

All the Right Moves

Living the HARROWSMITH
dream: An update

by Tom Cruickshank

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN FULKER

Since we first paid them a visit in our April 1988 issue, country living has taken some interesting turns for Derek Hill and Betsy Johnston. What better time to catch up with them than on the occasion of HARROWSMITH'S 25th anniversary, for like the magazine itself, times have changed for the industrious couple, but old ideals still shine through.

Derek Hill and Betsy Johnston did not take the decision to pull up stakes lightly. They had invested their hearts and souls into the construction and maintenance of a unique log home near Sutton in Quebec's Eastern Townships ski country. Indeed, the house had been Derek's passion since 1974, the reward that compensated for the workaday stress of a career as an airline pilot. "I built that house with my own hands with hardly a thought of moving on," he recalls fondly. But in 1993, Derek and Betsy kissed it all good-bye. It's hard to fathom how they could possibly improve on their log retreat in the woods, but they found an even better idyll on Salt Spring, the much-praised rural paradise in B.C.'s beautiful Gulf Islands.



An exercise in do-it-yourself rusticism, Derek and Betsy's Quebec home appeared in HARROWSMITH in 1988.

When HARROWSMITH dropped in with a camera in 1988, there were signs that Derek and Betsy were already growing restless. With always a project on the go, it appeared they had done it all. Derek had dismantled not one, but two pioneer log cabins and rebuilt them as a family home. The couple had combed the Quebec countryside in search of antiques with which to furnish it. Meanwhile, Derek had indulged his penchant for tinkering with what he calls "other people's junk," by rescuing, adapting and reusing such time-worn artifacts as a discarded cookstove and an ancient cast-iron wood furnace. Outside, he had dammed a brook and dug a pond. For three years, Derek and Betsy had opened their doors to paying guests—their foray

Under the shade of an arbutus tree, Derek and Betsy take a break on their waterfront deck.



With tall gables overlooking the bay, the new home on Salt Spring Island adopts a more sophisticated pose.



Not your average cellar: the basement opens at grade, offering a patio with a view toward the water.

Knowing that “everyone always ends up in the kitchen,” the open-concept floor plan ensures guests and cook are never separated.

Cathedral ceilings and plenty of wood set the stage for the decor.

into innkeeping demanded extensive renovations to the house, not to mention a round-the-clock commitment to preparing meals, changing the linens and all the other duties of the hospitality trade. Also on hand were seven kids—his, hers and theirs—as Derek maintained his duties at Air Canada. After 13 years, it was time for a breather. “At present,” our article said, “Derek seems be taking stock of his love affair with log buildings and building in general. For the first time, he has no great renovation plans in mind.”

At the time, Derek and Betsy were in the throes of a quandary that, sooner or later, plagues every country dweller with a mortgage. Our HARROWSMITH story continued, “It is a common and curious circle: to have financial security that curbs freedom, and to desire freedom but fear the uncertainty it brings.” Like many another couple who embraces rural life, they longed to have the financial means to live independently, free

from the rat race. But at the same time, the regular paycheque was impossible to forsake. Derek says, “That’s why we went into innkeeping: to earn a living at home.” It worked for a while, but by the third year, Betsy, who took on the lion’s share of the duties while Derek was flying 727s, was burning out. So the circle continued until the couple came up with a novel solution: they became developers.

It was an idea that struck out of the blue. “Our log house stood on 360 acres of pristine woodlands and fields in a tourist region that was ripe for recreation-home development,” Derek says. So he and Betsy took a portion of their property and subdivided it into 20 five-acre lots. With their rustic abode and blue-jeans demeanour, the couple was a far cry from the fast-talking suits for which the real estate trade is notorious. “We were determined to be responsible developers,” says Betsy, recalling how each lot was sold with a covenant that, among

other things, restricted the number of trees that could be felled. In addition to providing roads and hydro, the couple also built a man-made lake—“We learned a thing or two from building our pond,” says Betsy—to which every property owner would have access. But from a personal point of view, perhaps the most significant aspect of the proposed development was the construction of a new model home. “It was designed to set the tone for the entire community,” says Betsy of its tall gables and walls of windows. But financing the new house was no easy task. “We had to make a tough decision to leave our much-loved log house behind.” With that, Derek’s hand-hewn labour of love was up for sale.

The move to Salt Spring Island came still later, as a long-buried dream finally rose to the surface. Always an avid sailor, Derek longed to spend more time on his yacht. “In the back of my mind, I always harboured a notion to take a year off and sail far, far away,” he admits. “Of course, raising a family came first, but in the meantime, I still fantasized about spending more time on the water, about living somewhere I could dock my

boat at my doorstep.” In 1993, when all but their youngest child had left the nest, Derek and Betsy finally indulged the call for adventure and started the search for waterfront land. At first, they set their sights on Lake Champlain, then the Great Lakes, until finally they found nirvana on the west coast. On Salt Spring Island, tucked into the Straight of Georgia between Vancouver Island and the mainland, they found three vacant acres of waterfront property for sale. “It was a big deal to move 2,000 miles from home and it meant we would have to build yet another house from the ground up,” confesses Betsy. “But one look at this peaceful location was all it took. Best of all, the water is deep enough for an anchorage.”

Discovered years ago by an eclectic mix of back-to-the-landers and Vancouver weekenders (see “The Good Life on the Gulf Islands,” April 1998) Salt Spring is hardly known for bargains in real estate these days. “Thus began another chapter in juggling the country dream with the reality of finances,” says Derek, who kept his job flying with Air Canada. While waiting for the lots back east to sell, the couple took a lesson from past experience and decided on another foray into the hospitality trade. “This time, we figured on opening a bed and breakfast, not a full-fledged inn,” Betsy explains. “A B&B is smaller and doesn’t serve dinner, which makes my workload much more reasonable.”

Betsy settled on three guest rooms. “They are separate from our private living quarters, and each has its own bath,” she says, describing some of the features she specified when she and Derek set about designing their new dwelling. “Moreover, they were intended to double as family accommodation whenever the kids

Betsy Johnston and Derek Hill call their year-round B&B "Anchorage Cove." Accommodation with continental breakfast starts at \$145 a night; You can learn more by visiting their web site at www.anchoragecove.com or writing 449 Long Harbour Road, Salt Spring Island, B.C. V8K 2M2; phone 1-888-537-5360.



come home for a visit." Technically, the guest accommodations are in the cellar, but you'd never know it because the house is wedged into a slope so that the basement opens at grade on the downhill side. "And bonus: all the rooms have an ocean view."

Building a B&B into their plans was only one of the criteria. Foremost in Betsy's mind was an open-concept living area uninterrupted by interior partitions. "A house is more sociable when the kitchen, dining and sitting areas are one big room," she explains. "Besides, whether it's family or friends, everyone always ends up in the kitchen, so why separate it from the rest of the house?" Likewise, Betsy and Derek were anxious to take advantage of the panorama over the bay, which explains the presence of such architectural devices as floor-to-ceiling picture windows, cathedral ceilings, corner windows and a full-width deck whose railing is supported not by a balustrade but by see-through glass panels that don't block the view. "We took all these ideas to a local builder named Tony Meek, who wove them into a coherent package with tall gables and scalloped-shingle siding," Betsy continues. "He calls the look 'post-Victorian.'"

The house is inviting, informal and innovative, but even Derek admits it's a long way from the rustic charms of a recycled log dwelling. "This is a much more sophisticated house that just wasn't suited to my hack-and-hew style of carpentry," he laughs. He still likes to tinker, but is more apt to apply his talents to maintaining his sailboat, building a dock or making a trellis for the clematis. Nevertheless, Derek sees some similarities. "Just like the log house, wood is a strong presence here: in the maple floors, the pine trim, the recycled antique doors and exposed wood beams." And of course, their collection of old Quebec furnishings add a rustic note to the decor.

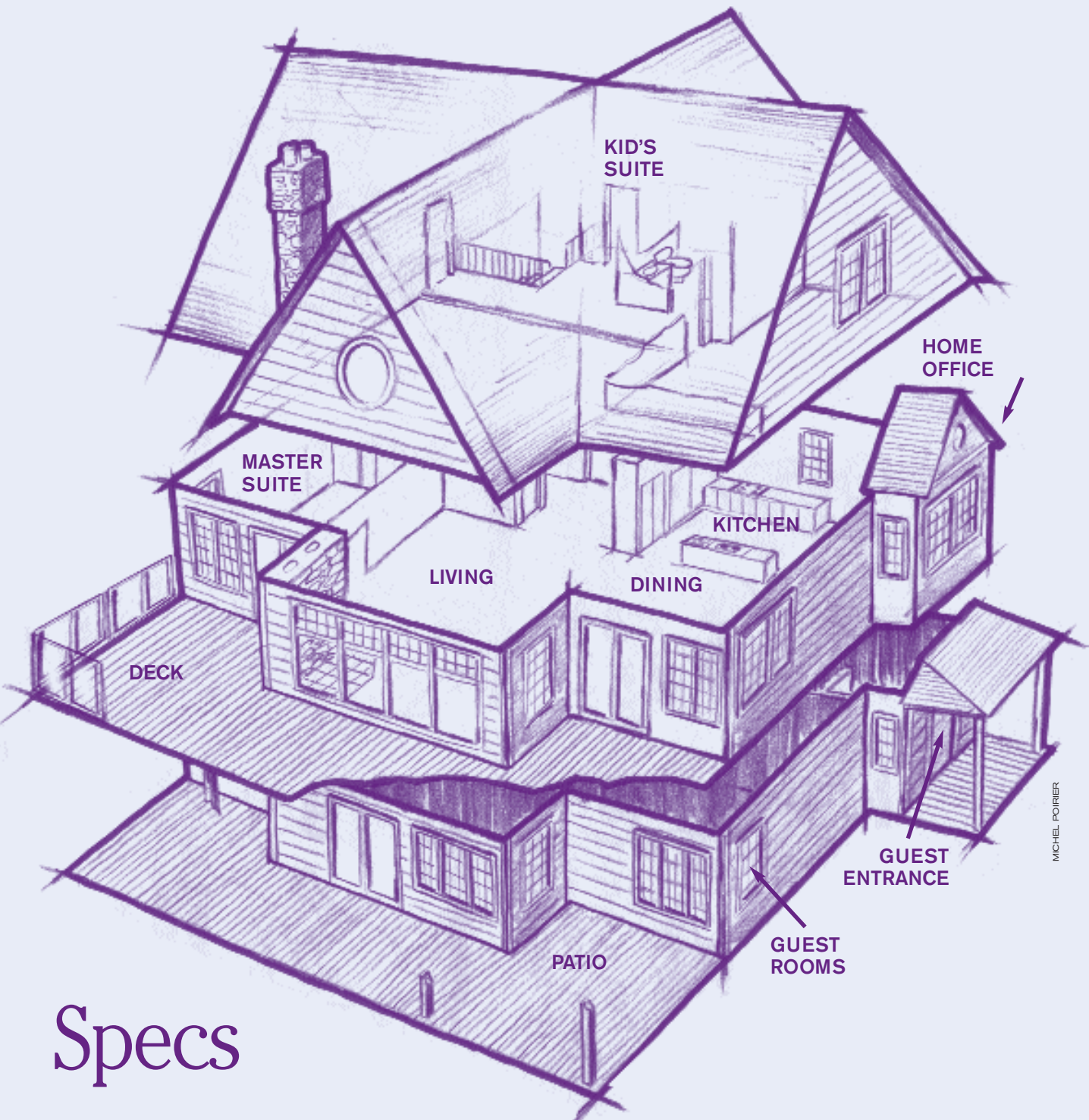
In a way, Betsy and Derek's new life on Salt Spring is a microcosm of the country dream and how it has evolved over the years. Back in the '70s and '80s, it was enough just to live the rural lifestyle, no matter how rudimentary the surroundings. "But we're older now," Betsy says. Like many other successful country couples, she and Derek are more inclined to indulge creature comforts than in the old days. "We loved the log house, but it was dark; it felt confining," Derek admits. "So maybe it's no surprise that we built something more sophisticated this time round." Moreover, they have less patience for do-it-yourself endeavours. "If we'd had the time and the talent, we would have built this place with our own hands. But it was just too much to ask." Nevertheless, the couple embraces country living for the same reasons they always have: for the opportunity to putter in



Wedged into a slope at the water's edge, the house has a monumental scale softened by Victorian-inspired detail. Meanwhile, Derek's yacht awaits.

the garden; to build a unique home that expresses something of themselves; to live in a place not too far removed from nature; and above all, to be free forever from city stress. It's the HARROWSMITH dream, all grown up.

Through it all, Derek and Betsy still juggle finances to keep their dream alive. "I'm still flying, but retirement is looming," says Derek. And with their youngest now in her teens, he wonders if the time isn't right to consider a new direction. "It's not too late for that round-the-world cruise," he muses. *



Specs

Concept Two-storey post-Victorian waterfront home. Built by Tony Meek Construction, Salt Spring Island, with design advice by owner. Owner on hand daily for approvals as construction progressed.

Location Near Ganges on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia

Bedrooms 6 (3 for family, 3 for B&B guests)
Bathrooms 6

Total usable floor area About 4,200 square feet, including bed and breakfast accommodation

Cost About \$66 a square foot

Built 1994

Foundation Poured slab

Roof Asphalt shingles

Siding Cedar shingles, stained for easy maintenance; gables fitted with decorative fish-scale shingles.

Heat The local climate is so mild that heating is not a major consideration. All that is required is two small wood stoves—one for the guest quarters, another in the main living area—supplemented by electric baseboards.

Wood is easy to come by: owners gather stray logs in the bay that have escaped from lumber operations.

Insulation R6 (walls); R30 (ceiling)

Electrical service 200 amp

Water Well with 2,000 gallon tank-reservoir at top of hill behind house.

Windows Low-emissivity (glass coated with insulating film) thermal units

Walls Drywall throughout

Floors Maple strip flooring; ceramic tile in kitchen/entry areas