

THE Lakehouse

Eugene Casey and Gerry O'Donohue's transformation of a dilapidated lakeside cottage makes the most of an idyllic lakeside setting and shows what can be achieved within strict planning regulations.

PHOTOS: ENDA NOONE

INSIDER INFO

The owners: Eugene Casey and Gerry O'Donohue

The location: Ballinaboy, Clifden, Co Galway

Type of house: Run down rural cottage dating from late nineteenth century

Purchase price: €50,000.

The brief: To turn a near derelict cottage into a comfortable holiday home.

The architect: Michael Cullinan

Budget: €180,000

Timeframe: Three years (from purchase of property to completion of renovation).

Present value of house: Unknown but conservatively estimated by Eugene as "in excess of €500,000".

Planning issues: Initial plans to substantially develop the property were turned down by the local authority. The second phase of plans did not require planning as the extension was within the 40sq metres exempted development. Permission was sought and granted for a 'bio-cycle' waste unit.

Problems encountered: Property had to be underpinned as it turned out to have no foundations.

Best bargain: "Unfortunately, there weren't many!"

Verdict: A flawlessly executed turn-around: "We're very happy with the result."

Eugene Casey and his business partner, Gerry O'Donohue, have been running a fish farming business on the beautiful Lough Beaghcaunee in Clifden, Co Galway, for many years. To access the lake, they used to pass through a section of land containing a cottage owned by three elderly brothers. After the last of the brothers passed away, the land, including the ramshackle cottage, came up for sale. "We were worried that whoever bought the land wouldn't give us the same access," says Eugene, "so we decided to protect our business by buying the land ourselves."

the old cottage

"The cottage itself," says Gerry, "was very run-down and valued at just €50,000. The brothers had lived in very basic conditions. Looking at the place, you would have guessed it had been left unoccupied for 20 years. There was just one bedroom, a living room and a lean-to kitchenette. They had cooked on a two ring hob and a hot plate in the fireplace.

"We didn't buy the cottage to develop it; it was primarily the land that we were interested in. But we soon realised the cottage was in a very bad state – the tin roof had started to fall in – and if we didn't do something rapidly, it would become derelict." From a planning perspective, Eugene and Gerry were fortunate that the house had not been left uninhabited for long. It appeared on the ordinance survey map and also had an ESB fuse board, making it clear that in planning terms the house was habitable. Eugene and





Eugene Casey enjoys the peace and solitude offered by the renovated cottage

> THE PROJECT

> BUDGETING

> ADVICE

> CASE STUDY I

> RENTAL

> TRADE IN

> HOUSE DOCTOR

Gerry knew they had to act fast to protect their investment. "We could have just slapped up a new tin roof," says Eugene, "but Gerry was insistent from the start that if we were going to do it, we might as well do it right."

development plans

Eugene and Gerry decided to renovate and develop the cottage as a holiday retreat. Originally, they applied for planning permission to extend the property significantly, but it was turned down. So, with the help of their architect, Michael Cullinan, they went back to the drawing board with a new brief: to make the most of what was there within the planning constraints. "Michael came up with a design that used every bit of the existing building, including an old outbuilding. By turning the outbuilding into an additional bedroom and adding a modest 40 square metre extension, Michael was able to create a comfortable three-bed holiday cottage with a large kitchen-dining area. As soon as we saw Michael's drawings", recalls Eugene, "we knew that was it!"

Despite the great confidence Eugene and Gerry had in Michael's designs, there were a few minor disagreements regarding the plans and specifications. "Michael is a purist; he wanted to preserve the structure of the house exactly as it was. He originally

wanted to use a corrugated metal roof but we compromised on high-quality Bangor slates. We also insisted that an en suite bathroom be included in the new 'outbuilding' bedroom. The bedroom remains unconnected to the main house and we didn't feel we could ask guests to run across to the main house if they needed the bathroom in the night!"

the right people for the job

Eugene believes that finding the right people is critical to any renovation job. "We waited until we found an architect and contractor with conservation experience. Any old contractor can throw up a bungalow, but renovating a traditional cottage is more complex."

After getting several quotes, renovation work began with locally-based contractor Mitchell Construction. "The renovation process took eight months in total. We found the cottage was in worse structural condition than we had expected. The rafters in the roof were too far gone to be saved – in fact it turned out they weren't even proper rafters – each one had been made up of several thin pieces of wood nailed together. The house had no foundations and, after investigation, required underpinning. The chimney showed signs of smoke damage – there was a constant smell of stale smoke – and the old mortar had to be painstakingly scraped out of the joints. One of



the gable walls collapsed and had to be re-built. It was clear that the house had originally been built on a very tight budget and less could be saved than was expected. It's really only the original stone walls and chimney that survive."

As part of the renovation, services had to be brought to the cottage. A pumping system was installed to supply water from the lake, and a 'bio-cycle' eco-friendly wastewater treatment unit was installed.

Keeping character

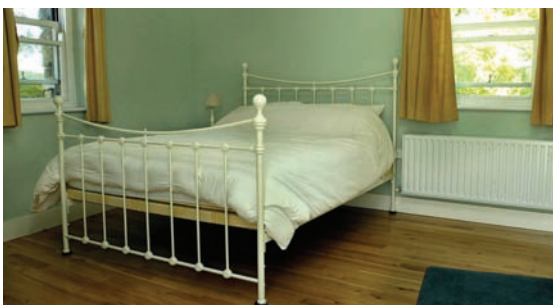
Despite the level of renovation, the basic structure and proportions of the original cottage were unaltered. The original window openings were fitted with timber sashes, and the large glass panels, which make the most of the wonderful views, were reserved for the contemporary kitchen extension. "Keeping the original proportions made the interior design easy," says Eugene, "The house was painted in a traditional lime wash and furnished simply, with cast iron beds." Most of the fittings and furniture were "donated" by Eugene's

wife, Grainne, who runs Whistlestop Gifts and Interiors in Clifden.

The stone walls around the small field in front of the cottage were left completely untouched by the builders. "The walls are an important part of the site and we wanted to preserve the 100-year old lichen and moss growing all over them," says Eugene.

The quality of the renovation proved expensive, with the initial budget of €180,000 overrunning by approximately €20,000. "Renovating an old cottage isn't cheap, but we see it as a long-term investment. It costs the same to renovate a cottage as to build a new house and you probably get less square footage. That said, you can buy a site easily enough, but you won't get a superb situation like this. Planning laws are so strict nowadays.

"The results of this project have been so fantastic that we are certainly glad we didn't consider knocking it all and building a bungalow! It didn't save us money in the short-term, but we have something really special. I only live two miles from the cottage, and I like to go down there for peace and quiet, especially in spring-time." ■



USEFUL CONTACTS

- > Beaghaneen is available as an exclusive holiday rental by ringing 095 21262.
- > Whistlestop - Gifts & Interiors, Station House Courtyard, Clifden, Co Galway. Tel: 095 21532 / 086 2304210. Email: whistlestop@eircom.net
- > Mitchell Construction, Calla, Roundstone, Co Galway. Tel: 095 23938
- > MV Cullinan Architects, Isolde's Tower, 2 Essex Quay, Temple Bar, Dublin 8. Tel: 01 6707566. Email: mvarch@indigo.ie