

## Rossend Castle – Part Two

*The following is extracted from a small booklet published by the architects in November 1977, during the reconstruction period. It is reprinted here with their kind permission.*

### A Recent story of Reconstruction after 25 years of struggle – Saint Andrew's Day, 1977

*Qwhen Alexander our kynge was dede,  
That Scotland lede in lauch and le,  
Away was sons of alle and brede,  
Of wyne and wax, of gamyn and gle.  
Our golde was changit into lede.  
Crist, born into virgynyte,  
Succoure Scotlande and ramede,  
That is stade in perplexite.*

This poem, believed to be the earliest extant piece of poetry in Scots, has perhaps tenuous links with Rossend. It is however interesting to think that when Alexander III, referred to in the poem, died in 1286 a mile or so away on the road to Kinghorn, about nine feet of the present walls of Rossend Castle were standing along the seaward and west sides. This section of the Castle, showing parts of three lancet windows and broad talus base is certainly of a much earlier date than mid-sixteenth century generally given by architectural historians as the date of Rossend as we know it. This earlier history, suggesting an ecclesiastical building, was produced only seven years ago by the National Monuments Record of Scotland.

Another feature should be commented on because the present facts as we now see them do not generally accord with those given in the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments volume on Fife. Evidence produced by the National Monuments Record is that identical mason's marks occur in each wing and that extraordinarily similar fireplace mouldings occur in both. So, instead of being given sixteenth and seventeenth century dates for the parts, we now learn that part of the west wing is thirteenth century, but that apart from this, the two wings are generally of the same period, i.e. mid-sixteenth century.

During the past twenty-five years, as deterioration of the fabric was accelerated by boys and girls playing in the building, a marvellous and virtually intact painted ceiling of c. 1616 came to light. This discovery was made in September 1957 when the burgh Clerk of Works, William Campbell, made a routine visit to the castle. In July 1962 the Town Council finally decided to gift the ceiling to the National Museum of Antiquities, the Provost regretting that there was no place capable of housing it in Burntisland. It is at present in the National Portrait Gallery in Queen Street, Edinburgh, but it is believed to be earmarked for a permanent museum setting in Chambers Street. It is at least interesting to consider that its original home is once again in a reasonably fit state to rehouse it, should it fail to find a better. When that ceiling was discovered several pieces of painted board, split up and reused as lathing to support a later plaster ceiling were also found. They were from another, and possibly earlier, painted ceiling. The pattern on the front cover represents the thistles and dolphins which were a recurring feature in the geometric background to shields bearing arms. The Proceedings of the Society of Antiquarians of Scotland vol. 104, pp 222-235 give a detailed account by M.R. Apted and W.R. Robertson of these finds and of the two armorial panels on the exterior walls of the castle.

An interesting story surrounds the saving of much of the fine late seventeenth century panelling which was an outstanding feature of the interior. It was probably introduced by Sir James Wemyss, later Lord Burntisland, who modernised the Castle; it may even have been shipped partially made up from Holland, but whether this is the case or not, it is typical of the period in Scotland. Much of it was taken at £6.00 a load and is refitted in Easterheughs Castle.

By November 1962 the struggle to save Rossend was on. A petition was launched following permission to demolish. The Territorial Army had been asked to get rid of the castle but that fell through. Douglas Kerr of Burntisland said then, "Why spend money demolishing a castle when it could be spent preserving it. We want it retained as a link with the past." or so he was quoted in the Fifeshire Advertiser. A government source had recommended that the upper floors be converted to flats and the lower to a community centre but that idea was not popular with the Town Council. The successful preservation of Menstrie Castle was also drawn to the attention of the Town Council by means of a report originally presented to the County. Bailie Livingstone was obviously worried about the cost, and said that if the Development Department did not make a concrete suggestion for use, with an offer of grant to pay for it, the Council would demolish it. "This

will shilly-shally back and forwards for years if we don't watch" he warned; and how right! Dean of Guild Bolam amazed to read of the historical interest said "I would like to know what comprises historical. I understand that Mary Queen of Scots stayed there one night – that's nothing to get hysterical about, never mind historical."

By December 1963, the Royal Engineers and Royal Navy had turned down the job of demolition and the Council hoped to get a Glencraig contractor to do the job. Efforts by the Scottish Development Department to press for conversion to housing were unsuccessful. No money of any substance was offered and earlier attempts to raise money from the Historic Buildings Council had failed. It is interesting to note that Bailie Livingstone continued to state that if a conversion could be made it would be an added attraction but he was worried about it being "a terrific burden". Application to demolish had been made but not given until September and the decision to demolish was reaffirmed by the Council. Through the summer of 1970 public interest widened and the battle rolled on with press headlines "Is this the Final Chapter?" "Will Rossend Come Down?" "The Siege Ends, Famous Castle Falls after 650 years". "Farewell, Rossend" said the Edinburgh Evening News on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, but they also reported the extremely important discovery by an architect of the Ancient Monuments Commission of the early wall and lancet windows referred to at the beginning of this story. The short piece ended with the sentence "Demolition will begin in the next two weeks". It had been a straight political decision. Provost Duncanson and all the progressives present, voted to delay demolition and the five Labour members voted against rescinding standing orders. The National Trust for Scotland was now well involved in the fight and Nigel Tranter, in a letter to the Scotsman, also on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1970 drew attention to a new government circular. It was an important issue for Listed Building Procedure – the New Regulations under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1969 – requiring notification of any application to demolish listed buildings to be made to national and local amenity bodies and for the Secretary of State to be informed. That day, 3<sup>rd</sup> August, the New Regulations came into force. Unfortunately Nigel Tranter also wrote about "shameful consent to licensed vandalism" and, "is Fife County Council going to let this maverick majority on one of its small burgh's council fly in the face of public policy?" and he referred to the "whim of any philistine, prejudiced or ignorant group in temporary power in a local authority". Taking the opposite side, he must fairly have angered many a democratically elected member of council!

On 14<sup>th</sup> August, the demolition contractors Thomas Nicol and Partners moved a loader and new crane onto the site to start their £4,000 contract. That same evening, Tony Wheeler, of Wheeler and Sprossan, who had worked very hard to draw up preliminary plans to present to the Council, was heard in a private meeting and given two months to prepare a feasibility study. The struggle was certainly engaged at close quarters and the difference between success and failure a very near thing. It would be correct to say that on the 14<sup>th</sup> August 1970 disaster was averted and Tony Wheeler deserves very great credit for that. Immediately the Historic Buildings Council for Scotland stepped forward offering help. A spokesman said "You will recall that at a much earlier stage we indicated that we would be prepared to consider recommending a grant towards the cost of structural repairs! Having followed recent press reports with interest," he went on "I would like to reassure you of our continuing interest. I am sure that we would view with sympathy and favour any viable scheme which could be recommended for financial assistance." In October, Mr Wheeler's plan for conversion of the Castle to provide fifteen houses was presented to the Housing Committee and on 2<sup>nd</sup> November it came before the Town Council. The estimated cost was £85,300 and it was calculated that Burntisland would qualify for grants of approximately £53,000. It was shown that after all the sums were done, the difference in cost between converting the Castle to fifteen houses, and demolishing and building new houses, was trivial. The matter was referred again to the Housing Committee. A week later they decided not to proceed with the study and to proceed with the demolition. The amendment to consider the scheme further was defeated by seven votes to four. Provost Duncanson felt that "his idea" was turned down because of party politics – how sad to be forced into such entrenched positions. However, the real winning stroke was delay in demolition, allowing the defenders of the Castle time to gain strength and numbers.

That same week and effective from 9<sup>th</sup> December the Castle was given Statutory B Listing and a Preservation Order placed on the building by the Scottish Development Department. Now the Secretary of State most definitely had to be consulted afresh. The Provost was delighted – "delighted not only for the townspeople of Burntisland as part of their heritage, but also as part of the national heritage. In my opinion the tremendous interest concerning the fate of Rossend Castle in many newspapers and the large number of letters, have all assisted greatly in prompting the Secretary of State to use his powers. Very many men and women of eminence, architects, scholars and historians have petitioned the Scottish Secretary to intervene and I am most indebted to all of them for their valuable contribution." The date is still 1970, but he'd left his sillar in his iither breeks, as the saying goes. There was no viable project to save Rossend. A week later the Council decided to write to Fife County Planning Authority requesting permission to demolish, on the

margin of a single vote. Dean of Guild Livingstone, as he had foreseen eight years before, now suggested that many people were coming in at the last minute on something that should have been settled years ago. A letter from Link and Associated Housing Societies of Edinburgh enquiring about possible purchase of the Castle site was remitted to the Housing Committee. A petition in the name of the Saltire Society signed by seven hundred people had been handed in. It was stated that among the seven hundred, there were ninety eminent architects. The late Sir Robert Matthew, special advisor to the Secretary of State on Buildings of Architectural or Historic Interest was said to be one. Unimpressed, the Dean of Guild asked "Will there be any architect signing it who is financially interested in the restoration of the Castle?" "Yes," said the Provost, "If the opportunity presented itself, yes." Mr Stuart Matthew, architect, suggested setting up a Committee aimed at raising money to save the Castle and encouraged the Council to negotiate with Link Housing. They might be able to bear all the costs and avoid the cost of demolition. The voice of Mr Harry Gourlay, MP for Kirkcaldy Burghs was strong at this stage. He attacked the Secretary of State and said he would raise the matter in the Commons. He said "as far as I can see there is absolutely no argument for preserving this building. It does not even look like a Castle and has no beauty at all in my eyes". This is one of the saddest statements ever made against Rossend and illustrates a common trait in the Scots character. We should all take heed!

At last matters were brought to a head when a Public Inquiry was ordered. This at least would allow the opinion of persons of each side to be stated and questioned openly in the presence of a reporter to the Secretary of State. It was held in the old Town House in Burntisland on 21<sup>st</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> September 1971. Ian MacDonald, Esq.;M.C., Q.C., was the reporter.

At this point we should mention the sad state of deterioration to which the Castle had sunk while people talked and wrote. Throughout the first half of this century, the Castle was owned by the Town Council but rented to two ladies who ran it as a boarding house in the manner and style of the last owner James Shepherd, for whom they had worked as maids. Weddings, functions and afternoon teas were a feature of the services and many people coming to Burntisland in connection with shipyard or aluminium works took lodgings there. Naturally money was not plentiful and the rent had probably been fixed in 1914-1918 legislation, so that even the simplest repairs necessary could not be afforded. Even electricity was not installed, nor was it in the new housing development on the adjoining castle estate because Burntisland town Council also owned the Gas Works! The result of almost fifty years of hard wear on the Castle without any sort of renovation was the rapid deterioration of the structure when it became unoccupied in 1952. It may be difficult for some who knew Rossend in the 1930's to appreciate that by 1970 it was a roofless, gutted shell with debris piled many feet thick on top of the vault-supported main floor. Even the masonry wall structure was beginning to collapse. Timber lintels had rotted away and stones overhead loosened. The south window of Queen Mary's Room had disappeared and a large and dangerous looking hole opened the room dramatically to all the wind and rain. There was much speculation as to whether someone was actively hastening the destruction of the Castle, but it is more likely that the dressed stones that formed the window opening were needed elsewhere and now grace some other building.

But to return to the Public Inquiry. The sides ranged against one another were Burntisland Town Council represented by Mr R. King Murray, Q.C., and on the other the National Trust for Scotland, the Saltire Society, the Scottish Civic Trust and the Burntisland Society represented by Mr W.D. Prosser, Advocate; the St. Andrews Preservation Trust and the Central and North Fife Preservation Society, the East Neuk of Fife Preservation Society, represented by Mr. Hew Lorimer; and the Scottish Georgian Society, represented by Ian Begg. This Inquiry is well written up in the official records so there is perhaps little need to go into detail. Three persons represented the Town. Ex Provost Livingstone's evidence is summed up in the sentence: "The witness stated that to date there had been no suggestion made which offered a reasonable alternative to demolition". Treasurer Mrs. Charlotte Haddow simply opposed the housing proposals, thought that demolition was cheaper than maintenance even as a safe ruin, and expressed fear for children's' safety. She also felt that the Council should keep control of the site. Adam Watson, Burgh Surveyor and Sanitary Inspector, gave evidence pointing out that even in 1956 considerable repair was required. He also said that attempts to interest others, including the Ministry of Works, had failed. For the opposition, Ivison Wheatley spoke for the National Trust for Scotland and Link Housing. He strongly supported the housing proposal by Mr. Wheeler who followed him, representing the Saltire Society in giving evidence. The idea of a safe ruin did not appeal because the Castle, an important element in the burgh, required a purpose. Andrew Weir for the local society, Ex Provost Duncanson and Dr. Peter Davidson defended the housing idea. Mr. Duncanson pointed out that only recently had he become more aware of the need to preserve old buildings. Mr. Maurice Lindsay, Director of the Scottish Civic Trust urged the importance of Rossend not only in its locality but as part of the national heritage. He felt it should be an economic asset to the tourist trade. Hew Lorimer and Ian Begg in written statements read at the Inquiry, made particular reference to the historical evidence

recently uncovered. A brief mention should be made of the housing proposal. Although this would have required some alteration to the appearance of the building by adding new windows, the removal of vaults and fairly drastic alteration to the thirteenth century part of the structure, - perhaps requiring modification later - this does not detract from the importance at the Inquiry of having an alternative to demolition. Anyway, the Secretary of State refused permission to demolish in March 1972 and the heat was taken out of the case. Mr Harry Gourlay's advice was to "erect a palisade around the Castle high enough and strong enough to keep children out and also to prevent people from seeing the monster, remove all mechanical implements which are sustaining the building at the moment and allow it to fall into a state of utter decay".

In June 1973, the building was offered to Link Housing Association for £350. Continuing the old warning Mr. Livingstone said that the rentals suggested by Link in their proposals submitted to the Council were fantastic but "I have no objection to us selling the Castle for £350 - but they can get their money from somewhere else - not from the people of Burntisland". Link withdrew from the bargain. A Mr. Broach made an offer through Fife County Council, but his intentions do not appear to have been made clear. A Rescue Rossend Committee was formed in 1974 led by Dr. Davidson. This committee, though active, was tied by the need to find a user for the building. The Press statements made maintained interest, and encouraged the Secretary of State to act. The making of a temporary safe ruin was the only immediate action that the committee could propose.

The Secretary of State was now in a most difficult position. As he had refused demolition two years before, this further application to demolish, if conceded, would have created a very dangerous precedent. In August 1974 he could delay no longer and called a large meeting of interested parties. The Chairman was Ronald Cramond of the Scottish Development Department and it was most interesting. Much homework had been done before the meeting, and many people spoke. The Scottish Georgian Society asked questions about the possibility of grants being made to develop the Castle as a prestige office, perhaps for a firm operating on an international scale. In view of its location it would be ideal if it were connected in some way with the sea. Perhaps the Ports Authority could be interested, or a firm involved with the North Sea Oil developments, it was suggested. Other proposals made at the meeting included a sports hall, museum or library, but again housing was given as the most valuable use. The alternatives seemed to lie between housing and office use and the Scottish Georgian Society was asked to assess the cost of minimal work to create basic office accommodation. The figure was estimated at £54,500, excluding fees and any type of finishing that could be expected to be added by someone taking the building over. Ian Begg represented the Scottish Georgian Society again. Of course, Robert Hurd & Partners, and L.A. Rolland & Partners had considered the whole idea with some thought of its feasibility from their own point of view. Even the cost seemed acceptable. As Burntisland is midway between their offices in Edinburgh and Leven, it offered positive advantages if extra accommodation were required. Sadly, right in front of the Castle, the harbour basin had been substantially filled in, and a massive shed built. Even Cromwell's Dyke had been covered. When one considers the life of a castle, and despite some loss of outlook, Rossend still seemed an attractive and valuable structure. So as accommodation was needed, the matter was discussed with the Scottish Development Department and the Historic Buildings Council for Scotland, and an approach was made to Burntisland Town Council, suggesting that the firm purchase the Castle, with a view to converting it to office use.

In March 1975 the Development Department wrote to the Town Council pointing out that they had again considered the Link plan for housing, but that Link had been informed that this scheme was not thought viable. They added that other proposals had been under consideration and that the Council would be approached shortly by this firm of architects. An understandable outburst followed this. "Just another delaying action" said Bailie Livingstone. In April, Ian Begg and Larry Rolland were invited to meet a sub-committee to discuss proposals. Mrs. Haddow in the chair firmly but politely opened the proceedings by asking why the architects had discussed the matter first with the government and not with the owners of the Castle, the Town Council, and what were the intentions. Explaining that the financial considerations forced an approach to the government if financial complications with the Council were to be avoided, the proposals were presented. A remarkable and warm spirit of co-operation developed during the meeting. Even Bailie Livingstone, who to some seemed such an ogre at the Public Inquiry, in Press comments, and quotes from Council meetings, was on the side of saving the building. He had always maintained that no expense in connection with Rossend Castle would fall on the people of Burntisland. The fact that the burden of Rossend was being lifted from Burntisland must have been the key. At the last full meeting of the Council before it disappeared in local government reorganisation, the decision to save Rossend was taken. The District Valuer confirmed the price of £350 previously quoted to Link Housing, and entry to the Castle was given on the last day of European Architectural Heritage Year.

Rossend, through its long contact with life in Scotland, is important. We are all products of our past. Geography and all our background of social history are without doubt more important to each one of us than an isolated building, but by maintaining buildings such as this Castle, we hold on to our roots and perhaps avoid a trap, imagining that we are more important than we are, of even thinking that the world started with our birthday.

Finally, before we pass on to the reconstruction, a very brief story illustrates the cruel stroke that the Scot is capable of giving. Many felt it during the struggle for Rossend. Norman MacCaig, talking quietly one evening long ago, told this story:

A young man who had just had his first slim volume of poems published, showed it to an older man he respected. He read through the book with no expression on his face. Reaching the end, he turned back over the pages until he settled on one poem. Then, pointing a heavy finger said, "That's the worst!"

***I take up the story at the beginning of January 1976.***

A Historic Building Council for Scotland grant was obtained, allowing us to proceed with a broad plan, showing three levels above the ground floor vaulted chambers. Our use of the building as an architect's office was ideally suited to the existing structure. No significant change in fenestration and no demolition of inner walls was needed. When the time comes to occupy the upper floors, a further stair will be required, but for the time being it was sufficient to see that we could provide two floors for architects, with surveyors sandwiched between – with staff rooms, exhibition room, machine rooms, lavatories and storage space in the vaulted ground floor.

We started without much detail. This was going to be an inch by inch job, basically divided into two phases. The first task was to secure the building from further deterioration by stabilising the walls and making it wind and water tight. It was in a sorry state – open to the sky, the roof virtually gone and gaping holes where windows used to be. Intermediate floors had collapsed and serious demolition efforts by children were "in progress". Stone fireplaces were vandalised and stones removed from the building. Most serious of all, the wallheads were now exposed to the weather and were beginning to decay. The structure was under grave threat.

The method for getting the work done was easily agreed. We had to control the expenditure month by month, and so we decided to employ our own men. In the office we all wanted to retain an interest in the work. After all, some of us might eventually work there, and we were the clients, architects and contractors. Ian Begg took on the role of client and consultant. I became partner in charge, Jimmy Shepherd, an associate, the job architect, with Bryan Hickman a student architect to assist him. One of our clerks of works, John Lewis, became organiser – general foreman and magician, conjuring up materials and plant at the drop of a hat! Our beginnings were small. Two labourers, one William Bell from the Castle area, started the task of clearing out the shell, which had become a home fit only for pigeons. Within the Castle the general mess was five feet deep at first floor level. This was rewarding work – stones were found and carefully laid aside. Quickly we were able to see the top of the vaults and lay a new concrete floor. After that, we erected a scaffold and some steel beams at intermediate levels so that they in turn became our own built-in scaffold, taking us up to the wallhead level and so to our first target, that of putting on a new timber roof before winter. By this time we had taken on two joiners and a mason, but we needed a plumber, and for this we let a contract to provide lead flashings, valleys, cast iron rhones and conductors. At this stage we demolished the nineteenth century north extension, restoring the Castle to its sixteenth century T-shape. After much thought, and with advice from an experienced tradesman, we decided to tackle the roof work ourselves. Pantiles, rather than slates, were perhaps surprisingly selected for the major covering but the Castle is on the coast where pantiles are prevalent. It seemed that they were an appropriate roofing material and their use perhaps also provided a little side step from the conventional approach. Tom McLellan, our roofer and plasterer, deserves special mention for his work.

All this time we had been struggling with the problem of how to finish off the south-east square tower. There was evidence of roofs at different levels, but not enough information to show precisely how we could restore to the original. The decision was made to retain the nineteenth century castellated style, and cap the tower with the gable-ended slated roof, containing a new modern room, thus making our contribution to the history of Rossend. The mystery of this corner of the Castle is as fascinating as the Castle's origin. Was it built in one, or in two or three different stages? Mason's marks indicate one hand on the stone mouldings, but the west block containing the Hall has what appears to be an external gable running in line with the west wall of the north-south block. It has even been suggested that the south-east corner tower was built first! There is ample evidence here of an elaborate top with projecting corner corbel turrets and it is interesting to

see how these have been crudely cloured off to comply with the fashion of the time. We have left this detail as we found it.

New windows were required throughout, and this was our next outside contract. Following this, the building was to be re-harled. Thus we completed Phase I, but by this time our ideas and planning within the office were developing. While we never intended moving out of Edinburgh or Leven, and Rossend was to be a central building for our use at some future date, we now urgently wanted to provide space for our own use, and in particular for our quantity surveyors. This accelerated the exciting decision to embark on part of Phase II. We wanted a floor of accommodation! Now our joiners, John Stevenson and William Nicholson, needed help – and the salary bill increased. Careful thought had to be given to the interior restoration and finishings. We decided to use the second floor and take more time over the details of the more important first floor with the Hall, the room that had previously contained the painted ceiling, and Queen Mary's Room.

We were very luck to obtain some panelling from Polton House south of Edinburgh. It is of similar date to the original panelling and will be used in the Castle. We have also obtained some suitable doors. Walls were plastered, skirtings and architraves run and fireplaces restored; lavatories had to be installed and drainage connected; electricity and gas were required and externally the entrance area had to be prepared.

And so we come up to date and on 30<sup>th</sup> November we have part of the building ready for occupation. Phase I will have been completed at an estimated cost of £35,000 and Phase II is well and truly under way. It is hoped that a further H.B.C. grant will be made to help with this part of the work. An application is being considered.

This is merely the end of a paragraph in the latest chapter – I hope there will be much more to write.

L.A.L. Rolland