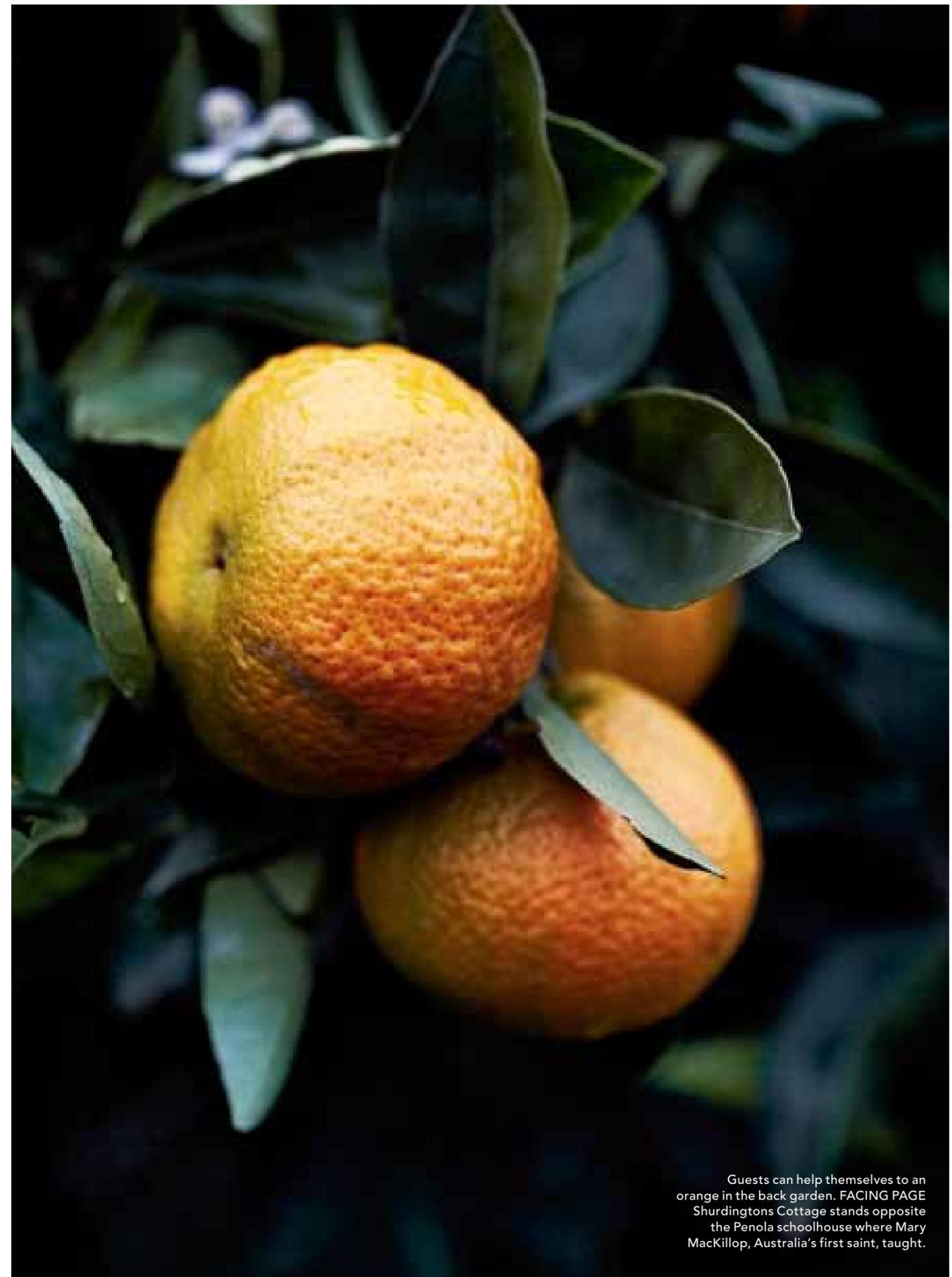


MYSTERIOUS WAYS

WHEN A COUPLE BOUGHT A RUNDOWN COTTAGE ALMOST BY ACCIDENT, A SAINTLY PROVIDENCE WAS CLOSE AT HAND.

WORDS GRETEL SNEATH PHOTOGRAPHY SHARYN CAIRNS



Guests can help themselves to an orange in the back garden. FACING PAGE Shurdingtons Cottage stands opposite the Penola schoolhouse where Mary MacKillop, Australia's first saint, taught.



CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT
Locals have referred to the property as 'Shurdingtons' for more than a century, recalling an early owner; one of the three bedrooms; the front verandah; the Westons have made the bathroom gleam with old dresser mirrors; many of the antiques are family heirlooms. FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT
Vintage furniture and photographs in the dining room; Robin installed an original Southern Cross windmill which "works beautifully" to match one shown in an early photograph of the property; the kitchen was salvaged from an old homestead and its authentic 1940 style saw it chosen for a vintage fashion shoot.



'NUN HABIT BROWN' seems an unusual description of the paint colour in the hallway of an 1880s cottage on SA's Limestone Coast. But Shurdingtons Cottage is located in Mary MacKillop country, so it's quite fitting for the owners to pay homage to such a significant former resident.

Australia's first saint founded the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Sacred Heart, affectionately nicknamed the 'Brown Joeys', in Penola in the 1860s. The schoolhouse where she taught is directly opposite the cottage — and *something* seems to have been moving in mysterious ways when Robin and Caroline Weston bought the property in 2001.

"It was one of those things; we saw the auction sign, came in to have a look, didn't think we would buy," Robin says. "But then we ended up with it."

The cottage had been empty for several years and wasn't wearing well; a full renovation would be required and yet a buyer would need to comply with the conditions that came with a state heritage listing. "Everybody obviously

thought it had too many restrictions placed on it and that it needed too much work; bids got to only \$38,000 and we thought, 'Why wouldn't you buy it?'," Caroline recalls.

It was a match made in heaven. Robin works as a landscape designer and calls himself 'The Invisible Gardener'. ("It's not because I'm never there; it's because I like to create gardens that seem as though they have always been there rather than looking like I have put my personal mark on them.") He and Caroline, a veterinarian, applied that same approach to the renovation project, taking their cue from old photographs and local folklore in order to maintain integrity. Early records suggest a tailor first lived there, while father-of-six Francis Shurdington extended the original red gum slab structure in 1902. "It's been known as Shurdingtons ever since; that's what the town calls it, so we kept the name," Robin says.

Everything from roofing iron to linoleum tiles and limestone pavers was happy finds. The 1940s kitchen came from a sheep station over the border in Victoria, and is so

authentic that it has starred in a vintage fashion shoot.

The pet-friendly garden also has a potted history; beds are bordered with beer bottles bearing the century-old Pickaxe brand that were found beneath the house, even older grapevines were rescued when a nearby block was being cleared, and fenceposts came from the Coonawarra dairy farm where Robin was raised. Caroline says it took more than five years to get everything just right.

"We were in no hurry; we just worked our way along," she says. "It owes us nothing but our hard work and that's something that we enjoyed doing anyway."

The three-bedroom cottage is within walking distance of the galleries, shops and award-winning restaurant Piper's of Penola and the historic Heyward's Royal Oak Hotel built by Mary MacKillop's uncle, Alexander Cameron. Penola (population around 1700) is, in turn, just minutes from the Coonawarra wineries. Yet the Westons hadn't considered turning it into self-contained accommodation until they

became aware of the interest generated by its transformation. "People would stop and ask if they could have a look, and we got many donations," Robin says. "One bloke pulled up and offered us a mantelpiece that he had pulled out of a house from a similar era."

The Westons insist Shurdingtons is "plain rather than frilly", but they're proud of luxury conveniences like the Philippe Starck freestanding bath, the Otway stone flooring and the "\$800 basin teamed with a \$5 mirror". Thoughtful touches like the provision of fresh eggs and homemade fruitcake show true country hospitality, and as you relax by the cosy wood fire, there is a sense of calm that harks back to a slower era. Robin says it's exactly what they intended.

"There's a bit too much going on with life these days," he concludes. "But a house like this represents a time when there weren't as many things being thrown at you." * *Shurdingtons Cottage is at 7 Portland Street, Penola, South Australia. 0427 028 652; caroline.weston@bigpond.com*