

Where's our builder?

By MICHAEL PLACE
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THE disappearance of a Torquay builder has left about 40 families stranded with unfinished or crumbling houses.

Many face bills of tens of thousands of dollars to fix or finish their houses, and several have discovered their buildings were uninsured.

Steve Watson was involved with 42 building projects, almost all private homes, worth \$3.5 million when he left Torquay.

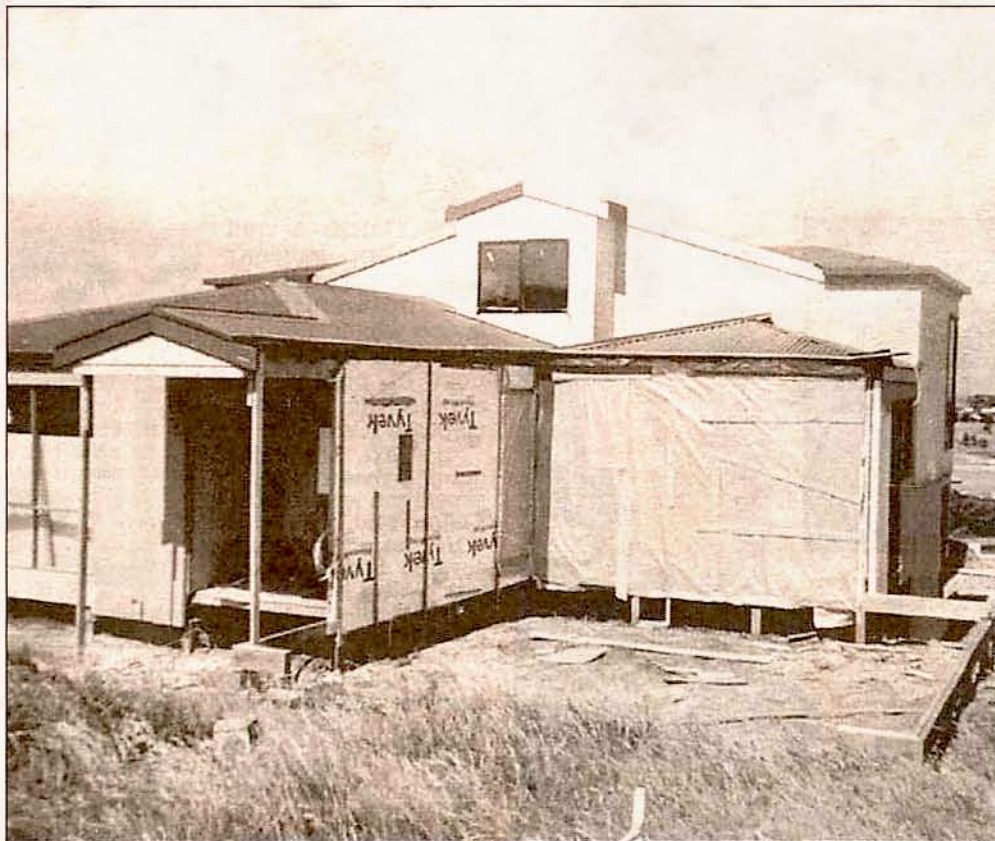
Also left in limbo were unpaid tradesmen and building suppliers, owed an estimated \$500,000.

The Victorian Building Control Commission has cancelled Mr Watson's licence and has pledged to aggressively pursue the missing builder.

One woman living in a house built by Mr Watson, who asked not to be named, said her four-year-old home had rotting timber cladding, stumps without concrete, and mouldy carpets from water leakage.

She said the situation had greatly distressed her family, and the house might have to be demolished.

Torquay carpenter Dave McPhail, who worked for Mr Watson for two years, said he and at least 10 other sub-contractors were each owed about \$7000.



Unfinished: Anne and Ken Haining's shell of a house at Torquay. Pictures: DAVID GERAGHTY

Mr McPhail said Mr Watson had left town possibly owing contractors and suppliers as much as \$500,000. He said Mr Watson had "pulled the wool over everybody's eyes".

Building Control Commissioner Tony Arnel said

the private building surveyor who issued permits for the houses was under investigation.

Police said Mr Watson could face charges of theft, obtaining property by deception and fraud.

Det-Sgt Michael Baker, of Torquay CIU, said police believed Mr Watson may have fled to the Gold Coast.

"We're very concerned this is occurring and we're making every effort to find him," he said.

Det-Sgt Baker said it was possible Mr Watson was building interstate.

"If we could establish that he's set himself up in Queensland we would bring it to the attention of the relevant authorities," he said.

Mr Arnel said the possibility of Mr Watson setting up another business had prompted swift action.

"He could be trying to do this again, so we've acted to have his permit suspended," Mr Arnel said.

"This will mean he will be breaking the law if he builds anywhere in Australia."

Mr Arnel said the commission was investigating 42 projects in Mr Watson's name — many of them for faulty workmanship.

Several homes were possibly uninsured, leaving home buyers with no financial recourse other than to sue Mr Watson.

Mr Arnel said it was illegal for a builder to begin work on a home without providing the buyer with a certificate of insurance.

He said it was worrying that Mr Watson's customers had signed contracts without being insured.

"We are urging people who buy homes to be careful about which builder they choose and to ensure they are properly insured," he said.

Police said Mr Watson had no criminal record in Victoria.