

The Landmark Trust

ASCOG HOUSE AND MEIKLE ASCOG, ISLE OF BUTE, ARGYLL AND BUTE

The history of the Ascog demesne goes back further than either of the two houses on it. In 1312 Robert the Bruce is said to have given Ascog to the Bute family of Glass. In 1594, the estate, including a mill, Loch Ascog and Nether and Over Ascog, was bought by John Stewart of Kilchattan, a distant kinsman of the Stewarts of Bute who became Earls and later Marquesses of Bute.

Ascog House - John Stewart may have built the first house at Ascog, replacing an older tower. Despite the date of 1678 above one of the dormer windows, the original Ascog House was built earlier than that. With its stair tower and cap-house, it is of a type commonly built around 1600. In addition, in the wall of the present kitchen is part of a grand chimneypiece. This belonged to a great hall whose floor and ceiling were both at a higher level than today. In 1673 John Stewart of Ascog, grandson of the first John Stewart, married Margaret Cunningharn and it is their initials that are engraved on the house. They must have carried out a major reconstruction, lowering the floors to create two main storeys, and adding the dormer windows. John Stewart was rich enough to lend the Earl of Bute £9,385 to help re-build Rothesay Castle after damage in the Civil War. He was also crowner or coroner of Bute from 1666-98.

During the 18th century, the original mullion windows of Ascog House were enlarged and fitted with sash and casement frames. In 1773, another John Stewart, who had no children, made a complicated will intended to ensure that Ascog would always be owned by a Stewart. His heir, a cousin named Archibald McArthur, therefore had to change his name. Archibald Stewart was said to both mean and eccentric - he kept pigs in his drawing room in Edinburgh - but he helped pay for a road from Rothesay to Ascog in 1813. He too had no children. The next heir was a distant American cousin, Frederick Campbell. He tried to sell Ascog but the terms of the old will defeated him. His brother Ferdinand, a professor of mathematics in Virginia, succeeded where he had failed and in 1831, sold Ascog House to the eminent engineer, Robert Thom.

Meikle Ascog - Robert Thom is best known for designing the Greenock water supply. He also revived the Rothesay cotton mills and, after buying Ascog House with its estate of 420 acres, planned the development of elegant villas there. One such villa he built himself about 1840, within the policies of Ascog House. This was Ascog Lodge, now Meikle Ascog. Raised on a half basement in the traditional way, its large windows were designed to take full advantage of the view.

Robert Thom made a garden in front of Meikle Ascog, but it was the next owner, Thomas Russell, who laid out the more elaborate garden in front of an enlarged Ascog House. Russell bought Ascog in 1877 and lived there until about 1900. During that time a formal woodland garden, with walks arranged in geometrical patterns, and a water garden took shape. They are thought to have been designed by Edward Latrobe-Bateman who worked at Mount Stuart around 1875.

Later History – The Ascog estate passed through various hands until in 1939 it was bought by the Earl of Dumfries, later 5th Marquess of Bute. Meikle Ascog was lived in by Lord Rhidian Crichton Stuart, then let to a Mr Collins and finally to Patrick Crichton, who left in 1988. Ascog House was divided into several dwellings for estate employees, but structural problems began to appear, and the house gradually emptied. To secure its future, Lord Bute approached the Landmark Trust, as a charity which rescues and cares for historic buildings. In 1989, Ascog House, its gardens and Meikle Ascog, were placed in Landmark's care.

Today, Ascog House is let for holidays for parties of up to nine, two of them sleeping in their own tower. In 2013, Meikle Ascog was sold by Landmark into private ownership, its future having been secured.

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RESTORATION

When the Landmark Trust acquired the Ascog demesne in 1989, Meikle Ascog was in good condition and needed little more than redecoration before being ready for visitors in 1990. A new kitchen was put in what had previously been the study, and the dining room changed places with the drawing room, but otherwise the house is almost exactly as it was when it was built by Robert Thom about 1840. Since 2013, it has been in private ownership.

Ascog House needed complete restoration. This was done under the supervision of Stewart Tod and Partners of Edinburgh, architects with long experience of working for the Landmark Trust. The builders were A Robertson and Co. of Greenock. Work started in 1990 but tragically, when it was nearly completed in June 1991, an unexplained fire gutted the house. After inevitable delays, work started again and Ascog House was finally furnished in June 1993.

Ascog House now looks as it should, the house of a Scottish gentleman of the seventeenth century, a typical laird's house with steep roof and crow stepped gables. What is fortunately not now obvious is that the house was greatly and badly enlarged in the mid nineteenth century. Servants' quarters were tacked onto the back, almost doubling the size of the house. Then in about 1900 a drawing room and staircase were added to the right of the front door. With these additions, the house was far too big for modern use. Moreover, to build on at the back, the ground had been dug away behind the house, exposing the foundations and leaving the back wall extremely insecure. The ground had been lowered in front too, to make what had been a half-basement into a full ground floor. If the building was to survive, the ground would have to go back to its original level. All the additions were therefore removed by the Landmark Trust except for the staircase which remains, as a tower, separate from the main house.

The walls of the old house were reinforced and later windows and doors blocked for the same reason. The old door into the stair turret was reopened, with the ground level outside it restored. The walls were then harled with a mixture of lime and sand in the traditional manner. Inside, everything you see is new apart from the stone treads of the turnpike stair and the stone fireplace surrounds which survived the fire. The new work, however, and particularly the joinery, is based on clues found in the building and evokes the appearance of the house in the eighteenth century.

If the appearance of Ascog House has changed dramatically since 1989, so too has that of the garden in front of it. This was entirely overgrown, but Mr Ian Chisholm, the gardener, gradually cleared it, reclaiming paths and steps from the tangle of undergrowth. It is now possible to see the late Victorian layout, but the character of a wild woodland garden remains. Mr Chisholm also worked on the water garden, discovering the old pipes for the ponds and water works with the help of water-diviner's rods. The water comes from Loch Ascog and drains away into the sea. The wheels operating the 6in. valves had not been turned for fifty years or more and were entirely rusted up, but they were all carefully cleaned, and in 1993 there was a dramatic moment when the fountain spouted again.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Ascog House sleeps up to 9 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk or phone our Bookings Enquiries Team on 01628 825 925.