



Photograph by Jeffrey Richardson

AN AMERICAN DREAM

Linda Carr meets up with the couple who have transformed an historic Creswick Hotel

What makes a couple who have acquired extensive experience in running major accommodation hotels in Victoria, turn from taking the next big step nationally – perhaps even internationally – and deciding to purchase an historic country pub in need of care and attention? Owners of The American Creswick hotel, Brendan and Wendy Smith, smile together.

"It was in a sad state of disrepair when we took it over, but the hotel had character and a great history. We decided to renovate The American with the idea of making it an integral part of the community and social fabric of Creswick, with a nod to its history. Hence we decided to acknowledge the





heritage of the town and particularly the 174-year-old business.

"It kind of frightened us a bit, initially. It'll be enough for a couple of years we thought or until one of the kids finishes secondary education, then we'd retire," Brendan laughs at the memory.

"Well that didn't work out the way we thought. We started off with the upstairs function room — we wanted to get that up and going. All the flooring needed replacing, we were lucky that we had floorboards in storage from Craig's Royal Hotel to reuse. We replaced the ceiling and managed to save the original cornice. We removed the lards and plastering, introducing period chandeliers in the process. We added a stand-alone balcony at the rear with toilets, a bar and a fire escape giving the second storey room an entrance and an egress."

That was in 2004 and the couple have spent the last 22 years renovating the

building sympathetically — ignoring the trend to do the quick and easy modernisation turnaround — and all this in between running the business and establishing a presence in the town.

"When you go in somewhere to relax, have a drink, that modern look is often soulless. There's no ambience. So I thought let's go back because the hotel has been trading for 174 years. I think my experience at the Mildura Grand Hotel and Craig's Royal Hotel in Ballarat deepened my interest in history," adds Brendan.

Pre-Covid-19 the world was a different place and in a small country town with three existing pubs, it takes something special to stand out from the crowd.

"Well I learnt from my previous experiences and made slow, subtle changes — such as changing closing times, renaming 'the bar' to 'the lounge' and altering the way diners enter the food area," says Brendan.



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"But you know, mostly, old-style publicans take an interest in people, they realise they have a responsibility and a duty of care to the community which they serve. I wanted the youth of the town to be proud of their history, so as the renovations advanced I began upping the ante on guest behaviour. And it's paid off."

"It's turned into a community hotel, really, partly because we have so many rooms – the Green Room (the original hotel dining room), the Lindsay Function Room, Bistro, Café, Lounge Bar and outdoor areas – allowing for smaller groups to meet. On Friday and Saturday mornings local groups come in for quizzes or for a weekly catchup – these get-togethers fuel the community spirit and create a great support network," explains Wendy.

The curious name – The American Creswick Hotel – contains its own story. It began in 1856 when three cousins – Messrs Anthony, Wagner and Hoyt – arrived from America during the gold rush and together opened Anthony's American Hotel. Jack Wagner was associated with Cobb & Co and built the Stonnington mansion in Waverley, Melbourne and the Hoyt family lent its name to Hoyts Theatres and

Anthony ended up in Melbourne operating hotels. The American Creswick holds the longest lineage of any public house in the district and its first floor was the location for Creswick's Havilah Freemasons Lodge for 30 years from 1859.

Life is full of serendipity and the very famous Lindsay family of artists spent their formative years in Creswick. Norman Lindsay – he of *The Magic Pudding* and voluptuous nudes – has his own dedicated gallery museum in the NSW Blue Mountains and one of his favourite models has visited the Lindsay Function Room, which links the hotel to one of Creswick's key tourist features, the Lindsay Art Trail.

After so many years of hard work, what is the couple's best memory?

"It's been fabulous. It gives us a good lifestyle," says Wendy. "I think bringing the hotel back to what it should be gives a strong sense of pride but I think everything we've done in hotels is to leave them in a better place than we found them."

The experience of Brendan and Wendy at The American Creswick demonstrates that historic buildings – and their story – will continue to thrive if they can maintain a direct link to community.

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