





# Poppy's Cottage

## A FARMHOUSE CUPPA

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It doesn't matter if you're visiting as a friend of the family or a guest of Poppy Abbott's Bed and Breakfast, you'll still be greeted with a warm twinkling smile from the hostess herself.

Less than ten minutes out of Armidale near Peterson's Winery, Malvern Hill is where Poppy and her husband Jack raised their three children, and where Poppy established her B&B, aptly named Poppy's Cottage, back in 1991. First timers will marvel at the established trees on the 140 acre property and the promise of a quiet weekend away in a historic bush setting. Seasoned visitors, on the other hand, anticipate a sense of homecoming from Poppy and Jack's legendary hospitality. It's not unusual to find yourself enjoying just one more tea, coffee or wine after some very persuasive arm twisting.

With wannabe cattle dogs rounding up pet ducks in the cottage garden and, more often than not, music streaming from the farmhouse's open windows, Malvern Hill clearly has character. Much of this is Poppy and Jack's own style but the farm is also historic in its own right.

The property was once a 240 acre potato farm. The original farmhouse in which Poppy and Jack still live was built in 1901. The quaint yet comfortable two room cottage which houses B&B guests is even older.

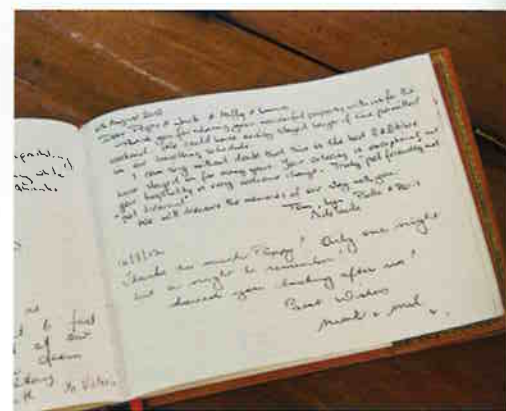
"It was built for gold miners at Hillgrove in the 1860s and was transported here by bullock team in 1901," explains Poppy. "There were 6,000 people in Hillgrove. When mining finished there were all these cottages and people bought them to provide workers' accommodation on their properties."

Poppy and Jack, from Newcastle and Glen Innes respectively, met while at school in Armidale but it was some time and many continents later before they were married. Poppy worked as a nurse and in London as a barmaid and then became an airhostess for Qantas. At that time Jack was in Tehran working for a bank and his mother asked if Poppy could deliver a letter to him, which she did.

"He said 'I'm going for a picnic today with a group of friends, would you like to come?' We had three days together and now we have three children," laughs Poppy. Jack returned to Australia in 1978 and the couple spent five years in Sydney where they married and had two children, before moving up to Armidale.

"We rented in town for a while and everybody said 'oh gosh, you wouldn't want to live out of town, all that driving' but to wind your way down a little country road and up the hills and around the corner was heavenly after five years of driving in Sydney. We're only ten minutes to town. Once you're out there you feel fifty miles away," Poppy says.





It was a more a case of Malvern Hill finding Poppy and Jack than the other way around. “Jack was a bit miffed because as we drove up the driveway I said ‘oh, this is it.’ There was no room for negotiation.”

It’s hard to see how anyone could resist the property’s charms especially the cottage and the grounds. “The garden had a wonderful skeleton with lots of big old trees which is always most helpful when you want to start a garden and there are lots of old perennials and antique flowers. It was an English type of garden so we’ve just gone along with that. It’s a fantastic garden that looks after itself. It’s very forgiving,” laughs Poppy. The couple share the gardening duties, although Jack is responsible for the vegetable garden which supplies many meals to Poppy’s Cottage and it’s not uncommon to hear him explaining the basic principles of companion planting.

Poppy’s gardening philosophy is a little simpler. “If you’ve got a space where you can sit and feel very comfortable with a bunch of flowers to pick 365 days per year, then you’ve got a good garden.” Of course the garden’s character is enhanced by the menagerie of animals. Joining the dogs and ducks are chickens and geese and, in the paddocks, cows. The yard is fully fenced and guests of Poppy’s Cottage are welcome to bring their dogs.

Having spent her school days in Armidale, Poppy didn’t find the move to the country too

daunting, although she does have a few amusing stories to tell. “I remember early on I was outside scooping leaf matter and mould from the chook trough when a Qantas plane flew overhead. I thought goodness me, life had changed.”

Thirty years on and Malvern Hill has seen a fair procession of cottage guests, relatives, school friends and even the odd rock star.

“We had Sting stay one year. It was TAS speech day and there were nine family members and friends in the house. Sting booked the cottage with his wife and their baby under a pseudonym – Gordon or something. I was getting the kids ready for speech day and serving the guests breakfast in the garden at the same time. He had an instrument box. I asked ‘are you a musician? Do you play in a band?’” Sting said yes, to which Poppy exclaimed “So does my son, I must introduce you.” It wasn’t until weeks later that Poppy noticed Sting’s real name in the visitors’ book along with his claim that it was the best stay he’d had in Australia.

Interacting with guests is what Poppy loves most and many have kept in touch over the years, exchanging Christmas cards and gifts. One couple got engaged at Poppy’s Cottage and then came back every year. Poppy realised how much time had passed when, on their last visit, the couple exclaimed “oh gosh, we’ll have to go, the boys will have finished soccer by now.”

The seed for Poppy’s much-cherished B&B was sown many, many years earlier while riding motorbikes through Ireland with a friend. Poppy’s eyes sparkle as she recalls staying in farmhouse accommodation in the Comeragh Mountains.

“The family had little children and we collected them off the school bus, helped them with their homework, peeled vegetables in the kitchen and ate at the table. We then sat up with the owners of the B&B and talked about their country and our country. Being in a situation like that is just memorable.”

Today, Poppy’s Cottage guests are treated to a delicious gourmet breakfast including freshly laid eggs and Poppy will happily dip into her extensive recipe collection to prepare a three course evening feast, complete with local wine. Just don’t ask to help in the kitchen.

“I’m no good at having people in the kitchen. I tune out and can’t concentrate,” explains Poppy. Ironically, this is exactly where her children’s school friends remember hanging out most.

Malvern Hill is located adjacent to Peterson’s Winery and is a great place to take a stroll, but catching up with Poppy and Jack and soaking up the personality they bring to their home is often all you need.

“Please, stay for another coffee.” ☑  
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