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Old-school ties revived

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Class is in ... the floor was elevated to create a loft-style bedroom.

Tricia Welsh discovers a restored classroom inviting repose.

School's in again at Rochford ... state school 540, that is, which is in Victoria's Macedon Ranges.

Constructed circa 1857 of hand-made bricks, the single-room school that once was the educational hub for students between the country outposts of Woodend and Lancefield has re-opened for business - but this time it functions as luxury accommodation.

Now part of Rochford Lodge, the Old School House and Principal's Residence have been restored by Melbourne travel agent Greg Ashmore and his wife, Sarsha, who bought the one-hectare property four years ago.

While they smartened up the headmaster's house to escape the city at weekends with their young family, they have spent every spare weekend and school holidays renovating the old classroom, turning it into a luxury retreat.

"It's been a labour of love for us all over the past three years," Greg says as he surveys the country scene today.

He says it was their love of travel, particularly their penchant for small hotels and unique accommodation, that started them on the project.

"We love the country and we love the Macedon Ranges," he says. "Provincial Victoria has a similar charm to many parts of Europe - but in a different way - mostly the lifestyle, local produce, the stunning landscapes, wineries, gardens, pubs and particularly the people.

"We have special friends at Hesket - the hamlet just behind us near Mount Macedon - and each time we visited we loved the region more and more and decided this was the region for us and our project.

"When we found the property, it was the blank canvas - the emptiness [although full of soul and character] of the school - that got us ... the 150 years of paint, school-bag hooks, the whole lot. It was as if the school children had just left for the day." It was tired but well-preserved.

The Ashmores bought the property in January 2006 and immediately set about renovating the cottage and garden as their weekend retreat. They used Daylesford-based architect Andrew Brownell, known for his expertise with heritage buildings. "He had just completed interior designer Stuart Rattle's Musk Farm, also a former schoolhouse," Greg says.

A simple galvanised iron-clad bathroom extension was added to one side with adjoining floor-to-ceiling glass sunroom that opens to a deck with barbecue facilities and Italian market umbrella - ideal for entertaining and watching the sun set over the surrounding countryside with the gentle slopes of Mount Franklin and the Cobaw Ranges in the distance. Plans are to fill an antique French riddling rack with bottles of local wine for guests' pleasure - the space to be "a wine lounge", Ashmore suggests.

The slick bathroom and pebble-lined shower recess are a striking contrast with the original triple-brick and blue-stone building. The toiletries are L'Occitane.

Inside the classroom, simple adjustments such as converting air vents into wall uplights, sandblasting 150 years of paint from the walls, elevating the floor at one end to create a loft-style bedroom with "rusted" wrought-iron balustrading, installing kitchen facilities and fitting a converted 150-year-old gaslight have transformed the six-metre-high space into a welcoming, functional living area.

Standing on a knoll in the bend of Rochford Road about two kilometres from the once-thriving village of Rochford, Rochford Lodge is about an hour north-west of Melbourne by car. The cool climate produces some of the state's finest pinots, chardonnays and sparkling wines.

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Immediate neighbours are Stonemont Wines and Braewattie Vineyards - a fourth-generation family farm now owned by Des and Maggi Ryan. Get talking to Maggi over a glass of their outstanding chardonnay in their weekends-only cellar door about her early days at Rochford School.



"I remember walking across the paddocks hand-in-hand with my cousin, James, on my first day of school - 70 years ago," she recalls. "And I can't wait to see the old school's reincarnation."

Greg says: "We hope that the Old School House will be a haven for 'retreat' lovers." If school really is like this, let's all go back.

Rochford Lodge is at 381 Rochford Road, Rochford, phone 0417 572 019 or info@rochfordlodge.com. Tariff from \$350 is inclusive of breakfast provisions and one bottle of local wine. There is a two-night minimum stay; packages are available. See rochfordlodge.com.