



House of dreams

Ardfin estate, Isle of Jura, Argyll and Bute, part II

In the second of two articles, Clive Aslet examines how a Victorian shooting lodge on the southern tip of Jura has been reimagined as a modern country house

Photographs by Dylan Thomas





Fig 1 preceding pages: The glorious view from the stone mullioned windows at the southern end of the new east wing, overlooking the sea. The bronze window frames were chosen to stand up to sea spread and driving rain. *Fig 2 above:* The swimming pool in the east wing recalls a Victorian winter garden. Big doors give onto the landscape. *Fig 3 below:* The kitchen has an Arts-and-Crafts feel. The large island in the centre provides the ideal surface for children—and adults—who like to bake



views (*Fig 1*) more than made up for the rather forbidding character of the house. Initially, the decorator Louise Jones was asked to do little more than repaint the walls and recover the furniture. But the project grew. The owners found they liked Jura House so much that they wanted to share it with guests; by 2012, the architect Alireza Sagharchi of Stanhope Gate Architecture had been asked for a scheme that would completely reimagine the house, creating a new entrance on the landward side and adding a new wing to east and west.

This provided a new drawing room and family kitchen at one end and a swimming pool and spa at the other. But the work did not entirely equip Jura House for the vagaries of the island climate, in which even the fairest of days can suddenly give way to showers, if not driving rain. There was, however, an answer. Up the drive from Jura House were some stone-built steadings, based around two courtyards known as quads. They had once been home to horses, some of the island's sturdy black cattle and the estate office. Now dilapidated, one of the courtyards could be glazed over and pressed back into service as a play space in inclement weather.



UNTIL 2009, Jura House, on the Isle of Jura's Ardfin estate, was a somewhat glum shooting lodge, originally built by William Burn in the 1830s and enlarged by Alexander Ross 50 years later. Its attraction was less the Victorian architecture, which had perhaps never been distinguished, but the exceptional landscape setting. Overlooking the mountains of nearby Islay, it commands glorious views over the constantly changing sea and shoreline. More than 10 miles of fretted coast is trimmed with beaches of grey sand that are inviting for rugged barbecues. Guns

had been coming for generations to cull Jura's splendid stags, which can weigh 25 stone; shoot the dusk flights of woodcock as they emerge from woods to feed on pastureland; or even bag one of the island's colony of wild goats. In the summer, midges permitting, there were hill walks and trout fishing for the energetic, with, nearer the house, a large walled garden planted with tree ferns and other exotic species that can be grown on the west coast of Scotland, due to the gulf stream. What a place to holiday with young children.

Certainly, it caught the imagination of the present owner, for whom the spectacular



Fig 4 left: Jura House from the south-east, showing the broad bay window illustrated from the inside in Fig 1. Fig 5 below left: The conservatory was originally to have been a cloistered garden, but is now an indoor-outdoor space

Further, the old cart sheds, byres, bull pens, granary and hay loft could be made into bedrooms that would provide semi-independent accommodation for friends (**Fig 9**). Once the quads had been restored, another idea began to emerge. Ardfin could go some way towards paying for itself by being rented on an exclusive basis. The quads could put up sizeable groups and an award-winning and unusually challenging golf course, created by the celebrated Australian golf designer Bob Harrison to look as natural as possible, would itself be an attraction, quite apart from the high level of service and food that would be offered by a 21st-century country house.

‘The qualities that make it so attractive to family life can help secure its future for the next generation’

This is a new reinterpretation of an old ideal. In the 18th century, it was intended that country houses would be supported by agricultural estates: the rents from tenanted farms would pay for the upkeep and life of the big house where the owning family lived. This model became impractical after the long agricultural depression that began in the 1870s and lasted until the Second World War. In recent years, country-house owners with land on the edge of towns have found that building houses is better than growing crops, but this is hardly possible on a Hebridean island with a population of 200. Ardfin, however, is showing that the very qualities that make it so attractive to family life can also help secure its future for the next generation and their successors.

Under Mr Sagharchi’s hand, Jura House has itself become a fresh interpretation of a Scots Baronial country house, which balances novelty with tradition. Externally, the architecture takes its note from the mullion windows and tower of the old Jura House, which survives within the extensions that have been made on three sides (**Fig 4**). The entrance—previously on the seaward side of the house—is now on the north front, so that the panorama of sea is not impeded by cars. The new entrance has a Doric porch →





Fig 6: The quads once housed horses and cattle and contained the estate office. Largely rebuilt out of local field stone, they now form an entertainment complex

to increase the sense of arrival. You walk up stone steps to an entrance hall. To one side is a boot room, whereas a door ahead leads to the shell of the old house, which contains the formal rooms—hall, dining room, drawing room, sitting room and so on. A new wing to the east provides a family kitchen (**Fig 3**) and a breakfast room, looking over lawn and cricket square towards Islay.

Balancing this wing is, on the west, another, linked by a conservatory (**Fig 5**): it contains a swimming pool (**Fig 2**), sauna and massage room. Three double doors within arches open onto the terrace. Rooms in the basement below the old house include a shooting simulator, a golf simulator, a large state-of-the-art wine cellar and a catering kitchen (beneath the family kitchen) for parties.

Although Jura House is listed Grade C, the steadings had no protection. Nevertheless, the outer walls were kept as far as possible

and any new work was built from outcrops of field stone in the manner of the old. Former cowsheds became bedrooms, as part of a guest and entertainment complex (**Fig 6**) that also holds a pro shop for golf. Off the glazed courtyard are a ceilidh barn and a billiard room.

Inside Jura House and the steadings, the past has been respected as far as possible, but almost everything has been refreshed—and yet it would be wrong to say it is new. Although the old sporting lodge did not contain a notable collection of antiques, the largely Victorian furniture and fittings were entirely appropriate to the type of building that it was and the clients insisted that, where possible, every stick of it should be salvaged. Worm-eaten pine shutters were taken off site and restored. Chairs were reupholstered, tables moved to new places, lampshades given a new lease of life by replacing the fringe. The boot room contains the table and Belfast

sink from the old kitchen. Pieces that could not serve their original function were turned into vanity units or radiator covers. When the somewhat motley, but serviceable furniture that was found in Jura House fell short, it was supplemented by the contents of a London property that had recently been sold. It might not have been expected to fit together aesthetically, but somehow it did.

The genius of the achievement has been to distil the atmosphere of every comfortable well-appointed country house you have ever stayed in and present the essence in a fresh light. Big patterns and wallpaper contrast with dark-stained pine panelling and the restored billiard table (**Fig 7**), ebonised display cabinets contain domed arrangements of stuffed birds. Light floods in through tall mullioned windows that are closed by shutters and hidden behind enormous curtains at night. There are generous, deep-buttoned sofas and cast-iron radiators that suggest a previous era. Old-fashioned picture lights shine on Highland landscapes, dog paintings and military scenes. Brown mahogany furniture and a Victorian dining table sit happily with Persian rugs.

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You would never guess that the cast-iron balustrade to the main staircase, Gothic in style (**Fig 8**), had been specially made for the project. Like seemingly Victorian (actually new) tiles patterning the floors or the corridors containing upright pianos, it has an immemorial quality. In traditional country-house style, what appears to be a bookcase may actually be a door. Such details combine, with the architecture of Jura House, to create a sense of place, complementing the views of the coast seen through every window.

Old chimneypieces have been refitted and reused, perhaps painted black and set against terracotta-coloured walls. New work, such as raised and fielded panelling, gives the impression that it has always been there. In an homage to the Burns era, some cornices have Jacobean detail of a kind not often seen in the 21st-century. Pine is much used for panelling, which has been stained to the shade favoured by shooting lodges through the ages—something between treacle tart and tobacco. Floorboards were taken up to install underfloor



heating, but not replaced: they were treated to withstand the temperature and relaid.

Stairs, carpeted with the sort of Turkey runner that has been little seen since the Second World War, lead to the bedroom floor. Here huge bathtubs evoke the heroic age of Edwardian plumbing. Differences in level have been celebrated, as adding to the country-house feel; you may have to climb three steps to a bathroom or go three steps down.

Every bedroom and bathroom has a different look. They might be trellised, lit from on high by a concealed skylight or vaulted with a wooden ceiling like the upturned hull of a ship. Exposed rafters and matchboarding hint at the traditional rigours of a Scottish shooting lodge, although the bath water no longer runs brown with peat and the upholstered furniture, if still chintzily old-fashioned in style, does not sag. Corridors might be horizontally panelled with planks and lit with hurricane lamps. There is a judicious use of tartan and, inevitably, a fine showing of stags' heads.



Fig 7 above left: Decorator Louise Jones was tasked with repurposing all the furniture in the house, including the billiard table and pine doors. Fig 8 above right: The new timber and iron staircase leads to the master suite. Fig 9 left: One of the bedrooms in the converted stable block

As in any country house worth its salt, there are books. They are of the well-worn kind that relate to Scottish history, topography and sport. Thumb them and you will see Ardfin as it used to be: four milkmaids holding the wooden pails known as luggies or stoups; shearers with pipes clenched between their teeth, kneeling over sheep; boatbuilders on the Sound of Islay; men stacking peat. These characters died long ago and, should they return, they might not immediately recognise Jura House, let alone the steadings. They would see, however, that Ardfin is still a working estate. The sea, the deer and the heather are the same—and as we have seen, that is also true of the contents. 🐾