

THE OLD PLACE OF MONREITH, PORTWILLIAM, DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY

The Old Place of Monreith was discovered for Landmark by Stewart and Vivienne Tod, architects who carried out many projects for the Landmark Trust in Scotland in its early years. 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 (the field to the southwest of Old Place, marked Pentland on some maps). 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 nineteenth 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. 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 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 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.

As the house had not been lived in for 20 years, 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.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. The Old Place of Monreith sleeps up to 8 people. To book New Inn or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please visit our website www.landmarktrust.org.uk or phone Booking Enquiries on 01628 825925.