



HITTING THE



HIGH spots

Carolyn Holmes visits a stunningly converted Victorian water tower in Surrey that is home to architect Elspeth Beard and her young son, Tom.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN SUMNER.



Above: Tom's room has a work area on the platform.

Far Left: The water tower reaches high above the Surrey countryside. The top section, which once contained the water tank, is now Elspeth's galleried sitting room.

Left: Elspeth and Tom and their towering home. Photograph courtesy Elspeth Beard.

Living in a 130-foot-high water tower does have both up and down sides,' admits architect Elspeth Beard. 'On the "up" side are the amazing views, wonderfully spacious rooms and the feeling of being in my own little world up here. The "down" side is carrying shopping up the 89 stairs to the kitchen. And, when I go away, my legs ache for about two weeks after I get back, till I get used to the stairs again.'

Elspeth's Victorian water tower is tucked away down a leafy Surrey lane. She bought it from Thames Water in 1988: 'I work in a practice that specialises in converting listed buildings, such as warehouses and power stations,' she explains. 'I wanted to convert something for myself and I just happened to find this. It was derelict, full of pigeons, had no windows and the walls leaked, but I didn't actually

see the problems - I just saw what I wanted to do with it. I felt it was an amazing building, and I really wanted to turn it into a home. I admire the way that buildings were constructed in Victorian times - they have so much power and presence.

'The old water tower was completely empty from ground to fourth floors, with a large water tank in the top. I decided to keep the base of the water tank to form my kitchen ceiling, but cut out the tank walls to create a large, light and airy living room on the floor above.'

Preferring quality of space to quantity of rooms, Elspeth decided to keep each floor as open as possible. She wanted always to be aware that she was in an octagonal building, so there is just one large room on each floor, reached by a long, winding flight of maple stairs.

Restoring the water tower became a



Above: The kitchen is the room with the most natural light. Modern and practical, it has black lacquered doors on the units and green slate work surfaces.



Right: In the entrance hall, huge doors made of solid maple lead to the staircase. The flagstones are original, and Elspeth had the curved stone steps made. The Victorian doorstops were bought at auction.



Above: Elspeth's hexagonal galleried sitting room is both stylish and comfortable.



Left: The original iron spiral staircase leads up to the roof.

very long-term project. 'First I had to get planning approval, which took a year, then it took several months to clean the place. No sooner had I shovelled out all the pigeon mess than bats moved in, but luckily they moved out again. I spent the next two years waterproofing - we had scaffolding up all round as we repointed the bricks, built a new roof and fitted new windows. So, after three years I had a waterproof shell.

'Year four was spent on steel work and building the staircase. During the fifth and sixth years I installed floors, plumbing and the kitchen. In fact, when I moved in Tom was just six weeks old, and I had no bath, hot water or proper kitchen; it was like a building site. Fortunately at that age children don't know much about it.

'Actually, it was wonderful having so much time to make changes as I went

along - very different from working for a client who wants things fast. Six years gave me plenty of opportunity to change my mind. I started off without any real vision of what I wanted, so living there meant I could learn, for instance, where the sun comes in.'

Today the large original wooden front door, from which Elspeth stripped several layers of rusty red paint, opens into a high-ceilinged hexagonal entrance hall. An Oriental rug sits on the old flagstones and huge curved stone steps lead through high maple double doors towards the stairs - 116 in all - which climb to the living room at the top of the tower, passing three bedrooms and the kitchen on the way.

In her conversion Elspeth has kept as many of the water tower's original features as possible, like the heavy front door, the flagstones and a lovely iron



Above: An 'open plan' bath above one of the bedrooms.

Right: The guest bedroom is cool and elegant, with its bathroom high on a platform above the sleeping area.

spiral staircase leading from the sitting room to the roof, which offers spectacular views across the Surrey tree tops.

Elspeth's bedroom and the guest room are both light and high-ceilinged, and furnished with elegant antiques. To avoid rooms within rooms Elspeth has designed bathrooms on a platform above the sleeping area, reached by a flight of open wooden steps. In seven-year-old Tom's room a similar platform serves as a work area, while he plays and sleeps below.

The water tower has won several architectural awards for Elspeth. In 1993 she was awarded the Surrey Historic Buildings Trust Award, much to her surprise: 'I just took a few pictures and sent them in - I couldn't believe it when I won,' she says. This inspired her to enter for others, and in 1994 she won the RIBA South East Region Architecture Award and also the Downland Design Award for that year.



Right: An unusual feature of the sitting room is the device that acted like a ballcock in the huge water tank, turning off the water when it reached a certain level. Old plans of the water tower can be seen on the walls.

Inset right: A windowsill on the staircase shows the thickness of the old walls.

Inset far right: Looking down the staircase. There are 116 stairs between the entrance hall and the sitting room.

Elspeth has always had an adventurous and unconventional streak. A lover of motorbikes, she owns two, one of which she rode round the world for three years in her early twenties. Today she also drives a Caterham Seven open-topped sports car.

She takes the problems of vertical living in her stride: 'You learn to be organised and make life easier for yourself, like buying five sets of cleaning materials, one for each floor. The stairs certainly keep us fit and I haven't yet had any visitors who couldn't manage them - even quite elderly people - though one day I might get some handrails,' she adds as an afterthought.

And what of the future? 'Well, I would rather like to live in a windswept castle on the coast, where perhaps I could work from home...' Knowing Elspeth, it might well happen.

