Harbour views

ESCAPING TO THE COAST for the hot summer months has been an Adelaide convention ever since the city was founded. This restored historic river house at the port of Goolwa offers a new glimpse into the early days of this tradition.

Napier Kyffin Birks was a prominent Adelaide businessman, son of the well-known Charles Napier Birks, who founded the Charles Birks & Co department store on Rundle Street (now Rundle Mall). Napier took over the store when his father retired in 1911 and ran the business until his death in 1953. A year later the store merged with David Jones, which remains on the same site today.

As a wealthy gentleman looking to get away from the city in summer, Napier Birks built two noteworthy stone houses and established a private marina on a site overlooking the River Murray at Goolwa; he called it Birks Harbour. The houses, built around 1900, were surrounded by acres of terraced gardens and majestic trees fronting onto his private marina and slipway with 26 moorings in the deep, protected waters of the river.

Charles Birks was known as a benevolent employer, improving working conditions and establishing an employees' trust fund, and it seems his son was equally popular with the workforce. News of the restoration of Birks' old summer house sparked an unexpected visit from a group of his former staff.

These pages: *Dating back more than a century, Napier Birks' summer house, now Birks Riverview Retreat, sits amid lush gardens surrounded by established trees. Goolwa is known for its wooden boats, and many historic examples can be found at Birks Harbour private marina, looking back towards the boathouse.*

Above: The stone arbour walk be side the swimming pool was added by the current owners, bringing an additional touch of grandeur to the property and providing somewhere for aromatic wisteria and colourful bougainvillea to climb. ***Below:*** *The summer house has been renovated into two separate holiday homes: the Garden Retreat in the main body of the old house, and the Riverview Retreat upstairs.*

"About three years ago when we first opened, we had a call from a group of ladies who used to work for Napier Birks," says Wendy Watson, manager at Birks Harbour. "They were all in their 70s and 80s, and they had read in the paper that Birks' summer house had been restored. They all came down in a bus and they were so excited to see the place all done up again."

Napier Birks was also an avid garden lover. The gardens feature majestic 100-year-old Port Jackson figs, Portuguese wine palms, date palms and Norfolk pines. Behind the house is a towering bunya pine that can be seen from the river.

Over the intervening decades, the houses and marina had been divided up, falling into some disrepair. Wendy and husband Phil bought the marina in 2001 and converted the slipway into a boathouse, which they opened as luxury accommodation later that year. At the same time, they purchased the gardener's cottage, which is now their home.

Later, in 2007, Napier Birks' large summer house itself came up for sale

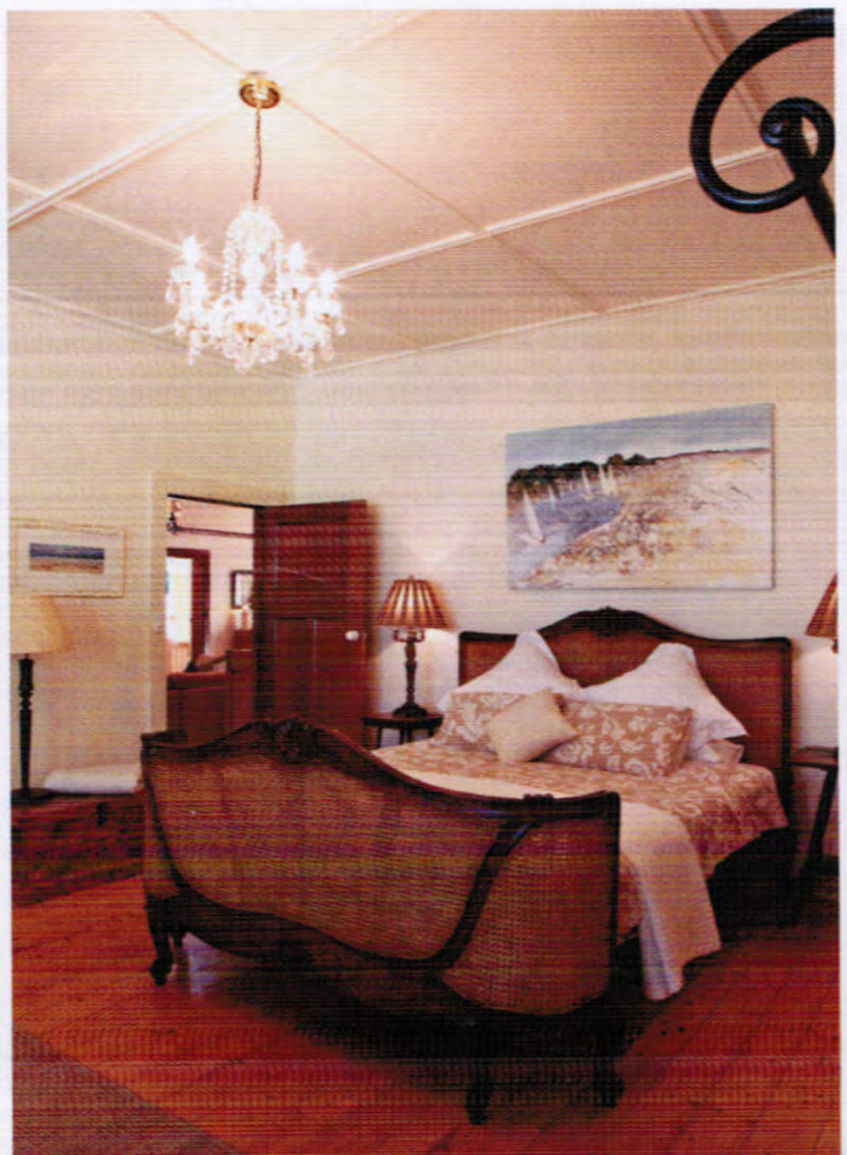
Above: Comfortably furnished as a relaxing retreat, the summer house has maritime touches connecting the interior to the river. The polished Baltic pine floors and red pine doors are original. **Below:** *An antique Louis XV-style bed adds a touch of romance to the master bedroom. An elegant bay window seat in the master bedroom looks out over the river.*

and rumour had it that a developer was planning to demolish the house and carve the land up into nine separate titles. Fortunately, the Watsons' long-time friends, Robert O'Callaghan and Pam O'Donnell, heard about the building's plight and stepped in to buy the main house, with the aim of restoring it to its former glory.

Happily, very little structural work was required, and the sympathetic renovation enhanced both the house and gardens. Just one wall was removed to open up a particularly dark hallway.

"We lifted up the carpet and revealed 100-year-old Baltic pine floorboards in perfect condition; they just needed polishing," says Wendy. "All the doors had about seven coats of paint on them, so we had them stripped and they're beautiful red pine. The house really has come alive. It's the same with old wooden boats; give them a bit of TLC and they'll respond."

The Watsons are self-confessed wooden boat fanatics. Reflecting another aspect of Goolwa's history, many of the



Above: Date palms shade the lawn beside the swimming pool in this flourishing garden. "Napier Birks loved his garden, and we've brought it back to what it was. It's not just the trees; they bring the birds too." ***Left:*** *A shady seating area under the trees. "There's a lovely ambience and feel to the place."*

boats moored at Birks Harbour are unique and historic. Birks' summer house has now been thoughtfully renovated into two luxury self-contained holiday rentals called Birks River Retreats, which are elegantly furnished with a coastal theme, using some modern touches to provide a sense of perspective with the present day.

"There's quite a large collection of original maritime pieces from South Australia and most of the artworks are from local artists," says Wendy. "We spent a lot of time sourcing individual pieces of furniture from all over the state. We've tried to retain that feel of an old river house but with some contemporary pieces. One of the things we really tried to create was a sense of the history, which is what Birks Harbour is all about. It's so easy for people to lose sight of what's just behind us.

"I think Napier Birks would be very pleased to see the whole place in harmony again. All the trees are happy and the birds are back in abundance too. There's a lovely ambience here; it's been brought back to life."