

IN MEMORIAM

A curator with a penchant for discarded treasures has made himself, his family and his collection at home in a Whanganui church hall

WORDS SARAH LANG / PHOTOGRAPHS PAUL MCCREDIE



THESE PAGES Clemency Boyce, daughter Tilda and son Inigo in the hall-cum-lounge space of the Whanganui home they share with Greg Donson; the bentwood chairs from the original Sunday school hall are suspended on the wall "in an act of extreme child-proofing with a decorative twist," says Clemency; visitors love the giant Unitruss sign and the *Times Atlas* from 1922, which was rescued from a skip in Wellington's Aro Valley; the kids and their friends like playing on the original church organ (at right).



SINCE 1922, TORO STREET HALL has stood sentry over Whanganui from its post atop Durie Hill. A Presbyterian Church chattel until it turned 80, the hall hosted the occasional satellite church service and many a Sunday school class. Generations of children squirmed on its hardback chairs, listened to Bible stories and asked curly questions about Jesus.

In the 1980s, Greg Donson was one of those children. The hall was a second home to his favourite Sunday school teacher Melita McLean, who lived across the road and died in 2001. That was soon after Greg moved back to Whanganui to take up a curatorial position at the city's prized Sarjeant Gallery. At her funeral he wondered about the hall and arranged a visit. "It was just as I remembered – basic, honest, no frills; a blank canvas, unloved – and something went click."

Why not make it his home, he thought. The three classrooms would make nice bedrooms, the hall a large lounge and the overgrown backyard a formal English garden to salute his parents' heritage. The church, planning to sell the hall anyway, accepted his offer to rent with a view to buy. "It would probably have been bought for the land, moved off or demolished," says Greg. "This way, all the people who are attached to the building can still say, 'There's Toro Street Hall'." In 2002 Greg moved in, making the place habitable by installing a shower and repainting the rooms.

In 2004, he bought it and began serious renovations, adding a laundry, a proper bathroom and salvaged windows, one of which came from Melita McLean's long-time house, to remember her. Later that year his girlfriend Clemency Boyce moved to Whanganui – and into the work-in-progress. The couple later painted the exterior, re-roofed, rewired and insulated.

Their challenge was to transform a religious building into a home without losing the things that made it special. With that in mind, they kept the original stage, pulpit, organ, hymn board and hymn books to honour the hall's history. But no, they're not religious themselves. "That might seem strange to some," says Clemency, "but I think if you were religious it would be incredibly hard to carry on your everyday life here. >

THIS PAGE Greg doesn't hunt, but he's intrigued by antlers as trophies: "I've banned one he painted a yucky green," says Clemency; Greg, a Labour supporter, framed the Michael Joseph Savage photo that sits atop the hall's original piano; all the blinds were made by Wanganui Furnishers, a firm that was established in 1916.

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left) Greg sits at the hall's original table, surrounded by specimens from his ever-growing chair and lampshade collections. Once an antique washstand, the cabinet came from a Miss Havisham-like house nearby; the skinny deco armchair was a wedding gift made by sculptor friend Regan Gentry. Greg bought the rocking chair for Clemency to nurse baby Tilda on, covered it in a vintage cowboys and Indians fabric, and later painted it hot pink.





THIS PAGE (from top) The side lounge is a cosy spot in winter: “We often find Tilda arranging toys and objects that resemble miniature art installations, like me,” says Greg. The E Mervyn Taylor woodcut print *Mai* was Greg’s first art purchase. Greg installed a bathroom in a small classroom; the large cabinet, originally from a lawyer’s office, provides much-needed storage. **OPPOSITE** The hall’s original stage doubles as a spare room and this is the original hymn board: “We’ve still got the hymn books,” says Clemency. “We found one of our midwife’s children’s workbooks under the stage, which compared Noah’s ark to the Love Boat.”

“You know, I always think this place has its own life. Whenever we go away, even for less than 24 hours, its faint hall smell comes back, as if it’s trying to become a Sunday school hall again.”

People often ask if they’ll erect dividing walls in the cavernous main hall-cum-lounge. “But then why would you buy a hall rather than a house?” asks Greg. “I wouldn’t want to strip its hall-iness and, working in galleries, we’re both used to rattling around in big spaces.” Clemency, a museum educator who’s currently a full-time mum to Tilda, six, and Inigo, three, loves that there’s room for the kids to make elaborate huts and keep them up. “As a kid I always had to take mine down in time for tea.”

Greg enjoys finding the kids’ things – marbles, drawings, toys – among his own curated collectables. His eclectic finds range from salvaged industrial signs through to deer antlers and an ancient atlas found in a skip. “My obsession with objects – especially chairs and lampshades – is quite out there,” admits Greg. “At work, I like to bringing disparate things together and make conversations across time – by putting, say, historical paintings next to contemporary photography – and I guess I do that at home in a more relaxed way.”

It’s tempting to call the result the Greg Donson Collection and the hall his art gallery. “Even the most un-domestic, un-house-proud guy loves all the stuff,” says Clemency of visitor reactions. “Whereas women think, ‘How do you keep it clean?’”

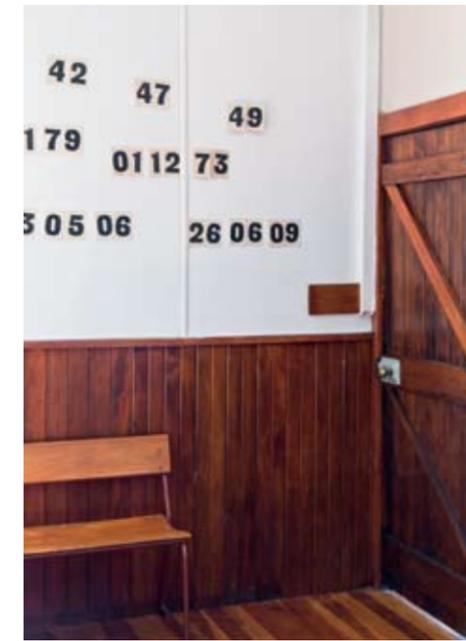
When Greg was in the UK on a scholarship for two months in 2012 Clemency did a little curating herself. “I did a mad shift around of things and really enjoyed it but felt a bit guilty. Tilda looked worried and said, ‘What about Daddy?’”

“This place is part of Greg, part of who he is, part of the Greg I fell in love with and married.” But, since their wedding in 2008 – the ceremony was in the garden, the reception in the hall – it’s felt like theirs, not his. “It’s become a family home without our really noticing,” says Clemency. Greg agrees: “Clem orders my chaos to make this a home.” >





THIS PAGE Greg traded an old toilet for this sign from their “Trojan” builder Murray Sedcole, who used to own Bon Ton Cake Shop in Whanganui; most of the ceramics on the shelf are by Whanganui potter and friend Ross Mitchell-Anyon. **OPPOSITE** (clockwise from top left) The Pinocchio figurines in the kitchen reflect Clemency’s love of all things Italian, as does the name of her son Inigo. The hall’s original plywood bench seats remain. Numbers from the hymn board are used to record family birthdays. Fox terrier Poppy joins the family in the large back garden, with its flower plots, vege garden and fruit trees.



She’s banished the odd thing and stored the overflow, including at least eight more lampshades. “I moved to Whanganui before TradeMe,” says Greg, “when there were lots more op shops, so I could acquire lots of things quickly. And because I had lots of space and was living alone...”

He trails off and Clemency turns to him: “There was no one to ask you, ‘Do you really need that? And that?’ You’re a magpie with a need to remember. You’re a child of immigrants who came to a new country without many things, so things ground you. You invest emotionally in objects and memories, even if they’re not your memories.”

Greg nods: “I like saving things that have been overlooked, discarded. Things with a past function. Orphans that would end up in a second-hand store and no one would know the story.”

In a way, the hall is one of those orphans, crying out for a guardian who would honour its past, tell its story and give it a little love. It hit the jackpot. ■

Q&A

My renovation high point was: Finishing painting the exterior of the hall in 2008 after spending three summers with a heat gun in my hand. *(Greg)*

My best moments in the garden are: Late August when the garden beds are full of irises and the soggy lawn starts to dry out. *(Clemency)*

When you visit, make sure you see: The Sarjeant Gallery: fantastic building, beautiful collection and diverse exhibition programming – the best regional gallery in the country. *(Greg)*

Best time to visit: You can’t beat Whanganui on a Saturday morning in summer, the River Traders Market by the river, then an afternoon at one of our great beaches or local parks. *(Greg)*

A well-kept secret about this area is: Sushi from the Durie Hill Store – people trek up the hill in their lunch hour especially to buy it and it’s made by the nicest dairy owner, Lisa.

Greg Donson and Clemency Boyce



