



Heritage preserved

One of New Zealand's most treasured historic homesteads is in good heart, despite suffering substantial damage in Canterbury's earthquakes, as **David Killick** discovers.

Poet William Wordsworth would have felt inspired at Otahuna, a historic Canterbury homestead offering boutique luxury accommodation to guests from around the world. Daffodils transform the grounds in front of the big white homestead into a sea of yellow. The Port Hills, those scalloped folds of Christchurch's ancient volcano, form a rugged backdrop. For now the sky is blue; warmer weather is on the way. The

scene looks as calm and serene as a picture postcard.

Not so on the morning of September 4 last year. After the 7.1 magnitude earthquake struck, Otahuna's owners, Hall Cannon and Miles Refo, who live in Christchurch, quickly checked on guests and staff. "People were fine," says Cannon, "but we lost 11 chimneys. Some crashed through the roof and tumbled to the ground."

That wasn't all. There was extensive cracking of the plaster and water damage. It became clear Otahuna had



Sir Heaton Rhodes



The original wallpaper in the formal dining room dates to the late 1800s.

Photos: DAVID KILLICK

suffered a "catastrophic level" of damage. Fortunately, being built of rimu and kauri timber, the homestead rolled with the punches and remained structurally sound, unlike big brick historic houses like Homebush, which collapsed.

So what to do? "We have an amazing team here," says Cannon. An action plan was drawn up and heritage specialists were retained, including structural engineer Kevin Simcock. Fletcher

Construction oversaw the rebuild. Six thousand slate shingles were brought in. Replacement chimneys necessitated "sophisticated seismic engineering". They look the same as the originals, but incorporate steel bracing, plaster, tiles and limited use of bricks. The interior – hallway, drawing room, dining room, bedrooms and kitchen – all had to be meticulously restored.

Otahuna reopened on January 10, in time for a busy



Classic furniture and fabrics were chosen to complement the historic character of the house, without turning it into a museum.



Bedrooms combine modern comfort and classic style.



summer season.

Then came February 22. No chimneys came down this time, but Cannon says there was an extraordinary amount of cracking and several areas of the house experienced slumping. Those parts of the house had to be propped up and new foundations put in. Once more, Otahuna had to close. Once more, walls had to be repaired and items repaired or replaced. A huge task, but once more, Cannon and Refo remained undaunted. The June 13 quake caused only minor additional damage. The

property reopened for guests and functions on July 9.

Sir Heaton Rhodes, who built the homestead in 1895, would probably have weathered the earthquakes with similar equanimity. (He gifted the spire of Christchurch Cathedral after an earthquake knocked the top off in 1888.) Rhodes was a postmaster-general, minister of tourism, and landowner. His face beams benignly out of portraits and paintings.

To Europeans, Rhodes wanted to show that it was possible to live as well, or better, in the colonies as one would in England.

Architect Frederick Strouts designed Otahuna as a colonial interpretation of Queen Anne architecture. Otahuna means the "little hill" on which the homestead sits, affording a fine view west

towards the Southern Alps. The hill was artificially constructed, as was the lake. Gardens were laid out under the direction of Kew-trained landscape architect A E Lowe.

In 1927, Rhodes was in charge of the visit of the Duke of York (later King George VI). He had bright-blue Rose of York carpet laid in the drawing room. The Duchess came down with tonsillitis in Wellington, and never visited Otahuna. Another historic link is the piano, which came from HMS Renown, the ship the Duke and Duchess sailed to New Zealand on. Rhodes and his wife, Jessie, lived at Otahuna until Sir Heaton's death in 1956. With no heirs, 5000 acres were carved up for returned servicemen and Otahuna became a working seminary. In 1972 it became a hippy commune, then after 1976 home to a

New Zealand native timbers in the entrance hall had to be stripped back and polished.

number of private owners once more. When it went on the market in 2006 the property was in receivership.

Cannon, who hails from Memphis, Tennessee, and Refo, who is from Boston, had been working in New York City. When they visited New Zealand, they loved what they saw, but initially did not think they wanted to take on "such a quirky house". They were beguiled by its history and captivated by its potential.

Although the earthquakes have caused enormous stress, Cannon is convinced Otahuna has a bright future. "It will be a challenge. We're confident. We wouldn't be doing it if we weren't."