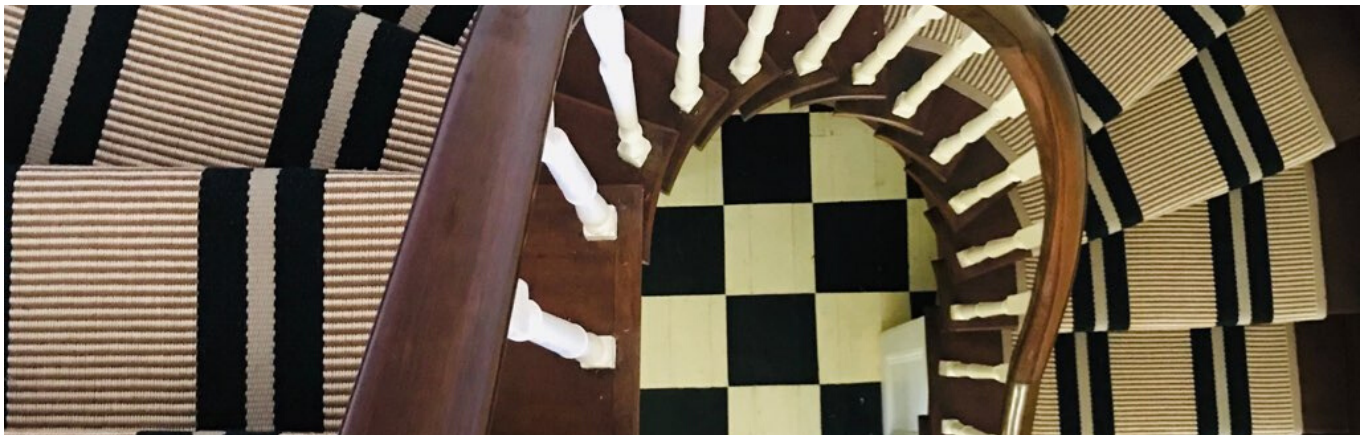

Terragong Staircase

By Simon Milner.

The traditional Georgian cantilevered staircase in the entrance hall at Terragong always elicits a 'wow' from visitors to the house and has featured in many a wedding photograph over the decades.



Dating from 1858 when the main house was constructed, this piece of architectural sculpture was badly damaged in the Sydney earthquake of 1961, when the supporting steel rods from which the structure is suspended and that run from the ground through to the top floor attic space were wrenched from the walls, resulting in a partial collapse; not soon after, the then owners engaged the services of a carpenter who claimed he was able to make the required repairs but - as we discovered 50 years later - not 100% true to the original.

One of the first repair jobs we undertook as part of our renovation and restoration of Terragong was to the staircase, with our specialist woodworker Richard putting right some of the earlier repairs; this included replacing broken and mismatched balusters with new ones which we commissioned from a Sydney-based wood turner, who used one of the originals as the model for the new replacements - a dozen in total. These were crafted using cedar wood to match. We took the opportunity to commission a newel post at the same time, as the original had been removed at some stage (probably during the repairs made immediately following the earthquake in the early '60s); the design of this too was based on the shape of the original balusters.

Once Richard had completed his work, our wood finisher Rudi was able to fit us into his busy schedule, living in-house and working 12 hour days on the next stage in returning the staircase to its former glory.

At some point in the past the bannister, stair treads and risers - as well as the skirting board that winds its way up the stairs and along the first floor landing - had been given a coating of an Estapol-like high gloss varnish. Not only was the high-gloss finish at odds with the original cedar surfaces in the house such as the windows, window casements, doors and door frames, the colour had turned an odd shade of deep orange/marmalade through oxidisation.

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We all underestimated the time it would take to complete the job! Rudi's original four-day estimate quickly turned into eight days, with the first six days alone spent stripping the estapol finish from the wood, using a variety of strippers (some organic, some highly caustic, not all effective), eventually resorting to a heat gun which was the only thing able to shift the mirror-like coating.

Once the wood was bare, Rudi's artistry was put into play, creating a custom blend colour varnish to match the other cedar wood in the house, painstakingly applying layer after layer to achieve the right depth of colour.

Once stained, the wood (bannister, risers, treads and skirting board) was then French polished using traditional shellac and methylated spirits and buffed to a glorious satin finish which glows. Rudi also gave the front door and large passage door under the stairs the same treatment, revealing their original beauty.

The original brass carpet rods which had been in storage since the original carpet was lifted were polished and reinstalled as the new wool stair runner from Hartley & Tissier (Paris) was installed.

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The staircase mid-refurbishment, with the original stair runner and discoloured high-gloss finish. The unpainted balusters are the newly turned ones in cedar.



The newly turned balusters and newel post, awaiting installation



The new stain on the treads, contrasting with the orange hue of the Estapol coat on the side panel.



The completed bannister with its new stain and French polish.

