

Life among the battlements

Living in a Scottish castle sounds romantic, but how do owners cope? Mary Miers talks to four families who say the castle has to earn its keep

Photographs by John Millar

Kelburn Castle, Ayrshire

The Boyles (de Boyvilles) came over with William the Conqueror and are first recorded at Kelburn in 1140. They built their castle overlooking the Firth of Clyde, within view of the isles of Arran, Cumbrae and Bute. 'You can identify the four main phases by the different window sizes,' explains David Boyle, who was brought up here with his sister, Alice, and studied architecture at Newcastle.

‘I was looking at the gloomy walls and said: “Imagine if we covered it with colour” ,

David now manages the day-to-day running of the place, sharing the castle with his father, Patrick, the 10th Earl of Glasgow. 'We come to blows over the odd thing, but, on the whole, we get on really well,' says David, adding that he has recently created his own living quarters.

'We share the Victorian kitchen and Dad has his own area, which includes the tapestry room. It does limit one's freedom, but there's also a sense of purpose and belonging. The things I cherish most are the William and Mary drawing room [created for the 1st Earl, a leading instigator of the Act of Union], and the Glen, a Picturesque valley of waterfalls and semi-ancient woodland.'

David's parents began developing the gardens as a country park in 1977, since when Kelburn has won awards as a family attraction. There are tours of the castle in July and August; otherwise, it's open by appointment for weddings and functions, for which they employ an events manager. In 2009, David established the Kelburn Garden Party, a music festival in July attracting some 4,000 people.

But it's the 2007 Graffiti Project that's brought Kelburn the most fame



Artists Os Gemeos and Nina and Nunca took inspiration from mythology and local subjects when painting the exterior walls (above) of Kelburn Castle, home to the 10th Earl of Glasgow (right, with son, David, and daughter, Alice)

in recent years. The idea was initiated by Alice, who lives in Edinburgh and is an artist: 'I was looking at the castle's gloomy grey walls one day and I said "Imagine if we covered that whole side with colour". David had a book on Brazilian street art and really liked the work of the identical twins known as Os Gemeos. A friend, Camilla Wegener, knew somebody who knew them, so we sent a proposal to the artists via Camilla, who helped direct the project.

'Amazingly, they said yes. We got £5,000 in sponsorship, which paid their fares, and David and I went round all the businesses in Largs explaining the project and asking for contributions. In three days, we made £4,000—everybody wanted to be involved. The day before the artists arrived, they emailed to check we'd primed the walls. "What?" We hadn't even thought of that! So we got all our friends to help and painted it white in one day.'

David adds: 'Dad was away and I was really worried, but then, when I met the artists [Os Gemeos plus

Nina and Nunca], I knew it was going to be all right. They stayed a month and we were astounded at how professional they were. They had no brief, but they came up with mythological scenes incorporating local subjects. We got all the materials sponsored—1,500 cans of spray paint, free. It's crazy how much detail they can get from a spray can.'

It would be difficult to find a more whacky way of responding to the potential nightmare of dealing with the fabric of a historic building. 'The impetus for the project was the knowledge that we were going to have to remove the cement harl from the castle walls,' says David. 'Surprisingly, Historic Scotland was supportive and keen to be associated with the project. The graffiti was given a three-year life span, but nobody has been nagging us to remove it yet, although, of course, it will have to go. When we realised we had this temporary canvas, we thought we had to do something exciting.'

Telephone 01475 568685 or visit www.kelburnestate.com



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Living with history

What is it about these buildings that holds such appeal? 'Romantic Scottish Castles' is among the three most popular property searches on the COUNTRY LIFE website, which suggests that it's not just their architecture, history and sublime settings that make them so alluring, but their aspirational value, too.

From ancient strongholds enclosed by curtain walls, royal palaces and Cromwellian forts to Victorian mansions bristling with pepperpots, the Scottish castle manifests itself in diverse ways. Perhaps most familiar is the tower house, a form that, despite impenetrably thick walls, steep spiral staircases and relatively few, small windows, has lent itself surprisingly well to modern living.

The Scots delighted in sheer height, so while Englishmen were building manor houses, lairds built 'castle-wise', raising their houses sometimes to as many as eight plain, harled storeys, before bursting out with a skyline flourish of turrets and castellations. How defensive these buildings were intended to be is debatable, but their architecture is certainly freighted with the symbolism of ancient lineage and martial strength.

In the 18th century, ruined castles were romanticised by topographical artists. Robert Adam helped popularise the Picturesque genre with his imagined landscape sketches and 'castle-style' Georgian mansions. With the arrival of the self-invented laird, and the growing obsession with 'clancestry', the Victorians reinvented Scotland's feudal architecture in the style known as the Scotch Baronial.

Then came the Arts-and-Crafts Movement and the influence of architects such as Robert Lorimer, whose tower-house restorations were models of gentle-handed intervention. Others took greater liberties for romantic effect, rebuilding ruins such as Eilean Donan as shortbread-tin castles—modern confections widely revered as the real thing.

The Ancient Monuments Protection Act of 1900 brought new emphasis on research and archaeological recording and recent decades have seen constraints on restoration tightened, dividing restorers and preservationists amid a tangle of red tape. Historic Scotland's Scottish Castle Initiative and the Buildings at Risk Register offer guidelines and advice and highlight some castles that need restoring.

‘It’s much nicer to have bought than inherited because I don’t feel any ghosts’



Fingask Castle, Perthshire

‘Keeping out pirates was vital in the 12th century, so a green crag with an artesian spring overlooking the Tay estuary was an obvious defensive spot on which to build Fingask,’ says its present owner. ‘They dug in huge boulders and built a modest tower, which got into the written records as something worth owning. Nearly 900 years later, it’s still a wonderful place.’

So wonderful, indeed, that one family, the Threiplands, have bought it four times: in the 17th century, by paying good money to marry a Miss Bruce; again, to buy it back from the government after they supported the Jacobites; and twice in the 20th century, when it was bought by a Murray Threipland, who sold it to his brother in 1994.

‘It’s much nicer to have bought than to have inherited it, because I don’t feel any ghosts,’ says Andrew Murray Threipland. ‘It was owned by a bank after the Great Depression—banks are rotten at cleaning out gutters—so much of it had to be demolished in 1925 and it was then remodelled on a smaller scale.’

The magic is in its position. It stands in a wind shadow facing south over the Carse of Gowrie, the garden filled with topiary that staggers across the lawn like mildly drunken guests. In fact, the garden is often full of real mildly drunken guests, as Andrew has opened the place up for weddings and ‘corporate entertainment’.

‘We used to throw acorns at them when they stared at us through the

windows,’ says 13-year-old Beatrice. ‘In the morning, we’d sneak down and gobble up the leftover cakes.’ For Sacha (11), the glory of Fingask is its grounds—endless trees to climb and tracks to explore. Peter (15) bemoans the slow internet and lack of hot water, but loves the space that allows him to have a bedroom duplex.

For their mother, film and theatre director Helen Molchanoff, Fingask is ‘my idea of heaven because it provides me with a theatre of my own and the space to be creative. I first came here to direct the *Fingask Follies*, which Andrew had established as “drawing-room entertainment for the thinking man” in 1995; we’ve just had our 20th season’.

Above left: Andrew Murray Threipland with his wife, Helen Molchanoff, and their children, Peter, Sacha and Beatrice. Above: Andrew and Helen in the topiary garden. Right: Fingask’s subscription mural by Elena Gubanova and Ivan Govorkov. Proceeds go to the Fingask Follies charity

The Murray Threiplands will make an occasion out of anything: a Burns Night gathering, a Russian Orthodox christening, performances of the Really Terrible Orchestra or the Highland Shakespeare Company, a shooting weekend, the Perth Ball—Fingask has been the catalyst for many new friendships. There’s always music, warmth and fun.

And there’s always a new project in progress. They’ve converted the old vaulted kitchen into a chapel, erected a belvedere, commissioned two murals and constructed a lake with a new house and boathouse. ‘Little and Often’ is Andrew’s motto, although he’s now talking of rebuilding the 700-year old tower.

Telephone 01821 670777 or visit www.fingaskcastle.co.uk



Dunvegan Castle, Isle of Skye

Nowhere rivals Dunvegan as a bastion of rugged antiquity. Guarding the ancient sea highway of the Minch, this rock-fused stronghold has been the seat of Clan MacLeod for more than 800 years and, although its appearance today owes much to the confections of later centuries, it is Scotland's oldest continuously inhabited castle.

'It was designed to keep people out, but, now, we give them a warm Highland welcome,' says Hugh MacLeod, the 30th Chief, who combines his career as a film-maker with managing and developing the 42,000-acre estate. Since taking over in 2008, he has rebranded Dunvegan and completed phase one of a major restoration—£1.2 million just to repair the roof and windows.

He's improved visitor facilities and created new business opportunities, ever conscious of Dunvegan's vital role as the largest private-sector employer on the island. 'Last year, we attracted 114,000 visitors, but you never know; Skye's a very challenging place to run a business, Dunvegan is fragile and tourism is fickle—I don't take anything for granted.'

The famous Dame Flora MacLeod, Hugh's great-grandmother, pioneered the role of the professional clan chief. She travelled the world to visit the clan diaspora and put Skye—and Dunvegan—on the map. She also spent a lot, some of it (such as re-roofing the castle with copper) inadvisedly, and, by the time Hugh's father took over in 1976, the estate was teetering on the brink of financial collapse. Much of value, including tracts of the once vast MacLeod lands, had been sold off centuries before.

John, the 29th Chief, was a professional musician, who continued his grandmother's work in promoting the clan worldwide and opened up the castle as a tourist attraction. 'I got used to seeing lots of people in our home,' says Hugh, who was brought up mostly in London but remembers 'Mary Poppins childhood holidays' in Skye, exploring the hills and glens and having Christmas dinners in the old library as storms raged about the battlements.

He describes the family apartments on the upper floors of the 12th-century keep and the Fairy Tower as 'in a bit of a dilapidated state. With the second phase of works to the castle now in progress, we only have two habitable bedrooms and a 1970s pine Fiesta kitchen. My wife, Frederique, is desperate to make it more homely, but the



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visitor facilities, public rooms and gardens take priority: we're kind of camping.'

Hugh is mindful of James Boswell's advice to his ancestor while discussing the difficulties of creating a garden at Dunvegan when he visited with Dr Johnson in 1773: 'Keep to the rock: it is the very jewel of the estate. It looks as if it had been let down from heaven by the four corners, to be the residence of a chief.'

Hugh MacLeod (above) combines his role as 30th Chief with film-making and has so far spent £1.2 million restoring Dunvegan (top)

Working with Head Gardener David Maclean, he has continued his father's horticultural legacy by developing the gardens, with much new planting and landscaping in the walled garden. Meanwhile, his plans for the third phase of works to the castle include redecorating the principal rooms and opening the south wing as a museum.

Hugh takes a low-key approach to the role of clan chief. He has neither the time nor the inclination to dress up in tartan and eagles' feathers and embark on tours, 'but then times have changed; Dame Flora and my father didn't have Twitter and Facebook, so they had to travel to promote the clan'. It's clear that, for the MacLeod of MacLeod, Dunvegan is a business as well as a home. 'I regard it as a huge privilege, but I see myself as just a link in a chain' he says. 'My aim is not to be a weak link.'

Dunvegan Castle is open April 1 to October 15 and at other times by appointment (01470 521206; www.dunvegancastle.com)

www.countrylife.co.uk

Oxenfoord Castle, Midlothian

When Michael and Harriet Dalrymple got married in 1991, it never occurred to them that they would end up actually living in Oxenfoord Castle, which Michael's great-great-aunt had established as a girls' boarding school in 1931. But then, in 1993, the school closed and, says Harriet, 'it came as a bit of a shock. Michael refused to contemplate selling and, as it had been an institution for so long, it seemed sensible to find another. Various ideas were considered—an open prison, a religious sect and a school of holistic education—but, then, we received a letter from a past pupil asking if she could have her wedding reception here; I looked at Michael and said "That's it".'

She continues: 'We arrived in January 1996, with three-year-old William, two-year-old Angus and Peter due in April. Immediately, we had to replace five-sixths of the roof and endure 18 months of dry-rot works. Then, we concentrated on the principal storey—the library didn't really need touching and still has its 1842 paper; the ballroom and dining room we simply titivated; they were just asking to be filled with people.'

Their first event was a black-tie dinner dance for the Scottish Yeomanry, then came the weddings, corporate events and foreign-language summer schools. The Dalrymples had another house on the estate and moved between the two, camping in the castle for large parties and shoot weekends. 'It was

Arctic and had no mod cons for general living; I felt very sorry for the girls who'd boarded here as they must have frozen in winter. One never knew when a tap would produce hot water and invitations to guests always included "bring your own heater".'

‘It was Arctic and had no mod cons; the girls who boarded here must have frozen’

'After 10 years, we decided we had to bite the bullet and installed central heating throughout the upper floors. We put in nine bathrooms, got rid of the institutional feel and moved in permanently.' There were 'ghastly structural problems', leaks, burst pipes, floods and continuing outbreaks of dry rot and, 'somewhere in the middle of it all, we produced Flora, our fourth child'. Every spare minute was spent clearing the grounds to re-establish the 70-acre gardens. 'We chopped, hacked, cleared and bonfired for what seemed like years and there's still always a garden project in progress.'

Oxenfoord's site is an ancient one, but the present building started as a 16th-century tower house of the MacGills. In the late 18th century,

already enlarged and landscaped, it passed through marriage to the future Lord Dalrymple, a lawyer, politician, scientist and improving landlord, who commissioned his friend Robert Adam to encase the old tower with a symmetrical turreted and castellated mansion.

His son, the 8th Earl of Stair, added a large Victorian extension and laid out the garden terracing, but the family's focus then shifted to Lochinch Castle in Wigtownshire, which became the main seat and is now the home of Michael's brother, the 14th Earl of Stair.

'The job of everyone in our situation is to try to keep these historic castles intact and safe for another generation,' says Harriet. 'As the *Downton Abbey* way of life is a thing of the past, this means turning them into businesses in a way that allows others to enjoy them. Hopefully, this will ensure their continuity in the hands of families that not only love them, but are also wrapped up in their history.'

Oxenfoord Castle, Pathhead, Midlothian, is open on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, 9.30am–4.30pm. For more information and bookings for events and house-party B&Bs, telephone 01875 320844 or visit www.oxenfoord.co.uk

Having a ball: Michael and Harriet Dalrymple have reinvented Oxenfoord, previously a girls' boarding school, as a wedding and event venue

