

A Highland paradise

*Balmoral Castle, Scotland
A home of Her Majesty The Queen*

The product of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert's enthusiasm for the Highlands, Balmoral remains a much-loved home of the Royal Family. **Mary Miers** looks at the history of the castle and its role as a sporting estate

Photographs by Paul Barker





Fig 1 previous pages: The entrance front, with the dominating tower connected to the castle by a lower range of offices and staff bedrooms. ↑ Fig 2 above: The Queen looks down on Balmoral from Craig Gowan to the south of the castle, in 1971

BALMORAL CASTLE, with its attendant buildings and 50,000 acres of Upper Deeside, represents the ultimate model of a working Highland sporting estate. Uniquely documented in pen, paint and photograph, its role today as the Royal Family's Scottish holiday home has remained relatively unchanged since 1848, when Queen Victoria and Prince Albert first came here and fell in love with the wooded strath, its wild encircling hills and heather moorland. Balmoral offered the young couple a private refuge far from official life—a family holiday home where they could recuperate from the trials of public duty and enjoy outdoor sports and other pursuits in a landscape that reminded them of Switzerland and Albert's native Thuringia. But it would also contribute a significant chapter to the story of how the Victorian perception of the Highlands transformed the image of Scotland in the 19th century.

The 'discovery' of the Highlands dates back to the late 18th century, when literary- and artistic-minded travellers came north in search of the Sublime. The enthusiasm of these early Romantics coincided with the rise of the cult of the Picturesque and the success of writers and poets such as James

'Ossian' Macpherson and Sir Walter Scott, whose nostalgic depictions of an ancient, heroic culture untainted by industrialisation and romanticised by the failure of the Jacobite uprisings captivated Europe. As economic depression and enforced evictions depopulated the glens, the Victorian tourist industry flourished, with its Highland games, colourful costumes and pageantry. For sportsmen, too, the Highlands were a new-found paradise and, by the 1840s, many native lairds were selling or letting their lands as sporting estates as growing numbers headed north for the seasonal migration. The coming of the railway, the invention of photography and the widespread success of literary and artistic works contributed to the dramatic transformation: the Highlands had become 'all the rage'.

Much has been made of Victoria and Albert's Celtic enthusiasms, not only for the scenery—'beautiful... severe & grand'—and the air—'remarkably pure and light'—but also for the people—'more natural, & marked by that honesty & simplicity which always distinguishes the inhabitants of mountainous countries' (the Queen turned a blind eye to her servants' excessive drinking habits)—and their 'historical

traditions'. The adoption of tartan at Balmoral, not only as a keynote of the interior decoration, but also sartorially, with kilts and tweed jackets for the princes, keepers and gillies, and shawls for the Queen and her ladies in waiting, had a note of irony, given its proscription after the 'Forty Five. Bagpipes, now embraced by the royals as a stirring enhancement to the Highland experience, had also been proscribed by the Queen's ancestor as instruments of war.

But we should remember that, in spite of the recent vicissitudes of Highland history, the enchantment was far from one-sided. On their first visit to Scotland in 1842, the royal couple was given an ecstatic welcome, as colourful as that orchestrated by Scott for George IV's Scottish 'jaunt' in 1822. Taymouth Castle in Perthshire provided the climax of the tour, with the Marquess of Breadalbane's castle being extravagantly remodelled for the occasion. There were fireworks, bonfires, reels, boating on Loch Tay to Gaelic rowing songs, a Grand Ball and piping at every meal, all enacted by clansmen 'plaided and plumed in their tartan array'.

They returned north in 1844, borrowing Blair Castle, where they lived 'a somewhat primitive, yet romantic, mountain life',

enjoying all the activities that have come to identify the royal Highland holiday—picnicking and excursions into the hills, shooting, dancing, attending Highland games and listening to piping. Three years later, they were back, sailing from Osborne up the west coast to tour the islands and then spending a month at the Marquis of Abercorn's Ardverikie estate on Loch Laggan, where Albert first donned a kilt, Landseer was a guest and they got their first prolonged taste of the infamous Highland weather. It did not put them off; indeed, the royal love of remote, cold places, and their stamina for enduring the elements and the discomforts of long outdoor expeditions, is legendary. Earlier tourists had come north to observe the Sublime; the Royal Family relished the full physical experience, getting out into the wilds and pitting themselves against the elements.

As Osborne neared completion on the Isle of Wight, Victoria and Albert set their hearts on acquiring a Highland holiday home. And then, a fortuitous accident occurred: the Hon Sir Robert Gordon, who had taken a long lease of Balmoral from Earl Fife in 1830, choked on a fishbone one October morning in 1847 and died, leaving the property in need of a new tenant. The lease devolved on his brother, the future Prime Minister Lord Aberdeen, who sent Victoria and Albert enticing watercolours by James Giles. The couple came here for the first time in 1848, arriving as the new tenants by way of 23 triumphal arches along the



↑ Fig 3: The castle drawing room in 1857, one of 11 interior views by James Roberts

route, to be greeted by a pageant of piping, bonfires, fireworks, wild dancing and waving villagers wearing full Highland dress.

Old Balmoral Castle had begun life as a small towerhouse built by the Gordons of Abergeldie, Deeside landowners who acquired the property in 1486. In the mid 17th century, the estate passed to a cadet branch of the Farquharsons of Invercauld, but their Jacobite activities resulted in heavy fines and, in 1798, Balmoral was sold to James Duff, 2nd Earl Fife, whose vast landholdings

included the neighbouring estates of Mar.

Sir Robert Gordon, the 4th Earl's tenant, transformed Balmoral into a sporting estate. He cleared Glen Gelder to create a deer forest and, in 1834, engaged the Aberdeen city architect John Smith to enlarge the old towerhouse in a Scots Tudor style redolent of William Burn (Fig 8). 'Small but pretty' was the Queen's opinion of the house, which, even with Smith's additions, was too modest in size for her growing family, unceremonious and simple



↑ Fig 4: Prince Albert and Queen Victoria are depicted ascending Lochnagar in *Morning in the Highlands* by Carl Haag, 1853



Glyn Jones/Balmoral Estate; The Royal Collection © 2012 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II/The Bridgeman Art Library

← Fig 5 facing page: The castle entrance front with its *porte cochère*. ↑ Fig 6 above: Returning from the hill through Ballochbuie

though they liked their holidays to be (the Earl of Malmesbury complained of having to write his dispatches on his bed).

Although they carried out various building projects as tenants, ownership was necessary before they could embark on creating a more suitable home, and Prince Albert was determined that 'we ought not to let Balmoral slip away from us'. Negotiations to buy the estate were protracted. The price was high and a private bill had to be passed owing to certain legal complications. Having already acquired the 6,000-acre Birkhall estate for the Prince of Wales and the lease of 14,000-acre Abergeldie, they finally took possession of Balmoral in autumn 1852, paying £31,500 for 11,000 acres.

The Queen had just received 'a very handsome fortune [that] had inexplicably been bequeathed to me by a Mr John Camden Nield. He knew I would not squander it'. A scheme conceived with J. & W. Smith in 1848 to remodel the old castle was abandoned and Prince Albert summoned William Smith to help him design a new house. (An unsigned perspective design in an English medieval/Tudor idiom suggests that Cubitt's office was also consulted.)

As with Osborne in the 1840s, Albert took a central role, supervising every detail

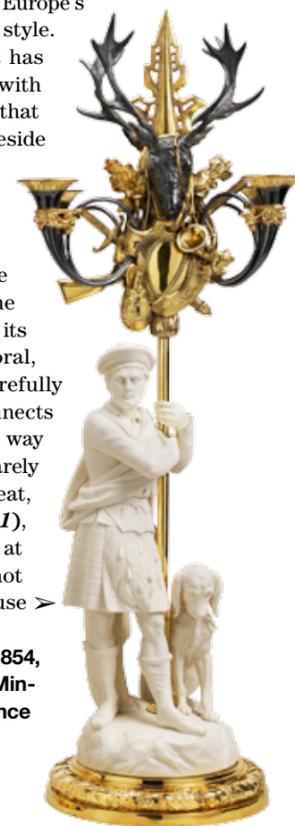
and managing the entire project with methodical precision. He was also a tireless improver of the rundown property, superintending the design and building of model estate buildings (Fig 14), landscaping and planting, the laying out of formal gardens and diversion of the public road.

The intelligent, technical-minded prince had been brought up in an atmosphere of German Romanticism at Schloss Rosenau in Coburg, which his father had restored and Gothicised, and he was deeply interested in the Arts and architecture. At Balmoral, however, he was mindful of economy and 'very much afraid of getting out of the rough character of a Highland residence'. The resulting composition, which incorporates elements of the old castle, is a fairly conservative essay—more a hybrid of William Burn's 1830s Scots Tudor than full-blooded Scottish Baronial (Fig 5). The Scots detail is limited, the main windows mullioned and transomed, which Albert favoured over sashes 'in point of architectural effect', stipulating that they should be large and capable of admitting plenty of fresh air. Set into the pale, polished Glen Gelder granite are heraldic carvings and relief panels of saints, including the hunter St Hubert, by the sculptor John Thomas RA.

There is no doubting the prestige Balmoral brought to the Baronial Revival in Scotland that spawned Europe's first truly nationalist style.

But, in some ways, it has more in common with a different tradition that had emerged on Deeside several decades earlier for a more informal, picturesque genre of Highland shooting lodge whose very essence was the landscape that was its *raison d'être*. Balmoral, with its long, low, carefully orientated ranges, connects with the outdoors in a way that a Baronial pile rarely does (Fig 2). The great, keep-like tower (Fig 1), which hints so readily at a castle, is, in fact, not part of the main house >

→ Fig 7: Candelabra, 1854, by Winfield & Co and Minton, designed with Prince Albert and Landseer



at all, but is a purely pictorial device acting as a visual counterpoint and compositional pivot. The two linked courtyard blocks—one for the principal accommodation, one for the domestic offices—are set diagonally to each other so as to view the landscape on all fronts, and the royal suites are raised up over the principal public rooms to make the most of the best prospect, looking up the Dee to the Cairngorms.

Although relatively obscure beyond the North-East, Smith deserves more credit than he has been given for this arrangement, which echoes that of his father John Smith's Forghen in Banffshire. In his influential book *The Gentleman's House, or How to Plan English Residences*, his former pupil Robert Kerr compared Balmoral favourably to Osborne, praising its rational planning and 'a certain familiar character about the disposition [of principal rooms] which is in fact the character of home comfort'.

Building works began in 1853 and, for two seasons, the family resided in the old house as the new one went up beside it. They moved in on September 7, 1855, just hours after the decorators had finished fitting up the principal rooms (other interiors were not completed until the following year). A photograph by George Washington Wilson, who was commissioned to record the progress of works in 1854, and later produced a series of widely publicised views of Balmoral, shows the two buildings standing side by side. The old castle was finally demolished in 1856.

The architectural historian Ian Gow has argued convincingly that the interior of Balmoral is a rare success among comparable schemes. Externally, the Scottish Baronial style had a sculptural vigour highly expressive of its stirring context, but it was limited by its failure to find a compatible solution for



↑ Fig 8: Old Balmoral Castle, which was demolished in 1856, from the south by James Giles

the interior, resorting to decorative devices later caricatured as 'Bloodsports Baronial'. It could never quite resolve the dichotomy between evoking a romantic vision of the past and fulfilling the demand for fashionable furnishings and the latest modern comforts.

But the decoration of Balmoral had a different aesthetic. Unlike its counterparts, with their acres of dark panelling, heavy ceilings, uncomfortable carved furniture, displays of heraldry and weapons and ranks of dusty taxidermy, the royal interiors exuded freshness and colour, with a relative modesty and relaxed feel appropriate to a summer residence. Mr Gow points to the influence of the fashionable 'Deeside Décor' adopted by such lodges as Corriemulzie on the Mar estate. This 'pretty sporting villa' had been furnished in about 1830 by the pioneering decorator Lady Agnes Duff

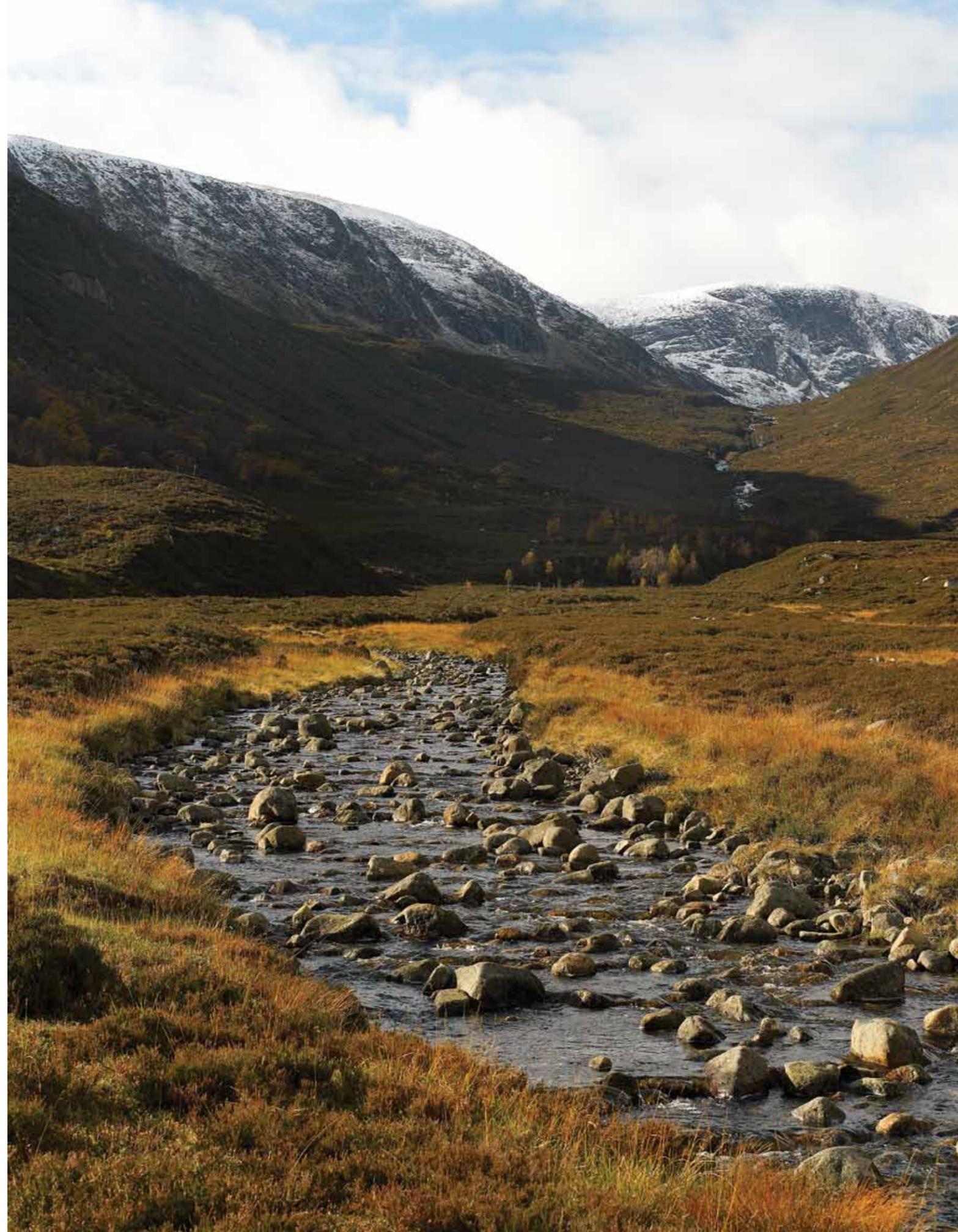
(later 5th Countess Fife), with a distinctive combination of moiré wallpaper, floral chintzes, simple painted furniture and a few mounted stags' heads. The Queen was a regular visitor and attended several torchlit balls there; there can be little doubt that, despite its rustic architecture, something of Corriemulzie's decorative taste filtered through to Balmoral. It appeared first in the old castle, the interiors of which were recorded in four watercolours by Giles shortly before its demolition. The royal couple had rented old Balmoral with all its pictures and chintzy furnishings, but the stags' heads, deerskin rug and Landseer prints seen in the view of their sitting room were almost certainly their addition.

“Prince Albert was determined that “we ought not to let Balmoral slip away from us”

A similar spirit, albeit in less cottagey mode, infused the largely plain Classical interiors of the new castle, the best record of which is a series of watercolours by James Roberts (Fig 3). The overriding impression was the use of colour and pattern—tartan, bold wallpapers and chintzes sprigged with thistles—to emphasise a Scottish theme. The tartan, some of it designed by Prince Albert, was everywhere: it decorated carpets, linoleum, curtains, table and seat covers—even the inhabitants themselves. With all its romantic associations, tartan had an obvious appeal for the Baronial decorator, but, as Mr Gow points out, it was much in vogue among the Edinburgh design



↑ Fig 9 above: The Queen and Prince Philip with Highland cows on the Balmoral farm in 1972. → Fig 10 facing page: Allt an Dubh-loch tumbles down to the head of Loch Muick



reformers of the 1830s, whose colour theories favoured the flat-woven, kaleidoscope blending of bold colours over outmoded three-dimensional and shaded patterns.

The leading decorator Holland & Sons, which had worked at Osborne and provided furniture for the Palace of Westminster, was responsible for almost everything. Upholstered furniture was mixed with more elaborate pieces in pale satin-, birch- or maple-woods, ranging in style from late Georgian to a Pugin-inspired 'functionalist' Tudor-Gothic. A suite of cabinets in the drawing room supported 12 candelabra in the form of Highlanders with dogs holding stalking trophies (Fig 7), made in close collaboration with Prince Albert. 'The wall-lights are silver antlers, guns or game bags, and if one's pen needs dipping, one must look for ink in the back of a hound or a boar,' observed the Queen's dresser Frieda Arnold. Albert's choice of sporting engravings as more suitable than oils for a summer residence popularised the fashion for decorating shooting lodges with prints.

The use of taxidermy as a decorative device was downplayed. Despite its sporting associations and use in many houses with which Victoria and Albert were familiar, stags' heads were limited to the entrance hall, stairwell and corridor—public areas deemed more appropriate for the mood of elemental primitivism evoked by specimens from the wilds. There were deerskins on the hall floor and, in a nod to the chivalric, antiquarian displays popularised by Abbotsford, a bronze figure of Malcolm Canmore. Here, too, is the sole item that is known to have been transferred from the old castle—a carved oak chimneypiece attributed to Trotters of Edinburgh.

Only in the ballroom was the theatrical



↑ Fig 11 above: Queen Victoria and John Brown, photographed in 1863.

↓ Fig 12 below: The Gillies' Ball by Egron Lundgren, showing the Balmoral ballroom, with its painted ceiling, Puginian chandeliers, Gothic alcove and silk-hung walls with sporting trophies, targes and weapons draped in tartan



vein of the Baronial Revival given full play. Balls are a recurring theme in contemporary accounts of Highland life and the gillies' ball at Balmoral remains an annual event. Albert had first installed a temporary ballroom here in 1851—E. T. Bellhouse & Co's early pre-fabricated design for emigrants' housing, which he had seen at the Great Exhibition. A unique survival now resided near the game larders, it was replaced by the present ballroom in 1857 (Fig 12). Here, the theatre designer James Grieve created a fantasy reminiscent of the 'Troubadour' Gothic style of the Taymouth Castle interiors.

Even before fashions changed, not everybody was as enamoured of Balmoral as its owners. Rooms were criticised for being small and cluttered and Lady Augusta Stanley ventured tactfully that the Scotch-themed decor was 'not all equally *flatteux* to the eye'. 'Thistles,' wrote Lord Clarendon 'are in such abundance that they would rejoice the heart of a donkey.' Marie Mallet, writing in the 1890s, noted the dreadful food and footmen reeking of whisky. And then there was the cold—frequently a source of complaint in a house where 'the Queen had the windows open while we were at dinner'.

Few had the Queen's stamina for long expeditions out in the rain—'I seldom walk less than four hours a day,' she wrote, 'and



when I come in I feel as if I want to go out again'. Some guests failed to enter into the spirit of such occasions as the whisky-fuelled evening of merriment and dancing around carcasses of newly slain stags, as depicted in Carl Haag's acclaimed *Evening at Balmoral*. Others found life here tedious: Campbell Bannerman wrote to his wife: 'It is the funniest life conceivable: like a convent. We meet at meals, breakfast at 9.45, lunch 2, dinner 9 and when we have finished each is off to his cell.'

But for Victoria, life at Balmoral represented the happiest days of her marriage, a time when she saw most of her husband and could enjoy all their favourite activities, as recorded in paintings by Leitch, Fisk, Landseer, Fripp and Haag (each year, a professional artist was invited to Balmoral and she was a demanding patron). As well as the picnics, hill walks (Fig 4), socialising with local lairds and forays further afield, there were sketching expeditions, visits to local cottages and, of course, the sport (Fig 6). Albert's appetite for shooting was insatiable and he was happy to endure long days on the hill, sometimes starting at 5am, to bag his quarry of grouse, otters or deer. Brought

↑ Fig 13 above: Remote Glas Allt Shiel on the shores of Loch Muick, remodelled for Queen Victoria in 1868. → Fig 14 right: The model dairy, planned by Prince Albert in 1861 and built, with dairy cottages, by William Smith in 1862–63



up in the Continental (and traditional Scottish) *battue* system of hunting driven deer, he was introduced to stalking at Taymouth and loved it, although he was also happy to take pot shots at tamer beasts grazing in parkland from the window of a house or carriage. Fishing was not the sport it is today; the salmon in the Dee were mostly speared by estate tenants for the larder.

After Albert's death in 1861, the atmosphere

at the castle changed: 'How different from my first visit here,' wrote Leitch in 1862. 'The joyous bustle in the morning when the Prince went out: the highland ponies and the dogs; the gillies and the pipers. Then the coming home—the Queen and her ladies going out to meet them, and the merry time afterwards; the torch-light sword-dancers on the green, and the servants' ball closing the day. Now all is gone ➤

with him who was the life and soul of it all.'

But the grief-stricken Queen soon came to rely on Balmoral as her solace (**Fig 11**). She would spend as much as a third of the year here, to the frustration of her private secretary, who complained of 'innumerable difficulties from the Queen staying on here... I can't conceive for what purpose, except for the gillies' ball on the 9th'. Being 500 miles from London could affect the outcome of state affairs: 'from these mountains the fate of the world is often essentially modified,' wrote Count Helmuth von Moltke in 1855.

As well as politicians, guests included several generations of her expanding family, including Nicholas and Alexandra of Russia and numerous European royals. Life at Balmoral was no longer the carefree affair of her younger days—but there were remote hideaways to escape to. Unable to face staying at Allt-nagiubhsaich, the Glen Muick bothy that she and Albert had extended to create a cosy retreat (now available for rent), she had the still remoter Glass Allt Shiel remodelled as a 'compact little house' (**Fig 13**). To this inaccessible spot, she would be rowed up Loch Muick to enjoy a few days of solitude in what had been Albert's favourite place, always returning 'the better and the livelier for it'.

Just as she seemed more interested in the cosy domesticity of these simple retreats, so enthusiastically described in her journal, she was enchanted by the 'shrewd, clever, noble' Highlanders and idealised their rustic way of life. She took up Gaelic and spinning, ensured that the outdoor staff wore kilts and bonnets and commissioned Kenneth MacLeay to paint a series of Balmoral retainers and clansmen. These interests pervade *Leaves from the Journal of our Life in the Highlands*, which many thought would damage her image by dwelling too much on the servant classes and projecting herself as too ordinary and sentimental. However, despite a lack of literary polish, the Queen's chronicle of her Highland life was a publishing sensation and helped spread the fame of Balmoral.

The royal romance with the Highlands precipitated an influx of tourists and sportsmen in the later 19th century. For the new plutocracy, a Highland sporting estate was the ultimate status symbol and simple shooting boxes were replaced by mansions for entertaining on a lavish scale. Balmoral played a key part in establishing the social phenomenon of the Scottish season, and it exemplified, too, the particular blend of 'unionist-nationalism' that shaped the cultural identity of Victorian Scotland. Architecturally, however, Balmoral was relatively unimportant, despite its obvious links with the Baronial revival. Indeed, it remains in essence a picturesque holiday retreat created by a family that has never been happier than when pursuing outdoor activities in the wilds.

Tim Graham/Getty Images; Colin Preston/naturepl.com

A queen's home is her castle

Balmoral was first documented in the mid 15th century

Having built the new castle 100 yards north-west of the old building, closer to the river, Prince Albert laid a stone where the old entrance had been: on the lawn, opposite the tower

Queen Victoria laid the castle's foundation stone on September 28, 1853. This can be found at the foot of the wall, next to the west face of the entrance porch. Before this stone was laid, she buried a dated and signed parchment in the cavity below

The estate is punctuated by 10 cairns and obelisks, as well as other statues and monuments to members of the Royal Family, household and pets

In the summer of 1946, Prince Philip proposed to Princess Elizabeth at Balmoral

The Earl and Countess of Wessex spent their honeymoon at Balmoral in 1999

Balmoral employs seven gardeners. The Duke of Edinburgh takes a particular interest in the growing of fruit and vegetables in the flourishing kitchen garden

Certain areas of the castle are open to the public between early April and the end of July, including the grounds, gardens, stables and ballroom

For the Jubilee, there will be an exhibition of ballgowns belonging to The Queen, with a diamond theme, in the Ballroom. In the stables, images depicting Her Majesty's horses throughout her 60-year reign will be on display

The estate owns five holiday cottages, available to rent most of the year. For details of these and the exhibitions, telephone 01339 742534 or visit www.balmoralcastle.com



The estate today

AS we crossed the old stone bridge at the very edge of the royal estate, a fisherman cast a line across into the clinking waters of the River Dee, hoping to lure a salmon from its deep slumber behind a granite rock. A salmon that is a direct ancestor of a fish that would have lain beside the same rock when Queen Victoria bought Balmoral in 1852. As we drove up the main drive, red squirrels scattered hither and thither.

Nature hasn't changed; time at Balmoral appears to stand still. The estate contains one-sixth of all Scotland's Caledonian pine forest, as ancient as any flora in Britain. The forest formed when the glaciers slunk away at the end of the last Ice Age, creating scenery of U-shaped valleys that is captivatingly beautiful (**Fig 10**).

Victoria and Albert bought Balmoral for this scenery and sport, rather than the existing house, which they pulled down. It remains the most private royal estate, a haven where The Queen can sleep for two months of the year in the same bed. Some 50 people are employed full-time to manage it, although this number swells by a further 100 members of the Court from late July to late September, when the Royal Family is in residence.

Balmoral is run as a classic sporting estate, and also has about 550 acres of arable farmland and pasture, home to 100 Highland cattle (**Fig 9**). The red deer are still brought off the hills on the back of a garron—typically a Highland or Haflinger pony—after being shot. A beating line a mile wide drives the grouse towards the guns. Quality is always placed above numbers.

Tradition rules, with no medicated grit, no sheep and low pressure on the wild birds making for the most classic of shooting days. If Edward VII were to walk to a butt today, he would notice no difference, save for the fact that the gundogs are transported from Sandringham by road rather than rail.

This management allows for a profusion of wild birds, including ospreys, eagles, merlins and peregrines as well as all the breeds of grouse—red, ptarmigan, black—and the capercaillie (**Fig 15**). At present, thanks to fencing being removed, the capercaillie population is about 180 birds.

Balmoral is a haven for more than the wildlife, and, driving back over the old bridge, it was easy to see why the Royal Family treasures its wilderness as a well-earned escape.

Mark Hedges



↓ **Fig 15: A true capercaillie haven: some 180 of the rare birds live on the estate today**