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PROPERTY OF THE WEEK



Romancing the stones

A humble boathouse with a charming history is now a five-star bolthole, writes **Lesley Riddoch**

TEN years ago Carol Boyd's decision to renovate a roofless and crumbling boathouse on the northern shores of Skye began as a fairly shrewd investment in the Highland five-star self-catering cottage market and ended as an exercise in sheer, bloody-minded determination.

A fitting tribute to the equally resolute Flora MacDonald who deposited Bonnie Prince Charlie here after rowing the fugitive Prince over the sea to Skye 255 years ago.

Now the boathouse is commanding attention again – as a five-star renovation job by Skye craftsmen using largely local materials.

In 2005, Carol thought the Kingsburgh Boathouse project might take six months – in the event it took five years. The result is a spectacular, comfortable, romantic retreat for two people within a sturdy stone cottage, built to withstand the rigours of its location on the fringe of the Atlantic.

Kingsburgh is a small township on the Trotternish peninsula of Skye, eight miles north of Portree. The boathouse sits just a few steps from the rocky shoreline with views of the Cuillin ridge to the south, and the hills of South Harris to the north.

It's an ideal spot for yacht-lovers, surfers, canoeists, anglers or wildlife watchers.

Ayr-born Carol Boyd is none of these things – but she is the unlikely saviour of the Kingsburgh Boathouse.

"I'm in my late 50s, have no dependents, and aim to leave no savings worth a damn. After years working for oil companies in London, I decided to put my 'oil dollars' to good use restoring



Kingsburgh Boathouse has a spectacular location on Skye, main; Lesley Riddoch outside the building which took five years to renovate, left

Scottish heritage. I didn't plan to build a house or rescue a ruin, but the location at Kingsburgh was outstanding. So I got drawn in."

So did a small team of contractors. The renovation began in late 2005, when the Skye stonemason Hector Nicolson and his son David started to stabilise the building, clearing out decades of debris, removing loose stone, closing up some original openings and re-pointing the masonry. A fierce winter stopped activity for weeks as wind, rain and severe cold picked away at the newly rescued stonework. According to Nicolson, the building might have been beyond rescue if it had endured last winter (or this one) without repair.

Architect William Paterson and Skye builder Angus Nicolson began work in 2006. The duo gave Skye its first five-star accommodation 11 years ago when they refurbished the award winning Three Chimney's restaurant and built The House Over By.

According to Angus Nicolson: "Some old ruins are not worth saving – but this one was different. The location was fabulous but so was the stonework. The building – even without a roof – had clearly been professionally built. The walls were square – unlike many old houses built by crofters from whatever came to hand."

One of the biggest and riskiest jobs was the removal and replacement of the old decayed wooden lintel on the north side of the building. Hector Nicolson sourced several replacement stone lintels from across Skye and the North West Highlands.

Over the next 18 months, plans and costs for the interior were worked and re-worked until a building warrant was granted in 2008.

But by then, Hector Nicolson was rebuilding bridges on the newly widened road to Armadale, the credit crunch blocked Carol's bid for an extra loan and the truck delivering large joists and

heavy flooring slid off the track and into the verge.

It could have been the end of the project, but according to Carol Boyd, the unlikely hero was the often vilified RBS.

"The local manager, Norman Mackay, understood the potential for quality holiday rental and agreed new financing – subject to tight controls. That was a huge relief."

Most of the contractors were themselves juggling several jobs in traditional crofting style. One contractor laid cement between running marathons and driving the local ambulance. Another delayed the final glazing until swallows nesting in the rafters had left for the winter.

The biggest problem for Carol Boyd, however, was Scottish Water. Even though an over-sized pipe had been laid when her own neighbouring house was built, a new policy meant each individual property was supposed to have its own independent line to the main meaning digging through half a kilometre of rock and a vegetable garden.

"I had to deal with umpteen tiers of contacts within Scottish Water – made doubly difficult by the privatisation of business water supply that spring. Eventually, a senior manager agreed to accept a previously-approved water connection scheme – but the correspondence took over a year."

Dampness in the main gable wall took almost as long to fix. The team tried more re-pointing, more heat and a humidifier. The dampness would disappear but then, after another storm, the feature wall would be saturated again.

According to Angus Nicolson: "Anywhere else we would simply have harled the walls to seal them, but we all agreed that would have spoiled the traditional look."

Finally Iain Begg – Plockton-based architect of Edinburgh's Radisson BLU Hotel on the Royal Mile – suggested the builders use a German product, Keim mineral paint. The improvement was immediate and one final re-pointing of the dormer gable delivered a completely weather-proof structure at last.

According to Angus Nicolson the interior design is a mixture of down-to-earth tradition with high-quality modern materials.

"The unfinished wood of the rafters in the bedroom and the exposed steel supports are quite distinctive. The steel supports – painted black like wrought iron – are deceptively narrow and elegant, but also hugely structural – they stop the roof spreading."

"The under-floor heating works especially well with conductive materials like the slate that we used as flooring downstairs."

So would Carol do it again?

"I did canvas opinion at the start, asking everyone 'would you do it?' The answer was always the same. "Of course – it'll rent all year-round." It was a cynic who said much later I didn't ask the right question. "Would you spend your own money on it?" That might have brought a different response. But if I did ask the wrong question, I'm delighted. A derelict piece of Scottish history is now a functioning piece of Scottish life again. That's priceless."

● Rental information at www.kingsburghskye.co.uk