

Estates of mind

Long the domain of the title-rich but often cash-poor, Scotland's prime properties and untrammelled acres are being snapped up by a new kind of laird. As golf courses and private jets proliferate, Annabel Sampson, whose family's estate on Jura was bought by a hedge funder, surveys the lay of the land

If the prototypical Scottish laird is a red-cheeked, weak-chinned figure, then his successor, the all-conquering hedge funder, comes as something of a surprise. Greg Coffey, worth £273 million, is an elegant, sleek-haired Australian, glamour incarnate – and still not yet 50. Mr Coffey, known as the Wizard of Oz for his prowess on the trading floor, bought Ardfin, my family's estate on the Isle of Jura in the Inner Hebrides, a decade ago. He first flew by private plane to Islay, the island next door, then zoomed over on a powerboat. By lunchtime, he'd made the decision to buy the 14,000 acres – all in a half-day's work.

In time, the industrious tycoon doubled the size of the house and added a golf course spectacular enough to trump Trump's Turnberry. Ardfin is due to reopen this summer after years of lavish renovations – the beautiful and shabby farmstead of my childhood converted into a luxury hotel. Jura beach is now accessorised with a powerboat and pizza oven, and the house itself has a souped-up 7,000-bottle wine cellar (brimming, too, with Jura whisky), a golfing simulator and a swimming pool to rival the Baths of Caracalla. It can be rented for £20,000 a night for a minimum of two nights: the ultimate in Hebridean chic.

In fact, all across the Hebrides, as well as on the mainland, there has been a palpable changing of the guard as aristocrats finally free themselves of their cumbersome, age-old Scottish estates. Fresh international blood is pulsing through the rivers that flow down from the Munros as a new type of laird arrives: one who travels by private jet, operates across numerous time zones and can readily afford to splash cash on sprucing up the odd thousand acres or >



Jura House, part of the Ardfin Estate on the Isle of Jura

◁ financing the 'facade lift' of a crumbling, turreted castle.

In 2018, Denmark's richest man, Anders Holch Povlsen, and his wife, Anne, overtook the Duke of Buccleuch as the largest private landowners in Caledonia. They own 221,000 acres through Wildland, the company they've formed that is rewilding vast tracts of Scotland's landscape. Urs Schwarzenbach, a 72-year-old Swiss financier worth £900 million – whose wife, Francesca, is godmother to Lady Louise Windsor, the Earl and Countess of Wessex's daughter – owns the sprawling 68,000-acre Ben Alder estate. Its private main lodge is a splendid building, familiar to Princes Charles, William and Harry, who have all stayed there.

There's also plenty of interest from the UAE: the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, plans to drastically expand his property on the 63,000-acre Inverinate Estate in Wester Ross. There's more investment from Switzerland, via art-world royalty Iwan and Manuela Wirth, who opened The Fife Arms, a kitsch, art-laden hotel that was once a Victorian coaching inn, in December 2018 (after buying it in 2015). There's the Danish Lego heir Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, who owns just under 70,000 acres in Ross-shire. In the Cairngorms, the Dutch tycoon Eric Heerema, of Nyetimber glory, has become an actual Monarch of the Glen, buying Balavil House, the property that featured as Kilwillie Castle in the BBC series and was on the market for £5.25 million.

Meanwhile, on Speyside, there's Tulchan, which was bought in 2017 by the vodka tycoon Yuri Shefler – worth £1.5 billion and the original owner of the yacht *Serene*, which he sold to Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia. At the time, it was billed as 'Scotland's most expensive sporting estate', and now Tulchan has been ritzed up into a sprauncy members' club (complete with dancing poles), designed by Philip Vergeylen for Nicky Haslam.

Then, of course, there's the Fordie Estate, situated in the Southern Perthshire Highlands. It was bought by Xavier-Louis Vuitton of the French fashion dynasty, after he sold the Dalchully Estate in Inverness-shire. At Fordie, a shoot wholly dissimilar to the fashion variety can be enjoyed; today it is run as a sporting estate offering holiday accommodation.

So far, so splashy. But are there tensions brewing in the Highlands? Is the old money bitter at the new? Are locals aggrieved by all the wealth? There's much opposition to private land ownership, spurred on by the government-backed Scottish Land Commission and fuelled by statistics that reveal just how much of the country belongs to a small clutch of people: 70 per cent of Scotland's rural land is owned by

as few as 1,125 individuals, according to a report in *The Guardian*.

That figure, of course, used to include our family; in 1938, my great-grandfather William Riley-Smith, the chairman of the John Smith's brewery in Tadcaster, made the journey from Yorkshire to see an estate on Islay, only to discover on arrival that it had been sold. Instead, he was tipped off about a place one island over, on Jura. He bought it without even bothering to look – it turned out to be Jura House, the diamond in Ardfin's crown.

Jura became famous as the place where George Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* while battling tuberculosis. (The Hon David Astor, then editor of the *Observer* and laird of one of the seven Jura estates, had offered him some respite from London to write.) In 1984 my grandfather Tony Riley-Smith, who started a hotel on the island, bought a long-wheel-base Land Rover to ferry Orwell pilgrims to Barnhill, the house at the wildest, northernmost point of the island where Orwell stayed. Alas, few showed up.

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More people came to Jura for the summer solstice in 1991 to witness 'pop's ultimate pranksters' Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty of the band KLF carry out a pagan rave, with journalists from *i-D* and other global publications travelling from as far as Tokyo, South Carolina, New York and Brussels to cover the story. Three years later, the band returned to burn £1 million at my uncle's boat house in a marvellous or ill-thought-out publicity stunt, depending on whom you asked.

My uncle Francis Riley-Smith was a law unto himself, the very definition of a tortured 'new age' artist. A journalist at the time described him, not entirely unfairly, as 'a ragged public-school exile, one minute he's jovial, the next violently obnoxious. Once upon a time he was banned from Jura, despite owning almost a third of the land.' Of course my mother, Miranda Sampson – née Riley-Smith, a dancer and actress who appeared in the 1980 film version of *Flash Gordon* – adored her

wayward older brother. And we all adored the house. But in 2010 the family resolved to sell Ardfin and Greg Coffey stepped in with his millions.

For Lord Ted Innes Ker, at least, the changing landscape in Scotland is a good thing. The very model of a modern aristocrat, the 36-year-old younger brother of the new Duke of Roxburghe grew up at Floors – said to be Scotland's oldest continually inhabited castle. He says that for him, the influx of super-wealthy foreigners to Scotland – the site of their second, third or fourth estates – has presented an opportunity. 'From my perspective, it's great,' says Innes Ker. 'With more people pumping lots and lots of money into incredible lodges and me getting to know them, my business will continue to grow and grow.' He means Reiver, his newly launched travel company, offering 'money no object' exploration of the Highlands. Innes Ker has quickly established himself as the most connected of guides, fluent in the finest nooks, crannies and private highland places to take his clients, who visit from all over the world.

You could say he works both sides: tailoring holidays for the super-rich, but also brokering deals to rent out the great estates of the remaining old families – estates that had previously proved about as profitable as setting fire to a fistful of fivers. 'The estates I take people to, generally I have known the owners for a very long time, and they trust me,' he says. 'I'm not some random bloke saying [in an American accent], "Hey, can I take your castle?"'

The man who took ours, Greg Coffey, lives a highly international life himself, with properties in London, New York, Australia and Oxfordshire. He now finds himself in New York after retiring, then starting up again (with an alleged multimillion-dollar signing-on fee).

For Coffey, the draw of Jura is reportedly the isolation – a glorious house contained within those thousands and thousands of acres, on a 30-mile-long island, five nautical miles from the mainland. 'Anything more accessible would have been too accessible for them,' an Ardfin source tells me, adding that for Coffey, Ardfin is the last property he'd be willing to sell. It's his devoted family's 'forever home', as the money they've ploughed into it (thought to be upwards of £70 million) would suggest. But Coffey isn't one to let an asset go fallow.

The new set-up – as I discover on crunching down the familiar gravel driveway, returning for the second time in a decade, the first since the renovations – is swish in excelsis. The estate has been transformed into an ultra-exclusive mecca for golfers – 'the best new ▷



*Australian hedge-fund manager
Greg Coffey and his wife, Ania*



The Ceilidh Bar at Ardfin



Ardfin's swimming pool

*Annabel Sampson on the Isle
of Jura in 1997, aged eight*



*Annabel's grandparents Tony and June Riley-Smith,
far left and front left, with family and friends, outside
Jura House, circa 1953*

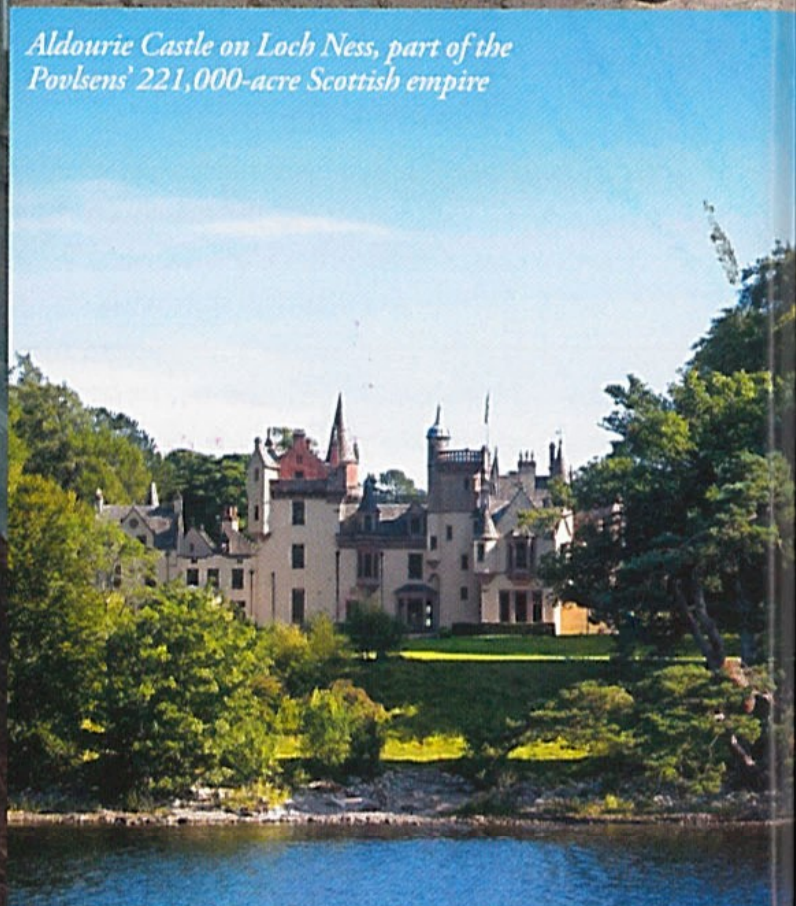




*Swiss art dealers Iwan and Manuela Wirth
at The Fife Arms, their hotel in Braemar*



*Billionaire Danish fashion retailers
Anders and Anne Holch Povlsen*



*Aldourie Castle on Loch Ness, part of the
Povlsens' 221,000-acre Scottish empire*



*The Kristiansens' Ledgowan
Estate in Wester Ross*



*Danish Lego heir Kjeld Kirk
Kristiansen and his wife, Camilla*

◁ course of the 21st century' is what Innes Ker calls it: high praise from somebody who has played Augusta. To service that, there's now the hotel known as the Ardfin 'Quads', a repurposed farm building, which in my family's time was home to cattle and thick with mud.

Coffey and his wife, Ania, have turned it into a place that is truly exceptional. It's dramatic, spacious, light and airy, and comes complete with underfloor heating. Taxidermied 12-point stags heroically punctuate the Ceilidh Barn, which is finished with Tudor windows. Uncle Francis's formerly derelict boat house has been ritzed up with a free-standing bathtub, rustic red bar and vast glass window with a view out to sea – and serves as the perfect whisky stop after the 11th hole on the golf course. One of the seven Jura estate lairds is Viscount Astor, owner of the 18,000-acre Tarbert Estate – and Coffey's neighbour. According to Innes Ker, Lord Astor has played the Ardfin course and thinks it's incredible. David Cameron, William Astor's stepson-in-law, has reportedly been sighted quite a bit around Jura since calling it a day in Westminster. Perhaps he too will have time for a quick round.

Speaking to locals, I gather that all eyes were on Coffey when he arrived. People were captivated by the handsome foreign mogul who, in his early forties, had already retired and wanted to invest in the remote Scottish isle. What would he do with the land? To start with, to the dismay of the locals, Coffey shut Jura House's much-loved walled garden and tea tent, previously open to the public. Few at that stage would have guessed that his thoughts were settling on the creation of a state-of-the-art golf course.

Then again, one Diurach inhabitant suggests that the locals didn't do themselves too many favours either when Coffey first arrived: 'They sent him begging letters asking for money, as if they were a charity case, which was obviously not the best way to start any kind of relationship. Rather than giving money, he asked them to come up with a business proposition.' Nothing materialised and there has always been tension about the empty houses in Craighouse, Jura's village – homes that were bought up by Coffey to house his staff during the period of peak construction and are now left empty.

And sleepy Scottish island life has its drawbacks for any big-time deal-maker. There was the occasion when Coffey, apparently in a rush, asked if the chug-chug ferry that travels to Islay at set times daily might be able to slot in a quick extra trip between shifts. It would have been doable, but his request was met with: 'No, we leave at the set time.' And though Coffey tried, no amount of cash seemed incentive enough.

Still, islanders are getting used to this type of wealth on their shores. Word has it that Islay airport is going to be enlarged to accommodate all the new private planes, since it is already full to bursting with the aircraft of the local lairds.

Of course, the new investors are all small beer beside one Danish clothing tycoon. The Povlsens were looking for land in Denmark when Anders was tipped off about a place in Scotland – Glenfeshie Estate, once owned and run as a hunting lodge by my great-grandfather William Riley-Smith. They acquired it in 2006 and realised they had 'bought into something special. As Anders once told *Tatler*: 'Coming from such a flat and boring landscape as Denmark's, you really appreciate it.'

Lisbet Rausing would, on one level, agree. It was the landscape that drew the 60-year-old Swedish Tetra Pak heiress to the 57,000-acre Corrour Estate and its rugged mountainscapes,

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steeped in drama and romance. 'Our family were enchanted by the Scottish mountain landscape, as Nordics often are,' she says. 'One magical summer in the early Eighties, we had ridden across the Highlands. It was a journey we never forgot.'

Rausing's staggeringly futuristic five-star Corrour Lodge is available to rent for just under £60,000 for seven nights – it's a building that's pure *Star Trek*. Designed by Moshe Safdie, creator of Singapore's new Jewel Changi Airport, the asymmetric £20 million property is formed of granite, steel and swathes of plate glass and is about as un-Scottish as they come. (Another odd-man-out property is Balnagown Castle, a 15th-century turreted pile, which now has a part-pink facade. It's owned by Mohamed Al-Fayed, of Harrods, whose net worth is £1.7 billion. He bought it after 'falling in love' with it on a business trip to the Highlands.)

Innes Ker completely buys the idea that the likes of Povlsen were drawn to Scotland on

the strength of a single visit. 'Oh, without question. I mean, one of my best clients every day sends me details of the next estate that comes up for sale on Knight Frank or Savills, and he's asking my advice: "Is it the right place, the right size, do you know it?" Every time people come to Scotland, they get blown away by the vastness, the beauty and how deserted it is. Especially my clients who live in America.'

Perhaps that's no surprise: Scottish-Americans throng the States, thanks to an epic-scale emigration that began in the 1700s, when dislodged Scots went in search of a better life. Of presidents alone, there have been two Bushes, Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump (whose mother was Scottish). Evelyn Channing, director of rural sales at Savills Edinburgh, attests to the upswing: Americans make up 42 per cent of all international viewings – attracted as they are to the romantic turrets, colossal tapestries, grandfather clocks and gilded splendour of Scotland.

Andrew Carnegie, the Dunfermline-born industrialist who was once the richest man in the world, was a Scot who had relocated to America but constantly felt the call of his home soil. He felt it so intensely that he bought Skibo Castle, a majestic pile in Sutherland that dates back to the 13th century and in Carnegie's heyday hosted Vanderbilts, Rockefellers, Churchills et al. 'Heaven itself,' Carnegie declared, 'is not so beautiful as Skibo.'

Today, the castle is owned by another notable American, the executive financier and former football-club owner Ellis Short, who runs it as a private members' club. He bought the estate in 2003 after it played host to the marriage of Madonna to Guy Ritchie three years earlier – a star-spangled event that Short rather demurely says would these days be 'a little too flashy for us, something our members would not have liked'. There's a swimming pool housed in what looks like a palace of crystal, tennis courts and a golf course, all within 8,000 acres of Scottish wonderland. Yet Short, who employs more than 200 at Skibo's Carnegie Club, insists: 'It's not just a club for rich people, it's one of the biggest employers in the north of Scotland.'

Equally, at its peak, Ardfin employed 130 people (a number that accounts for more than 30 per cent of the island's population), with many more working offsite. A local told me that Coffey could be credited for having revived a 'dying' community.

Of course, my family are bereft to no longer own Jura House. But how gratifying to have the opportunity to return and to see our much-loved home metamorphose under the ownership of a tycoon: the ultimate exercise in 'what if'. The surface has changed, but the magic of the place remains the same. □