

BEFORE...



In the beginning...



Laundry as it was.



The soon to be pantry.



The old bathroom.



Much more than a renovation

The farmer becomes a wife

BY SOPHIE LOVE

When I found my dream farm in 2007 it had a tiny cottage by the river that looked (to inexperienced me) like it just needed a facelift – new kitchen, new bathroom and rip out three walls. Of course, as all experienced owner builders know, it's a bit like having a baby; the fantasy and the facts are very different. So I hired a builder to get cracking as soon as the sale was settled. He was to be on site for a week and have the place habitable by the time the menagerie and I arrived.

This very simple old weatherboard home consisted of verandah, kitchen, central sitting room with three internal walls, each with a doorway, one double bedroom, one single bedroom, an old-fashioned bathroom and a poky laundry area at the back door. The old back verandah had been enclosed long ago and so there was a fantastic pantry and a good sized slow combustion stove – but with those three walls around the sitting room, no way for the heat to circulate through the house.

Slow start

When I got there, despite our conversations, it didn't look like much had happened. He might have been sweet and his quotes had certainly been low, but he was slow; again and again I turned to my new friend, Ged the solar installer, who also happened to be a licensed builder. Soon the first builder got fired, after wasting an awful lot of my very tight budget, and Ged and I

became inseparable as he took the work on as a labour of love (rather like the tasks of Hercules!)

The first builder had ripped down the walls but one of them was load bearing and he hadn't understood my post and beam brief. He had decided to make his own telescopic piers and they looked cheap, unsteady and unattractive. He had also ripped up the carpet and underlay throughout the house and the lino in the kitchen. What was exposed were a number of uneven floors with unattractive (and cold) gaps between boards, and a mishmash of particleboard and very old floorboards. Somehow we were going to have to level the floor, lay the whole house area with particleboard (after levelling the joists) and then re-floor with timber boards.

The dog, cat and I had been sleeping in the house while this work progressed. Winter by the river on the NSW mid north coast may not be as cold as some, but we had deep frosts and for the first time in my life I slept fully clothed in thermals and layers, a beanie, and under every doona and blanket I possessed. If it hadn't been for the dog and cat snuggled up to me for body warmth I don't know that I would have survived. The gas-fired hot water had packed up two days after I got there so Ged had been under pressure to get the solar hot water up and running. Meanwhile I filled the bath with kettles and pans of boiling water for my daily ablutions. In a cast iron bath, by the time I had boiled the next pan what I had just put in the bath was cold. The air was as blue as my body!



Tallowwood posts and a red gum beam replaced the old load bearing studs once the internal wall was removed, opening the space up.



Progress

But once Ged took over things started to move a little more quickly (he had ulterior motives in keeping me happy as it turned out). First he fixed the roof, which leaked in a number of places. It pretty much all had to come off and then be properly attached with bitumen impregnated foam under the joins (it's a very shallow pitched roof and apparently water can run uphill). We also took the opportunity to install pure wool insulation which has made a huge difference.

Ged ripped out the horrible shelving in the pantry and built me proper shelves so there was one room in the house that felt like a home and we had somewhere to store all the food and utensils. Then he ripped out the kitchen. It had looked fine on the outside (although the wooden bench top was very narrow) but the particleboard shelves inside and the framework of the cupboards were all warped and it was easier to start again. At least once it was gone I felt that progress was being made. Creative cookery took on a whole new meaning!

Once Ged and I became an item we got the big oak queen bed out of the garage and set it up in the master bedroom and it was a damn sight warmer with two in the bed (plus the cat and dog obviously). When we weren't working at weekends we set to work on what we now realised was a bigger project than I had initially envisioned.

Then there was a long period of waiting. We ordered blackbutt (*Eucalyptus patens*) timber floors from the local sawmill at Yarras. I painted endlessly, having not learned the key lesson of priming before applying colour so the Porter's Butter & Sugar yellow took about eight coats to cover the vile hospital-green walls. We replaced two external doors so I painted those (primed first!) and four internal doors as well as seven linen press and wardrobe doors.



Above left: Kitchen transformed...

Above: ...to a creative cooking space.

Right: Small spaces in new bathroom cleverly utilised with shelving having curved edges.

Ged levelled the floor and started re-stumping and we put in plants, cleared years of farm debris in both metal and ordinary skips, put in the chook yard and demolished the original cattle yards, which were right beside the house. We were always gratified when the skip man came because he was so astounded with the changes to the farm – it kept us going.

Ged got sick with a really bad flu and stayed at his home for a week. I was marooned with the first big flood so poor Ged had to get off his sick bed and bring me supplies, as I was ill prepared for being completely cut off from the outside world then (not now!) Then I got the flu and he went away to a conference in Cairns and came back to a waif-like woman in bed still running a raging fever. I will never forget Ged and a colleague humping the huge tallowwood posts in and erecting them, then cutting the red gum beam into them so they could finally remove the load bearing studs, while I was adrift in deliria in my bed. (All the timber was sourced from a retired timber miller less than 10 kilometres away and cut to spec).

Added impetus

Ged took me down to the Central Coast to meet his best friends. One of his friends Gary, who is a carpenter, came up to stay on the farm and speed things along. By this time we had a deadline – we were getting married! If we hadn't had the impetus and inspiration of all our friends and family descending on us for the big day, I don't doubt I would still be living in a building site three years on.

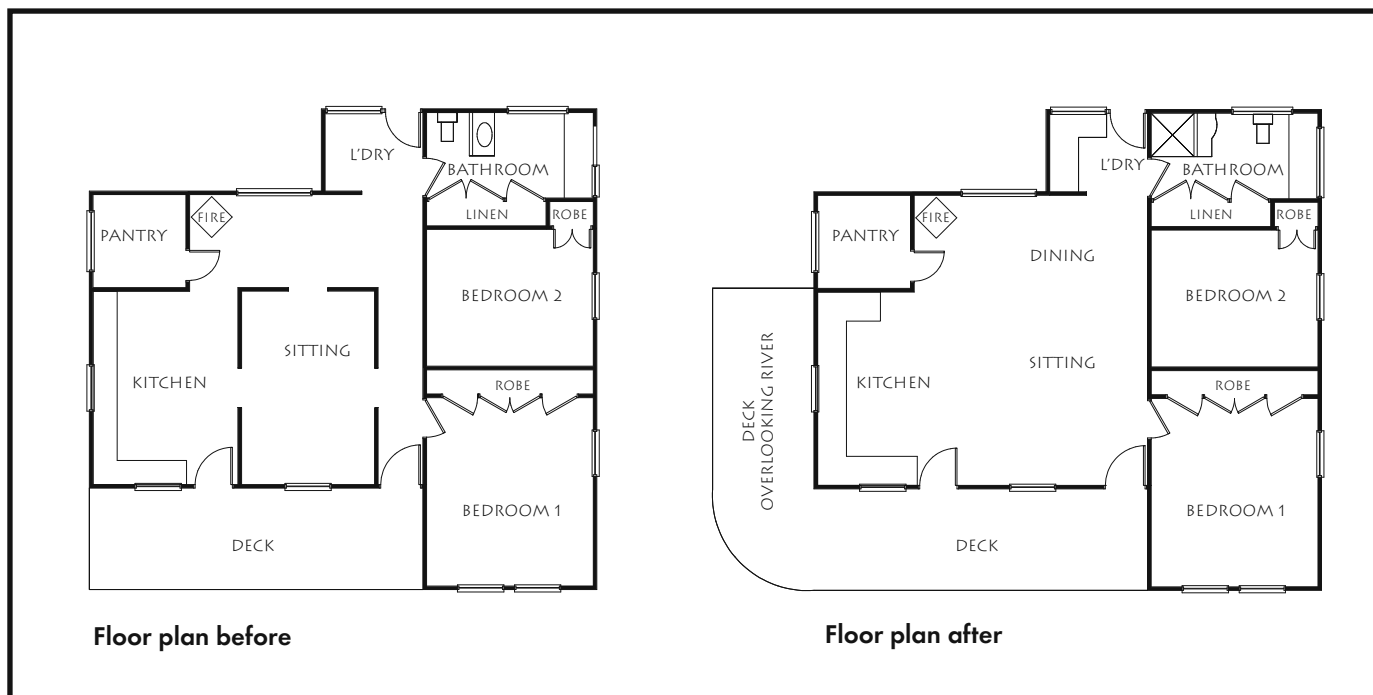
Gary ripped out the bathroom. Unfortunately it wasn't possible to save



the old tiles as they had been concreted to the floor. We discovered that water had been seeping under the tiles for years and the particleboard was completely rotten so that had to be replaced as well. In order to put the shower where the toilet had previously been the Villaboard walls had to be waterproofed and then sealed and tiled. We ripped out the ancient, rotten sash window above the bath and Gary bought a recycled cedar sliding window and customised it to suit. The claw foot steel bath went out into the garden and Ged and I enjoyed many a romantic starlit soak in there. It is still in the garden, repainted, as a reminder of the romance and also as a practical place to wash the dog or cool off on hot days, or perhaps one day to sit and soak in again...

Gary also made a cupboard for a strange empty corner space in what was to be the baby's room – Ged and I were going to be parents. He enclosed the area above the wardrobes in the master bedroom to create additional, useable storage space in what was just a cobweb trap. Another great friend of Ged's, master craftsman and detail joiner Scott Knight, came on board and the new floor was laid, the beautiful tallowwood turned into bench tops, the bath and shower installed. Gary tiled the bathroom and Ged and I went to Sydney to buy the kitchen. My house was beginning to take shape and I felt like it might finally become a home.

The boys assembled the Ikea cupboards without too much swearing, while I rushed out and got a local woodworking company to make me a bench top (the tallowwood we had on



site was just a little bit too varied in width and I couldn't wait a few weeks until Scottie could do it). Ged's best friend, Steve, came up from the Central Coast and worked us all hard, long and relentlessly. He is a star!

I painted the outside, more inside and did a lot of directing. I ordered door knobs online and shopped for paints, bathroom fittings, laundry and kitchen sinks etc. And sometimes I would throw up during mid-morning directionals and sometimes I would have to find a corner for an afternoon nap. I flew down to Sydney for wedding dress fittings and hair care and would be texted photos of work in progress for the okay or not. It was a crazy time. My family turned up a few days before the wedding and were put to work on finishing touches. No one escaped the work detail.

Happy home

We had a lovely day and a well-deserved rest in Fiji. The next deadline looming when we got back was the impending birth, and everything had to be properly finished before then. We built an office so the baby could have his room back and I kept painting and painting... rather like the Sydney Harbour Bridge it could all do with a lick of paint again.

We are totally self sufficient out here. All our power needs are met by our stand alone solar system (not grid

connect), with a back up generator on odd occasions. Water is either from our rainwater tank or pumped from the river. We are 20km off the highway, on a mainly dirt road, and one hour from the nearest town. To us this is all so second nature now!

We have many more building projects planned for the farm and are avid TOB readers. We have learnt from building our 6x7 metre office overlooking the river flat that it's easiest to start from scratch rather than renovate. Also, the chief architect (me) has to be very clear of her vision and instructions and ensure they are properly conveyed to her builder (Ged) and tradies (friends), because girls and boys generally see things differently and understand building practices differently.

The kitchen bench top will need replacing in a year as it is warping and we will have it done properly this time by a local joinery. The Ikea kitchen is not withstanding the constant use and while the shells can remain, next year we will need new cupboard doors and drawer fascias. The blackbutt floor is fantastic but very scratched and dinged now. It will need a facelift in a year or so. We made a terrible mistake in using green timber for the posts and they are splitting under the weight of the beam. We inserted ventilating fans (whirligigs) on the roof the first hot summer with Ben and they have been great. We probably should have replaced more windows and

I think we will slowly. Last year Scottie extended the verandah; now we have so much more space and the perfect spot to sit and watch the platypus and the river.

Ben is now two and this is a happy home. Ged and I have built a family, a home, a life and a lifestyle together. Everyone thought I was a fool to buy a 162 hectare farm on the 'wrong' side of the river as a single lady of 40, but look how it turned out . . . the farmer became a mother and a wife!

For further information on renewable energy solutions for your home, go to Ged McCarthy's website, www.energyandspace.com.au. For more articles by Sophie Love, or for help marketing your business, go to www.thezenpen.com.au.



SEIA

Solar Energy Industries Association www.seia.org.au

Rovert Lighting & Electrical

Electrical supplies and lighting, servicing NSW north coast. www.rovert.com.au

Reece

Supplier of bathroom and plumbing products. 1800 032 566, www.reece.com.au

Customline Joinery

Stunning craftsmanship, care and attention to detail in all things timber. 02 6585 3065 www.customlinejoinery.com.au