

Historic Houses - North County

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# Local castle is under new ownership

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It has always been a given that the San Lorenzo Valley is as close a place to Scotland as any would find in the New World. Sure, there are no redwoods in Scotland, but we easily imagine the forest primeval; towering trees making a backdrop for ancient people's whose history is told only through myths and legends.

One of the great symbols of the visual parallels to Scotland is what was once known as Howden Castle. Now to be known as Robert's Castle, as the castle has recently been repurchased.

New owner Michael Roberts smiles like a kid in his new home, which is, of course, his castle. He knows he lives in an unusual, beautiful and important landmark. "I actually have a friend from New York who's taken only two trips in his life. One to Florida and one to California, and he's been to this castle."

"A lot goes with owning it," Roberts states. It's a very pleasing thing; I feel very good about this place, and I'm hoping to make it work." This includes the hope of being a long-term owner, he adds.

As to Roberts' background, he believes his family tree may indicate a connection to Scotland's hero Robert the Bruce. But with regards to more recent events, "I've been in computers since the early 1960's, and I've been a consultant to Stanford for 22 years," he offers. During that time,

he helped Stanford put together their Internet, from its earliest beginnings. "I decided to take my skills and move into the 'real world,' and establish an Internet presence up here. I'm starting four or five Internet developed businesses, including computer graphics and programming services."

Yet, after looking around the castle as well as his office, it becomes obvious that his real love is history. Roberts devotes a great deal of his 'free time' to the digital archiving of old documents, as well as the continued collection of these documents and artifacts. These include, for example, the Brookdale Lodge collection of old newspapers which Roberts is now negotiating to archive. Of course, his largest project is the castle itself.

The beautiful and architecturally correct castle was built in the late 1920's by Robert Howden, a Scot who owned a large Oakland tile company and whose one desire was to live in a castle. He chose the site on a bend in the San Lorenzo River where he had spent treasured vacations camping in a tent. He, like many at the time who were familiar with Scottish scenery, found striking similarities in the San Lorenzo Valley. He patterned the castle after those remembered from his boyhood in his native Scotland.

Roberts Castle sits somewhat hidden on Highway 9, near the Econo Lodge. Although the outside of the castle looks like stone, with each brick varied slightly from its neighbor, it is actually a thick stucco. On this unusual exterior one can see perhaps the most interesting aspect of this unique

structure, which is its varied decorations and attention to detail. And it is here that the genius of the builder can most greatly be appreciated.

There are mosaics of fourteen Scottish highland dogs at the entrance and a mosaic of a guard at the door. Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Paine are depicted above the door. The turrets have coats of arms, and a front courtyard is made of abalone shells.

Howden used his extensive skills as a stone carver to etch panes of glass windows with depictions of Scottish scenes and the poems of Sir Walter Scott and Robert Burns, and Robert Burns grave. Some would argue that the window patterns would be the 'soul' of the castle, depicting Howden's love of his homeland as well as his identity with Scotland. There are even poems identified as being by "Howden."

Howden kept the castle until 1937 and worked on it as much as possible, yet parts still remain unfinished. Even now, outside the castle rests a retaining wall made from river rock that was being built by Howden. Near the end of the wall, the building approach changes, showing where in the project he died. Also, there is unpainted stucco on the back wall illustrating an unfinished part of the castle.

Several owners had brief stays there before it was bought by Howard Sullivan and his wife, a Santa Cruz couple who owned the castle to 1946. The Sullivans extensively remodeled both the living room and the kitchen. In keeping with the authenticity of a European castle, they wanted to use

Keanstone on the walls. Unable to find anyone locally to work with Keanstone, they contacted Randolph Hearst at the Hearst Castle in San Simeon and were able to arrange to employ the man who had done his installation to work for them in Ben Lomond.

In 1946 the castle, still unfinished, was bought by George and Ivy Weatherly and became known as the Weatherly Castle. Before a trip through the Big Basin area, the Weatherlys had supposedly each had a dream about a castle surrounded with water. After driving through Ben Lomond and seeing a "For Sale" sign on the castle, they followed the omen of their dreams and bought the castle within 10 minutes for \$25,000.

It was to be the Weatherlys who finally finished the castle by adding the towers, turrets, a disappearing stairway, and balconies. They also added a dining room, party room, and food storage cellar. Several partitions were torn out to make small rooms larger, and there were retaining walls added in the garden. During the Weatherly's tenure the castle was filled with Scottish antiques and paintings. After George Weatherly died, Ivy continued to live on in the house with more than a dozen cats. She gave regular tours of the house for almost twenty years.

More recent owners gave the castle a more rustic look. Yet, in contrast the kitchen now has some decidedly modern amenities such as a microwave oven and a satellite dish on the tower.

This building was deemed eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places on October 31, 1979.

As to Roberts plans for the future of the castle, he states, "I plan to keep working on it. To expand it a little bit, to finish off what he (Howden) started, to make and expand some of the rampways. But we'll keep our work in the tradition of how the castle was originally constructed. We're also planning to open it up to the public for weddings and other special occasions starting in the spring."

But the big question is how much public access might occur with the new owner, the castle having been closed to the public for many years. "I'm hoping people who really want to come here will be able to visit. A week doesn't go by where someone doesn't tell me that they've lived here all their lives and never seen the castle. And so there's a lot of interest in this area about this place." But for now, there are no concrete plans to have regular tours or a bed and breakfast, Roberts suggests. "I don't know about overnight accommodations yet; it's a possibility. I have some extra room... but that's in the future. But I am planning to talk with Tyrolean Inn to work together to prepare weddings in the European style. And they have accommodations just across the street, and more parking."

But for the present, the first event the old castle will play host to will be Y2K millennium party on New Year's Eve. Roberts is busy tending to details to make the castle ready to open its ancient looking doors again on the eve of the future.

*Roberts Castle is located at 9699 Highway 9. Call (831) 419-4368 for Y2K party reservations.*