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CHAPEL HOUSE IN PENZANCE OFFERS HISTORY AND HOSPITALITY

Words by **John Williams**, photographs by **Greg Martin**



“I fell in love with it, and the obvious plan was to turn it into a B&B”



Perched in a prominent position at the bottom of historic Chapel Street lies one of Penzance's most handsome houses, proudly looking out over the broad sweep of St Michael's Mount and Mount's Bay. Chapel House has a colourful history to match its handsome exterior but in recent years, as home to the Penzance Arts Club, it had clearly seen better days. However, in the nick of time, a saviour appeared to transform the building into a no-expense spared, boutique B&B which should prove a magnet for the clientele who demand the finer things in life. That saviour was Susan Stuart, a chartered accountant who spent 30 years in investment banking in the City of London before becoming CEO of Thrive, a horticultural



therapy charity in Battersea.

Susan moved to Penzance early in 2013 and quickly immersed herself in the life of the town – she’s heavily involved in the Save Our Lido campaign on behalf of the Jubilee Pool, is chair of the Neighbourhood Plan Board and is a leading light in the Humphry Davy Project, celebrating Penzance’s most famous resident.

She came across Chapel House almost by accident, and has since combined all her other commitments with overseeing a massive regeneration project at the property. She was introduced to architect Keith Bell, who lives just a few yards up the road, and a team of half a dozen local builders and craftsmen who worked non-stop for two years on breathing new life into the building.

The result is stunning, with six double bedrooms (most with spectacular sea views), large drawing rooms and an informal, open-plan kitchen-diner. The best of the original period features co-exist happily alongside ingenious modern design

solutions, state-of-the-art contemporary bathrooms and underfloor heating as well as bespoke kitchen and bedroom furniture made by local carpenters Ben Williams and George Robinson.

“After 38 years in London, I just felt I needed a change,” Susan explains. “I’d always loved Penzance, which I’ve visited for many years to see a long-standing friend. When I made the move, I had ideas of setting up a consultancy and working part-time, three days a week in London. But I saw Chapel House was up for sale, fell in love with it and the obvious plan was to turn it into a B&B.”

However, it was clear from the start that the building was in a very bad state. “Any accountant will tell you that you don’t find premises and build a business around it, but I’ve ignored the advice of my own profession and the result is that I started out rich but am now poor!” laughs Susan. “I was expecting some nasty surprises, and there have been plenty.”

Perhaps the worst was the realisation that all the chimney breasts on all four floors would have to be rebuilt by hand because they were so fragile. “The experts said they thought that they probably wouldn’t have survived the storms of early 2014.”

Nevertheless, despite the numerous problems encountered throughout the refurbishment, Susan Stuart and Keith Bell have stayed true to their vision. “The ethos has always been to combine the old and the new in a sympathetic way to create something different and of really high quality for Penzance. There is a bit of a gap in the market for accommodation in Penzance that appeals to the comfortably-off visitors who go to Scilly every year, especially since the Abbey Hotel closed, and I hope to fill that gap,” says Susan.

“At the same time, I didn’t want the place to feel too much like a hotel, which is why we’ve created the big open-plan kitchen where coffee on tap and early evening drinks will be available. I hope it will be somewhere that can lift the whole accommodation sector in Penzance, and yet remain an informal place where people can properly chill out.”

Despite the setbacks and back-breaking work she undertook stripping all the interior walls, Susan has thoroughly enjoyed getting to the stage of welcoming her first visitors. “I’ve had great fun bringing the building back to life – it’s almost 230 years old and I hope it is now fit to last another lifetime,” she added. “Penzance is a fantastic town – coming here has been by far the best thing I’ve ever done.”

To find out more, visit www.chapelhousepz.co.uk ➔

A history

Visitors to Chapel House will be staying in a house which has a rich and varied history.

1790: The property was built by Admiral Linzee, who ran the important naval base housed in Penzance at the time. One of Lord Nelson's trusted lieutenants, Linzee spent some time hunting pirates and fought in the battles of Copenhagen and Trafalgar. He was also captain of the *Temeraire*, later immortalised by Turner in his painting 'The Fighting Temeraire'. During the restoration, an old piece of packing case was unearthed with the name Linzee written on it.

Early 19th century: Local legend has it that Chapel House later became a Portuguese embassy, although Susan contacted the Portuguese authorities, who said they had no record of there ever being an embassy in Penzance. However, Susan says the area had strong trading links with Portugal in the early 19th century, and she believes it is quite possible that a consul lived in the property.

1838: Chapel House became home to the Carne family banking dynasty. Caroline Carne, who lived there until 1901, was a benefactor who helped to build St Mary's C of E School and was also a great collector with a museum on the site of what is now Cattran's Yard.

1918 to 1937: Chapel House was owned and run as a guest house by Louisa Chappell. After her death, it was sequestered by the Government and used to house evacuees.

Late 20th century: Chapel House has been home to the Penzance Arts Club, affiliated to the Chelsea Arts Club, and a focal point for the town's large artistic community.



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