

Country Roads: Birchwood B&B borders on delightful in Derby Line

BY ROCHELLE LASH, MONTREAL GAZETTE AUGUST 13, 2012



The Fletchers have overhauled the Birchwood B&B. (Courtesy Birchwood Bed & Breakfast)

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Editor's note: Some of the details might have changed since the original publication date. Please check with the establishment before heading out!

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If you go

Derby Line, Vt. is a two-hour drive from Montreal. Take Highways 10 east and 55 south. Derby Line is the first exit after the U.S. border.

Birchwood Bed & Breakfast, 502 Main St., Derby Line, Vt., 802-873-9104, www.birchwoodbedandbreakfast.com: the price for two including breakfast and afternoon refreshments is \$120 to \$125 U.S. a night. A theatre package costs \$145 to \$160 U.S. per night and includes two tickets to the Haskell Opera House (www.haskellopera.org). Golf, spa and dinner packages are also available.

Haskell Opera House, 802-873-3022, www.haskellopera.org, in Derby Line presents *Blithe Spirit*, by Noel Coward (June 18, 19, 20, 25, 26); *Curtains, The Musical*, a murder mystery (Aug. 13-15, 20-21), and *Dracula, Lord of the Night* (Oct. 21-24), by Susan Lynn Johns, a Vermont playwright.

Arrive at the charming Birchwood Bed & Breakfast in Derby Line, Vt., and you might find Elizabeth Fletcher working in her bountiful garden and Richard Fletcher drawing maps so guests can find local

attractions.

The Fletchers moved from the suburbs of Boston to this interesting town straddling the U.S.-Canada border. They reasoned that they would have a steady clientele visiting, primarily in summer, to enjoy the southern swath of Lake Memphremagog. As well, Derby Line would allow them to experience the Vermont countryside.

"Once we saw how beautiful and pristine it is here in this part of Vermont, with the lakes, the farms, the mountains, the dirt roads, we loved it," Richard Fletcher said. "It's like going back to yesterday, because it has not changed dramatically over the years. ... when you think of Vermont's postcard charm - the barns and the cows - that's what we see on the outskirts of our town, all of the time."

Birchwood is a refined white clapboard manor house, a 1920 Colonial Revival beauty, set back from Derby Line's main street, where elegant old houses line the wide thoroughfare. The Fletchers overhauled the house, creating three guest rooms with private bathrooms. They hired craftsmen to paint the ceiling's crown mouldings, refinish the hardwood floors and polish the brass sconces that originally were oil lamps.

The Fletchers have a keen interest in antiques, and they had dabbled in shows back in Boston and later in Shelburne, Burlington and Johnson, Vt. As a result, Birchwood is filled with treasures. The couple favours formal furniture, so you'll have afternoon tea or an early evening glass of wine on a Chippendale sofa surrounded by delicate tables from the late 1800s. A mahogany table and chairs and rose-patterned wallpaper create the perfect formal setting for a candlelit breakfast. The house specialties are French toast with a twist, fruit-filled crêpes and poached eggs.

The three guest rooms upstairs follow suit with admirable antique furniture, needlepoint pillows and a gracious air. The Maple room is so pretty it was chosen for the cover of a brochure on Vermont country inns.

Derby Line has had an intimate cross-border relationship with Rock Island, its Quebec neighbour, for centuries. "It was almost like one country," Richard Fletcher said. "The social, cultural, family and business ties across the border were very strong. And you still have some of that today."

With the Tomifobia River powering mills and factories, Derby Line originally was an industrial success. Butterfield Inc., a tool-and-die company, was built in the late 1880s, straddling the border because of a surveying glitch. A member of the Butterfield family built the Birchwood in 1920.

Today, Derby Line is mostly a tourist town in the heart of farming country. The main attraction and one well worth a visit is the 106-year-old Haskell Opera House. A rich blend of ornate architectural styles, the arts centre and library is the only opera house in the world that sits in two countries. Take a seat in the 400-seat theatre, you likely to be in Derby Line. But the actors on stage are in Stanstead (formerly Rock Island).

But increased border security has brought more restrictions. Strolling back and forth on the grounds

is no longer possible, and there are strict rules about entering the theatre. But the repertoire continues to be lighthearted, with a focus on comedy and musicals.

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