

Now complete, Petch House awaits a purpose



By Brock Weir

It has stood in and around Aurora in various locations for significant chunks of three different centuries, but over 160 years since its logs were first sawn and put into place, Aurora's Petch House is a building looking for a purpose.

Reconstruction and restoration is largely complete on what is believed to be one of Aurora's oldest surviving homes. After beginning life in what was once Whitchurch near the present Highway 404, Aurora inched closer and closer to its territory eventually enveloping not just the house, but the history that came with it.

Making way for development, the house was hoisted and moved southward on Leslie Street, just below Wellington Street where it languished for the better part of a decade, decaying and becoming overrun with wildlife.

In the last months of the previous Council, after several years of debate on just what to do with the house ? ideas ranged from a visitor's centre to one heck of a bonfire ? the Council of the day put the wheels in motion on a plan to restore the building to its former glory.

Continuing with support from the current Council, the building was dismantled in 2011 and after several debates a home was finally found for it behind the Aurora Seniors' Centre at the formal entrance of the Aurora Community Arboretum.

After advocates came together to form Friends of the Petch House to ensure its future, the project continued working within a \$111,000 budget.

The logs were individually catalogued and evaluated for condition, spruced up and, where needed, authentic materials were located to complete the building. Focusing on the logs themselves, which were in various states of decay, each one was given a rudimentary cleaning before more intense steam cleaning and, in some cases, bleached and otherwise treated for durability before being left to air dry.

Some of the wood was beyond repair and new wood needed to be joined to the old in a way barely discernable to the eye.

Much of the restoration work was carried out by Peter Van Nostrand and, in order to complete the project, the Town of Aurora put much of its Heritage Salvage Program, a collection of materials collected from local demolition sites, at his disposal to fill in the gaps and foster an air of authenticity.

Now firmly in place off John West Way, clad in freshly treated wood siding, and surrounded by landscaping, all that's needed to finish the job is hydro and a purpose, according to Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation.

Mr. Downey was joined at the Petch House last week by Mayor Geoffrey Dawe, Aurora CAO Neil Garbe, and Parks Director Jim Tree on a sneak peek inside the house. Following the tour, Mr. Downey said aside from those two details, the job is done from their perspective.

“We have stated we were going to relocate the building, dismantle it, prepare a site where it is at the Seniors' Centre, put it back together and restore it to as much of its original state as possible, put in the windows and doors, and we have completed that task,” he said. “The next task is for Council to have discussions on what the future uses for the building might be.”

A report to Council recommending getting the wheels in motion to determine just what that future use might be is already in the works, he added.

As debate swirled over the future of the Petch House when it did indeed appear to be in jeopardy, proposed uses included a welcome centre to the Aurora Wildlife Park, when locating it near the future wildlife preserve off Wellington Street East between Bayview and Leslie was in the cards, to a place for students to come and gain first-hand, hands-on knowledge of Aurora's early days.

Thus far, however, no community group has expressed a formal interest in using it, said Mr. Downey, noting the building will come with its own challenges, such as a lack of bathroom and sanitary plumbing.

“They haven't come forward and that might be because they don't know it is done,” he said. “We now have it to a state where people can come and view it and maybe have some discussions on what the future uses might be. It has some limitations with regards to size, with regards to the various heritage aspects, but there might be a use out there that we haven't contemplated yet. We're all ears at this point.”

Despite Petch House being placed behind the Seniors' Centre and at the entrance of the Arboretum, Mr. Downey said he didn't anticipate either organization having a direct stake in the consultation process unless it had an equally direct impact on their operations.