WEEKEND FOCUS



NATIONAL ARCHIVE NEEDED: Rob and Tracey Beaton at Culdees Castle, near Crieff, in 2021, before their renovation gathered momentum. Picture by Kenny Smith.

Can't buy feeling of restoring a neglected castle

Service to Scotland: 'More people could do similar if they had access to the right advice'



BY MICHAEL ALEXANDER, *SENIOR FEATURES WRITER*

When Tracey Beaton first set eyes on Culdees Castle near Crieff, she wasn't necessarily looking for a 200-year-old Gothic mansion to restore.

Having renovated properties throughout her life, she was, by her own admission, rather tired of "fixer-uppers".

But what began as the purchase of a family home with an unusual backdrop has developed into an ambitious project to bring a neglected castle back to life.

Together with husband Rob, Tracey has spent the past six years transforming substantial sections of the once-derelict building into a wedding and events venue.

When they took on Culdees, built in 1801, the castle was in a desperately poor condition, with collapsed floors, waterlogged sandstone walls and huge quantities of debris.

One of the most daunting challenges involved a five-storey section of the building where no floors remained.

"There were literally no floors at all, nothing," Tracey recalls.

"When you finally managed to get in there and clear the floor, there was some 20 feet of debris."

The Beatons have shown what determination and hard work can achieve – as well as the challenges of restoring a historic building.

Their experience also illustrates why a major new project by the Scottish Castles Association is seeking to establish a comprehensive digital archive of Scotland's castles and fortified heritage.

The five-year programme, launched this week, has a fundraising target of £880,000.

It aims to establish a clearer picture of what survives, what condition castles are in and, crucially, what might still be saved.

Although the project has a national focus, it has particular significance for areas including Perthshire, Angus and the wider Tayside region.

The association says castles in the area have never been systematically recorded to a modern standard.

RESTORING CULDEES CASTLE

Cited as an example of what can be done, the Beatons have also had to find innovative ways of dealing with the building's thick, damp stone walls.

They've installed internal frameworks that allow modern plumbing, electrics and insulation without fundamentally changing the castle's exterior.

Of the castle's four main sections, two have been completed.

This includes a large glass-roofed courtyard and the five-storey section.

Rob continues to work full-time, while income from glamping, weddings and events is reinvested in the castle.

Tracey believes more people could consider similar projects if they had access to the right advice and information.

She has found membership of the Scottish Castles Association particularly valuable for sharing ideas and learning from other owners.

"I don't understand why more people haven't got the (courage) to do this," she says.

The satisfaction of seeing a neglected building return to productive use is, she adds, difficult to match.

"You can't buy that feeling at all."

> "Effectively on the brink of being condemned

WHY A NATIONAL ARCHIVE IS NEEDED

It is precisely this potential that Professor Richard Oram believes makes the Beatons' achievement so significant.

The Dundee-born historian, emeritus professor at Stirling University and president of the Scottish Castles Association, says Culdees was effectively on the brink of being condemned before the couple took it on.

What they have demonstrated, he argues, is that buildings which many developers might dismiss as beyond economic recovery can still have a future.

"They have shown that there is a life in these places, and they can give a very, very distinctive type of thing," says the Perth-based St Andrews University graduate.

Historic buildings also offer an alternative to the environmental and aesthetic costs of new development.

"They've got fantastic resource built into them," he says.

But one of the biggest obstacles to protecting Scotland's castles is that nobody has yet established a complete, up-to-date national record of them.

Various surveys and lists exist, compiled by different



The restored interior at Culdees Castle; inset below, Dairsie Castle before its restoration.



Professor Richard Oram, of Stirling University.



Claypotts Castle, Dundee.



Dairsie Castle after restoration.



Lordscairnie Castle, near Cupar.

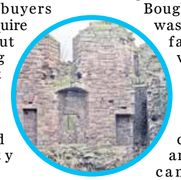
organisations over many years.

But coverage is inconsistent and much of the detailed recording is decades old.

Even the definition of what constitutes a castle or fortified site can vary.

Practical information will also be important for anyone considering taking on a restoration project.

He points out that prospective buyers sometimes acquire a ruin without establishing whether it has access to a road, or how close it is to water and electricity supplies.



The archive will identify where further research and conservation work are needed.

It will also bring together historic photographs, drawings and research, alongside new surveys and recording of buildings across Scotland.

The implications extend beyond the buildings themselves.

Oram points to Claypotts Castle in Dundee as an example.

He explains that what survives represents only part of what was once a much larger complex.

It included surrounding agricultural buildings, a gatehouse, brewhouse and walled gardens.

At Balgonie Castle near Markinch in Fife, surviving outer walls offer evidence of the extensive gardens and sheltered growing spaces that once formed part of the estate.

Dairsie Castle, near Cupar, provides another example of a building brought back from ruin.

Bought in 1992, it was rebuilt as a family home, with the work completed in 1996.

It was initially described as an "unsuitable candidate for restoration".

And the losses have been considerable.

Oram believes Scotland may have lost as many castles as remain standing today, although he stresses that this is an estimate rather than a definitive figure.

Cupar and Dundee castles, for example, have long since disappeared, but their names live on in places such as Castlehill and Castle Street.

Some disappeared through warfare, others through coastal erosion, changing political circumstances or simply because their owners abandoned them.

The archive's ambition is not simply to catalogue that decline.

It is also to identify the buildings where intervention could make a difference, whether through private restoration, conservation or community ownership.

HOW COMMUNITIES COULD HELP SAVE SCOTLAND'S CASTLES

Oram believes local groups could play an important role.

They could help survey historic sites and contribute information about buildings in their own areas.

Volunteers, students and community groups will have opportunities to develop skills in research, photography and heritage recording.

There are also potential benefits for tourism and local economies.

Oram cites Preston Tower in East Lothian, where a community group helped secure the reopening of a building which had previously been inaccessible to the public.

Reopening such places can also bring visitors and business to an area.

The archive is already taking shape, with an established digital platform and a partnership with Stirling University.

The project has already begun digitising collections – these include the Robert and Nicholas Bogdan collection – and has made an initial selection of material available to view online.

The formal launch at Dundas Castle on November 18 marked the next stage in its development.

The £880,000 fundraising target will support a dedicated archive researcher, digitisation of approximately 125,000 images, conservation of collections, further development of the website and new castle surveys.

A significant part of the investment will also support education and community involvement.

Having grown up on Ancrum Road in Dundee, Oram developed his interest in Scottish history through visits to the likes of St Andrews Castle and Arbroath Abbey with his grandparents.

He believes their educational potential is particularly important.

He says historic sites can capture young people's imaginations when we show them as places where people actually lived, rather than simply "piles of old stones".