

A towering example of imaginative design

Architect Elspeth Beard's greatest advert is her home – a Grade II listed Victorian water tower which she has painstakingly turned into a luxury residence. Surrey Monocle asked her how it all came about.

Munstead Water Tower, a Grade II listed building four miles from Guildford, was originally constructed in 1898 and was in use for about 70 years. The 130-foot octagonal red-brick tower dominates the skyline for miles around, but it had been derelict for nearly 20 years before Thames Water put it up for auction in October 1988.

It isn't everyone who wants a derelict water tower, but Godalming-based architect

Elspeth Beard bought it for £121,000. What's doubly amazing is that Elspeth bought the tower without planning permission to convert it to residential use – an incredible gamble to take, particularly on a listed building. As Elspeth later commented: "If they hadn't granted me planning permission for habitation I couldn't even have knocked the thing down and sold the bricks!" And just for good measure, at the time when she bought the tower, Elspeth hadn't actually become fully professionally qualified.

Nonetheless, Elspeth set out on an extraordinary five-year project to convert the tower into the home of her dreams.

Elspeth submitted her first set

Elspeth Beard's water tower home dominates the skyline for miles around. Only when you get close to the building do you appreciate its height and overall size.



After 14 months, planning permission was obtained to convert Munstead Water Tower into a residence, and work began on making the tower watertight. Encasing the tower in scaffolding was expected to take a week, but actually stretched to a month

of plans to the local authority three months after the purchase. Elspeth takes up the story: "They provisionally turned me down on two main issues – overlooking (i.e. loss of neighbours' privacy), and means of escape in event of fire. They told me I needed to deal with the escape before they could reach a final decision.

"What it then amounted to, administratively, was that I had to make a building regulations application for a project I had no planning consent for, so it was rejected again on fire

safety grounds. I then had to go to the Department of the Environment to appeal against the building regulations decision.

"Fortunately, I won the appeal, so I went back to the local planning authority to re-submit my original plans – which they then approved."

Obtaining the necessary planning permission had taken over a year and even then left Elspeth with fire safety regulations which would greatly influence the internal layout of her dream home. For example, all

the bedrooms had to be located below the kitchen.

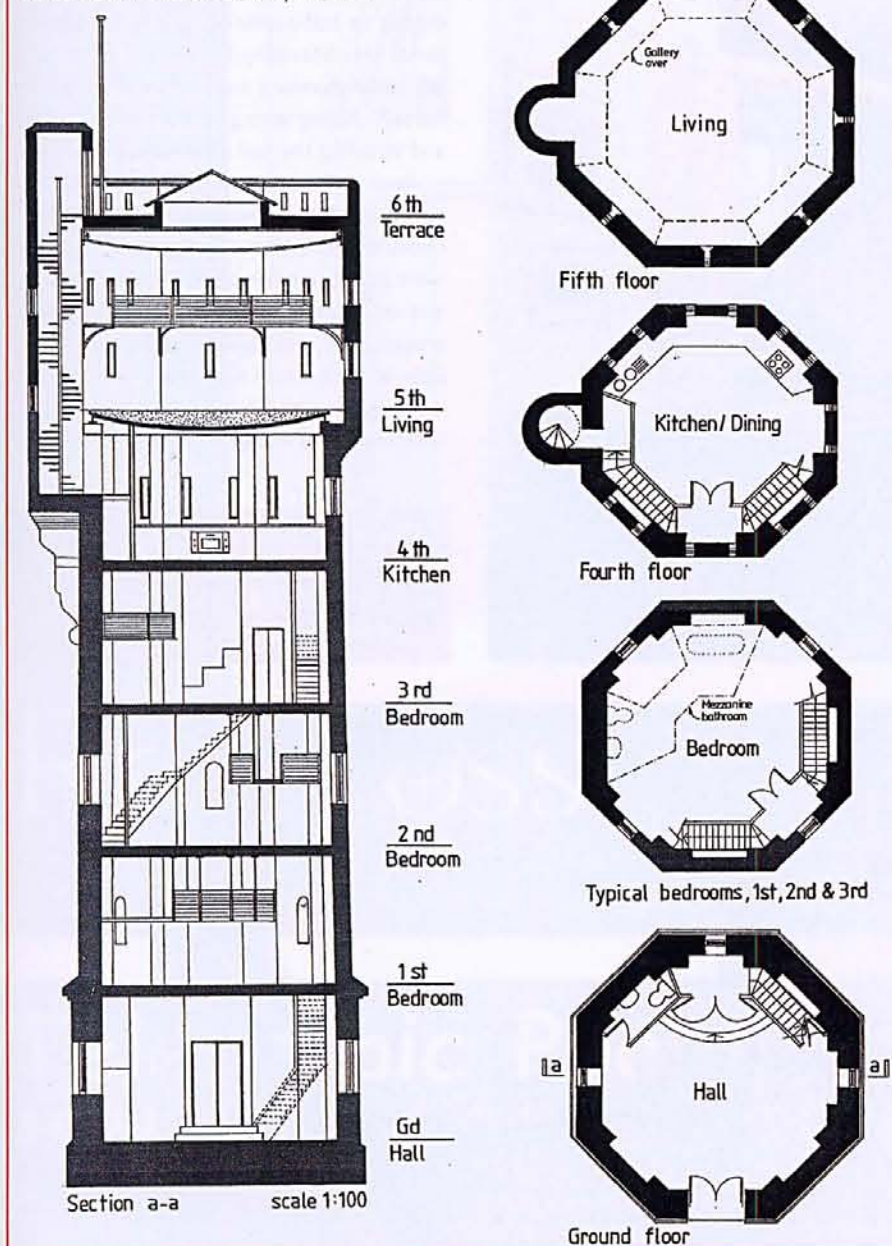
"In a way the restrictions forced everything into place," said Elspeth, "because the living room had to go in the tank space above the kitchen. That happened to be the biggest part of the tower, with fantastic views, so there was a certain logic to having it there."

Early in 1990 the construction work started in earnest, with Elspeth carrying out much of the building work herself in order to reduce costs to a minimum. Even so, outlay ran to about £115,000 over the five years of the project.

Originally the tower consisted of six levels with timber stairs bolted to the external walls on three sides of the tower and with quarter landings at each level. On the fifth floor there was a 30ft diameter steel riveted tank with a 20ft Victorian spiral staircase in the turret providing access to the roof. There were four cast-iron pipes running from ground to fifth floor level to supply the tank which held approximately 40,000 gallons to provide water to the houses in Munstead and the neighbouring villages.

The tower had been inhabited by pigeons for a number of years, which meant the unsavoury task of removing a 2ft thick layer of bird droppings which Elspeth shovelled into sacks and carried down to a skip at ground level 100ft below. It would be fair to say that the building was in a very poor state of repair, with extensive water penetration through the roof and large

Diagrammatic plan showing the positions of the various rooms within the various levels of the tower



When Godalming-based architect Elspeth Beard bought Munstead Water Tower for £121,000 at auction in October 1998 she became the proud owner of a Grade II listed building that had stood derelict for nearly 20 years and came complete with a 2ft layer of pigeon droppings



Cleverly conceived mezzanine floors in each of the three bedrooms provide space for unusual en suite bathrooms without altering the spaciousness of the building

cracks which had developed within the brickwork. All of the tower's 62 windows were replaced and about half of the exterior brickwork had to be re-pointed. The large cracks in the brickwork were 'stitched' with new brick.

The unusual size and shape of the tower itself began a sequence of ongoing problems. For example, the whole of the outside required scaffolding, and an initial forecast of one week to do the job turned into a month. The re-pointing was estimated as a six-week job – and took nine months! It was three years before the structure was made watertight and Elspeth was able to start work on the inside.

The interior of the tower was designed to retain as much of the original building that was practically possible and to maintain its industrial character. "Everything that was obviously new in the building was made to look modern, so that everything that was

After restoration, the spacious ground floor hall of Elspeth Beard's water tower dream home



Installing central heating was a major task in itself, not least because it involved digging up half-a-mile of road. Following her hands-on philosophy, Elspeth did much of the initial plumbing and electrical work herself, chasing wiring up the internal walls and installing the soil and waste pipes.

Looking back on the project, Elspeth recalls her biggest mistake – moving in! “I chose to move in at a time when the floors were in but not completely finished, there was no kitchen, the only toilet was on the ground floor, and I had a two-month-old baby to look after. I was suddenly living in a building site with a baby and commuting backwards and forwards to London.”

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original stood out,” Elspeth explained. Internally, new steel stairs and floors were constructed using the existing main floor levels. This involved fixing new steel beams at each level to support the new stairs and existing beams. There are now 142 steps to the roof with 88 to the kitchen and 113 to the living room!

To overcome the problem of the ‘means of escape’ the building is fitted with a fire alarm system linked to smoke detectors on each level and magnetic door holders fixed to the main doors to each room. The stair provides a one-hour fire-rated enclosure with emergency lighting.

The walls of the tank were removed but the base was retained to provide a curved steel riveted ceiling to the proposed kitchen. The existing valve and float within the tank were also retained and now form a major visual feature within the living room.

At the end of the project, the tower now consists of six floors with mezzanines and galleries to four of the floors. The accommodation provides a reception/hall on the ground floor, one bedroom on each of the first, second and third floors, and a kitchen/dining room on the fourth floor. The living room is situated within the old tank room on the fifth floor with a roof terrace above. One large octagonal room occupies each floor, varying from 25-30ft across, with suspended hanging bathrooms to the bedroom levels and a gallery within the living room.

The fifth floor living room with spiral staircase leading to the roof terrace. The huge original valve and float from the water tower's tank remain as a feature and can be seen at top left of the picture

