

A unity of Arts

Ardkinglas, Argyll

The home of David and Angela Sumsion

Mary Miers explores Sir Robert Lorimer's romantic
masterpiece on the shores of Loch Fyne

Photographs by Simon Jauncey





THE second of three new country houses built by Scotland's leading Arts-and-Crafts architect, Ardkinglas is the most romantic expression of Sir Robert Lorimer's mellifluous 'Old Scots' style. The commission came about after Cameron Corbett, owner of Rowallan (the first of the three houses), recommended to Sir Andrew Noble 'a promising young architect who you well might consider'. Noble met Lorimer at his newly acquired Argyll estate in January 1906, and, together, they chose the site for the new house. Soon afterwards, Lorimer wrote to a friend: 'This big new job I've got on Loch Fyne, I mean to handle, as I've never handled a job before. The ground is to be broken on the first of May, and the dear old gent wants to eat his dinner in it on 1st August, 1907 if he does it'll be a record.' The Nobles, whose main residence was Jesmond Dene House at Newcastle, had rented Ardkinglas the previous summer after seeing it advertised in *COUNTRY LIFE*; by November that year, they had bought the estate. The Scottish-born chairman of the armaments and shipbuilding company Armstrong Whitworth and his Scots Canadian wife, Margery, were already in their seventies, but their family persuaded them to build a bigger and more comfortable house for summer holidays and the shooting season, and they were keen to waste no time.

Whether Sir Andrew dined at Ardkinglas on August 1, 1907, is not recorded, but the speed with which the new mansion and its dependent buildings went up was astonishing. Designed in only a few months, the work (costing a total of £57,000) was complete in just 18 months, a feat all the more remarkable for the fact that there were still no proper roads to Cairndow and nearly all the materials had to come up the loch by puffer to a specially built pier. 'Never in my life have I enjoyed a job like that, it all went with such a swing. I managed to make everyone keen,' wrote Lorimer after a final tour of inspection. 'I do think ours is an attractive profession, the way one's life, one's thoughts and heart and soul are intimately bound up with one particular spot for a couple of years or so.'

It would surely have pleased him to know that, a century later, Ardkinglas remains little altered in the hands of the same family, and that the present owner, David Sumsion, is an architect, too. Mr Sumsion's interests, however, have been bound up with Ardkinglas for rather more than a few years. A great, great grandson of the original >

← *Fig 1:* Seen from the south, Ardkinglas evokes the forms and rhythms of Scottish tower houses. The complexity of Sir Robert Lorimer's exterior belies a compact and practical internal plan



↑ Fig 2 above: Lorimer laid out a pleasance to the south-west. → Fig 3 facing page: The drawing room, with its five-ton chimneypiece

owners, he spent his childhood holidays here and came to live on the estate in 1993, inheriting on the death of his uncle, Johnny Noble, in 2002. He now lives with his wife, Angela, and their two daughters in what was the principal bedroom wing, and one senses a deep respect for the subtle nuances of Lorimer's architecture, the delight in nature and materials, craftsmanship, and the richness of textiles and colour that imbue this house with its atmosphere of artistic harmony.

One outstanding feature is the way it responds so sensuously to its setting—to the tones and textures of the Highland landscape, the picturesque forms and detail of traditional Scottish buildings, and the stirring historic associations of the place. As Lawrence Weaver observed when he wrote up Ardkinglas in *COUNTRY LIFE* (May 27, 1911), the house stands 'amid natural surroundings of so magical a beauty that any discordant note in design would have had an effect doubly disastrous'. The defining characteristic of the setting is the juxtaposition of the mature wooded policies at the head of the loch with the bald hills rearing up behind—'magnificent; and yet well proportioned: bare of wood indeed, but rich from a varied and broken surface,' enthused William Gilpin in his *Observations Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty made in the Year 1776*.

The estate straddles the head of Loch Fyne and formerly included Dunderave, where Lorimer carried out one of his most inspirational tower-house restorations for the

Nobles' daughter Lily in 1911 (*COUNTRY LIFE*, February 3, 2005). The longest of the many sea lochs that fragment the Scottish coastline, Loch Fyne was silvered with herring in the 18th century and later plied by Victorian leisure steamers; today, it is most famous for the oyster beds founded in the 1970s by Johnny Noble and marine biologist Andy Lane.

'An outstanding feature of Ardkinglas is the way it responds so sensuously to its setting'

This was Campbell country, and Cailean Campbell's castle of about 1400 stood here on a site now forgotten, destroyed in 1769 and a ruin by 1792, according to Sir John Sinclair, whose account mentions three towers, a turreted gatehouse and stout walls. Remarkably, the names of several notable architects—Colen Campbell, Robert Adam and James Playfair—are linked to Ardkinglas through plans they drew up to replace it in the 18th century, although none of these materialised. When, in 1799, Sarah Murray wrote in *A Companion and Useful Guide to The Beauties of Scotland* that 'I was near a very pretty place called Ardkinglass, where is a new modern house just then finished', she was referring to the plain seven-bay edifice put up by Sir Alexander

Campbell in about 1795. Derelict when Dorothy Wordsworth visited in 1822, this house was destroyed by fire in 1831, the year Turner sketched its walls. (The walled garden, Ladies Walk and ornamental Caspian lake survive). A Tudor Jacobean scheme by William Burn was among the proposals for its replacement, but, in the end, the Campbells simply converted the Georgian stables, which served as the main residence until the present house was built in 1906–07.

The full picturesque impact of Lorimer's design is best observed from the drive, which follows the Kinglas river through the famous pinetum (home to the tallest tree in Britain) before swinging south to approach the entrance forecourt in a broad curve. Seen from here (**Fig 1**), the rhythmic composition of verticals and horizontals recalls the grouping of a Scottish tower house. The caphouse, crowstepped gables, pedimented eaves dormers, roll mouldings, drum and bellcast forms (**Fig 2**) are redolent of such buildings, too, albeit with certain Lorimer idiosyncracies. Then there are the materials—local rubble of a golden-greenish hue, warm grey sandstone ashlar and earth-toned slabs of Caithness stone, all blending subtly with the building's forms to evoke the 'undulating, weather-worn character of a group of hills'. Harling was originally intended but never applied, and without it, the rough/smooth textures and massing of the stone walls are emphasised, giving the architecture a greater monumentality.

Inspired by buildings such as Kellie ➤





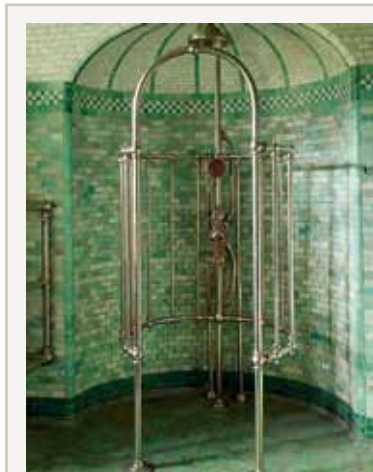
↑ Fig 4 above: The oak-panelled dining room. → Fig 5 right: The ashlar-lined Upper Hall and corridor; Noble stipulated that there should be no wallpaper in the house

Castle, which his father had gently resuscitated, and by the ideas of Sir Robert Rowand Anderson, the Scots Renaissance Revivalist for whom he had worked, Lorimer found in 16th-century Scottish architecture an honesty and national relevance very different in spirit to the restless, hard-edged Scots Baronial style. He admired the unself-conscious simplicity and picturesque irregularity of old Scots buildings, and his ideal of a 'gentleman's home' had well-lit, sparsely furnished, 'dignified and yet liveable, spacious, lofty rooms' and 'lovely plastered ceilings' looking out over a garden integral to the overall design. 'When you go into a room first it ought to give you a sort of total impression... of colour or light and shade, or of charm and lucid order,' he wrote in 1897. These ideas profoundly influenced his development of the genre of 'artistic' house, of which Ardkinglas is such a rich and beautifully balanced example.

Yet, for all the desire to emulate the spirit of traditional buildings and workmanship, this was, in many ways, a very modern house, built around a brick structure with floors and beams of reinforced concrete and equipped with all the latest domestic technology. The plan is surprisingly compact and practical, with four ranges around an open central courtyard, on one corner of which rises the main stair, on another a turnpike. In keeping with tradition, the ground floor is squatter and darker, with a lower hall giving access to the staircase, study and billiards room. The principal rooms, with tall windows orientated on Loch Fyne, are ranged along two sides of the first floor, with arcaded corridors providing the circulation routes around the inner light well.

Accommodated in the south-east range are the principal bedrooms, with a further eight opening off an arcaded corridor on the floor above. The kitchen and domestic quarters occupy the north-east side of the house, centring around a second open court.

The treatment of the principal interiors is more Classical than medieval in feel. The highpoint is the drawing room (*Fig 3*), with its Renaissance-style ceiling and other enriched plasterwork, an immense granite chimneypiece made to Lorimer's instructions by Scott Morton & Co of Edinburgh, and doorcases with elaborately carved Baroque detail. The Upper Hall (*Fig 5*), with an arcaded loggia opening onto the loch, separates the drawing room to the west and the dining room (*Fig 4*) to the north, and is dominated by a splendid piece of armorial carving in high relief over the chimneypiece. But nowhere is there a more lyrical expression of craftsmanship at Ardkinglas than in the plaster ceilings, variously flat,



Every modern convenience

Ardkinglas was built with all the high-tech conveniences that were available in its day, and very little has had to be modernised (rewiring is only now, after a century, being carried out). The original central-heating system is today operated by a ground-source heat pump, and the telephone exchange, fire hoses and turbine house are all still here. So, too, are Lorimer's electroliers and other light fittings, his patent lavatories (branded Remirol) and this spectacular shower of 1906 (*left*), which features wave and spray controls and even has its own tiled 'wet room'. The great kitchen, with all its original fittings and utensils, is also still used.




segmental or combed, and each one differently ornamented with vines, flowers, Zodiac signs and other motifs. Lorimer had developed his love of traditional plasterwork when watching his father's craftsmen at Kellie Castle, and he sketched out patterns derived from historic designs, relying on the modelling skills of Thomas Beattie and Sam Wilson to achieve the vitality and richness of the 16th-century originals.

Today, a lasting impression of the interiors at Ardkinglas is their largely untouched state. Faded and fragile, most of the original fabrics and furniture are still in use, offset by paintings, tapestries and other artworks acquired by later generations of the family. From its portraits by Sickert and de László,

a painting by Roger Fry and Dovecot Studios tapestries in the principal rooms, to a recent collection of paintings by June Redfern and ironwork commissioned to celebrate the 2007 centenary, Ardkinglas testifies to its owners' artistic sensibilities and continuing interest in 20th-century craftsmanship and art. John Noble, Sir Andrew's grandson and grandfather of the present owner, who came to live here in the 1930s, established the Scottish Craft Centre and was chairman of Dovecot Studios. He and his wife, Elizabeth Lucas, who went to art school and collected works by Duncan Grant, Elizabeth Blackadder and Stanley Spencer, were both very musical and Mr Sumsion well remembers hearing his grandfather practising every

morning before breakfast on the Steinway grand piano that Margery Noble bought for the house when she was 99.

Artist and musician friends continue to flock to Ardkinglas, which hosts concerts and other musical events, as well as occasional commercial activities, and there is a holiday apartment available to rent. The sound of the piano is still often to be heard drifting through the rooms, and this seems especially appropriate in a house designed by an architect upon whom music exerted such a powerful influence. 

Ardkinglas is open for house tours once a month from April to October. To book for visits and other events, telephone 01499 600261 or visit www.ardkinglas.com