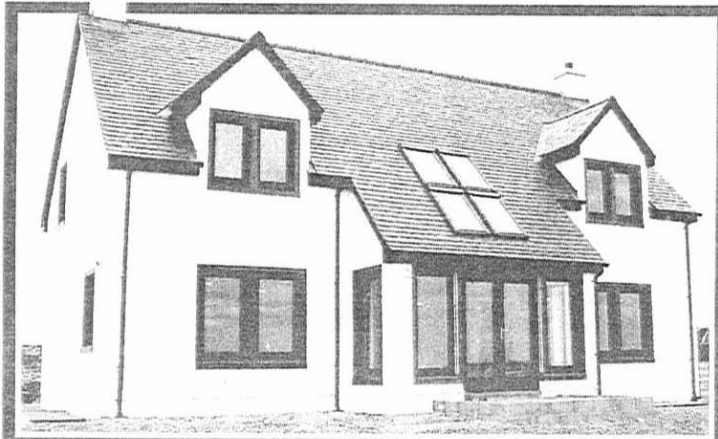


John MacLeod



Home sweet home: The traditional-style croft has breathtaking views over Loch a Bhaile

YOU may be happy to hear that, a couple of weeks ago, I finally took up residence in my Isle of Lewis croft. It was last summer I finally quit Harris after 11 years in that kindly, somewhat forlorn community.

Since Christmas I have been building a house and now I am at last in residence in the township where my mother was born and where her people have been kicking about ever since that embarrassing business at Killiecrankie.

We have since forsown Jacobite endeavour for devout Presbyterianism; but the land is an abiding constant and my newly-won five acres of the Lord's good earth is a happy but weighty responsibility.

I'm rather proud of the house. Like most new homes built in Scotland these days, it is of timber-frame construction, erected with spectacular speed, brilliantly insulated and extremely warm but, unlike most timber-framed houses - boxy, ugly things, all concrete tiles and vast impracticable windows - it came from a company whose designs are based on the classic croft house.

With its slate roof, storm windows, immaculate white render and solid chimneyheads, you would be hard pressed to tell if my new gaff had been erected in 2005 or 1935. Already, several visitors have become hopelessly lost looking for a 'new house' as they shuttle past my driveway.

A NEW house is but a shell and when I find a loyal Harris pal, Duncan MacLean, turned up three Fridays ago, it was bare and sterile, devoid of humanity and laced with rusty, new paint, immaculate plaster, basins that had never seen a toothbrush and bedrooms that had never heard a yawn.

Young Duncan, strong, practical and tireless, stayed barely a week but devoted 12-hour days to some very gritty jobs indeed to transform an echoing building site into a home.

Any fitting is the stuff of hubris; it met with minor tragedy; the most mortifying episode fell on Monday, when I finally realised one newly-assembled bed needed three small but vital legs - the self-same chunks of pointless-seeming wood I had, the Monday before, flung gaily on the third bonfire.

There has also been the saga of the Aga. The Aga is, of course, the best cooker in the world and this model - gleaming enamel and the size of a small car, four ovens and an auxiliary electric hob - has already produced some wondrous dinners.

It has, though, had an unceremonious start. When the engineers arrived in late June - an Aga, unlike its downmarket sibling the Rayburn, is always built on site - they were against to find, on unpacking it, all that the halogen hob had been smashed as with a sledgehammer.

With much embarrassment, and at no little expense to the company, whose after-sales service has been excellent, they returned the following week with its replacement.

Then the cooker started to overheat. Within a week, the

mercury was stuck permanently above the optimum mark and the kitchen felt like a Turkish bathhouse. I turned the thermostat down as far as it would go. By morning, the kitchen felt like High Noon at El Alamein.

I rang the long-suffering engineers, who told me to switch the thermostat off. It made not the slightest difference. I finally unplugged it 24 hours later; the butter was melting in the larder, the cooker was as hot as ever, the house had begun to shimmer like Dante's inferno and it was not an engineer I wanted, but an exorcist.

All this time Aga stockpots lids were flying to and fro over the March like so many Frisbees. I had invested in a mound of Aga kitchenware, including a vast 11-litre stainless steel stockpot from a particularly hyped range of gleaming casseroles, invulnerable, enduring, guaranteed family heirlooms.

The handle broke off the lid the first time we washed it. I rang the Aga Shop in some asperity and a new lid was swiftly posted out.

By now the Aga itself was all but glowing and you needed asbestos overalls to enter the kitchen. There was nothing for it but to switch the beast off. It felt like a death in the family.

The mortification of Aga-

Rayburn Ltd was complete and the highest of local high-heid-yins - Barry Johnson, the company's top engineer for what it is pleased to call Northern Britain - flew into Stormway on Monday.

Within half-an-hour, he had unmasked an installation blunder and adjusted a critical valve. He wielded spanners and eschewed a crucifix; nevertheless, the flow of oil was instantly reduced to rather less than Texan proportions and the reformed cooker has since then behaved perfectly.

BY then Duncan was back in Glasgow and Tearlach had landed; posh, tweedy and clever, he is a born countryman who improbably combines an East Sussex upbringing with immaculate Gaelic and the sort of finely turned vowels one only boasts if one has gone to a really good prep school.

Under Tearlach's direction, I have planted trees. In fact, between us, by sun and drizzle morning and eventide, the flight of the plow and the descent of voracious mites, we planted almost 300 trees.

The willows were easy - some 200 rods we cut and simply

stuck into the boggiest and most useless part of my croft. The rowan, tall, potgrown and guaranteed to bar the most formidable witch (to say nothing of the Free Church Continuing) stands sentinel by the road.

Half my escalonae - a handsome evergreen that positively thrives in ghastly soil and murderous, salt-laden winds - had no sooner gone in than they started to look seriously unhappy. First the leathery leaves turned grey; then they began to fall off.

Tearlach scurried back yesterday and shifted them to more innocent-seeming ground.

He also had a successful night's fishing. I have already won handfuls of fine brown trout from the river at the croft's foot, just where it joins Loch a Bhaile, with its promise besides of sea trout and salmon.

The first livestock have already been ordered: a dozen hens and their husband are due in October. I'd like to have a couple of Highland bullocks grazing next year - an urgent job before their reinstatement of fences last required in the Aitche administration - and Tearlach's detailed plan has already identified the rigs where I am to grow potatoes, barley and assorted vegetables.

Early days; summer nights; and a thankful sense of coming home.

The sorry Aga saga at my croft original



FIVE months into his reign, Sir Ian Blair's reputation as Metropolitan Police Commissioner is badly damaged by Scotland Yard's shooting of Brazilian electrician Jean Charles de Menezes. His remark about the force's performance being 'close to genius' will haunt him for the remainder of his career. Can anything worse now happen to politically correct Sir Ian? Yes, John Stevens might come to his rescue with a supportive article in the News of the World. Not for nothing was adroit Lord Stevens - Sir Ian's predecessor - known during his reign as Safe Hands.

POOR Jude Law, humiliated by his kiss-and-tell nanny Daisy Wright's unseemly disclosures, now has to endure the scorn of New York media harpies over paparazzi pictures of him changing into a swimsuit outside his mother Maggie's house at Vaudelnay, France. 'He's no Tommy Lee, that's for sure,' one of them crows in the New York Post, referring to the generously-endowed rock star who was filmed canoodling energetically with his then wife Pamela Anderson.

THE retired fashion expert Molly Parkin, 73, (pictured), is enjoying the fuss over Graham Lord's saucy John Mortimer biography which says she spanked the Rumpole creator's 'botchy' on a regular basis. At a book launch this week in the Groucho Club, Miss Parkin confided: 'After two hours or so I used to say to him "I'm bored now, sweetheart, can I stop?"'



FRANCE is suffering a kind of nervous breakdown after losing out to Britain in the 2012 Olympics bid, according to the magazine New Yorker. French novelist Philippe Labro says: 'They [Britain] sent Sebastian Coe, an effective man and a great Olympian, even if he came from the opposition party, and then Blair went in with a list of the undecideds and lobbied them, as a politician should. It was a case of our vanity-losing to their preparation.' The New Yorker goes on: 'France, and Paris in particular, could become another Venice, a perfectly preserved citadel of past glory.'

SCOOPED earlier in the evening by ITV's story about police mistakes leading to the Stockwell Underground shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes, the BBC's 10 o'clock news concentrated churlishly on the fact that documentaries had been leaked about the investigation. As if this was more important than the information the documents contained. BBC news budgets are far greater than ITV's. Is that why their bulletins are so constipated?

REMEMBER Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys, the satirical 1970s rock band? Mr Friedman, now 60, is running for the governorship of the Lone Star State in 2006 and says the locals are taking him seriously. Why not? They once elected George W Bush to the same job. And he never crooned the memorable, anti-women's lib song, Get Your Biscuits in the Oven and Your Buns in the Bed.

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