marvellous things with the ceilings in the two larger upstairs bedrooms. They've torn out false ceilings to discover elegant roof-lines and two new sets of stained glass windows. One of the previous owners had blocked them off because she said it was like sleeping in a church.

They have also found all the leaks and got rid of the bees. The nest went the length of the wall.

The Riches used to live in a 93 sq m (1000 sq ft) Beazley home. It was certainly a con-

trast coming here. Mrs Rich calls it heaven.

Her confident hand has touched almost every corner — from the basement well, which has been cemented over since one kitten too many fell down it, to the roof slates which have been scrubbed to a blushing pink.

"I like doing things properly," she says. "You wouldn't believe the number of people who say we'll have to start all over again when we're finished. They don't understand about restoration."

Although purists might quibble with some of her choices, Mrs Rich has attacked her task with enthusiasm and fierce affection for the house. Her decision to gut the tower and turn it into a playing space on three levels was an adventurous and successful one. There's not the slightest hint of sawdust in the air.

Their two sons Aaron (11) and Jason (4) seem to have made the most of the space the house offers. Aaron has turned the huge basement into his own domain (complete with electric lights) and built a tree-house in The Lovers (I'm sure Dad would have approved).

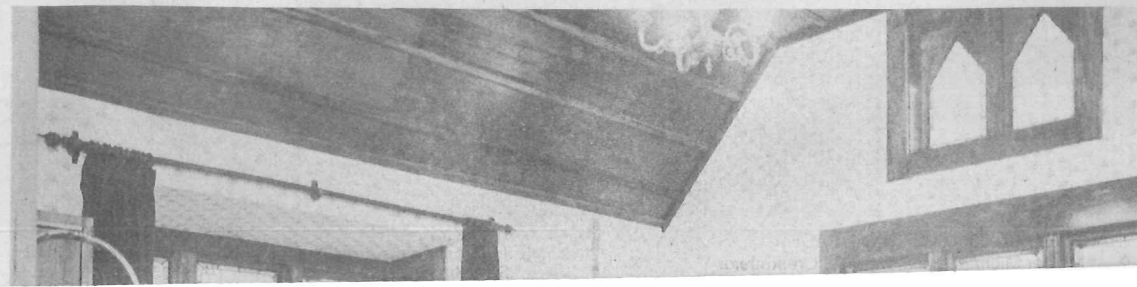
Bracken Street has always been a curiosity. I sometimes felt embarrassed living in a place that school mates called a wedding cake, a church, and spooky. But it did lovely things for our family, largely because it provided enough room for sulks, rages, music lessons, parties and fleeting moments of passion.

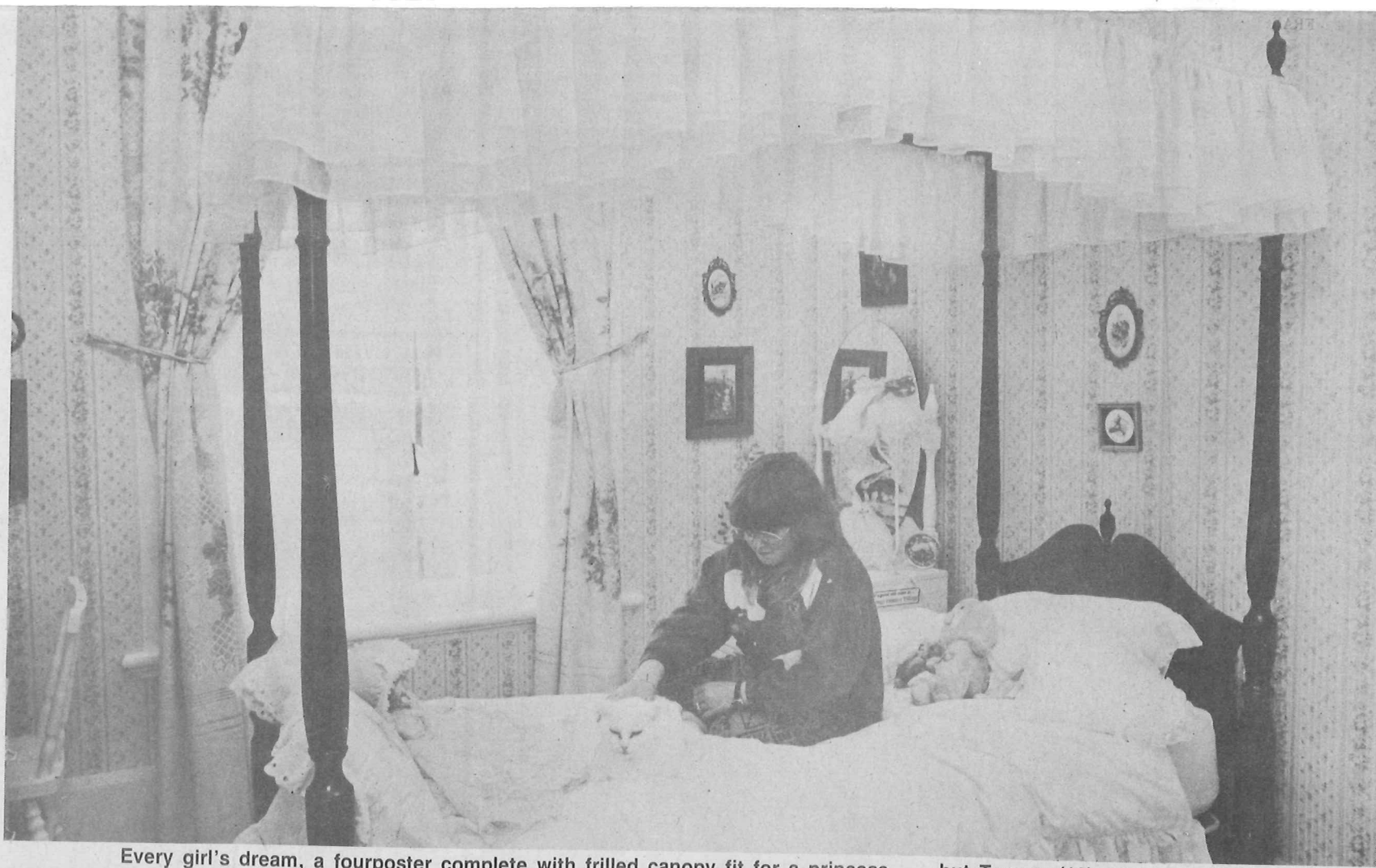
Inhibitions out

People seemed to shed their inhibitions the moment they stepped in the door. Full-grown men slid down banisters. Children dropped paper bags full of water from the top veranda. Mum could have a singing rehearsal in the living room while Dad and his pipe-smoking friend brooded over a chessboard in the dining room with Beethoven blaring from the loudspeaker.

Recently, the house has gained fame in a more bizarre form as star of a Listener comic strip titled Dick Sargeson. While almost everyone finds the plot inscrutable, locals delight in the easily recognisable characters and places.

Nobody seems able to place its style. Some say it's Italian. Others swear it's French. Pictures of similar houses have been taken in the United States. Whatever its origins, the house is a flamboyant individual who tends to mould its inhabitants the same way.

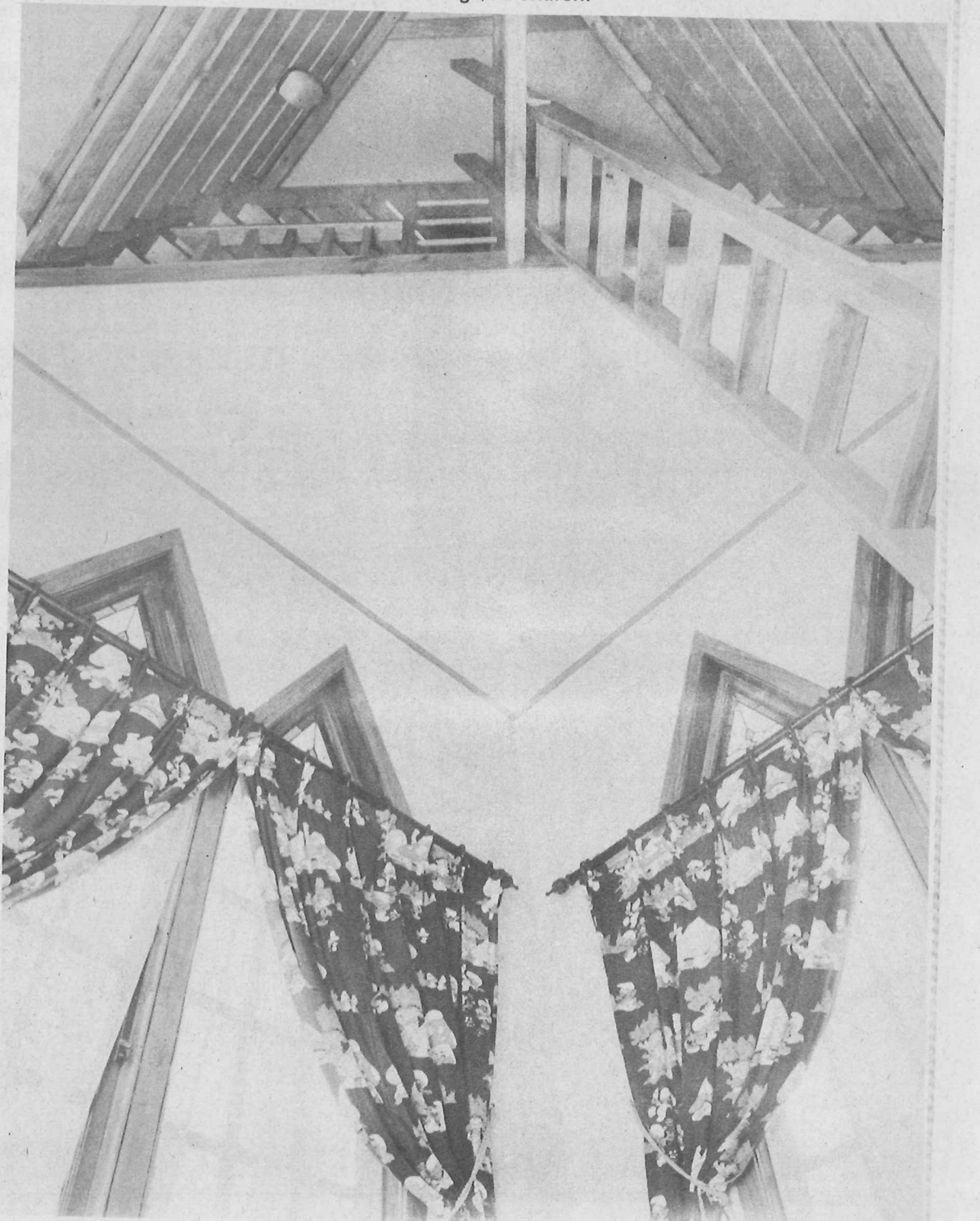




Every girl's dream, a fourposter complete with frilled canopy fit for a princess . . . but Tammy (12), pictured with friends, was not sure she wanted to know about Helen Brown's good spirits.



Jocelyn Rich in the master bedroom with its rediscovered ceiling and leadlight windows . . . "like living in a church."



From Jason's room, two ladders lead to the tower. Pictures by Glen Fergusson



The kitchen . . . transformed by the addition of a breakfast bar, modern cupboards and 13 power points.