

# Romance realised

*Ardfin estate, Isle of Jura, Argyll and Bute, part I*

A Victorian shooting lodge has been stylishly recast as the heart of a modern estate. In the first of two articles, Clive Aslet reports on this remarkable project

Photographs by Dylan Thomas











*Fig 1 preceding pages: Jura House, set amid the wilds of the Inner Hebrides.*

*Fig 2: The new Doric entrance, made on the landward side of the house; the old entrance interrupted the sea views*

If you were to be magically transported to the rocky southern tip of Jura in the Inner Hebrides, you would find yourself at Ardfin. There is a beach of grey sand and, when you have scrambled up the rocks, the path ascends steeply through bluebells and wild garlic, primroses and campions, between the gaunt, wind-sculpted branches of lichen-encrusted trees. At the top, you emerge onto a lawn, part of it used as a cricket pitch, occasionally shared—despite the best endeavours of those responsible for fencing the property—with red deer. Here is Jura House (*Fig 1*), once a modest Victorian shooting lodge, now a fully equipped country house, the style of which reflects that of the Baronial Revival of the original.

Jura House is the nerve-centre of the 14,000-acre Ardfin estate, site of the former home of the Campbell lairds who ruled the Isle of Jura from the 17th century. In 1772, the Campbell of the day entertained the amiable Welsh naturalist Thomas Pennant as he travelled through the area to research his book *A Tour of the Hebrides* (1774). Intending to land on Islay, he and his companions →

*Fig 3: The drawing room, with as much furniture as possible from the old lodge. It has been restored and, in some cases, repurposed—the cabinet behind the armchair serves as an air-conditioning unit*











Fig 4 above: The breakfast room forms part of the new East Wing. Fig 5 below: A hidden door set among the library bookshelves. Fig 6 facing page: The dining room. Whereas the overmantel and dining table were bought at an auction for the room, the chairs are among the furniture that was bought with the house and restored. Nothing was thrown on a skip or otherwise discarded

found themselves becalmed, then driven north; a bump at 1am, when their boat's hull scraped the sea floor, alerted them to their arrival off Jura. Presumably, it was the impoverished fisherwomen, collecting their 'wretched fare, limpets and periwinkles', who told Mr Campbell, because he obligingly sent horses for the travellers.

With Pennant was his servant Moses Griffith, who made sketches of points of interest, such as the Paps of Jura. There are in reality only three, but they appear in the resulting engraving as half a dozen rum babas receding into the distance. Already, the population had been depleted by emigration, the land being, for the most part, 'without the possibility of cultivation'. Unfortunately, Griffith did not draw Jura House, although Pennant was entertained there. After dinner, he was taken to see the little island of Am Fraoich Eilean, the 'heather island', with its castle or tower house, Clai Castle. Then—as now—only the ground floor of this 15th-century building remained. Pennant noted that the



walls are 9ft thick, with, on the west side, a cutting 'of vast depth' through the rock on which the castle stands that was formerly crossed by a drawbridge.

Another wave of emigration took place in the 1830s—a consequence, perhaps, of the extreme fertility of the islanders who, noted Pennant, often bore twins. From a peak of 1,300, the population of Jura fell to 200, where it remains today. Sheep replaced the small black cattle, which had once been swum across from Islay to be driven to the ferry taking them to the Scottish mainland.

The scene was set for the reinvention of the Highlands as a destination for sportsmen and readers of Sir Walter Scott, so much associated with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who bought Balmoral in Aberdeenshire in 1852. Initially, the attractions of shooting, stalking and fishing were enough for the hardy males who went North every August, gun and fishing rod in hand. As Mary Miers reveals in *Highland Retreats: The Architecture and Interiors of Scotland's* →







*Romantic North*, they were prepared to camp in little more than huts, tended by a farmer's wife. But they were soon dreaming of castles.

If it is to Scott that we owe the cult of the Highlands in literature, the architectural form was set by William Burn. In 1838, Burn reimagined Jura House, engulfing the previous structure in harling, gables and tower. It was a subdued essay in the Scottish or Scots Baronial style, in which Burn was a specialist: success allowed him to underwrite the publication of Robert Billings's *The Baronial and Ecclesiastical Antiquities of Scotland* (released in four volumes, 1848–52), which he quarried for details.

‘At first, sportsmen were prepared to camp in little more than huts. But they were soon dreaming of castles’

Burn's reputation was based as much on his skill in his planning houses as on the style he gave them. From the moment a Burn client and his wife got up in the morning, they proceeded through a logical sequence of rooms, in the order they needed them. Their paths never crossed those accessing the state rooms in which guests were entertained and their private quarters colonised more and more of the house, as well as, perhaps, part of the garden. There was often a door in the drawing room to reach them: only the family could go through it. Such arrangements, however, required scale and Jura House was too small for Burn to arrange it so completely. In about 1880, the Inverness architect Alexander Ross made improvements, commemorated by a wall plaque bearing the Campbell arms. Even so, it has only been in the 21st century that Jura House has fulfilled its potential as a fully orchestrated country house, the plan of which reflects the needs of its age (**Figs 4, 5, 7 and 8**)—however different that age may be from early-Victorian days.

After the First World War, Jura House was inherited by Charles Campbell. He was one of the younger of four brothers, two of whom had been killed in the conflict. Before 1914, he had worked in Canada, Alaska and Australia, whence he returned to fight, obtaining a commission with difficulty because of a glass eye. Ardfin was a burden to him and, in 1938, he sold the estate. Many years before, it had been prophesied that the last Campbell on Jura would be a one-eyed man, his possessions loaded into a single cart pulled by a white horse; and so it proved.



**Fig 7: The East Room. Most of the furniture here came from a home that the clients had sold in London. It has adapted unexpectedly well to its new surroundings**

Without the investment needed to maintain a Highland estate up to the nines, the property declined, until it was run as a B&B for fishermen and stalkers. Water from the taps ran brown from the peat, a sight that may have gladdened the hearts of whisky drinkers, but wrought havoc on the plumbing.

When the present owner bought Ardfin in 2010, he soon realised that he would have to upgrade the lodge to suit 21st-century life. This gradually led to the decision to rebuild both the house and farm steadings on a large scale. The old Jura House would survive in the centre of the composition and set the style

(**Figs 3 and 6**), but the size was trebled and a new suite of accommodation created from the derelict steadings a little way up the hill.

The architect of this transformation has been Alireza Sagharchi of Stanhope Gate Architecture, helped in execution by the local firm of Thomas Robinson. Mr Sagharchi is not only a specialist in the creation of luxurious homes, but restored The Prince of Wales's farmhouse in the Romanian village of Viscri, a project that called for an exemplary understanding of local crafts. Jura House displays a similar love of materials, such as the walls built of field stones of different colours





**Fig 8: The expansive new boot room with its tiled floor was inspired by the 'pine box' of the original entrance hall. The table (and the Belfast sink) came from the old kitchen**

made for the steadings. Other extremely hard local stone, practically a kind of granite, was used where possible. Ugly cement harling was removed from the walls of the main house and replaced with a lime render that not only looked more sympathetic, but allowed the house walls to breathe. Scored to imitate stone, the render forms a contrast with the greenish stone of the quoins. Basalt window surrounds and mullions have been cut from solid rock, which is so thick that no water, however tumultuous the weather, can penetrate to the inside; having soaked in, it is expelled as the stone dries.

Gutters, painted dark green, stretch across the fronts of some dormers, as they might in a traditional lodge. Although Ardfin is now much bigger than it was before, the volumes are broken up, so that the homeliness of the original has been maintained. A bracket on the east gable has been left for a future statue, perhaps of Diana (as the goddess of hunting), perhaps of Finn McCool (the legendary giant after whom Ardfin has been named). There is a family kitchen on one side of the house and a swimming pool and spa on the other.

Previously, Jura House was entered on the south side, facing the sea. This arrangement

has been changed (**Fig 2**). The new entrance court not only enhances the visitor's sense of arrival, but allows the rooms on the south side of the house, with their big mullion windows, to enjoy uninterrupted views of lawn, sea and the coast of Islay. The lawn, however, is not quite what it seems, being also home to the first tee of an outstanding golf course designed by Bob Harrison, so naturally planned that you would hardly know it was there. Sand bunkers have been kept to a minimum, although outcrops of rock present their own challenges and some holes require players to drive across sea. The presence of the course would be all but invisible if it were not for the flags by the holes.

Mr Sagharchi's scheme not only transformed Jura House, but the whole estate, with its 16 miles of shoreline. The old boathouse was restored and an Adirondacks-style barbecue built; a small chapel is being discussed for the grounds. This has been part of a general revival of the estate, which has also seen the planting of thousands of young trees. Plans are under way to make Ardfin self-sufficient in energy, too.

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Among the projects afoot is the reawakening of the walled garden. Under the 19th-century Campbells, the garden must have been the glory of Ardfin, created—if the date proudly displayed on the cisterns of both lavatories is to be believed—in 1812. The sundial boasts that it was ‘calendared for Jura’ the same year. Sheltered by rough stone walls and watered from a burn that runs through a dressed stone channel, the garden includes tree-ferns and eucalyptus—sourced by the then head gardener on a trip to Australia and New Zealand in the 1980s. Azaleas, rhododendrons and fuchsias thrive here, as the globe shapes of metal buoys, rescued from the sea, provide structure. There was an air of romantic decay when the present owner arrived, but decades of manuring vegetable beds with seaweed had left a highly fertile soil. Due to the presence of the Gulf Stream, there is no need to protect against frost. When the replanting is complete, this walled garden will become a significant addition to the glorious horticultural tally on the West Coast of Scotland. 🌿