



## TO HAVE & TO HOLD

If four walls can mould a person, then the historic Abbey, in Sydney's inner west, is such a place. **Karina Machado** visited the Davis clan, as they prepared to leave their mysterious home of more than 60 years.

**T**he Abbey is alive, a weaver of spells, a house that reaches out and wraps its inhabitants and visitors in a crushing embrace.

For me, the enchantment began in May 2009, when I read a newspaper article about the auction of the home's contents, ahead of the sale of the property. I lost myself in stories of its ghostly legends and pored over pictures of a stunning neo-gothic Victorian mansion guarded by gargoyles and snarling stone lions. I studied its tower peeking out from behind a web of dense greenery, never imagining there was a princess to go with it. Then, after months of correspondence, I arranged an interview with one of the owners, Gervase Davis, and his new bride, Estee, at the house.

It's a real-estate cliché to describe a house as having 'character' but it was

eerily true here. The Abbey pulsed with human qualities; elusive and haughty, it seemed to say 'Welcome,' with a knowing smile.

Something similar shone in Gervase Davis's dark eyes. In his jeans and Superman T-shirt, he is compact and handsome, in a lush-lashed, Robert Downey Jr-esque way. The 32-year-old is a surprising Lord of the Manor, except for his voice, which is deep and melodious – each consonant jutting against rotund vowels.

South African-born Estee, 24, with a complexion like a film noir heroine and tangerine hair to match her top, greets me with a wide, white smile. But the Abbey is like a fairground hall of mirrors, and this shadowy 50-room mansion – denuded since the contents auction – is no newlyweds' haven.

"You like ghost stories and things like that?" asks Gervase, with a half-grin and an arched brow, but like the shifting images in a hologram his amusement is only the other face of fear. "I'll sit down and tell you some. If we had somewhere to sit down that would be great." We all laugh, but I can't shake the impression that the house keeps them on their toes, that daylight is for gathering your wits until night falls.

The 130-year-old Abbey has a history of mystery and thwarted love. Master builder, high-ranking freemason and Mayor of Annandale, John Young, built the home in the style of a Scottish baronial manor reputedly to lure back his estranged wife, Eleanor.

It is the most famous of the row of unique dwellings known as the 'Witches' Houses' that Young conjured in the area.

It's unclear whether Eleanor rejected his efforts, or simply didn't live to see them come to fruition (she died in England in 1885), but Young, who remarried, never moved into the Abbey, preferring to settle at nearby Kentville, another of his creations. In 1916, Sarah O'Brien, her three married daughters and their families leased the property. Her swarm of cheeky grandchildren made the most of their fairytale setting, dreaming up spooky practical jokes and playing antique games like Oranges and Lemons and the Grand Old Duke of York.

In the mid-1920s, solicitor Ernest W. Warren bought the Abbey and lived there with his family, but the mansion was converted into flats after his wife, Alice, died in a car accident on the 26th of January, 1927. According to a brief history of the house by William Davis, Gervase's half-brother, the heartbroken widower wanted nothing more to do with the place after the tragedy.

Exploring the Abbey with Gervase and Estee, there's a sense of its past clamouring and humming, as much a part of the house's architecture as its imposing sandstone or the art and Masonic symbols adorning its intricate wall friezes and tiles.

The Abbey is a storyteller. I could walk through it 50 times and uncover something new each visit. The entrance hall, with its vaulted ceiling like a starlit sky, has a splendour reminiscent of the Chapel Royal at Henry VIII's Hampton Court Palace in England. A majestic fireplace flanked by marble benches dominates the dining room, which is bare save for an enormous sideboard

that's built into the floor with an antique gramophone – its speaker a massive, gaping mouth – sitting atop it. At our feet, a lone balloon waltzes gently across the elegant black-and-white tiles.

Upstairs, two white statues, disembodied heads with elegant Grecian profiles, keep watch over the tiny room that was Gervase's first bedroom, after he graduated from the 'nursery,' a vast room across the hall. "These two adorable ladies are the reason why I still sleep with the light on while I am in this house," he says. "And it's always been that single drop of paint that got me." I peer at the statue, and yes, one of the faces appears wounded at the hairline, a thread of scarlet trickling down her forehead. The effect is as unnerving today as it must have been to a three-year-old Gervase. "I've got very strong mental images of the way I'd feel in this room – safe – Dad's next door, I can hear him snoring. But," he pauses, "it was always, 'Keep a light on, please.'"

Gervase John Jewel Lancelot Milan Jovanovic Davis grew up in the Abbey, the youngest of three children of prominent Sydney doctor Geoffrey Davis and his second wife, Serbian-born Jelena.

The blonde and portly Dr Davis was a passionate advocate of safe abortion practice, a controversial speciality that led to him once being described as 'king of the abortionists' in Federal Parliament. One of Gervase's two sisters, Katriona, lives in another wing of the Abbey with her partner and two sons. There are also two step-siblings and two half-siblings from Dr Davis's previous and subsequent marriages, respectively. The three

families have a history as twisted and tangled as the bougainvillea that used to grow, unchecked, strangling the house and shutting out the sunlight.

The Abbey has sung its children home and it's banished them, but the spell can never be lifted. If four walls can mould a person's life, this is such a house. "It gets a hold of you, it does," reflects Gervase, whose father had owned the Abbey since 1959, when his own father, Lancelot, presented it to him as a graduation gift. "I've lived elsewhere for years and years and years, but it was always there," says Gervase, sadly. "It was always a part of us. Now, I finally have to sever the tie."

Even setting aside its phantoms and intrigues, the Abbey is still an urban marvel ruled by whimsy and wonder; Mark Twain is said to have once stayed the night, a Fabergé egg and a matchbox-sized ruby are among the family heirlooms lost somewhere in the depths of the house and in the backyard the pool once teemed with fattened trout for Gervase and his dad to fish. As for the house's scale and proportions, one look stills the heart.

What must it have been like to grow up in a place that seems carved from an Edgar Allen Poe dream? "Terrifying but magnificent," responds Gervase in his calm and measured way. "You don't walk through this house without looking around a corner before you pass it. You're always looking into the empty corner of the room. Just. In. Case.

Another balloon circles us like a forlorn ghost. Watching it, Gervase summons a memory of being put to bed with his two sisters here, in their parents' >



< room. "I was very, very young, but I clear as day remember it because we were absolutely terrified. We heard bells, and they were getting closer and closer and closer and closer and closer and we were just in hysterics," he recalls. "We ran straight out the door and down the stairs, after being frozen there for what seemed like hours."

"They were like jingle bells, not cathedral bells," explains Katriona, 38, when she joins us an hour later. Kat, as she's known, volunteers the memory without prompting and describes it as one of her spookiest moments in the house. The fear that bloomed inside her that night – when she was eight, middle child Demeter, five, and Gervase a toddler – has never been reconciled. Instead, it seems to have grown with her, becoming a vital part of what makes up this feisty, big-hearted woman with nervous energy to burn.

The uncanny became another member of the Davis family, acknowledged by the adults, but never in the presence of the children. Yet as the years unravelled, the house whispered its secrets to them, too. Kat rattles off Abbey folklore in her husky-voiced, matter-of-fact way: there was the time her mum was hanging washing out and happened to glance up at the tower only to gasp and look again, certain that her dead father was watching her from the top window; there was the mournful keens of bagpipes wafting through the rooms, the visitor whose silver jewellery would turn black whenever she stepped inside the house, and the famous female apparition.

"I'd say we are good and haunted," the late Dr Davis told *Woman's Day* magazine in 1967. "The front door opens and there are footsteps that sound as though someone is coming up the stairs, but when we investigate, there is no one

to be seen." The article featured a quaint photo of girls in floral minis and boys with Beatles-style mops doing a 'snake dance' around the living room.

One of those girls, Francesca, the doctor's stepdaughter from his first union, told a local newspaper five years later that a taxi driver once told her his sister was murdered at the Abbey in 1912, around the time the building is thought to have served as a boarding house and private school. Each family member encountered the feminine ghost, Francesca told the *Daily News*. "Once, I was in the music room and her ladylike

### **Walking down the stairs, she felt a stifling presence at her back, close enough to sense the static tingle of its spirit cloak.**

footsteps came in the front hall, up the steps and into the room, which went cold ... I couldn't get out fast enough." Intriguingly, the music room is a former name for the master bedroom, where the bells rang out and a bloodied stone head hovers by the door.

Kat's most chilling experience originates in the same general area. The memory has a name: the Joker. "I've never had an explanation for this," she says, her voice fluttering with emotion. "This thing was like a court jester, or a little joker from a pack of cards..."

Her encounters with the tiny, grotesque visitor happened whenever her parents were out, in a small room just off the master bedroom. "This court jester used to sit at the end of my bed, taunting me, and I'd race down the stairs. You can't tell me you can sleepwalk down those stairs, you'd break your neck! I'd be awake and he'd be running after me, he'd be taunting me. It would start at the end of my bed, you know, hassling with my feet.

Grandmother would try pacifying me when I got downstairs, but I'd be hysterical because that bloody thing would be behind me, he'd be behind me until I got to that bottom stair, just laughing at me."

As a newcomer to the family, Estee felt for months that she was being scrutinised by unseen eyes. And then she knew. Walking down the stairs, she felt a stifling presence at her back, close enough to sense the static tingle of its spirit cloak. Reaching the landing at the bottom of the stairs, the sensation of being followed became too powerful to ignore. "Look, enough! I'm not scared of you," she

scolded. "Then, I've turned around – ha! – and there's this male figure whose head's about here ..." Making an axe of her hand she slashes at the air, high above herself. "He was this big, and I thought, 'Now that you've shown yourself, I'm just going to leave you, and I'm sorry.' " But the looming dark mass, shaped like a towering man, wasn't ready to end the exchange. As Estee turned around to retreat, she felt herself slammed, chest-first, into the edge of the doorway. The fact that she didn't melt into her fear intrigues her. "I just thought, Okay, remain calm, just walk out and be nice."

Respecting those who loved the Abbey first is the key, Estee feels, to a peaceful coexistence. "They've all got their place and the way that they work, and then when somebody comes and disturbs something, it's like, Well, why? It hasn't been touched in 50 years. Who are you to move that chair? And they certainly make their presence felt!" Beloved spirits also came calling at the Abbey. >



< “Mum came and visited me after she died,” says Gervase. “I was 16 or 17 and I sat bolt upright because all of a sudden, Mum was just sitting next to the bed in the corner, as if to say everything will be okay, then she went away.” Similarly, following her death in 1986, the children’s grandmother returned to farewell Demeter: “That evening, I dreamed of school, and suddenly my grandmother was there in the school driveway, in her hospital gown,” recalls Demi, as her family call her. “I touched her shoulder in my dream then woke up in my bed, just as she turned to embrace me – faceless, but a definite presence – and we hugged.”

We head outdoors to sit on the front patio adjacent to the light-drenched private chapel where Gervase and Estee wed in May 2009. The bride wore a delicate gown of palest dusky pink, and the groom, a Victorian gentleman’s cape over his suit. It’s peaceful here, traffic noises drift up but they’re distant and tinny, as if filtered through a tunnel of time. It’s easy to feel cut off from the world at the Abbey.

For some minutes we’re silent, listening to birdsong and the muted sounds of the city, as the family reflects on the death in hospital of 74-year-old Dr Davis in 2008, after a long illness. “That night, I was the first person home,” recalls Gervase. “I got to the second stair on my way up and I felt two hands slam down on the back of my shoulders, from behind. It was terrifying, but comforting. I didn’t hear a voice, but I got this overwhelming sense of somebody asking, “Where is he?”

Later that evening, footsteps paced restlessly up and down the hall outside Gervase and Estee’s tower bedroom. In Gervase’s mind, there’s no question that at least one of the Abbey’s ghostly residents always had his father’s best interests at heart. When he moved back into his childhood home to help care for his dad after a 15-year absence, Gervase cleared a space amid his father’s interminable clutter and laid a mattress down in a room at the end of the cloisters that used to be the servants’ quarters. Every night for two weeks, a presence would drift out of a connecting hallway and hover over his bed, challenging him, like a guard-dog defending his territory. “I had a sense of it saying, ‘Who are you? What are you doing here? Why are you here?’ There was nothing to see, he explains, but the shift in atmosphere drew a picture in dread: “You know when the bed sheets are made of lead? And they hold you down and you freeze?”

“One night,” continues Gervase, “I just said, ‘Look, I’m here to look after Dad.’ Nothing bothered me after that, quite the opposite.”

Despite its perils, the family doesn’t love the house any less. It’s easy to see why. As an homage to love, the arts, secret freemasons’ business, architecture and to the bonds of family, it has no equal among homes in Australia. Layers of history haunt the Abbey. Laid flat, they’re pieces of a patchwork quilt threaded together by delicate stitches in time.

And then there are the ghosts.

“I think growing up in a house like this, with its dimensions and its shift in energies and all of that, you can’t be completely ignorant to it,” says Kat. “You can choose to switch off and rationalise, or you can be open to it.”

In November 2009, the Abbey was sold at auction. Today, a new family is filling the empty spaces in what was always intended to be a house haunted only by love – as attested by Demeter’s favourite memories of her Abbey childhood. “I remember after bath time, being snuggled in a warm nightie and dressing gown and Dad lighting sandalwood incense and playing us records before we went

to bed. The scratchy, crackled sound of vinyl somehow matched the warm fuzzy feeling of being with Dad all cosy and clean in the winter time.”

Now, the Davises are busy building new memories. Kat, her partner and her boys moved to northern New South Wales, chasing the sun to an idyllic seaside town. Gervase and his flame-haired princess also made a seachange, to the New South Wales south coast, where they’re enjoying the novelty of a modern and youthful home, where the sounds and scents of the ocean waft in on summer evenings.

But the Abbey beckons. “Gervase has been dreaming of the Abbey almost on a nightly basis since he left,” Estee tells me, some months after their move. And eclectic memorabilia from the old mansion dots the sleek surfaces and pristine walls of the couple’s new house, helping to tell the story of a family home like no other. “Even though we have this clean slate, we’ve filled it with what we know as home,” she explains.

A ship’s bell, said to be from the Endeavour, has been transplanted from the Abbey’s overgrown garden to the new house’s streamlined foyer, as curved and smooth as the interior of the relic itself. Estee has further plans to spruce up her home’s entrance space with a series of photos Gervase took of each step winding from the top of the Abbey’s tower to its front door. She hopes to frame each picture, and hang them all the way down the curly foyer, an effect to mimic the tower itself. “We miss the old girl,” says Estee, her voice rich with affection. “It grabs you, and you grab it,” says Estee. “And you’re a part of each other forever more.” **H&G**



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