

**THESE PAGES:** Located at the base of the Nut and next door to the Ship Inn, which is run by the Houstons, Kerry and Alastair's new home, the former VDL bond store, is steeped in local history.



# born-again bond store

MOVING TO STANLEY IN TASMANIA'S NORTH-WEST WAS ALASTAIR AND KERRY HOUSTON'S RETIREMENT PLAN. NOW IT'S OPENED A WHOLE NEW CHAPTER IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL LIVES.

BY KIRSTY MCKENZIE, PHOTOGRAPHY KEN BRASS





*“We were captivated by the village and its history and it became our holiday destination of choice.”*

**THESE PAGES:** Industrial hanging lighting suits the raw tone of the house, and the Houstons employed the same carpenter as they used when renovating the Ship Inn for the home’s cabinets and kitchen island benchtop.

It was meant to be. Call it fate, call it coincidence, call it plain old good luck, but it would be hard to imagine better owners for the historic former Van Diemen’s Land (VDL) Company store building in Stanley, Tasmania, than Alastair and Kerry Houston.

As a trained stonemason, Alastair had immediately spotted the potential of the slowly decaying 1843 bluestone building when he and Kerry arrived in 2018 to restore another historic building in town.

But that was two years before they actually bought the store and started a huge conservation project that is still a work in progress. “We’d first come to Stanley on a family holiday in 2015,” Alastair recalls. “People from Hobart think the north coast of Tasmania is a long way away, so it wasn’t really on our radar. However, we were captivated by the village and its history and it became our holiday destination of choice.”

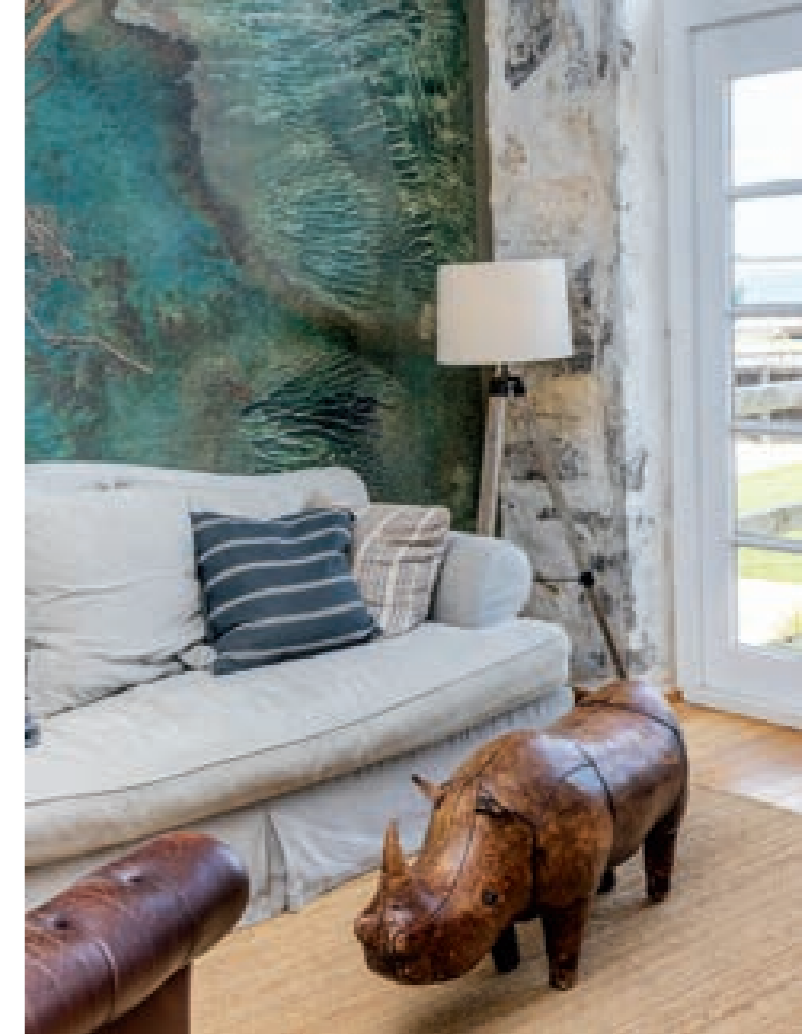
The Houstons rented a cottage from, and became friends with, Sam Humphrey and Louise Payne, owners of the Angel’s Share, where Tasmanian whiskies, other spirits and wines, along with locally crafted jewellery and fashion items, are sold. Alastair was busy with his stonemasonry and landscaping business and Kerry had a satisfying career in human resources for a healthcare company so their roots in Hobart were deep. However, one night after a pleasant evening sampling some of the Angel’s Share’s finest, they were headed back to the cottage when they saw a building for sale.

Alastair’s family has a connection to Talisker House on the Scottish island of Skye and he’d even gone to school there as a youngster when his family was on an extended holiday celebrating his great-grandmother’s 100th birthday. Godfrey’s Beach at Stanley reminded Alastair of Talisker Bay, and the cottage nestled in the lee of local landmark the Nut seemed like a miniature version of Talisker House, which has the dome of Preshal More brooding in the background.

“Of course, we ended up buying it,” Kerry says. “The plan was to restore ‘Little Talisker’ and rent it out until we were ready to retire. But it became harder and harder to leave, so eventually we thought, ‘What are we waiting for?’”

For a while, Alastair continued his business in Hobart, commuting back and forth. Then when the Ship Inn building came on the market, the Houstons became its proud new owners, and Kerry found herself supervising its conversion to a boutique hotel. Meanwhile, Alastair started spending more and more time on the property and its sprawling grounds, with hundreds of metres of rock walls needing construction.

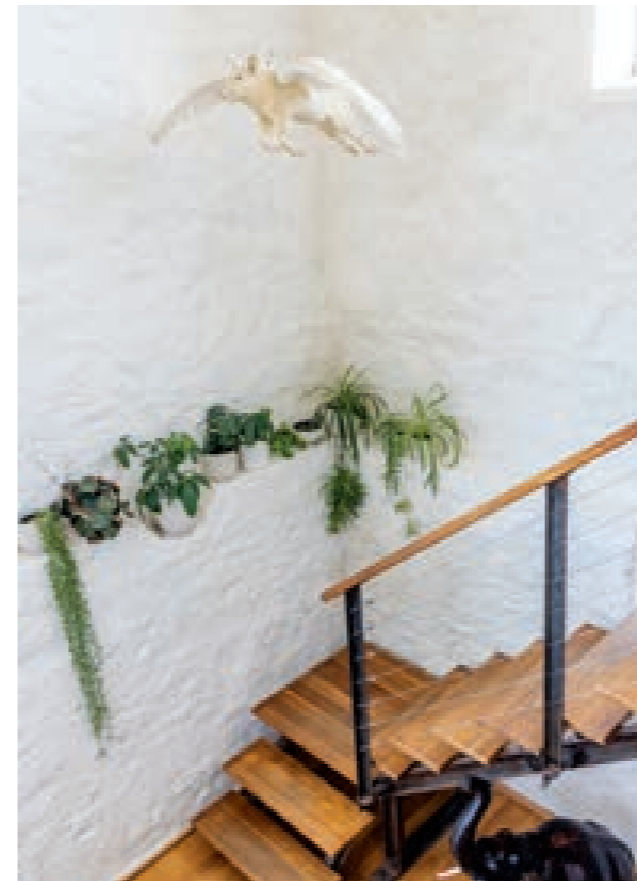
The Ship Inn was built as the Shamrock Hotel in 1849 for Michael Lyons, who was engaged by the British-owned VDL Company to run cattle on Woolnorth station. Michael was also the grandfather of Joseph Lyons, a working-class lad turned school teacher who went on to become Premier of Tasmania and later Australia’s 10th Prime Minister from 1932 until his death in 1939.





**THESE PAGES:** Exposed-stone walls, Tasmanian oak flooring and shades of brown, green and grey, seen in the timber, couches and cabinets, stay true to the building's industrial origins, yet also imbue a sense of home.

**THESE PAGES:** With the help of interior decorators and due to Kerry's knack for finding interesting pieces, the Houstons have created a quirky home that is full of character at every turn.



The VDL Company looms large over the landscape around Stanley. The business was established in 1825 with the aim of developing a supply of cheap wool for textile factories in the UK. It owned a vast tract of land west of the Black River to Cape Grim, which included Woolnorth and Circular Head stations, and was ruled from the convict-built homestead Highfield, perched high on a hill overlooking Bass Strait. Navigators and explorers George Bass and Matthew Flinders gave the landmark the traditional owners had called Munatrik the name Circular Head during their 1798/99 circumnavigation of Tasmania. The 152-metre volcanic plug is now known as the Nut, and the name Circular Head was changed to honour Lord Stanley, the British Secretary of State for War and the Colonies during the 1830s and '40s. Although sheep were not a huge success because the region was too wet, the VDL Company persisted and Stanley became the first permanent European settlement on the northern Tasmanian coast.

The company's bond store was built six years before the Ship Inn, close to the water overlooking Sawyers Bay, the port where the town's fishing fleet is moored and the shipyards where boats of all kinds are repaired. It was designed by colonial architect John Lee Archer, and in its heyday the store would have been the source of all provisions and agricultural supplies for the VDL company, which by 1851 had 846 tenants. The store sold everything from rum and rations to rope and other materials needed to run the huge pastoral enterprise and, through the years, the building has been everything from a place of detention, a customs house, a butter factory and a fish-processing facility. It was a B&B when the Houstons came along. "It was in need of repair and had been on the market for a while," Alastair says. "The owners were running it remotely and I think they appreciated that I would do it up in a respectful manner."

The Houstons and three of their daughters — the oldest works in Melbourne — lived in a semi-derelict billiard hall next to the Ship Inn, while that building was restored and while Alastair worked on the bond store throughout the first COVID lockdowns. When they were finally able to move into the store building, the billiard room became a guest lounge for the Ship Inn, which has quickly become a destination in its own right for its stylish accommodation and truly stunning gardens, complete with Alastair's signature stone walls.

Kerry has a keen eye for a quirky art find, so had plenty of intriguing pieces collected through the years to decorate both the hotel and the bond store. "We engaged [interior stylists] Lynda Gardener and Belle Hemming to curate the interiors for the Ship Inn," Kerry says. "It was such a success that we asked them to help with the house as well. They were able to come up with just the right colour palette and room settings to reflect our style. This house was never meant to be a home and they've hit on just the right balance of industrial and domestic. If I have one piece of advice to people embarking on a project like this, it's hire



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professionals. It’s totally worth the investment.”

Although Kerry’s experience in hospitality was limited, Alastair had clocked up considerable hours in his youth working for Hobart’s legendary seafood restaurateurs George and Jill Mure. “My mother passed away when I was in my final year of high school,” he explains. “I was drifting for a bit until George and Jill took me under their wing and gave me a job in their restaurant. Then they helped me out again, when I wanted to go travelling by introducing me to a friend of theirs in Suffolk who was a landscape designer. That was the beginning of my passion for stonework.”

These days, Alastair’s story has come the full circle as he occasionally helps out on the floor at his neighbours’ restaurant, the much-accoladed Hursey Seafoods.

“That’s the beauty of a small town,” Kerry says. “If there’s an event on, everyone supports it and there’s a real feeling of community. Alastair recently had some health issues and when we came back from Melbourne after his surgery, we were inundated with cakes and casseroles. It was an incredible demonstration of care, given we’d only been in town for a year.”

She adds that while it’s nice to hit the big smoke of Launceston (three hours away) and Hobart (five hours) for shopping, theatre and other entertainment fixes, there’s very little she misses about her former city life. “We love the fact that the girls attend a small school and we know everyone in town,” Kerry says. “We don’t miss out on much and the benefits far outweigh the downsides.” **AC**



**THIS PAGE:** In contrast to the stone exterior of the home, the weatherboard Ship Inn was built in 1849 and restored by the Houstons in 2018. The boutique accommodation can now host up to 20 guests.