

The Rossdhu Story

Background

Prior to the building of Rossdhu an older thatched cottage existed on this site and lay slightly to the north of the present building. It is likely that the raised mound at the extremity of the North garden is probably the remnant walls of an outbuilding from the original thatched building. It is also probable that stones from the original thatched house were used to build the lean-to on the North gable that is now the kitchen.

The occupants of the original thatched house were a family of cottars by the name of MacLean. The parents were Allan and Euphemia MacLean; they had seven children

- Grace 1863
- Neil Campbell (Neilie Allan) 1864
- Donald 1866
- John 1869
- Mary Catherine 1872
- Charles 1873
- Hector 1874

Details regarding Allan and Euphemia are a bit sketchy. We know that Allan had two older brothers, Archibald and Hector and that Archibald inherited the family croft (not sure of location) on the death of their father Charles. The croft was subsequently subdivided into two portions with Hector inheriting the second portion (allegedly to give the Duke of Argyll two votes), This left Allan without any land and, hence, he would be a cottar rather than a crofter and he and Euphemia lived in the original thatched house.

In 1882 Allan was sailing a boat from Balephetrish to Scarinish accompanied by his son Donald and one Charles MacLean from Port-na-Criche. Whilst sailing through the Sound of Gunna the boat capsized, either by hitting a reef or a freak squall. Donald and Charles survived and were washed ashore near Port Ban but unfortunately Allan drowned and his body was never recovered. This incident left Euphemia a widow and having to bring up their seven children alone; the youngest, Hector, being 8 when his father drowned.

Building of Rossdhu

Two of Allan and Euphemia's children (Neilie Allan and Donald) are connected with the building and subsequent story of Rossdhu. Neilie Allan left Tiree when he was a young man and trained to be a joiner in John Brown's yard in Clydebank, Donald joined the Glasgow police working his way through the ranks and was a Chief inspector when he retired.

Following the Crofting Act of 1886 there was a move in Tiree for house improvement with crofters starting to take advantage of the improved security of tenure and build two storey stone houses. Despite the crofting act not specifically offering much for the cottars, Neilie Allan and Donald must have felt sufficiently confident about security of tenure to follow suit and between them agreed to replace the thatched house with a modern stone property.

Neilie Allan was the builder and Donald assisted in the provision of some funds with the result that they became the joint owners of Rossdhu.

The house was built over a period of years with Neilie Allan working in Glasgow and coming back to Tiree from time to time; this was presumably a way of making the financial aspect of building the house a more realistic proposition. Neilie Allan, although presumably assisted by others from time to time, built the house primarily by himself, including quarrying and dressing the stones. The main source of the stones for Rossdhu is understood to be in the South garden of the house. The ground here rises slightly and if all the undergrowth is removed from the rocks at the back of the garden signs of holes for blasting charges can be seen. The bedrock of Tiree is Lewisian Gneiss which is a highly metamorphosed rock and has been subjected to great temperatures and pressures; this makes it extremely hard and difficult to work.

I am not sure of the exact date of completion of Rossdhu but it seems to be in the mid 1890s. Following completion, the house was occupied by Euphemia and Neilie Allan when he returned to Tiree.

The new house was named Rossdhu House after the home of the Colquhoun family on Loch Lomond side. It is unclear as to exactly why this is, but the story goes that Sir Iain Colquhoun of Luss had some connection with the Glasgow Police and Donald had a great respect for him and adopted Rossdhu House as the name for his and Neilie Allan's newly built Tiree home. (*This story is a bit confused as Sir Iain Colquhoun does not seem to have had a connection with the Glasgow Police. However, whatever the reason, it does seem fairly clear that Rossdhu was named after the home of the Colquhoun family home on Loch Lomond side.*)

Later Neilie Allan married Catherine MacLean of Ardbeg (Kate) and they lived in Rossdhu along with Kate's son Hector and Neilie Allan's mother Euphemia until her death in 1917.



Neilie Allan



Kate

The original thatched house became a home, initially for Euphemia's son John and subsequently a workshop for Neilie Allan.

The house, as built, had a traditional layout with the kitchen on the left-hand side of the front door and the 'good room' on the right-hand side.

After Neilie Allan died (1927) Donald became the sole owner. At some time after this Kate's son Hector built the lean-to against the North gable, which he used as a workshop; there was no connection between the house and the workshop. It is probable that stones from the original thatched house were used in the construction of the lean-to. There are no photographs of the original thatched house other than what appears in the background of a photo of Donald Ardbeg (Kate's nephew); this shows what seems to be a bit of the roof of the thatched house and its proximity to Rossdhu.

After Neilie Allan's brother Donald died (1936) his son Willie became the owner. It is not clear what exactly happened at this point but in 1937 Willie sold Rossdhu to Flora Campbell. It seems that during the mid 1930s Kate spent a lot of time at Clachan. This may have triggered Willie to sell Rossdhu on the grounds that Kate was not using the house. Willie seems to have offered the house to Hector but he was stubborn and thought it should have been his anyway and was not going to pay £400 for it. Hector, subsequently built Torosa as a home for his mother: building work starting in 1938. After leaving Rossdhu Kate stayed with Hector in Clydebank, coming back to Torosa after the Clydebank house was bombed during the blitz.

There is some slight confusion about exactly what happened after Donald's death. Some years ago, I met a daughter (Effie I think) of Neilie Allan's youngest brother Hector. Hector was also in the Glasgow Police and his daughter indicated that he said that he had also contributed money to the building of Rossdhu and hence should have inherited on Donald's death rather than Donald's son Willie. Interestingly this lady lived in a house called Rossdhu on the South side of Glasgow.

Flora Campbell

Flora Campbell was brought up in Tiree and spent most of her working life in Herefordshire. After she bought Rossdhu in 1937 she used it as a holiday home until 1948, when she came back to Tiree to retire and look after her mother. She planted the sycamore trees in the South garden to remind her of the trees in Hereford that she had grown fond of.

Flora changed the house internally by creating a connection from Hector's lean-to workshop into the house and converting the workshop into the kitchen. The original kitchen became a sitting room. Looking at available photographs of Rossdhu from the late 1920s onwards it seems that Flora also removed the extensive ivy from the South gable but left the ivy on the East wall.



Donald Ardbeg outside Rossdhu - part of thatched house just visible



Rossdhu -1928

The ivy was certainly a feature on Rossdhu. On our first visit to Tiree in the 1960s we walked from Dunmore to Kenovay to pick up bikes from Lachie MacFadyen at the Bungalow. We saw very few people on that walk apart from Flora Campbell who came out of Rossdhu for a wee blether: the ivy on the house made it very easy to remember and identify.

In her later years Flora was in the Eventide home and the house lay empty for about 4 years.



Rossdhu - 1930s



Rossdhu - 1942

The Knapman Era

Rossdhu came on the market some time in 1972 after Flora's death. After much soul searching as to whether it was possible to sensibly own a second home in Tiree, whilst living and working in Hampshire, my parents bought the house in the summer of 1972. It was unfurnished at the time of purchase and my Father had arranged to rent a van and bring some furniture up at Easter 1973. Just before they were due to leave Hampshire the Loch Seaforth sank at the Tiree pier. We sailed to Tiree on the Claymore that Easter leaving the van and furniture on the pier at Oban. The van was subsequently loaded onto the Glen Cloy which managed to squeeze itself between the Tiree pier and the sunken Loch Seaforth. The van was craned off the Glen Cloy and we were told we had an hour to unload its contents and bring the van back!

After being a holiday house from 1972 onwards my parents decided to move to Tiree permanently after my father retired. The years prior to their full-time move to Rossdhu were spent improving Rossdhu to make it fit for all year round living. Finally, in 1985 my parents took up full time residence in Rossdhu. Two years later they added a sunroom on the rear of the house, which greatly enhanced its overall comfort.

After my Mother died in March 2001 we have retained Rossdhu in the Knapman family.



Rossdhu in 1971:
My parents' first look



Rossdhu in 2018

Family Tree of the MacLean's who built Rossdhu

