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Coll Enterprises Present: Tigh-na-Mara

Tigh-na-Mara, or the "Postoffis" as it is still remembered by some, started life as a small one roomed corrugated iron building which was originally built as "the post office above the waves."

In 1889, my father Robert Sturgeon came from Dalbeattie to Coll to take over the post office which was in the shop building owned and run by the laird, Charles Edward Stewart; my father was also to run the shop.

After a few years, with the crofters/ fishermen from the East end of the island, he established a fish buying and processing unit, which salted and smoked fish for export to the continent.

(It is of note that when war broke out in 1914 a consignment of fish had just arrived in Germany – this was paid for in full at the end of the war.)

Such was the interest in this enterprise and its inevitable expansion that my father decided to resign from the shop and concentrate on fish processing. When the laird realised that Mr Sturgeon planned to retain the post office he refused to provide him with a site. The Eastenders, having heard this and having no allegiance to the "West End Laird", set about building a post office. This was carried by horse transport to Arinagour and established on stilts below high water mark (crown land) near the present village car park. Steps enabled the public to transact their business without getting their feet wet. After a few years the laird relented and offered my father the piece of land on which Tigh-na-Mara now stands. The Eastenders, delighted that the fish business would continue, removed the post office to its new site and using horses and carts built a gravel road from the middle pier to the post office.

As time went on, living quarters were progressively built on to the post office until eventually the old Tigh-na-Mara, as it was then named, consisted of 14 rooms. "Boarders" were kept in these days with no difficulty in getting as many as there was room for – by 1960 overflow from the hotel was taken at £1 per person per night. In 1961 Tigh-na-Mara was sold but was back on the market in 1977. During this period, while spending much of my time under canvas in the African bush and considering the possibility of returning to Coll, I spotted the advertisement and was successful in repurchasing the house. Plans were then set afoot to demolish the old house and build a new one.

Roy Thorburn took on the job and despite many difficulties the new Tigh-na-Mara arose like Phoenix from the ashes. Ruth returned from Africa with a list a mile long of furnishing to buy and arrange to be delivered. Moving-in day (and the furniture van) arrived; amid frenetic activity and shouts of "that goes there" and "end bedroom on the left..." the van was emptied, most furniture generally in the right direction, the fed and back on the ferry to Oban 3 hours after disembarking. There followed moans of "why didn't they send this (or that, or the other)" and "Just look at that!" Eventually, many telephone calls and grey hairs later, everything was more or less ready and by April 1983 Ruth opened the doors to the first guests. Experience is a great teacher and we have all

learned a lot since then.

Initially advertising was important but by 1987 more than 50% of guests came from word of mouth recommendation. We now have quite a number of guests who return regularly and it is very rewarding to realise we have made so many new friends. When I returned from Africa, I immediately embarked on an extensive outdoor programme. This included having “the great wall” built by Peter and Ali, and clearing ton after ton of rock, stone and rubble from the garden. 30 tons of shell sand were spread on the future lawn area and as much seaweed and peat dug into what eventually became flower beds as we could lay our hands on. Now our guests are able to enjoy croquet (this can be a vicious game) and putting.

As numbers of guests increased it became obvious that a staff annexe was required. Peter and Ali got busy and the annexe was completed by 1985, with Iain and myself doing the decorating; once again the trauma of obtaining paint, wall paper and furnishings. Worst of all was “The Day of the Bed”. Both Roberts went to Glasgow and loaded the van with, among other things, beds. One to go upstairs, but no matter what we did (or said!) the bed could not be lifted, pushed, pulled, coaxed, or heaved through the trapdoor. In final and awful exasperation father commanded son “fetch me the saw”. To Ruth’s horror a brand new bed was sawn in half then hoisted upstairs piecemeal and reassembled – never to be removed! We draw a veil over that particular memory!

Present day visitors to Coll frequently stop and admire the colourful garden and this gives me the excuse to lean on my spade and enjoy the crack. When not working the garden or talking to beloved cat Coalas, I’m at sea. Most guests thoroughly enjoy seal viewing and fishing activities – though a few have been known to puke in a genteel manner over the side! In the nicest possible way this inevitably gives rise to a lot of humour, as hotel guests on a fishing trip found out. It was quite windy and choppy but the two young men fished away quite the thing until first one then the other had to “perform” over the side, obviously hoping the skipper wouldn’t notice. My comment “I see they’re feeding you well at the hotel these days” followed by a belly laugh did nothing to relieve their discomfort! A junior guest out fishing for mackerel lost three darrows – then a fourth – and said to his father “I’ve lost all the hooks again” Daddy consoled him with “It must have been a big one” – while myself, who has the job of replacing darrows, muttered “Probably called the Buoy Rock!”

In general, guests are very appreciative of our efforts to make their holiday enjoyable and memorable and we get many letters of thanks and appreciation. Running a guest house is constantly fraught with trials and tribulations, not least of which is finding suitable staff, but it is often surprising how we move on from one panic behind the scenes to the next without the guests being aware of a problem. Life is often very demanding, frequently exhausting but is always fun one way or another. There is a constant to-ing and fro-ing and sometimes confusion while waiting for Bookers and/or Cal Mac to get their act together. I am sure we can count ourselves lucky that we have had such pleasant guests. By the end of each season we feel we have made so many new friends and many of them return each year.