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The Advertiser

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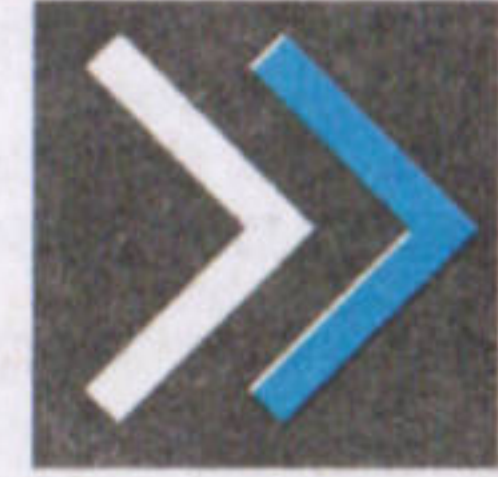
GLORY DAYS

Simon Wilkinson finds grandeur restored at Goolwa.

Birk's River House

138 Liverpool Rd, Goolwa, Ph 8555 0338

www.birksharbour.com.au



ROBERT "ROCKY"

O'CALLAGHAN looks out the bay window of the guest house he has just opened at

Goolwa and sees a vision of river life from a century ago. The Murray is flowing strongly and the bustling harbour below services a mixed flotilla of steamers and pleasure craft. Up at the house, holiday makers might be preparing for an elegant afternoon tea to be taken in a shaded spot in the lush garden.

This is how O'Callaghan reckons Birk's Harbour would have looked nearly 100 years ago, and it's a vision that's guided him and partner Pam O'Donnell during a remarkable, brave project to restore an old property to its former glory. It might seem fanciful, particularly given the plight of the river, but the man behind Rockford wines is a certified Barossan legend and, whether it's vineyard or old boats, has a proven knack for bringing new life to the unwanted and unfashionable that otherwise would be on the scrap heap.

The River House was built in 1910 by Adelaide retailer Napier Birks on an elevated site looking over the river north of Goolwa township. He surrounded the house with acres of gardens in a large estate that included smaller holiday cottages made available to his staff.

O'Callaghan, whose love of wooden boats has made him a regular visitor to Goolwa for many years, had long admired the house. When it came on the market and it seemed certain the grounds remaining around it

would be subdivided, he made an offer. Over the past 18 months he has overseen a stunning restoration of the house's dilapidated interior and services. Countless metres of skirting boards, architraves and window frames have been stripped to reveal the warm hues and natural grain of red pine and cedar. Where new work has been done, for example in the country-style kitchen and doors, the quality of craftsmanship is obvious.

The restoration of the terraced garden is just as extraordinary, with a combination of landscaping, stone work and the existing large trees creating an outdoor haven with a large pool and a variety of spots to hide away, depending on the prevailing weather.

From our first glimpse inside the River House we feel privileged to be staying there. Each piece of furniture, each little touch, has a stamp of quality and character. While the collection of model boats and other maritime artefacts might be too much for some, it's in keeping with a place that is personal and definitely reflects its owners.

The ground floor is divided into three main zones, as it was originally designed. At the spine is a long, open space, once the ballroom, now the main living area. Here you can sit in casual seats around a small table, put your feet up and watch TV on the oversized lounge/day bed or sit around the dining table. Plenty of room for six people, which the house can sleep, to do their own thing and not get in each other's way.

To the right is the type of kitchen you'd like at home, with beautifully crafted cupboards, plenty of (stone) bench space, and all the quality cookware and gadgets you are ever



THE VERDICT

accommodation the River House has two bedrooms downstairs, each with ensuites. Upstairs is a self-contained retreat, with kitchen, bathroom and front and rear balconies. Also Boathouse by the river's edge.

facilities fully-equipped kitchen; gas fires; flat screen television; large dining table; terraced gardens with variety of outdoor settings; pool.

price: From \$250 a couple per night.

rating *****

going to need. Our party of six cooked a progressive birthday feast without a hitch. A newly created bay window by the sink makes the space light and brings you into the middle of the garden while you are doing the dishes.

Two push-button gas fires built in back-to-back keep both the kitchen and living area toasty on a chill winter night, though there's no real temperature control, just on or off.

On the other side of the house are the two main bedrooms, each with their own charm. The larger one has the gorgeous bay window, looking down to the harbour. A well-padded window bed looks just the place for an afternoon of reading or dozing in the sun.

The other room, while a little smaller and without the same outlook, has the advantage

of a bath. The showers in both ensuites deliver the kind of heat and water pressure that make it very difficult to turn off. Thin, scratchy towels feel surprisingly mean.

A third bedroom built on upstairs has its own entrance, kitchenette and bathroom – as well as river views.

The final stage of O'Callaghan's vision is restoring the marina, and hopefully attracting a fleet of classic boats. He will team up with the marina's owners, Wendy and Phil Watson, who gave advice and guidance in the work done so far, and now manage the River House.

Accommodation reviews are unannounced and paid for by SA Weekend.