



# This earthly paradise

Mary Miers visits the West Highlands and discovers a little-known outpost of Arts-and-Crafts patronage that includes Philip Webb's first country house

Photographs by Simon Jauncey

**T**HE Road to the Isles no longer winds slowly round the oak-fringed inlets of Moidart, but zips through raw rock cuttings, altering the orientation of familiar landmarks to hasten the fish lorries and ferry traffic to Mallaig. Among the villages by-passed is Arisaig, scattered about the head of a bay with a mesmerising view of the conning-towered hull of Eigg. Until the 1790s, there was nothing much here but a solitary inn and the old house of Keppoch, which stands at a polite distance round the loch.

Even within living memory, the road was little more than a rough track and many outlying villages were accessible only by boat or foot. Today, Arisaig is like many former crofting/fishing villages: unpretentious, reliant on seasonal tourism and the typical trades of the rural West Highlands and partly colonised by incomers lured by the breathtaking scenery and quiet life.

Nowhere in Scotland has a more romantic history than this district, known as the Rough Bounds, yet one chapter of its recent past remains largely unknown. Remarkably, for an area so often dismissed as being of scant architectural interest, Arisaig is home to the first country house built by the father of Arts-and-Crafts architecture, Philip Webb. Indeed, apart from Greenock, where he designed a drinking fountain, this is the only place in Scotland where you can see Webb's work.

Arisaig House stands above steeply terraced gardens looking out over Loch nan Uamh to Eigg, Skye and Rum. Although rebuilt following a fire in 1935—with the loss of its interior and subtle interplay of gables and chimneys—a surprising amount by Webb survives, along with his garden and several other buildings. Still less known is Arisaig's tradition as an Arts-and-Crafts outpost, with a legacy that can still be admired today.

Much of the credit goes to the Astley family, land and colliery owners from Cheshire who had the estate from 1851 to 1961. Like a number of wealthy, artistic-minded patrons who sought out remote parts of the Highlands as a dream escape, the Astleys belonged to a breed of gentry that exemplified many of the paradoxes ➤

**Arisaig House stands above the Borrodale burn close to the beach where Bonnie Prince Charlie first set foot on the British mainland**



Arisaig House and Gardens, Arisaig.



HOUSE AT ARISAIG  
GEORGE JACK ARCHT  
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**Top: Arisaig House pre-fire, showing its unknown early garden design by Philip Webb. Above left: Faire na Scur, a fine Arts-and-Crafts house by George Jack. Above right: Webb's memorial to the Astleys in Kilmory churchyard**

William Bowman, a leading ophthalmologist, amateur botanist and gardening enthusiast, who first visited Arisaig in 1865. He was so impressed, he decided to commission Webb to design his own house: the influential Joldwynds in Surrey of 1872-4.

Astley was a young man when he bought the Arisaig estate, attracted by its wild beauty, proximity to the sea (he was a fanatical yachtsman) and plentiful deer, fish and seafoal. Its recent history had been unedifying: many lived in conditions of dire poverty and a recent owner, Lord Cranston,

had carried out swingeing clearances. Although responsible for some evictions, Astley rebuilt crofters' cottages and renovated the church and other buildings; his family would be remembered as enlightened landlords with a social conscience who did much for the area.

The principal house on the estate, which, until 1826, had been part of the ancestral lands of the Macdonalds of Clanranald, was a damp Regency villa with no coastal view, so Astley resolved to rebuild on an elevated site. After rejecting a scheme by Stevens and Robinson, he turned to Webb, whom he had met as a fellow member of the short-lived London arts club, the Hogarth Club. The new Arisaig House was begun in 1863 and finished within a year.

For the young Webb—who had recently completed Red House in Kent for his friend William Morris—Arisaig and its environs were an alien world. The main route was by steamer from Oban to Fort William and, from there, by boat to Rhu or a day's journey by mail coach. The local workforce was Gaelic-speaking and unaccustomed to his exacting standards. Webb would later observe that, although 'the stone seems to me to be everywhere in mountains', he had 'infinite trouble' finding suitable seams and difficulties getting labourers to cut and work it to his satisfaction. Persistence paid off and, after making them build sample walls, he got his way.

Architecturally, the house had little in common with its neighbours, but it was nonetheless 'sturdy and strong-looking', deriving strength from the



solid massing of plain chimneys, buttressed walls and undulations of steeply pitched gables and achieving local context through materials: 'a house of walls and roof, not one of window-frames and cornices, one indeed that does not look ashamed amongst the great hills that surround it,' as George Jack would write.

Webb later called it 'a product of my ignorance', but, for the 1860s, Arisaig House was an advanced design. All the elevations were treated equally and, with an emphasis on structural honesty, plan rather than stylistic detail dictated. The principal rooms were arranged in U plan around

**Above: Webb remodelled Borrodale House as two dwellings and built beside it a simple, but grandly scaled, barn (1864-66). Below: Webb's Astley Hall in Arisaig, opened in 1893 with a display of home-spun tweeds, woodcarvings and local produce**

a toplit hall—an early example of a living hall, the reinvention of the medieval great hall that would become a key feature of the Arts-and-Crafts country house.

It had a great stone-hooded fireplace, first-floor galleries and the main staircase rising from an arcade, but no direct windows. By contrast, the other main rooms had large bay windows to drink in the views and the drawing and dining rooms were fitted with the high, white-painted wainscot panelling and deep wall-papered friezes that would become an influential feature of Webb's interiors.

He was already designing for Morris & Co, which supplied wallpaper for the house, and it is likely some of the furniture was by Webb. On the floors above were 24 bedrooms, a good supply of WCs, one bathroom and Astley's billiard-room suite. The kitchen and servants' hall were in the basement, but, because of the steep site, they enjoyed good views and plenty of natural light.

Although the house was remodelled on a reduced scale in 1937, the entrance court, with its echo of Red House, and the Butterfield-like service wing and dairy survive largely intact and the building retains its relationship to the garden and sense of rugged grandeur. Between 1864 and 1866, Webb built a gardener's bothy and a great steading on the scale of an English tithe barn and remodelled Borrodale House for the factor and coachman. All this work survives. ➤



Astley was to enjoy just four years of his new house, as he died aged only 42 in 1868. When his only son, Frank, drowned in 1880, the estate passed to the eldest of Frank's three sisters, Gertrude, who, in 1883, married Sir Arthur Nicholson, a cousin of Florence Nightingale.

The sisters continued the family friendship with Webb, who, in 1881, returned to Arisaig to see about erecting a memorial cross to their brother. 'In that rude little churchyard with its ancient ruins standing by, the native stone would look more congruous than any imported stone would,' he advised and the degree of

## There is no-one here but myself who understands the circumstances of building at Arisaig

attention he paid to even such relatively minor jobs runs through his letters. His drawings, too, were meticulous: those of 1896 for a carved plaque still to be seen a few miles away on the former Polish school-house are annotated with detailed notes on such things as letter spacing and how to chisel the stone.

When Gertrude's sister Constance decided to build a village hall for Arisaig, naturally she turned to Webb. By now (1891), he was too busy to return to the Highlands, but 'there is no-one here but myself who understands the circumstances of building at Arisaig,' he wrote and his specifications are long and detailed. The result was an unpretentious, timber-framed and weatherboarded building, more Sussex barn than Highland vernacular, although with a roof steeply pitched to cope with high winds and clad with Ballachulish slates. Astley Hall opened on January 27, 1893, and is still in use today.

Connie Astley (1851–1935) is a central figure in this story. An accomplished artist and musician with an energetic London cultural and social life, she was widely travelled, adventurous and emancipated. From the 1880s, she increasingly spent more time at Arisaig and her journals abound with vivid impressions of life in 'this Earthly Paradise' from the perspective of the big house.



What comes across is the amount of leisure time they enjoyed and also their stamina: sea swimming, climbing mountains in heavy tweed skirts, sailing to remote islands, endless expeditions and picnics, socialising with the neighbouring gentry and, of course, shooting and fishing. An interest in nature, animals, poetry and painting runs through the journals, which ripple with in-jokes, cartoons and doggerel verse.

The contrast of this summer idyll with the daily grind of Highlanders' lives could not be more extreme, yet the Astley sisters were liked and respected by their tenants. They took a great interest in the schools they financed, put on concerts and theatricals and organised Christmas parties. Connie had studied at the National Art Training School in South Kensington and was an accomplished wood carver—photographs of her beautiful music

**Continuing the tradition of sisters with a strong commitment to Arisaig House and its environs: Emma Weir, its owner, and Sarah Winnington-Ingram, who runs it as a hotel and restaurant**

stand (bought by the Princess Royal in 1889) and a sideboard decorated with fruit and foliage (1895) can be seen in the Arisaig visitor centre.

In 1886, she started woodcarving classes for boys in the village and a Mr Boag came every winter (1889–95) to teach them at her expense. Classes resumed in 1906, taught by a trainee of Mrs Anstruther Mackay, and many local houses had stools, bellows, bookends and cupboards carved with Celtic designs. One attendee was John MacQueen, whose grandson still has some of his woodwork. 'My grandfather was head coachmen to the Astleys, like his father and grandfather,' says Ian MacQueen. 'He was a brilliant musician and very articulate with his hands. He could make anything—axle shafts, wheelbarrows—his two brothers were cabinet-makers and his son (my father) was the estate carpenter.'



West Highland Museum

Connie was an advocate of the Home Arts movement and hosted annual exhibitions of handiwork. She became adept at spinning, weaving and dyeing and engaged a weaver to give classes. The Scottish Home Industries Association had been founded in 1889 to promote household crafts in rural communities as an additional source of income. Across the Highlands, the

**Still in Arisaig House, Letters and News at the Lochside by H. T. Wells RA (1868) includes F. D. P. Astley (in the prow) and J. E. Millais (to his right)**

wives and daughters of estate-owning families played an important role in promoting these activities and in using their contacts to market the homespun tweeds, knitwear and other products as far as London. It was a movement far more practical than the idealistic revival of peasant culture flourishing in the Home Counties at this time.

In about 1900, Connie and her companion Margaret Shaen decided to build their own house at Arisaig. Again, they turned to Webb's practice, where the architect/designer-craftsman George Jack had taken over. Jack, who was also chief furniture designer for Morris & Co from 1885 to 1906, had already done a carving for Margaret and is best known as a skilled woodcarver. Now, he embarked on one of his largest architectural projects, a highly original Arts-and-Crafts house in a modern Scots vernacular—Faire na Scur.

Webb gave his protégé advice, particularly on the finding and handling of stone, but also on the need to be gentle but firm with his clients, who kept requesting revisions. Among unusual features were a dark room (Margaret was a keen photographer) and a two-storey glazed bay for fresh-air sleeping (Connie had TB).

The ladies became warm friends with Jack, who also carved three panels for the exterior and extended Astley Hall. They moved into Faire

na Scur on June 29, 1903, and, although Margaret would never settle here (Connie's diaries reveal a complex love triangle between different women), they shared a strong commitment to the education and welfare of the community.

The tradition of handicrafts continued under their influence. In 1917, Arisaig established the third branch of the Scottish Women's Rural Institute, which entered rugs, tartans, scarves, embroidery and weaving for competitions all over the country. Carlotta Astley-Nicholson (Connie's niece), who would take over the estate in 1932, gave lessons in modelling ivory 'scratchings' and making buttons, buckles and brooches from stag horns.

More recently, the artist Su Grier-son hosted working weekends for international artists and craft workers at Faire na Scur, which her family has owned since 1971.

The strong female thread that runs through this story has a satisfying continuity with the involvement at Arisaig House of another pair of sisters: Emma Weir, who bought it in 2010, and Sarah Winnington-Ingram, who, with her husband Peter, runs it as a hotel. The family has revived the house, restored the gardens and made this one of the most memorable stops, with the best restaurant, on the Road to the Isles.

*Acknowledgements: Adam Swan Arisaig House (<http://arisaighouse.co.uk>) The Land, Sea and Islands Centre, Arisaig ([www.road-to-the-isles.org.uk/centre](http://www.road-to-the-isles.org.uk/centre))*

**Ian MacQueen, a boatbuilder, at home with a picture frame and tea caddy carved by his grandfather John MacQueen, head coachman to the Astleys**

