

Raasay House history



A clan house, home to the Macleods of Raasay, has stood on or near the present site, overlooking the sound of Raasay and the mountains of Skye, since the early 1500s. In 1596 a Crown Charter states 'that the MacLeods of Raasay had held these lands since time immemorial'. However, ownership of the land could not stop the destruction of the house. In 1745 the original clan house was burnt to the ground, torched by government troops in the 'recreminations' that followed the battle of Culloden, in revenge for a supposed clandestine visit to the island by Bonnie Prince Charlie. The 8th Chief, who with his clansmen had fought alongside Charles Edward Stuart, was imprisoned and the land made over to his son. Building commenced on the present Raasay House in 1746.

There is archaeological evidence of settlements on the shore in front of Raasay House from the Mesolithic period (8000-3000 BC). A beautiful 13th century chapel dedicated to St Moluag still stands behind the house and marks the appearance of early Christianity on the island.

In 1773 Dr Samuel Johnson and James Boswell made their historic journey to the Western Isles. The journals of their trip have vivid descriptions of their time spent with the Clan Chief in Raasay House and, in Boswell's case, walks around the island ('A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland' by Dr Johnson and 'The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides' by Boswell).

In 1843 the last Laird, John MacLeod, left the house and emigrated with his family to Australia, leaving the island and his estate to trustees and creditors. The house was sold in 1846 to a George Rainy from London, and changed hands again in 1872 and 1874. In 1876 it was sold to Henry Wood, a young man whose family had accumulated vast wealth in the potteries of Staffordshire. He ran the island as a sporting estate and added the ornate Georgian-style wings and frontage to the house.

In 1911 Bairds Ironmasters bought the house and island and operated an iron ore mine until selling out to the Board of Agriculture in 1923. Between 1937 and 1960 Raasay House was run as a sporting hotel, very successfully at first, with many wealthy guests returning each year. However, as the popularity of other holiday destinations grew, guest numbers declined and the hotel closed in 1960.

In 1961 the house was purchased for £6,000 by Dr Green from Sussex. By 1967 Dr Green had spent £85,000 on repairs to the exterior of Raasay House and improvements to the farm. He planned to turn the house into a hotel with shops and a service station and the two other big houses that he owned on the island into guesthouses. In 1967 he approached the newly formed Highlands and Islands Development Board for grants to finish the internal work on the house. The HIDB was a government body set up with a specific remit for rural development in the Highlands and Islands. It appears that there was interest at board level in acquiring and developing the Raasay estate and in order to further this interest Dr Green states that board members asked him to 'mark time' with his development whilst they sought permission from the Secretary of State to initiate the purchase.

Whilst time is traditionally 'marked' slowly on the West coast of Scotland, the time taken over negotiations between the Board and Dr Green was remarkable. Nobody could have foreseen that it would take another 12 years for the final offer to be made and accepted by Dr Green. In this time Dr Green gained what may have been an undeserved reputation in the Scottish press as the worst type of absentee landlord. He and his wife lost heart in their Raasay project and withdrew their interest from the island, leaving their affairs and their estate in the hands of a local factor.

Elsewhere in the UK, the 1960s were exciting times. For Raasay House they heralded a decade of dereliction and despair. Bad weather and trespassers took their toll on the building and its interior. The beautiful antique furniture and fittings, paintings, books and silverware were ransacked. Ceilings fell in and floorboards rotted. By the time that the Board purchased the building in 1979 little was left of the former grandeur of the old house.

In the early 1980s, in a final attempt to bring some development to the island, the Board spent



three quarters of a million pounds on the renovation of Borrodale House, and a 15-bedroom hotel was opened in 1981. Raasay House was boarded up and left to rot. Further decay and eventual demolition would have been its fate had not a former army major Rod Stewart Liddon set up the Scottish Adventure School Trust, a training centre for unemployed young people, in the derelict house.

Four years later, in 1984, when enthusiasm and funding for the training project started to run out, three people - all former staff members of the Trust - became the founding directors of Raasay Outdoor Centre. Roddy MacDonald, Tekela Koek and Lyn Rowe came from entirely different backgrounds but all shared a passion for future development in the Highlands. They had the vision and determination to attempt to turn the fortunes of Raasay House around yet again. They, and the staff who joined them over the years succeeded in saving the building, developing a business and making the house once again a focal point and social hub of the island.

In the late 1980s Roddy and Tekela left to pursue other ventures. David Croy and Freya Rowe bought into the business, became directors and, with Lyn, drove the business forward, developing new areas of work and increasing sales. Throughout this time both directors and landlords were formulating plans for the renovation and repair of the old building.

In 2008 Raasay House was purchased by the Raasay House Community Council with the intention of spearheading its refurbishment and safeguarding the future of the building and the business within it. With completion of work in February 2009, a new chapter in the life of Raasay House begins and a new generation of visitors can experience for themselves the beauty and magic it offers. We know that Dr Johnson would approve and can imagine Boswell's dance of delight on the top of Dun Caan.

