



Eileen Argyris

HERITAGE

Planning for the future requires an examination of our past

Changing Fortunes

Once known as Mount Fortune, Mackechnie House, now a B&B, has a very welcoming spirit



The dining room (formerly the library) of Mackechnie House was added to the original c.-1840 structure in the 1850s. It has painted wide-board pine floors, built-in shelves and a fireplace that, like many in the old house, was bricked up by a previous owner.

Three living people and three ghosts make Mackechnie House their home. Cathryn Thompson, a caterer and hostess of the Mackechnie House bed and breakfast; her husband, Ian Woodburn, a renovations and restoration specialist, and their 11-year-old son, Rory, own the more-than-150-year-old house.

Story and photos by Eileen Argyris

But also more or less in residence are the spirits of a Scottish bagpiper, an old woman, and a 12-year-old girl named Elizabeth. "I don't play it up too much (about the ghosts)," says Ms. Thompson, "because some people could be nervous."

6:45, so she rushed down to the kitchen to make sure he had his breakfast. When she got there, the coffee-maker was just starting to drip (it's not on a timer) but there was no sign of the businessman, who appeared at his usual time of 7:15.

"If they're going to be helpful like that," she says, the ghosts are fine with her.

The house was built about 1843-44, and first belonged to a man named

Stuart Mackechnie, a Scottish immigrant who founded woolen mills, she has been told, on the present site of the Cobourg Daily Star building.



Below: Mackechnie House on Cobourg Tremaine Street, now a bed-and-breakfast inn, was built in the 1840s and was once owned by a prominent Cobourg businessman. The "monumental heavy cornice (molding under the eaves) of molded brick with stone returns" mark it as an architectural gem.

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But most of her guests enjoy the thrill of hearing about these benign spirits who have so far only manifested their presence in very quiet, helpful ways.

The Scottish bagpiper is believed to have been one of an infantry battalion associated with the Cobourg Militia that was billeted in the house around 1866, when a Fenian uprising was expected from the northern part of New York state, Ms. Thompson says.

She adds that people who have lived around Cobourg for a number of years — adults who played in the house as children — can vividly recall hearing his music, and a number of people she has met, claim to have seen him.

"It wasn't a frightening experience," people have told her, although she hasn't seen the gentleman, herself.

The bagpiper reportedly dwells in part of the building that is now a self-contained apartment, but may once have been either the servants' quarters or a 19th-century version of the modern "Granny flat."

Three separate guests in the bed-and-breakfast have claimed to have psychic powers and all three told her the same thing: there are three spirits in the house; an old woman, a little girl named Elizabeth or Beth, and a bagpipe-playing soldier.

When the first psychic mentioned Elizabeth, Ms. Thompson recalled an earlier visit from friends who brought their young daughter with them.

While the adults were busy chatting, the young visitor looked down an apparently empty hallway and asked, "Who's the little girl?"

Elizabeth, the psychic said, appears to children because she longs to play, but she is very low-key because she does not want to frighten anyone.

For her part, Ms. Thompson says she keeps an open mind: "I wouldn't say I disbelieved, I just haven't had anything (ghostly) ..."

Stuart Mackechnie, a Scottish immigrant who founded woolen mills, she has been told, on the present site of the Cobourg Daily Star building at the corner of King and Tremaine Streets.

But Mr. Mackechnie must have over-extended himself financially, because Ms. Thompson says, he lost the house a few years later when the bank foreclosed.

Next owners of the home were the Poore family who, apparently, were anything but.

Anna Maria Poore's father was an English baronet, Sir Edward Poore. She also had a brother who lived at Grafton. She took over ownership of the house in 1848, probably before the last two additions had been made to it.

The house was built in three parts: the original "temple form" Greek Revival-style house shows the Regency influence in its front porch and double French doors at the main entrance.

The house is of solid brick construction of a technique known as Flemish bond.

The north side of the front (now the dining room, originally the library) was added in the 1850s, but prior to 1857, say architectural aficionados.

The back part of the house, where the kitchen is now, was added in the 1860s.

In spite of its staged development, Ms. Thompson says



always have been a cut or two above most.

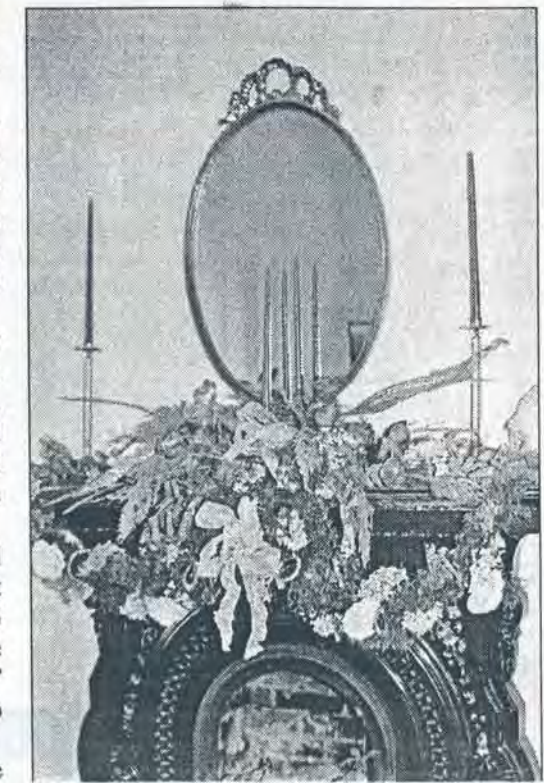
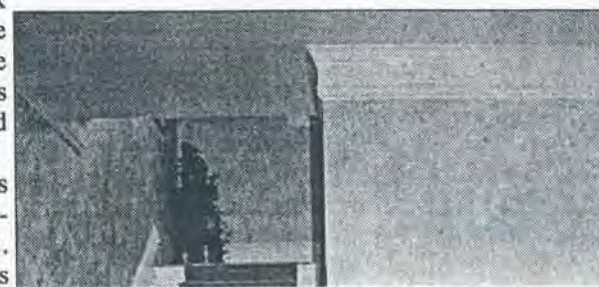
In the 1860s, it was known as Mount Fortune, because it belonged to James Fortune, the onetime sheriff of Cobourg.

At that time, the house stood virtually alone on a large piece of land, looking toward the centre of town. Although it is not obvious now, the land was on a slight rise, allowing the inhabitants of the home to look down on the downtown; hence the description "Mount."

But, whether the "mount" part was apt or not, good "Fortune," did not follow, since Mr. Fortune died soon after acquiring the house, in 1864, at the age of only 36. He was buried at St. Peter's Cemetery; the family continued to live in the home until 1869.

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Except that one time.

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house, where the kitchen is now, was added in the 1860s.

In spite of its staged development, Ms. Thompson says she has been told, architectural and historical evidence indicates the house would



Above: This impressive front hall is the welcoming entrance to Mackechnie House. Larger than many modern living rooms, the hall is adjoined on the south (left) by the front parlour and on the north by the dining room.

Left: This kitchen floor, made of pine, has been painted by Mackechnie House's Ian Woodburn to resemble tiles, a decorating technique often used in bygone times when wood was the most common building material around. The antique "Mother's Helper" cabinet and other furniture complement the decor.

Ms. Thompson and her husband bought the house in 1993 because they were looking for a "better" place than Toronto to raise their young son.

"It needed some TLC," Ms. Thompson acknowledges.

However, they were fortunate in that previous owners had retained the original wide-board pine floors, the near-12-foot-high ceilings, the creamy, wide baseboards, interior window shutters, plaster ceiling medallions and moldings.

The narrow muntins (divisions between the panes) in the windows mark the house as one of pre-Victorian vintage.

The recessed double front door is one of the more interesting architectural features and is more common in the U. S. than in Canadian homes.

It was one of only seven homes chosen to be on the Cobourg House Tour held in 1995 to raise funds for the Cobourg Public Library.

The house tour brochure points up the "monumental heavy cornice of molded brick with stone returns," as an archi-



This ornate fireplace is probably not original to the house, says owner Cathryn Thompson. It is more likely a Victorian addition. Inside the front panels are pictures of flowers rendered in coloured foil.

tectural feature particularly worthy of note. Apparently this feature was particularly expensive and difficult to execute.

With its many outstanding architectural, and spiritual features, this house is perhaps one of the most interesting ones between Toronto and Kingston and has been labelled as such by local history buffs.

Ms. Thompson has learned it was always "a great house for parties.

"Lights would be strung down to the ends of the laneways, there would be parties and dancing... A lot of people in Cobourg have been in this house."

Today, the Mackechnie House Bed and Breakfast carries on that tradition of hospitality. Mystery Weekends are offered; it has hosted an old-country-style ceilidh (a party where everyone performs in some way) which was filmed by TVO, and readings by authors. Ms. Thompson also runs occasional Bridge Packages with the Victoria View B&B, also in Cobourg.

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