

# Ardtornish Estate

## ANNUAL REPORT, 2015

### *A word from Dennis Overton, OBE, Chairman of the Ardtornish Estate Company*

Welcome to our annual report for 2015 – a big year for Ardtornish, as you will read below. It was twelve months of ambition, construction, renovation and recruitment. Ardtornish is stronger – as a community, and in the community.

I'm delighted to welcome Chief Executive Tony McInnes, who brings wide-ranging business experience and a practical head for a new era of investment.

There's a lot more happening at Ardtornish than when I joined the board in 2010. With a larger team, and a wider range of skills, we can keep more of it in-house.

After four years of heavy investment, we have more to do on electricity generation, but can also now make progress in other areas. To our new hydroscheme at Uileann we plan to add a further two, one apiece in

2016 and 2017. We're upgrading our visitor accommodation, and planning new additions. We're expanding our commercial buildings at Achranich. Achabeag has seen great progress: phase one now all but complete, the next phase moving fast. It was a tough year on the farm, but we're lucky to have highly experienced farm staff who continue to produce the best of Highland stock.

I take this opportunity to thank the Ardtornish team for an excellent year. We hope you find this a helpful overview of what we do. We welcome feedback – either to the estate office please, in the usual way, or to [annual.report@ardtornish.co.uk](mailto:annual.report@ardtornish.co.uk)

Thank you for taking an interest in the work of Ardtornish.



### *People*

The community of Ardtornish grew again in 2015. We were pleased to be joined by six new members of staff. Michael Faryma, who with his sons produced such expert decorated joinery on the Uileann turbine house, biomass boilerhouse, and gates, doors and other wooden finishes around the estate, is now in charge in the joiners' shop. Ali Nudds did a great job slating the boilerhouse, and agreed to join full time as machinery operator and roofer. Richard van de Peer's green fingers proved themselves in our cottage gardens, so we tempted him into taking on the walled garden – to be back in production, therefore, in summer 2016. Richard Mullen, a familiar face for the last couple of years on the estate construction team, accepted a full-time permanent position, and with his wife Caroline and children lives as part of the Ardtornish community. Janette Mowat joined the visitor team in the spring as seasonal assistant to Kathryn, contributing so much that she's now our permanent assistant tourism manager.

During the summer after a thorough search we welcomed our new Chief Executive Tony McInnes. Formerly head of commercial development at Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Tony's a trained accountant, ran a legal practice for many years, and has a great deal of experience in managing construction projects. He replaced Hugh Raven, who remains – living with Jane at Kinlochaline – on the board and involved especially in estate planning and communication.

There's been much sadness too. Iain Cameron, for almost 25 years our resident machinery specialist and engineer, died in 2014. Isobel Laurie (nee Gillies), youngest of three vivacious sisters who for many decades played a great part in Morvern life, who was married to Bobby Laurie, died in January 2015.

At the end of the year, Ardtornish salaried staff numbered 22, whose families include nine children of school and nursery age. A further eight are on the payroll.



## Around Ardtornish

Much of what kept us busy during the year is outlined below.

We needed a bit of a lift during an exceptionally wet winter, so in January revived a long-dead estate tradition when Ardtornish House hosted 70-odd local friends and neighbours to an evening of speeches and poetry at the Ardtornish Burns Supper.

Springtime saw a weekend gathering of architects, buildings historians, rural development experts and other specialists, devising an inspiring masterplan for extension and restoration of the historic buildings at Achranich.

Following that plan, in the autumn we started preparing a new working estate yard, opposite the Achranich hump-back bridge on the left bank of the Rannoch. This will site our new shed for drying and processing wood, to be followed by other commercial buildings, and – consents permitting – the trades workshops to be relocated from the historic buildings at Achranich. We intend in time to move the estate office too, and put a safe distance between improved facilities for visitors and holidaymakers and the noisy power tools and heavy machinery of a working estate.

We were proud to make good use of our own trades skills, supplemented with expert contracting by MacDonald Joinery, in extending and renovating Claggan Cottage. Amanda Raven's new house – a remarkable single-storey timber building with a metal alloy roof, by Brocklehurst Architects – was also completed in a commanding site at Old Ardtornish.

## Energy

Electricity generation from our hydro schemes at Tearnait and Rannoch has continued to be excellent. The weather has helped. Exceptional hydro output in early months of the year continued good through the summer, until September broke the spell with the first long dry period and just 30% of our average monthly rainfall. Seven dry weeks ended in late October, with the rest of the year again wet to torrential. Cumulatively it was the wettest year we've ever recorded (since 1987, when estate records began). Mid-January saw 3.5 inches of rain in a 24-hour period, and two months vied to be best-ever from a hydro perspective.

But more is not always better. Both winter periods – early in the year, then late – brought serious challenges of other kinds. Lightning strikes took out power supplies (shutting down turbines), gales crashed trees over powerlines (with the same effect), and telephones were out time and again both on mobile and landline networks.

Our new Uileann scheme in the White Glen was completed during the year and is a great success. It wasn't all plain sailing. Pipe-laying was exceptionally tough in the very hard White Glen granite. It was tested in early April on water from just one of three



intakes, and was finally running with all three just as the drought broke in late October. We're very pleased, and it's run well since. Our thanks to the team of D A MacDonald and Hydroplan, with the great home-grown expertise of Angus, Robin, and Ken.



The biomass heating system has worked well, and spurred us to buy an industrial telehandler – perhaps the best kit we've ever had.

Work on the fourth hydro scheme is underway. It's an Archimedes screw, where water at low head and high volume passes in a tube down a corkscrew-like turbine, slowly spinning a generator. Think large electric water pump in reverse, of the type that's allowed the Dutch to live below sea level at least since the Middle Ages. The intake is above the Rannoch humpback bridge. Water will pass in a huge pipe under the road and old sawmill, emerging into a turbine house beside what we call the Bracken Shed. There it will return to the river, gently turning the great screw.

Autumn also saw us achieve our consents, from the environmental protection agency and planning authority, for a fifth and final scheme. It's of a conventional high-head design – pipes and slopes and a turbine like our others – bringing water off Achranich hill through a powerhouse on the banks of the new hydro loch behind the dam. Water from that scheme – which we call Socaich – will then spin our big Rannoch turbine, then the Archimedes screw. It feels good to use each drop three times.

That will probably spell the end of our hydro ambitions. The government has heavily cut the incentives, so many other potential schemes are now uneconomic.

## Achabeag

2015 was a vital year for Achabeag. Phase one is complete but for interiors on the final house and construction of the bin store. That's seven new houses, the six already occupied providing exceptional family homes for new residents or poorly housed locals – the biggest expansion of housing in Morvern for a generation. Phase three, below the public road, is fully serviced, its first house complete and occupied, and we expect to see four house starts there in 2016. Phase two – (slightly confusingly) the last to get going – sits between Achabeag and Achnaha farmhouse, and should be fully serviced with construction underway in 2016.

## Farm

It was a poor year, meteorologically, for livestock. The awful conditions weren't much fun for humans either, and we're obliged to our farm team as ever for turning out in all weathers and putting the animals first.

The very cold and late spring meant hungry stock, in poor condition for lambing, ravenous predators and expensive bought-in feed. We lost hogs to predation at both ends of the year, and

young lambs to foxes particularly at Inninmore. A spell of sheep worrying at Achnaha was more unwelcome trouble. The cows needed hay well into June, and the sheep clip was interrupted and extended by the wet summer.

Inninmore achieved full organic status in June, and we got a good price selling our first organic store bullocks to a Northumberland finisher. The main sheep sales were up for blackface lambs but down for crosses, giving a price per head lower than the year before. A good main calf sale in late September saw us average £3.20 per kilo live weight for 101 calves – 20p/kilo up on the same sale the previous year.

A break in the summer downpour allowed us to treat over 150 acres of bracken, including around Tearnait, above the village, and on the Rahoy Hills reserve. We joined the new sea eagle management scheme.

We retained the Shorthorn cup at the Strontian Show. Congratulations to shepherd John Nudds for his Champion of Champions award for an excellent shearing tup, which then also got Best in Class at the Isle of Mull's Salen show. James and Annemie Shanks lifted silver too with a wee black West Highland terrier.

We ended the year with two separate farming units totalling some 1,950 ewes and 180 breeding cows.



## Woodlands

We met Morvern Community Council, Community Trust, and Community Development Company in the spring and outlined proposed increases in native woodland cover at Ardtornish. The plans are for some 300 hectares (750 acres) of new planting at various densities. Our woodland consultants RTS Forestry studied the ground and surveyed soils to advise on areas suitable for new planting, others that would regenerate naturally when protected from grazing, and places we must not plant to protect the precious carbon-rich peat. The main areas are in the Tearnait basin, the western edge of the sanctuary, and eastern reaches of the White Glen. We're also supporting a Woodland Trust-inspired project to extend the Sunart Oakwoods project and reconnect the woodland corridor around the coast of Morvern.

The list of rare species at Ardtornish grew in June when a male Golden Oriole was spotted and heard singing in Arienas wood – which also recorded a second confirmed sighting of the chequered skipper butterfly. The Rahoy Hills reserve was described by Scotland's official nature watchdog, SNH, as a 'hidden gem', and declared by the Scottish Wildlife Trust as 'the most biodiverse of its 130 wildlife properties' – quite an accolade.

'The contrasts in this small reserve are remarkable', said Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) in its official magazine: 'the special

nature of Rahoy is recognised by two international nature conservation designations – both the montane habitat and the oak woodland are Special Areas of Conservation and form part of the European network of protected sites. The importance of the montane habitats with their rare arctic-alpine plants was first recognised by the botanist John Raven more than 50 years ago'.



## Visitors

Few will have noticed more change at Ardtornish than our regular holidaymakers. Kathryn McLaughlin's housekeeping team have been busy like we've not seen since the Edwardian heyday of Ardtornish House. From the floor of the great hall – hundreds of hours of work, now gleamingly waxed – to every ounce of brass, it's a polisher's paradise. It's also Wedding Venue of the Year 2015 for N W Scotland. Congratulations to the team for that welcome recognition of their exceptionally hard work.



New bathrooms in Achranich and Castle Cottage, hard-wired wifi to all our holiday let property, and a newly-tarred drive to the House were the other main improvements. We put up interpretive information boards in the estate square, explaining more about the farm, gardens, and the country sports we offer. We agreed a partnership with Crombie Clay Shooting covering a range of target sports on the estate, from archery to clay pigeon shooting to axe throwing to slingshot.

We update our visitors from time to time on what's happening at Ardtornish, circulating during the year three e-mail newsletters as usual – available still on our website.

## Stalking and fishing

The decline of the river Aline remains a worry: like all west coast rivers it fishes less well than it did. We've restarted our own wild fish hatchery, stocked with smolts (three year-old salmon migrating to sea) caught in the river by Simon and Robin in a special interceptory net. These will grow to maturity, and their offspring,

raised from eggs in the hatchery, will be released in the river to boost the wild-born population of genetically similar juvenile fish.

Fishing on river and lochs started strongly, but the twenty salmon to rod and line by late August scarcely increased, as the long early autumn drought broke just as the season ended.

Assisted by our customarily Danish ghillie, Simon and guests got 45 sporting stags. A new arrangement with the slaughterhouse on Mull now means that our carcasses mainly go there, and we can say for the first time that all meat we sell (venison, beef, lamb, hogget, mutton and pork) is now locally produced. A new five-year Morvern deer management plan was adopted by Morvern Deer Management Group and approved by SNH.

### *In the community....*

Through the hard work of Morvern Community Development Company (MCDC) the peninsula now has road fuel on tap round the clock at community-owned and operated fuel pumps in Lochaline. We support MCDC particularly with Angus Robertson's time, and the Morvern Community Trust with £12,000 per year in hydro community benefit payments.

MCDC achieved much during the year, including improvements to the safety of the Lochaline Quartz Sand mine with construction of the new road by-passing the mine workings and allowing safe lochside access between the village and Cala Loch Alainn's office and pontoons.

Scottish Sea Farms operates the Arienas smolt unit as before, but unfortunately 2015 saw closure after 25 years of the net station on the east shore of Loch Aline, with the loss of five jobs plus two more redeployed. SSF's local squad, assisted by Ardtornish staff, did a good job tidying the site. The shed and slip remain – shore base for the company's Sound of Mull operations.

The Scottish Government conducted several consultations locally on improved management of the waters round Morvern, ultimately designating a Marine Protected Area covering Loch Sunart, and a much larger one from Sunart to the Sound of Jura. Ardtornish's consultation responses supported the proposals, and we're actively promoting a new voice in marine management for local people –

the Community Association of Lochs and Sounds (CAOLAS).

Ardtornish House for the second time hosted the gathering of Moidart Trust grantees. Selected companies across the region (including Lochaline's Whitehouse Restaurant) have received financial support from this entrepreneurs' fund, founded by Angus MacDonald OBE, and gather annually to hear from inspiring business leaders – in pursuit of Angus's vision that the West Highlands be a top place to do business.

In September Ardtornish House was the theatre for a show that transferred from the Edinburgh festival fringe. The Rhum Plants dramatised John Raven's post-war trip to that Small Isle, and his correction of many discredited records of rare species alleged to have been found there. This episode, and the scientific fraud behind it, was subject of a 1990s book – which as a result of Phil Baarda's play will in 2016 be revised and reissued.

Less happily, with the squeeze on council funding from governments in both Edinburgh and London, Morvern as elsewhere has seen a decline in council services. It's noticeable here particularly in road maintenance and much-reduced winter gritting.

### *In the press....*

Morvern's wildcats attracted a great deal of attention in 2015 – including from two wildcat conservation initiatives of which Ardtornish works closely with the 'official' one including SNH, Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, Scottish Wildlife Trust, National Trust for Scotland and many others. Numerous newspaper and magazine articles were topped off by a TV piece featuring Ardtornish's Hugh Raven on the main BBC news.

We were delighted to learn that Ardtornish is a favourite destination of the keen angler and celebrated novelist Justin Cartwright. His piece for Conde Nast Traveller – best-seller in the crowded market for travel dreams – celebrates Loch Teanait, the river Aline, Whitehouse Restaurant, Rose Cottage, and 'the wonderful light and the endlessly unrolling landscapes... in this shimmering twilight of the gods'. Oli Pilcher's photos capture the 'peace, the infinite space, and numinous quality' of this place – to which, like many others, Cartwright has 'an urge to come back.'

