Finding harmony on the hill

It has been an 11-year journey, but Mick and Amanda Fennessy are living their dream on their Tower Hill property that they have partly converted into self-hosted accommodation.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] H [/dropcap]ow do two former police officers from Melbourne wind up running holiday accommodation near an ancient volcano in South-West Victoria? The same way as so many other seachangers who move to the area – via a holiday to Port Fairy.

It is 11 years since **Mick** and **Amanda Fennessy** made the decision to relocate from inner-suburban Richmond to a five-acre property at Tower Hill after visiting relatives in Port Fairy and – you guessed it – seeing a property for sale on their way home.

"We did a bit of a drive-by, had a look, and dismissed it, but then shortly after we returned home, we opened *The Age* newspaper and there it was, rural property of the week. It was

like it was telling us something," says Mick.

The timing was right, Mick explains, for the couple to try something different with their lives, having worked for many years in the police force (which is where they met) and financial investigative work. They bought what he affectionately describes as "five-and-a-half nuisance acres": too small to generate an income, but too large not to require significant maintenance and mowing.

Drinks anyone? Quirky, locally made garden art like this piece by Casterton artist Barbara Dobson is sprinkled around the Fennessy property.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] P [/dropcap]art of the property is taken up by rolling lawns and native gardens, while another portion is devoted to a couple of hundred fruit trees, including a splendid fig, that provide ample produce for Amanda's home-made preserves that she sells through local markets under the Tower Hill Farm Produce label.

That left about two acres overlooking Lakeview Road, with

southern views to the ocean and eastern views across to the night lights of Warrnambool.

“Right from the get-go we thought about how we could use the two acres for accommodation, but we weren’t entirely sure exactly which path to take,” Mick says.

The pair knew they wanted something unusual, so initially explored using up-styled shipping containers – “self-contained, containers” – before settling on recycled school classrooms.

The six school portables come from mostly tiny hamlets – Coolaroo South, Nilmah, Merrijig, Bendigo South East, Syndal South, Manchester, Newtown and Goornong – and were bought through a supplier who trades in such things.

“They are quite incredible structures with solid hardwood floors and everything hand-nailed. Even though they are called portables, they aren’t going anywhere,” Mick says with a laugh.

The interiors of the former school classrooms have been completely refurbished to give them a second life as accommodation. Image: Harmony at Tower

Hill.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] A [/dropcap]manda, who during this interview is busy cooking figs on the stove, overseeing wood chopping by two visiting friends, and checking on the progress of a builder, dips in and out of the conversation, but has a moment to show off one of the five portables that have so far been converted.

As Amanda hauls back the sliding door (remember those?), I feel for a split second as if I am about to revisit Grade Two with Miss Fitzgerald at Warrnambool East Primary School circa 1972, but these portables are *nothing* like a classroom. The transformation from a utilitarian space into sleek, modern accommodation is remarkable.

"We always had a mental picture in our head of what it would look like, and we have not only reached that, but I think we have exceeded it," Mick says.

Harmony at Tower Hill, as it is known, has been open since last December and, because of its dog-friendly status, recently accommodated some of the Maremma dogs (and their handlers!) during the filming of the *Oddball* movie in Warrnambool.

Another life: Former Detective Sergeant Mick Fennessy and Senior Constable Amanda Fennessy during their days in the force.

[dropcap style="color: #a5cecd;"] T [/dropcap]he Fennessy's complete change in lifestyle has coincided with Mick having the ultimate wake-up call that life can, quite literally, shift in a heart beat.

When we meet, he is three weeks into his recovery from a quadruple bypass on a damaged heart that, if left untreated, would have failed him.

"It was like the warning light coming on, on your dashboard and you know that the rollercoaster is taking a dip downhill. You don't want to see that too many times in your life before you start making changes," he says.

Fortunately the only lights coming on for Mick now are those twinkling in the distance from Warrnambool.

Did you hear the one about…? Garden art by Timboon sculptor Jon Hayes (Tomrtoe) is among the Fennessy's collection.

[box type="bio"] **You can find out more about Harmony at Tower Hill on the web here.** [/box]

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