

# The Landmark Trust

## OLD PLACE OF MONREITH

### History Album



**Researched & written in 1984 by  
by Clayre Percy, updated in 2015.**

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW  
Charity registered in England & Wales 243312 and Scotland SC039205

Bookings 01628 825925 Office 01628 825920 Facsimile 01628 825417  
Website [www.landmarktrust.org.uk](http://www.landmarktrust.org.uk)

## **BASIC DETAILS**

<b>Built</b>	<b>c.1600</b>
<b>Acquired by Landmark</b>	<b>July 1983</b>
<b>From</b>	<b>Sir Aymer Maxwell</b>
<b>Listed</b>	<b>Category A</b>
<b>Architects</b>	<b>Stewart and Vivienne Tod of David Carr Architects, Edinburgh</b>

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**Old Place of Monreith**

## Summary

The Old Place of Monreith was discovered for Landmark by Stewart and Vivienne Tod, long-standing architects for Landmark in Scotland. They stumbled across it at Christmas in 1981, when the house and outbuildings were being used only to store hay or shelter the occasional sheep. The Old Place sits on the site of an earlier medieval house and outbuildings.

The present Laird's house was built c.1600, and is a later form of the traditional fortified tower house, less defensive but still incorporating gun loops at the turnpike stair on the north side and narrow loops or vents to the ground floor of the wing on the south side. The property developed over the years as a farm, with the steading acquiring numerous outbuildings to the north of the house.

Although known locally as Dowies (pronounced 'Doo-ies'), the house is called the Old Place of Monreith. In earlier days, it was called Moure and was the first possession in Wigtownshire of the Maxwell family. Sir Edward Maxwell of Tinwald, second son of Herbert, 1st Lord Maxwell, first acquired the estate in 1481, from a Cunninghame of Aikhead. The site would have been a strong one, for the now marshy valley was formerly a loch. Although there was an earlier castle nearby, the nucleus of the present building was occupied by Edward Maxwell's descendants until the 1680s.

The Maxwell family had the usual share of black sheep and heroes. One of the family, John Maxwell of Garrerie, was convicted of the murder of John McKie of Glassoch and beheaded in 1619. The eldest son of a later laird, another John Maxwell, was a fervent Covenanter and after escaping the Battle of Rullion Green, in Lothian, he rode home without stopping. His old father was so impressed by this that he declared the horse had done enough in one day for a lifetime and built a special stone-walled field for it, called the Horse Park. Here the gallant steed spent the rest of its days - not entirely idly, however, for under the name of Pentland, the stallion left a great many descendants of note in Galloway.

In 1683, growing prosperous, the Maxwells bought the (now ruinous) Tower of Myretoun nearby from the McCullochs, and moved there. After a period of neglect, the Old Place was considerably altered in the 19th century (especially its roofline) and became a farmhouse.

The plan is cross-shaped, the main block lying approximately east and west with a square wing projecting to the south and a circular stair-tower to the north. There are two storeys and an attic beneath a steep roof. The windows are fairly small, many with simple roll mouldings. Above one on the first floor of the west gable is a projecting gargoyle mask.

The two arrow-slit windows in the basement of the south wing are unexpected, giving an appearance of greater antiquity; one has an ogival head. There are two

good shot-holes at first and second floor level in the stair tower. Above the door at the foot of this tower is an empty panel-space with a chequered surround. A tall and massive hall chimney stack rises from eaves level to the west of the stair tower.

### **The Restoration of the Old Place of Monreith**

The building had been empty for 20 years when the Landmark Trust acquired it from Sir Aymer Maxwell in 1983. The house was surrounded by farm buildings, which dated mostly from the 19th century. These were in poor condition and so all were taken down except the present garage - originally a cart shed with a hayloft above.

Internally the building had been denuded of almost all its original features. The original front door had been at the bottom of the turnpike staircase with its stone panel for a coat of arms above, but this was blocked in the 19th century. The door on the south side became the front door and the back door was placed to the side of the staircase - where the window now is above the kitchen sink. We reopened the turnpike stair (removing a large amount of refuse in the process) and unblocked the front door. Traces of the original panelling may be found in some of the window embrasures. The large hall fireplace on the first floor has been reduced.

The roof timbers on the house turned out to be beyond repair and was replaced, using the old slates, supplemented where necessary with others taken from the steading roofs. The original dormers had been removed in the 19th century, but their position was still visible in the stone walls and so they have been rebuilt in stone as like the originals as possible and carved with "LkT" on one and "1983" on the other.

All the floors needed replacing as well as the roof timbers. The first floor ceiling had been raised as part of the 19th century 'improvements' and this had to be replaced back down at its original level for access from the spiral staircase to work properly. A central staircase was removed.

Bathrooms were installed in the wing opposite the staircase and a new kitchen built. This room and the cloakroom have floors laid in pink Locharbriggs stone from the quarry near Dumfries. The big kitchen table came from Lundy. The aumbrey by the kitchen window is one of several that were found when the lathe and plaster was removed - convenient places to put lamps.



## Description

The Old Place of Monreith – also known as Dowies and Ballingrene, and House of the Moor - sits on the site of an earlier medieval house and outbuildings. The present Laird's house was built c.1600, and is a later form of the traditional fortified tower house, less defensive but still incorporating gun loops at the turnpike stair on the north side and narrow loops or vents to the ground floor of the wing on the south side. The property developed over the years as a farm, with the steading acquiring numerous outbuildings to the north of the house.

In the early 19th century the house was extensively altered internally; most of the farm buildings were erected around this time. As part of Landmark's restoration, a new roof, floors and partition walls were constructed.



**This view from 1984 shows the surrounding farm buildings, mostly dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. These were very dilapidated, so all but the present garage were taken down. This had been a cart shed with a hay loft above.**

### The Maxwells of Monreith

The Maxwells of Monreith first appeared in 1481 and settled at the Moure, which is beyond Mochrum boundary in Glasserton parish. Here they resided for 200 years; Dowies farm shows evidence of their occupation. In the 17th century, father and son supported the Covenanting side, and the former was the hero of the meal-chest story: said the Edinburgh 'gudewife' to the pursuing soldiers, *'Ye're welcome to search the meal ark an' see if ony o' ye can hide in't without giein' a hoast'*. The son fought at Rullion Green (Pentland Hills, 1666) and owed his life to his good steed which bore him safe home; thereafter that good horse was turned loose for all time, and his field at Dowies bears the name of Pentland to this day.

William Maxwell, the founder of the family's fortunes, was a shrewd lawyer who seized the numerous opportunities of the wadset that offered themselves at the close of that troubled century. He was made a baronet in 1681 and purchased Myrton in 1683. Jane, Duchess of Gordon, daughter of the 3rd baronet, has a lasting place among famous Scotswomen. She was a mainspring of politics under Dundas, the brilliant leader of Edinburgh fashionable society, an acquaintance and patroness of Robert Burns, and she took a hand when the Gordon Highlanders were first raised, bestowing on each recruit a kiss. William, 4th baronet, is commended in *the Old Statistical Account* as a progressive agriculturist. He built the Church and Monreith House; he also built the original harbour and gave his name to Portwilliam. William, 5th baronet, lost an arm at Corunna with Sir John Moore; he won the St. Leggier in 1815 with Filha da Puta. William, 6th baronet, was an antiquarian of note and drained Dowalton Loch, discovering a crannog (1863).

Herbert Eustace (1845-1937), 7th baronet, was MP for Wigtownshire, Scottish Whip, Lord of the Treasury and Privy Councillor, chairman of the Royal Commission on Tuberculosis, president of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and chairman of the Royal Commission on Scottish Historical Monuments,

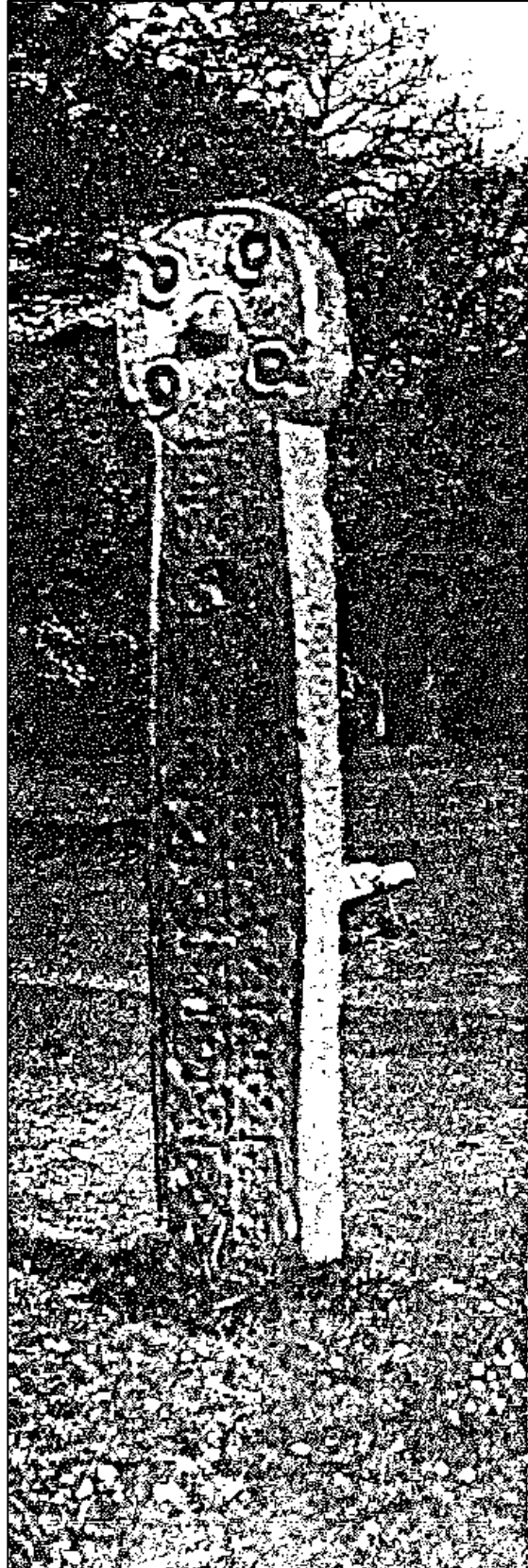


historian, essayist, novelist, naturalist, lover of trees, botanist and painter of flowers, Lord Lieutenant of Wigtownshire and Knight of the Order of the Thistle. Sir Herbert was best known for his essays on the countryside, *Memories of the Months*. In his autobiography, *Evening Memories*, he tells the story of the Celtic Cross that used to stand on a mound near the Old Place of Monreith. He described what happened when Sir William Maxwell, the 1st baronet, bought Mrytoun, the neighbouring property, in 1654:

*'Mrytoun is a more desirable residence than Ballingrene [now known as Dowies] where he and his forebears had lived as lairds of Monreith. At Mrytoun accordingly he took up his abode, and when transporting other movables, he designed to bring thither the Celtic cross which stood beside the old house of Ballingrene on an elevation known as the Mower. In transporting it the cart capsized in crossing the burn between the two baronies of Monreith and Mrytoun, the shaft of the cross broke in two, and the story goes that flames burst forth from the fracture, and an aged woman who witnessed the accident cried out, warning the laird that ill-fortune would befall him and his family if that cross were taken away from the old house. Sir William took the warning in earnest, and caused the cross to be replaced on the Mower. There or thereabouts it remained, until my father, finding that it had been set up over the burial place of a favourite horse, thought he would treat it more honourably and had it erected where it now stands in front of Monreith House. Some persons may discern fulfilment of the wise woman's warning in the break-up of the estate of Monreith following upon the cross being removed from the old house.'*

The cross is now in Whithorn Museum.

Sir Herbert Maxwell had two sons; the elder died of fever in Africa having fought in the Matibile war; the second, Aymer, was killed in 1914. Aymer's widow brought up her family at Elrig, about 7 miles north west of Monreith. Her youngest son, Gavin, wrote *A Ring of Bright Water* and describes his childhood on Monreith in his autobiography, *The House of Elrig*. He mentions the Old Place of Monreith but calls it Ballingrene, a name which had not been used for several generations.



The sculptured Cross of Monreith

Although known locally as Dowies and also by the name of House of the Moor, the house is called the Old Place of Monreith on old maps, and it is by this name that Sir Aymer Maxwell preferred it to be called.

Sir Michael Maxwell, great grandson of Sir Herbert and 9<sup>th</sup> baronet, owns Monreith House.

### The Old Place of Monreith

The following account of the building is taken from Volume 5 of Nigel Tranter's series *The Fortified House in Scotland* (1970):

*'Remotely situated in the marshy valley of the Monreith Burn two miles north east of Monreith village, Dowies is a most interesting fortified laird's house of mainly early 17th century date, latterly used as a farmhouse but now derelict. It has a number of unusual features.*

*'The plan is cross-shaped, the main block lying approximately east and west with a square wing projecting to the south and a circular stair-tower to the north. There are two storeys and an attic beneath a steep roof and no crowsteps to the gables. The windows are fairly small, many with simple roll mouldings. Above one on the first floor of the West gable is a projecting gargoyle mask. The two arrow slit windows in the basement of the south wing are unexpected, giving an appearance of greater antiquity and one has an ogival head. There are two good shot-holes at first and second floor level in the stair tower. The door has been originally in the foot of this and is now reduced to a window, with some more elaborate moulding remaining. Above is an empty panel-space with a chequered surround. The present doorway to the south is modern. A tall and massive hall chimney stack rises from eaves level to the west of the stair tower. Unsightly outbuildings have been added to north and west.*

*'Internally the building has been denuded of almost all interesting features, though the good turnpike stair remains and there are traces of the original panelling in window embrasures. There has been no vaulting. There are two chambers on each floor in the main block, and a small apartment in the wing. The large hall fireplace on the first floor has been reduced... This building could still be saved, and restored, would make an attractive residence.*

*'Its history is interesting. Formerly named Moure, this was the original possession in Wigtownshire of the Maxwell family. Sir Edward Maxwell of*

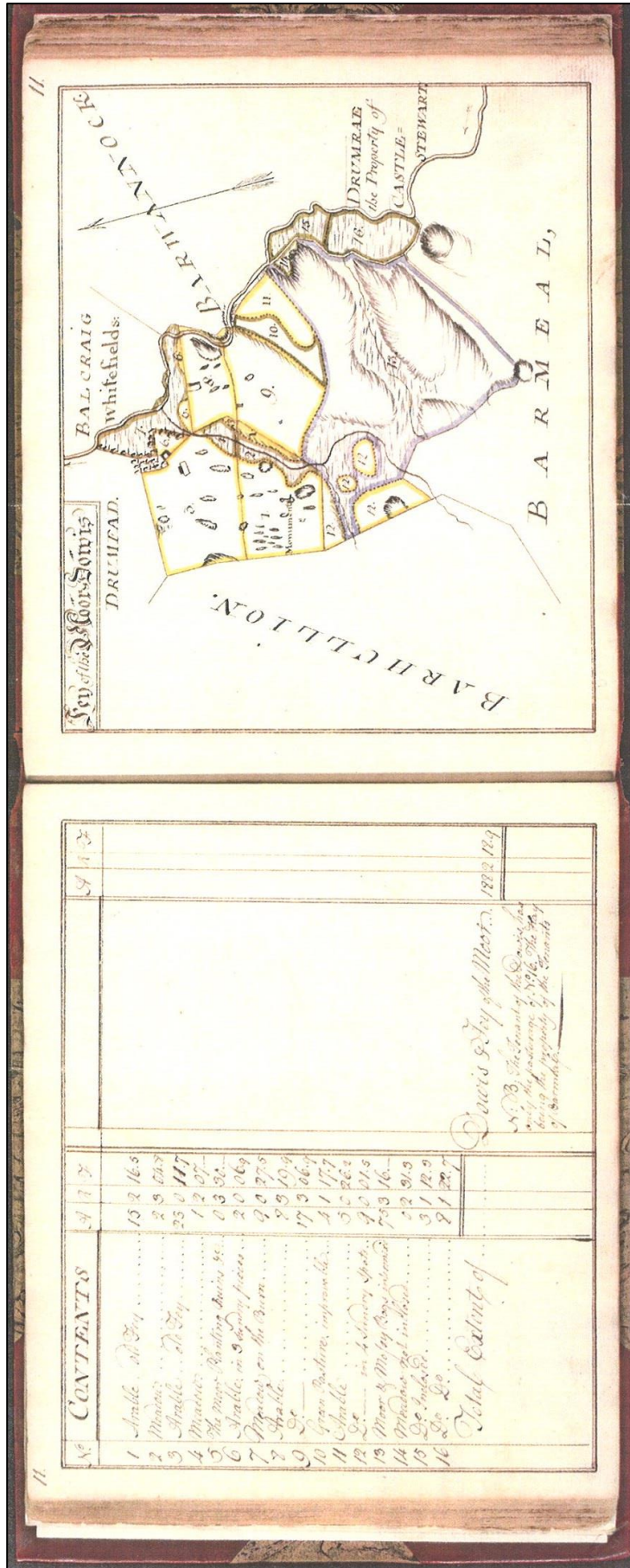
*Tinwald, second son of Herbert, 1st Lord Maxwell, acquired these lands in 1481, from a Cunninghame of Aikhead. Although there was an earlier castle nearby, the nucleus of the present building was occupied by his descendants until 1683, when they acquired through marriage the Tower of Myretoun nearby - still standing ruinous in the Monreith Estate - from the McCullochs, and moved thereto. This building after a period of neglect, was somewhat altered, especially at the roofline, eventually becoming merely a farmhouse. Its site would be a strong one, for the now marshy valley was formerly a loch.*

*'One of the family, John Maxwell of Garrerie, was convicted of the murder of John McKie of Glassoch and beheaded in 1619. The eldest son of a later laird, John Maxwell also, was a fervent Covenanter, and escaping at the Battle of Rullion Green, in Lothian rode home without stopping. His old father was so impressed by this, that he declared the horse had done enough in one day for a lifetime and built a special stone-walled field for it, called the Horse Park, where the gallant steed spent the rest of its days - not entirely idly however for under the name of Pentland, the stallion left a great many descendants of note in Galloway. The property still belongs to the Maxwells of Monreith'.*



**The south front from the edge of the ancient loch in 1982. The edge of the loch can be traced by following the old ash trees planted in the firm soil. The ground between the trees and the Monreith Burn is still damp and rushy, but the local farmer's cattle find some reasonable grazing there.**





Old Place of Monreith estate map, drawn up in the 1700s.

Stewart and Vivienne Tod, Landmark's architects, wrote in the 1980s:

*'Our first sight of the Old Place of Monreith was at Christmas time 1981. The farmyard and house were empty but not unused as the buildings had hay and the odd sheltering sheep inside.*

*'Our second visit was in the Spring and there were more inhabitants to greet us - crowds of jackdaws rose into the sky as we drove up to the house. The chimneys and fireplaces were full of nests of sticks mountains high.*

*'The turnpike stair had been bricked up in Victorian times and only used for storage. The steps were covered with refuse from many years so that it looked like a steep ramp. We crept up, kicking away the rubbish, and peeped round the corner to see two dear fluffy baby jackdaws with open hungry mouths.*

*'The local name for the Old Place is Dowies - but pronounced Doo-ies! And it was surprising how few of the locals knew that the house was so old and had been the original Maxwell house.*

*'The one big change that has occurred during the years, owing to progressing methods of transport, is the access. Originally the Maxwells approached their house from Monreith village - that is, from the sea, and arrived at the front door in the turnpike stair. As the local roads became better maintained and trade increased between the village markets, the more usual path to use was from the landward side, and that has now become the only way.'*

## Restoration

The farm buildings surrounding the house dated mostly from the 19th century. As they were in a very poor condition they were all taken down, with the exception of the present garage - originally a cart shed with a hay loft above.

The roof timbers turned out to be beyond repair and so had to be replaced, but the slates were reused, supplemented where necessary with others taken from the steading roofs. The original dormers had been removed in the 19th century, but their position was still visible in the stone walls and so they have been rebuilt in stone - as like the originals as possible and carved with 'LkT' on one and '1983' on the other.

In the 19th century the original front door at the bottom of the turnpike staircase, with its stone panel for a coat of arms above, had been blocked up. The door on the south side became the front door and the back door was placed to the side of the staircase, where the window now is above the kitchen sink. Landmark's restoration re-opened the turnpike stair and unblocked the front door.

The house had not been lived in for 20 years and so all the floors and roof timbers needed to be replaced. The first floor ceiling had been raised as part of the 19th century 'improvements'; this had to be reinstated in its original position in order to allow access from the spiral staircase to work properly. The central staircase was removed.

Bathrooms were installed in the wing opposite the staircase and a new kitchen was built. This room and the cloakroom have floors laid in pink Locharbriggs stone from the quarry near Dumfries. The big kitchen table came from Lundy. The aumbrey by the kitchen window is one of several that were found when the lathe and plaster was removed. They were convenient places to put lamps.





**The derelict 19<sup>th</sup> century farm buildings were removed.**







**The big bedroom on the first floor was the main hall in the original old house. A Victorian fireplace was removed from inside the grand stone one. In this room the panelling round the windows could be reused, but most of the panelling in the other rooms is old pitch pine from the Midlands.**



**The top of the Victorian staircase and the first floor landing. The floor boards were rotten and were replaced with second hand pitch pine from the Midlands.**





**In the 19th century the front door was blocked up; the door on the south side became the front door, and the back door was where the window above the sink in the kitchen is now.**



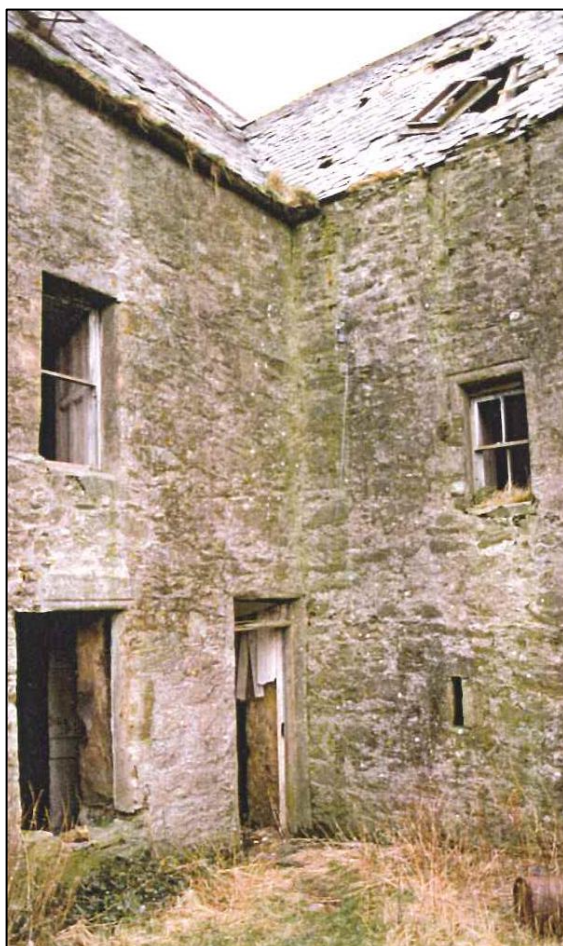
Opening up the original door.







**The original dormer windows were removed in the 19th century and replaced by skylights, but their bases could still be seen in the external masonry and they have been rebuilt in stone, in as similar a style as possible to the originals.**







**The roof timbers were beyond repair and are new, but the slates were either re-used or replaced by old slates from the steading.**







**The top of the spiral staircase without its roof, and the first floor ceiling being replaced at its original level; it had been raised in the 19th century.**



**The big kitchen fireplace has a salt cupboard on the left, in which are all the treasures found during the repairs. The little jars and ink bottles were found in the attic in one of the blocked up windows.**



The restored dormers.





The kitchen and the sitting room during repair.





**Discovering the old well – 1983.**

Sketch block and floor plans of the building

