



Looking lively

WORDS: ANNA DUNLOP / IMAGERY: MIKE HEYDON

A landmark house in Wellington's Thorndon has had three distinct phases in its life – and it's now set for another

It was full circle for conservation architect and recently retired Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Board member Chris Cochran when he received a commission to write a conservation plan for The Moorings, a Category 1 historic place on Glenbervie Terrace in Thorndon, Wellington.

"I'm actually a small part of the history of the building," he says.

Chris is referring to the summer of 1964 when he and a group of 15 fellow students from Victoria University of Wellington painted the house for the new owners – Martin (Johnny) and Betty Leniston – in return for free board and the use of their 17-seater Chevrolet bus (family transport for the Lenistons, who had 11, soon to be 12, children).

"We had some incredible summer holidays in that bus," Chris recalls. "Since then I've always had a fondness for The Moorings, and getting the commission was a lovely coincidence."

The large nine-bedroom Edwardian house, which dominates the skyline of the area, has been owned by the Leniston family for more than 60 years. It first belonged to John Sidney (also sometimes seen

as Sydney) Swan, one of Wellington's most notable architects, who built it in 1905 as a home for himself, his wife and their four children.

It was constructed as a two-storey house, but John made various additions over the years, including a third storey to act as an architectural studio in 1906, a spectacular double-height billiard room in 1926, and a conservatory in 1930.

The interior features beautiful timberwork, plush dados, tiled fireplaces and stencilled paper frieze cornices. The materials were the best of their types for the time and paint a picture of the life of a wealthy Wellington family in the early 1900s. They are also indicative of the taste of one of the leading architects of the period.

John had a passion for the sea that was apparent not only in the name of the house but also in its design: nautical flourishes in the architecture (including an underwater frieze of mermaids and seaweed); a flagpole posted on the balcony outside the master bedroom, which John would use to signal ships in the harbour; and porthole windows and a ship's wheel in the billiard room.

At the time of his death John possessed a collection of around 700 nautical images – photographs, paintings and lithographs (one of the largest collections in the world) – that were hung around the house. Most of the collection has since been dispersed, although a few items are still on display in the house today.

While The Moorings is important from an architectural perspective, Chris says that it's the social life of the place that is particularly significant.

"It's had three distinct phases and they are all interesting: first as the residence of the Swan family, then as a boarding house of varying fortunes, and then as the family home of the Lenistons."

The Swans left The Moorings in 1936 and the boarding house it became for the next 30 years was typical of those in the 1940s and '50s. John's

architectural studio was divided into four rooms, and it's thought that up to 20 people lived in the building, sharing just one kitchen and bathroom.

During World War II several US officers were billeted in The Moorings; they left behind a grenade, which was found by one of the Leniston boys in the late 1960s when he ran over it with a lawn mower. Thankfully it didn't explode, and it was subsequently taken away and disposed of by police.

Throughout its three decades as a boarding house, the building was badly neglected and fell into a state of disrepair; this was in keeping with the Thorndon neighbourhood, which had become very rundown (partly due to the threat of the proposed urban motorway) and was seen as ripe for redevelopment.

In fact, the Leniston family had only been living in The Moorings for six months when the Ministry of Works began demolishing nearby houses to make space for an off-ramp for the motorway. For a time, The Moorings was under threat, but Johnny Leniston resisted attempts by the Ministry to buy the house for demolition – something for which Chris is thankful.

"The Moorings is hugely important within the Thorndon conservation area. If it had been demolished we would have lost the single most significant building in the neighbourhood," he says.

The Lenistons' eldest daughter Margaret was 11 years old when her family moved into The Moorings in 1965, and says that from the beginning the house was full of life.

"My parents had this philosophy of having an open home," she says, adding that on occasion they would welcome in members of the community who had nowhere else to go.

"The house has also seen the most amazing parties, events, fringe festivals and concerts. My mother once had to bribe me with a pair of coloured stockings to go to a school ball because I just didn't want to leave the house; it provided this unique social environment."

Tim Leniston agrees. As the youngest of the 12 siblings, he was born while the family was living at The Moorings. He says it was a special place in which to grow up.

"The 1970s was an optimistic time – there was a lot of social movement and a lot of change," he says.

"I remember political discussions, talk about feminism and the beginnings of ecological politics, and plenty of debate. It was an extremely wide-ranging childhood in which I was exposed to many more influences than I would have had growing up in a nuclear family household."

John Swan's billiard room – known by the Lenistons as the ballroom or games room – played host to these famous parties and events, including meetings of the Thorndon Society and other community groups. It is one of Chris's favourite features.

"It's one of the most remarkable domestic spaces in Wellington and has been well used by so many people over such a long time," he says.

Another standout feature for him is the timberwork.

"The timber finishing is very high-quality work of the period [early 1900s] and is still unpainted and in its original state. There are heart native timbers and burr timber panelling – they are beautiful."

Tim, who currently lives in the house with his brother Patrick, their families, some distant relatives and several others, says that since The Moorings has been in the Leniston family it has functioned as a mix of family home and flatshare, and this communal living style has worked well. However, the family has recently decided to put the house on the market.

"It's time to let the house have another phase," he says. "I'd like to see it preserved well so it has another 100 years of life."

As for Margaret, she only wants one thing: "I just want to see it loved." 

[heritage.org.nz/list-details/1437/The%20MooringsPhotographers Building](https://heritage.org.nz/list-details/1437/The%20MooringsPhotographers%20Building)

