

# Scotland's Castles: Rescued, Rebuilt and Reoccupied



Summer 1997: a family is driving down the A75 on its way home from a holiday. At the side of the road is a sign, 'Castle for Sale.' How many of us, at that point, would have said 'how lovely, if only, one day...' and carried on? I think I would, and I've read *I Capture the Castle* more times than you've had hot porridge. The Brennans, however, were made of sterner stuff: back they went up a long country lane until there before them stood a totally derelict sixteenth century tower house; **Barholm Castle**. They fell in love. After seventeen years of devotion to that tower house, **Dr Janet Brennan-Inglis** was at Blackwell's last week to launch *Scotland's Castles*, the book she has written to celebrate the renaissance of Scottish castles since 1950.

It took the Brennans two years even to buy Barholm, which had been in the ownership of the McCullochs, a family whose line had died out perhaps fifty years previously. Janet has never been granted access to the family papers and still has virtually no information about the castle between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. Once the purchase was settled, four years were spent in obtaining building consents from such bodies as **Historic Scotland**; the renovation itself took another three years. Nothing goes smoothly with old houses; at one point the architects told the family that the south wall would have to be dismantled to the ground – one stone at a time. In the end though, Barholm was complete. As the Brennans were living abroad they decided to let the castle as holiday accommodation, furnishing it to allow their guests to 'live like a laird' – four-poster beds were the order of the day, and even the ceiling of the great hall was painted in sixteenth century style. It went, says Janet, 'like a merry-

go-round' – which was fortunate, as they needed to recoup the huge cost of the renovations somehow.

In 2011, Janet and her husband retired and moved into Barholm; they still live there today. With renovations complete, Janet found there was a gap in her life and decided 'I would 'just' write a book about all the people we had met who'd undertaken similar projects.' She soon realised that even the title of the book gave rise to many questions; What is a castle in Scotland? What does restoration mean? Who are the people who rescue these buildings? And what are the politics behind the restoration movement? Feeling the need for a more rigorous framework, she spent five years carrying out part-time research with the late **Charles McKean**, Emeritus Professor of Scottish Architectural History at Dundee University. The book rapidly turned into a PhD, and the PhD has now turned into a book (Janet calls it an abbreviated thesis without the footnotes.)

✘ Since the 1950s there has been a 'golden age' of castle restoration in Scotland. Before the 1939-45 war, these properties were largely inhabited by the aristocrats whose families had owned them for generations. After 1945 this began to change; whilst a few of the original owners did become involved in restoration, many more lacked resources or incentive and sold their castles to people who may have had no previous connection with the land, but did have huge dedication to the preservation of the buildings, whether for their personal use or for hotels, holiday lets, business centres or even as charitable headquarters. A few of the old families managed to get their properties restored by outside agencies – **Roslin Castle** in Midlothian was renovated by **The Landmark Trust** and is now rented out by the Trust as holiday accommodation (but still belongs to the Earl of Rosslyn.) Many owners just wanted to get rid of the financial burdens the castles represented and as a result many castles were demolished; Major Alan Gordon offered **Threave Castle** to the

nation and also offered to have it blown up first! Luckily this offer was refused, but other demolitions became popular public events. Some properties were blown up by the army on practice manoeuvres, others just crumbled away. As the 1970s began however, so did the heritage movement: restoration became far more popular and demolitions almost a thing of the past.

The people who take on the restoration of castles vary as much as the buildings themselves. Few developers are interested, the financial risks being too great, although an exception is **Kit Martin CBE**, an architect who rescues castles, splits them into private apartments, and uses the proceeds to fund his next project. He purchased **Cullen House** in Morayshire from the Earl of Seafield in 1981; despite a serious fire in 1987, it is now fully restored.

A few local councils and building trusts have undertaken other restorations – **Strathclyde Building Trust** saved **Newmilns Tower** Ayrshire (now a private house), – but for the most part it is private individuals like the Brennans who have taken up the cudgel. Of course some of them have rather more resources than others – the late **Queen Mother** bought **Barrogill Castle** in 1952, writing to her Treasurer 'I passed a dear little castle down by the sea...and discovered it was going to be sold for nothing, just the value of the lead on the roof....Do you think me mad?' HRH ended up paying £100 for the ruin, which she swiftly returned to its earlier name, the **Castle of Mey**. What her Treasurer did think of the vast expenditure that followed is perhaps best left unrecorded.

Many castles have been altered over the years to suit the needs and changing lifestyles of their occupants. In the 1980s **Lord Huntly** knocked down part of **Aboyne Castle** because he decided it was too big; others have had towers and staircases added. Some have even been changed into receptions for caravan parks, and one has acquired a Disney-style gatehouse and a memorial to the late Princess of Wales. In

1961, **Nicholas MacLean Bristol** bought the derelict **Breacachadh Castle** on the **Isle of Coll** and turned it into both his family home and the headquarters of the gap year charity **Project Trust**, of which he remains Life President.

**Lord David Steel and his wife Judy** bought and restored **Aikwood Tower** near Selkirk in the 1990s – the restoration won many architectural awards, and was mainly carried out by local craftsmen. The Steels lived at the Tower for many years; it is now owned by their son and let for holidays. The late **Nicholas Fairbairn** bought the ruin of **Fordell Castle** for £100 (there seems to be a bit of theme here...), restored it and lived in it until his death. Having passed through several other hands, it was sold in 2007 for almost four million pounds – but not every restoration ends with such profits.

Janet Brennan-Inglis describes the renovation of Barholm as 'bruising', and the specialist builders she used are now bankrupt – although she and her husband John love living in their castle, they're not sure they'd do it again. Although they did receive a generous grant from Historic Scotland, most funding needs to be more than matched by the recipients – these castles 'eat' money. Asked about the white rendering of the walls at Barholm, Janet explained that they had been rendered in harl because there was still evidence of it on the old walls. The original harl would have been made from a mixture of seashells, lime, plaster, goat hair and pebbles. A similar rendering has recently been applied – not without controversy – at **Stirling Castle**. Janet explained that nowadays restorers have no choice but to follow the original methods and materials, and that it is essential to find builders and architects who are experienced in this work. The Brennans sourced their stones from a nearby quarry.

Since the start of this century numbers of restorations have dropped again, but Janet says there are still many properties in need of rescue. Her next project is an examination of the works of **MacGibbon and Ross**, two Scottish architects who

published comprehensive illustrated surveys of many castles in the late nineteenth century and were perhaps the first conservation heritage campaigners, upset by the crumbling ruins they came across. MacGibbon and Ross's work inspired quite a few Victorian restorations. Janet intends to follow their books and has started with their volume on Dumfries and Galloway, where she has found that three-quarters of the properties are in a better state than they were when MacGibbon and Ross saw them – which does of course mean that one quarter are not, and some are at huge risk. She cites **Kenmure Castle** in Galloway, **Castle Wigg** in Wigtownshire, **Castle Cary** near Newton Stewart and **Hoddom Castle** near Lockerbie as particular causes for concern.

Janet urges people who are interested in saving these buildings to join the **Scottish Castles Association**, of which she is Chair. She feels that there is room for compromise in restoration – total authenticity is not always required. The SCA is planning to award a prize for young architects who can take an at risk structure and come up with innovative plans for it that still respect the integrity of the building.

There is of course an argument for saying that not all castles should be restored. Abandoned buildings are now very popular subjects for art – photography in particular – and the owners of the farm on which Castle Wigg stands describe it as 'pretty much left to nature...a wonderful place, very eerie, and full of wildlife.' Perhaps, as one member of the audience suggested, the crumbling of buildings is just part of the natural cycle of life? This is not a view to which Janet subscribes, and she asks anyone with any ideas or influence to put them to use to save Scotland's heritage.



This was an interesting, well-illustrated and thought-provoking talk, much enjoyed by an appreciative and engaged audience.

**Scotland's Castles: Rescued, Rebuilt and Reoccupied** is published by The History Press at £14.99.

The Scottish Castles Association can be contacted [here](#).