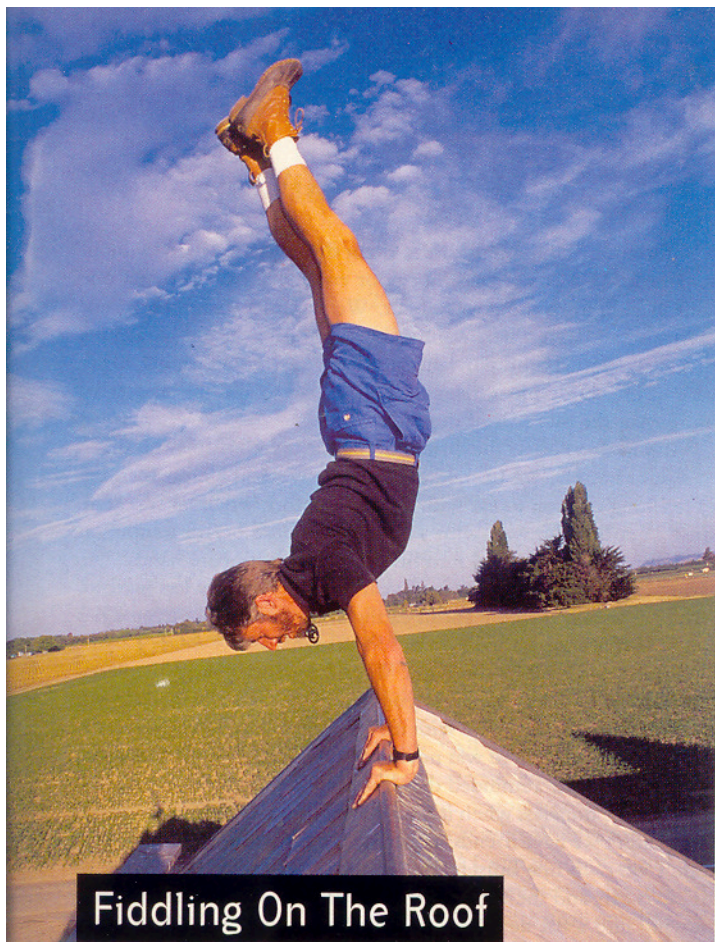


FOUR corners

Marlborough shingle roofer — and occasional acrobat — Tim Newsham admits he's hooked on heights, a legacy from his high-wire trapeze artist grandparents.



Fiddling On The Roof

TIM NEWSHAM originally wanted to call his Marlborough roofing business Shakes and Ladders, but he doubted New Zealanders would know what a shake was. That may have been the case when he set up his business four years ago, but times have changed. Now called Shingle and Shake, Newsham's venture is slowly and selectively covering South Island roofs in the sweet aroma and subtle shades of cedar shingles.

Newsham, 48, grew up in shingle country — the northeast states of America — in the Long Island village of Stony Brook, 170 kilometres from New York City. Pictures testify to the charm of Stony Brook with its mill pond and overhanging trees, a village cosy with comfort and glossy with wealth. Newsham's childhood home is 135 years old and typical of those in the village — large, two-storeyed and blanketed by a cedar shingle roof.

Three-quarters of the houses in Stony Brook have shingles, with some extending from the roofline to the foundations. Newsham says the number of shingles used on buildings in his home area every day is roughly equal to the number nailed on New Zealand houses in a year (a shake is a diagonally sawn piece of wood which is split by hand with a froe and mallet; it's more durable than a shingle, which is a cross section of wood machined on both sides to form a taper).

Tim Newsham is, to the best of his knowledge, one of only two trained shinglers in New Zealand. He learnt his craft in the United States in the early 1970s from a skydiving daredevil who was also the fastest roofer in the competitive Long Island roofing business.

As the summer sun rises in Marlborough's Wairau Valley, slowly rosy-tipping the surrounding mountains, Newsham is already up and working, busily laying down row after row of shingles or shakes — aiming to get as much work done as possible before it gets too hot. Transferring his trade to New Zealand has meant little change in his methods. He still triple layers each course: a line of shakes, then building paper and another slightly higher line of shakes. In North America this method prevents fine snow from scooting up under the shakes; in New Zealand it helps combat the wind-driven rain. Shingles are laid down without building paper because they are fitted so tightly the lack of ventilation would cause them to rot.

As well as the wooden variety, Newsham also works with imported asphalt shingles, made from sand, graphite and fibreglass. When using asphalt he adds a truck tyre tube to his usual working garb of overalls or shorts to prevent his clothes from shredding on the asphalt's rough surface. Dressing in black rubber to spend a scorching summer day on the rooftops would seem an odd way to make a living, although Newsham credits his paternal grandparents — vaudeville artists who specialised in high-wire trapeze acts on the circus circuits of North America and Europe — with his partiality for jeopardy. "I've always enjoyed working at heights, taking risks, chain-sawing the tops of trees. I think that's why I love the roofing scene — there's always that element of danger."

Risk aside, Newsham also inherited his grandparents' nomadic genes. He settled in New Zealand in 1973, after six years of travelling in Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, Europe and Polynesia.

His decision to visit New Zealand was inspired by the stories of New Zealand friends he met on his travels. "I grew up in the States' civil rights and anti-war movement; they were traumatic, emotional battles. My friends painted New Zealand as this wonderful country with no race-relations problems. My New Zealand girlfriend told me tales of fields filled with so many wild mushrooms they would get a wheelbarrow to bring them all home. It was so fresh. And I thought land would be cheap."

It wasn't, compared to parts of the States, but Newsham had travelled so much by then he'd discovered he liked living in a foreign land. And he eventually found his land, a one-hectare property edging the Wairau River in Spring Creek, near Blenheim. It was a paddock with an old wooden villa when he first saw it. Now he describes it as "a large biomass".

"We've got all the stone fruits and pip fruits, almost all the citrus, berries galore and all the vegetables we can eat," he says. The old villa is now eclipsed by a wooden house built by Newsham in 1989 and home to him, his wife, Kerry, and their daughters, Sophie, six, and Phoebe, three.

Environmental concerns have been an important part of Newsham's life for many years. His first years in New Zealand were spent living an almost totally sustainable life in Kaikoura — no electricity, growing almost all his own food and surviving on \$700 a year. Although he says the line he draws now is not as ecologically stringent, "I've got to be able to justify environmentally my trade."

It's not an easy call. "Truthfully, the only roofs I can wholly justify the use of are earth and thatch. But with wooden shingles you're at least utilising a renewable resource." Red cedar, the most commonly used material for shingles and shakes, is grown only in the northwest of the United States, and just five per cent of America's original red cedar remains. "I'd like to see replanting of cedar and macrocarpa instead of pine."

The way of the future looks to be in durable exotic timbers such as those of the eucalyptus, casarina and macrocarpus families, or in treating nondurable timbers.

Newsham has completed six cedar roofs, his most recent a 700 square metre monster just outside Blenheim. Future possibilities include an architectural blast from the past — an 11-metre high geodesic dome to be built in the Wairau Valley. Due to the multifaceted surface of the dome, each section will have to be individually crafted and, because there is no level surface to work on, Newsham will — in a style befitting his high-wire grandparents — abseil from the top of the dome, shingles in one hand, nail gun in the other.

Jennifer Bridgen ■