

FOR all the fame of the 'Road to the Isles', with its stirring landmarks and matchless views, *na Garbh Chríochan*, that rugged tract of the West Highlands captured so enticingly on OS Landranger map 40, is still one of mainland Britain's remotest regions. Often obscured by soft rain, the Rough Bounds, as it's known in English, is a rock-crazed landscape of tumbling hills and hidden glens, with lower wooded slopes descending to a ragged coastline broken by deep-winding sea lochs and skerried bays. Headlands and promontories are scattered with remote dwellings that, well into the middle years of the last century, were inhabited by the last of the Gaelic-speaking crofters who struggled to eke out a living here between the rocks and the peat moss, in townships accessible only by boat or foot.

Writing of this predominantly Roman Catholic area in the 1940s, Margaret Leigh reflected on that 'indefinable quality of romance' that is 'most often found in small islands, and also in places enisled in their own remoteness, like the country between Loch Shiel and Loch Nevis, the lonely and beautiful land of Moidart'. The folklorist Calum Maclean came in the 1950s collecting stories and songs that had been passed orally through generations, but never written down. He met some of Scotland's finest fiddlers and recalled how the dance band would think nothing of walking 10 miles over the hills with their instruments, playing until dawn, and then walking back. Although electricity came for some in 1947, television masts did not arrive until 1972, and so the old social traditions of music, conversation, dance and amateur dramatics continued in remote houses and village halls until well within living memory.

The 'big house' also had a refreshingly different image in Moidart, where many of the social barriers that segregate the gentry from their tenants were absent. And, just as their predecessors had played a key role in the events leading up to and following the 'Forty Five, so the Victorian mansions that replaced

them were central to a similarly romantic episode during the Second World War, when the Highlanders' legendary loyalty again prevailed. The Germans never discovered that the wilderness of the Rough Bounds was the Allies' paramilitary training ground, with Arisaig House the headquarters of the SOE Military Intelligence Wing, eight smaller houses supporting Special Training Schools and Inverailort Castle the base of the Royal Marines Commandos. In this Protected Area, some of the war's most famous resistance agents learnt their guerrilla tactics and skills of clandestine warfare in conditions of gruelling severity.

Life for the isolated communities had always been tough and, inevitably, with the short tourist season, limited road access and dwindling population, the area suffered post-Second World War decline. The traditional Gaelic culture had lost its vitality and the death knell was also sounding for the big houses, several of which were blown up; by the 1980s, Kinlochmoidart, Roshven and

Inverailort were all but derelict, their occupants struggling to keep the leaks and rot at bay.

Lately, however, there have been signs of new life flowing into the district, and not just with the encroaching

emblems of suburbia that, inevitably, have accompanied the long-awaited upgrading of the A830. Ugly signage and speeding traffic bypassing villages and the old winding road are the price for widespread local benefits. Mallaig High School now has 140 pupils, many of their families in fishing and tourism, new houses have been built and small businesses are flourishing. Another significant catalyst for regeneration has been the revival of three of the area's historic mansions.

Nino Stewart was brought up at Kinlochmoidart when the only landward route to Glenuig was a rough

Angus, Archie, Jamie, Michie and Donald MacDonald with their labrador Kilda at Roshven House on the shore of Loch Ailort. The MacDonalds have recently restored Roshven as a holiday home that is also available to rent

Taming the Rough Bounds

The wild land of Moidart is one of the most beautiful in Britain, but, by the 1980s, the population had dwindled and many of its houses lay derelict. Now, however, there are signs of new life. Mary Miers reports on a West Highland renaissance

Photographs by Simon Jauncey





track over the hills. When, in 1981, she returned to live here in the Baronial shooting lodge built by her great grandfather (COUNTRY LIFE, August 6 and 20, 1998), the rot she had known all her life had reached a critical state. (I recall on one visit being able to look down into the morning room through a large hole in the drawing-room floor.) Faced with an impossible situation, she applied for demolition in 1986: 'It was perfect timing; a few years earlier and nobody would have been interested in this untouched late-Victorian specimen, but now it was suddenly appreciated as a rare survival of William Leiper's work and I was offered an 80% grant.'

It was an incentive she couldn't refuse, and she engaged Simpson & Brown Architects, who understood the Moidart climate as Leiper had not. They carried out an exemplary programme of repairs and restored the richly decorated interiors, turning part of the ground floor into a home for Nino and the rest into separate holiday lets, which has

For all the romantic melancholy, it's a seductively beautiful place to explore

enabled the house to earn its keep. Never before has Kinlochmoidart been in such good shape.

Few places carry such poignant memories of Jacobite history as this estate at the head of Loch Moidart, with its Prince's Walk and Seven Men of Moidart (a row of beech trees marking the Prince's landing spot, now little more than withered stumps). Bonnie Prince Charlie stayed here before sailing up Loch Shiel to raise the standard at Glenfinnan, and among Nino's possessions is a letter he wrote on August 14, 1745, little knowing that his host would soon be beheaded, his mother dead and his house destroyed.

But for all the romantic melancholy, the wildness and the wet, precipitous terrain, it's a seductively beautiful and thrilling place to explore. Among those who have known it since childhood are Nino's god-daughter Emma Weir and her sister Sarah Winnington-Ingram, who, together, have recently resurrected another of the area's mansions. Arisaig House stands in its own wooded micro-climate above steeply terraced gardens, looking out over the green sward of the Borrodale burn to Loch nan Uamh and the Roshven hills. This place, too, is resonant with history, what with the caves that give the loch its name—one hid Bonnie Prince Charlie for 16 days—and the little bay where the Prince first embarked and finally departed from the British mainland. The old house of Borrodale, now let for holidays, stands at the head of the strath; its great barn, together with Arisaig House and its gardener's bothy across the burn, are the great Arts-and-Crafts architect Philip Webb's sole legacy in Scotland.



Above The view from Glenfinnan in Moidart, heartland of the Macdonalds of Clanranald. *Left* Lara, Kitty, Archie, Peter and Sarah Winnington-Ingram and, sitting, Emma Weir and Alex Weir-Addie with Ockle at Arisaig House

It was here that the Winnington-Ingrams spent their honeymoon in what was then the soulless luxury of a Relais & Château hotel. Later, Sarah would often talk of moving to the West Highlands. And then, one night two years ago, her son Alex dreamt that they lived at Arisaig House. When he came down to breakfast the next morning and saw it advertised for sale in COUNTRY LIFE, it seemed a portent that could not be ignored. They put together a business plan, but needed funds. Meanwhile, Sarah's sister Emma, who runs her own global executive search company called Eban, was looking for an investment. 'Everything fell into place at the right time,' she says. 'I had just turned 50 and wanted to diversify a bit. So I sold some stock and my



London flat and bought Arisaig House. It suited us both—I could have my place in the Highlands to come to regularly and Sarah could have her home and business.’ (Sarah’s husband, Peter, an electronic engineer who spent childhood holidays in Arisaig, commutes from Edinburgh at weekends; their children come and go).

As a family home combined with a licensed guest house plus restaurant, the place is fizzing again with life; the incomparable setting, atmosphere and food leave guests incredulous that they have stumbled upon such a place,

‘Seafarers, art lovers, gourmets: I can think of few who would not be entranced,’

and already plotting their return. With eight rooms and six self-catering cottages and flats to let, a productive kitchen garden, hens, lobster creels and a commitment to local produce—game from Muck, pork from Fort William, fish from Mallaig, scallops from local fishermen—the enterprise involves numerous local people. The house is big enough for guests to have privacy, yet sufficiently relaxed to encourage neighbours to drop by. There is much laughter and reminiscing: over kitchen tea, Ian John MacQueen talks of his mother’s childhood on the now-deserted

peninsular of Ardnish, and of the old days at Arisaig House, when she was the cook, his father the joiner and three generations of his grandfathers were the coachmen here.

There are comings and goings across the water again, now that the old laird’s house of Roshven at the mouth of Loch Ailort has been rescued by another enterprising young family with local roots. Roshven was

the home of the Blackburns, whose forebear, Jemima Blackburn, was a distinguished artist admired by Ruskin. My mother recalls staying here in the 1960s when heavily pregnant, when there was no

road, the larder door had to be kept open to support the floor above and one bathroom served the whole house. By 1990, only a few rooms were habitable and the estate had been sold off bit by bit. Then in 2007, the house and 40 acres were bought by Angus MacDonald, a businessman from the Lochaber family of Long John Whisky fame, entrepreneur and founder of the Moidart Trust. With the local builder Alasdair (Pod) Carmichael and his team, Angus and his wife, Michie, have transformed Roshven into one of the most desirable holiday homes in the West Highlands, which

Above Donald MacDonald, aged 12, playing *Roshven House*, composed in 2010 by the well-known local musician Fergie MacDonald. *Right* Nino Stewart, chatelaine of Kinlochmoidart. *Below* The team at Kinlochmoidart: (back) Romer Scott and Ruth Clark, (middle) Nino Stewart and Helen Nairn, (front) David Holisz and Debbie Muir



they use themselves and also rent out.

They have re-orientated the house, redesigned the garden and, with the help of Diana Sieff, redecorated the interior in a style best described as New England meets traditional country house with a contemporary twist. Antiques are mixed with stylish new furniture and fittings; there are gorgeous fabrics, contemporary landscape paintings and sculpture, and a collection of Jemima Blackburns in the study. Never before has Roshven felt so luxurious yet fresh. But the real selling point is its setting—the house stands just yards from the sea, its doorway framing a view of Eigg and Rum, the rugged cone of Roisbheinn rising almost 3,000ft behind. Seafarers, walkers, fishermen, art lovers, gourmets, those in search of a sociable weekend or a comfortable refuge: I can think of few who would not be entranced by this place.

Other recent local initiatives include the restoration of Roshven’s long-derelict farm square (including the

Cart Barn, now let for holidays) and a new house by the architect Helen Lucas—an innovative response to the landscape in the form of a timber-and-glass box suspended over a gully onto the sea. Meanwhile, neighbour Lex Brown continues to pursue his dream of restoring ancient Castle Tioram, which stands in an almost impossibly romantic setting on an island in Loch Moidart.

The strong friendships that have long existed between these families have rekindled something of the old spirit of socialising and visits by boat, picnics, *ceilidhs* and shinty matches. Doors are open to all and, with local dynasties of outstanding musicians still thriving, there’s always plenty of fiddle-playing, piping and dancing. I’m reminded of Margaret Leigh’s prescient words in her lyrical memoir of Moidart, *A Spade Among The Rushes*: ‘The fullness of the old life, with its kindness and gaiety, could come again, and come again with new material aids, if the will were there.’

Useful information

For area information www.road-to-the-isles.org.uk
Arisaig House www.arisaighouse.co.uk
Kinlochmoidart www.georgegoldsmith.com
Roshven www.roshvenhouse.com
The Cart Barn, Roshven www.thecartbarnroshven.com
Borrodale House www.lhscotland.com
Moidart Smokehouse, Mingary www.moidartsmokehouse.co.uk
Macdonald’s Smoked Produce, Glenuig www.smokedproduce.co.uk
Mallaig Heritage Centre www.mallaigheritage.org.uk
Glenuig Hall concerts and events www.glenuig.org.uk
Salen Hotel, Acharacle www.salenhotel.co.uk
Làrach Mòr Gardens, Arisaig www.achnaskiacroft.co.uk
Land, Sea and Islands Centre, Arisaig www.arisaigcentre.co.uk
Glenfinnan Monument www.nts.org.uk
Glenfinnan Station Museum www.glenfinnanstationmuseum.co.uk
The Jacobite steam train www.westcoastrailways.co.uk/Jacobite.cfm
Island and Wildlife cruises with MV *Sheerwater* to Eigg, Muck and Run www.arisaig.co.uk/index.asp
Castle Tioram and the Silver Walk www.walkhighlands.co.uk/fortwilliam/castletioram.shtml