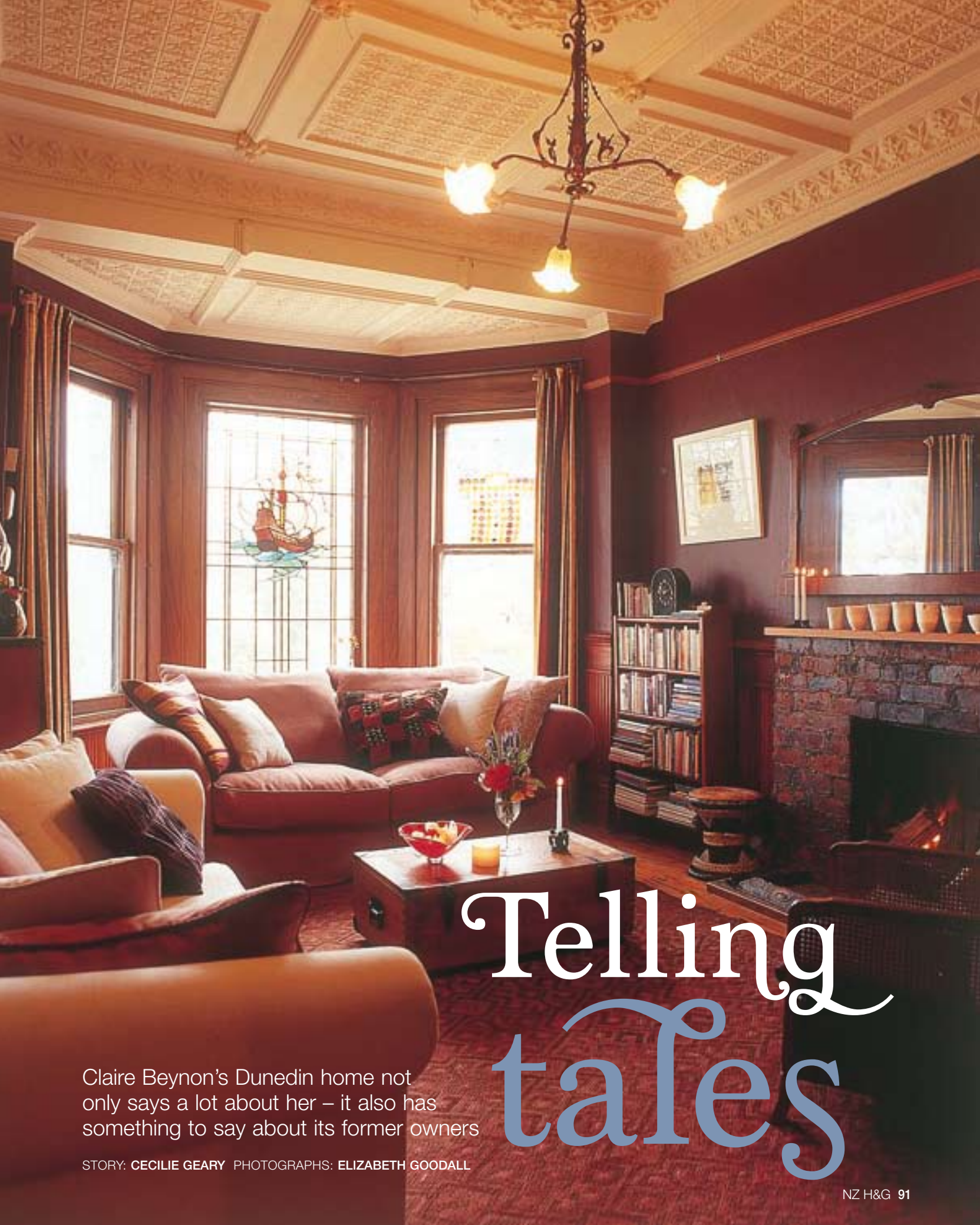


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# Telling tales

Claire Beynon's Dunedin home not only says a lot about her – it also has something to say about its former owners

STORY: CECILIE GEARY PHOTOGRAPHS: ELIZABETH GOODALL



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Next to the fireplace in artist and poet Claire Beynon's bedroom is a black deed box. Written on it in large letters are the words "John Irving, Cape Town". And thereby hangs a romantic tale. John Irving is Claire's grandfather and it was on a voyage between Southampton and South Africa in the early 1930s, accompanied by said box containing his personal papers, that he met his future wife, Claire's grandmother.

In the same room, one of Claire's own artworks – a large painting called *Crossing* – marks her personal journey from Cape Town to Dunedin twelve years ago, with husband Pieter and children Alisaundre, Daniel and Tomas.

Since acquiring her 1880s villa in the harbourside suburb of Ravensbourne in 2002, Claire has continued to juxtapose the past with the present. She clearly loves history but, though she has retained most of the house's original features, she has also filled it with an abundance of contemporary artworks – her own and those of other artists. The colours blend seamlessly with the other colours in the house.

Neutral colours predominate. Claire has chosen natural-coloured calico or cotton for her curtains and white linen for the beds. "You dream differently on white linen. I couldn't sleep on anything else." Nature's colours even come into play in the things she collects – shells, stones, old wooden fonts and metal type, vintage bottles in watery shades of green. ▷



## “You dream differently on white linen”

As for her time-worn furniture, collected assiduously with the help of Hayward’s Auctions in Dunedin, it fits in so perfectly it feels as if the house was waiting for it to arrive. Claire modestly calls these pieces “fortunate finds” but there’s a little more to it than that – she has an obvious talent for knowing what to put where.

In the bathroom, a tour de force of creative thinking, wall-mounted builders’ planes act as towel hooks, wooden bobbins from a Yorkshire spinning mill do duty as candle stands and a demolition-yard washstand has had its legs replaced with rough-hewn wooden ones that match the beams on the ceiling. It’s not often you see a bath in the middle of a room, end-on to a window, but Claire has positioned hers for the harbour view.

Claire’s studio, a large, lofty space filled with light, is every artist’s dream. When she built it, on the site of a former courtyard at the rear of the house, she was mindful of the fact that, although it was a contemporary structure, it had to have the same feel as the rest of the place.

All the timbers used here are rough-hewn and nothing is sanded or polished. “The team from Top Notch Builders and I worked together on the project and it gave us all a lot of pleasure,” says Claire. ▷



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The wiring for the studio's underfloor and ceiling heating is housed in an industrial, finned radiator pipe – another demolition-yard find.

Through a window at the end of the studio, under the stairs leading up to the loft, Claire's tiny galley kitchen can be glimpsed. Standing on the sill is a milk bottle carrier filled with old one pint bottles, a reminder of the days when "good things" came in glass.

Though the studio is the creative hub of the house, Claire will sometimes work in one of the smaller rooms – outer rooms that became inner rooms when the studio was added and still have their exterior windows.

Or she might set up her easel in front of the fire in the living room. It's not hard to see why she likes working here. The walls are a rich, deep oxblood colour and the space takes you in a cosy embrace.

One of the focal points in the living room is a wall covered with theatre bills, electioneering posters, old advertisements

and public notices relating to the suffragette and temperance movements. Some of the material – the legacy of one of the house's previous owners – dates back to 1860. The wall is social history writ large.

For the real writing on the wall, though, you need to go into the hall. Here, on a wall stripped bare of paint, visitors to the house are encouraged to write a verse or scribble a few words of wisdom. Though most are happy to oblige, the less eloquent simply pen their names.

Two years ago, in a heavy rainstorm, this area of the house was badly flooded when water poured in through the roof. The rest of the damage was repaired but this particular wall was left in its unfinished state.

"I wanted to leave some evidence of the flood as it's part of the house's history," Claire says. "I also hope that eventually the wall will tell a lot of stories."

*Claire's first book, a collection of poetry and images called *Open Book*, will be published by Steele Roberts this month.* ■

