

# John Noble

Born 1937. Landowner and oyster farmer.  
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# 1. The Noble Family



*Sir Andrew Noble (bottom left) and his wife Lady Noble (bottom right). Andrew Noble was John Noble's great grandfather.*

*The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Ardkinglas Estate website at [www.ardkinglas.com](http://www.ardkinglas.com).*

The Nobles are an ancient Scottish family of Dumbarton and Lanark and have been established there since the fifteenth century. They descend from Robert Noble of Ferme who was Baillie of Dumbarton in 1449.

Sir Andrew Noble was born in 1831 in Greenock. In 1854 he married Margery Campbell daughter of Archibald Campbell of Quebec and had two daughters and four sons. He was a gunnery expert and left the army to join Armstrongs when they opened their Ordnance factory at Elswick to produce the new Armstrong gun. He was to become Lord Armstrong's right-hand man, rising to Chairman in 1900.

He bought Ardkinglas in 1905 and enjoyed holidays on the estate until he died in 1915 aged 84. Margery Noble lived to 101. Dunderave castle was part of the estate at that time and was restored by Lorimer in 1916 for Andrew & Margery's eldest daughter Liliias.

After Sir Andrew died in 1915 his fourth son John Henry Brunel Noble inherited. He became 1st Baronet of Ardkinglas. He had a wonderful collection of silver and was regarded as a connoisseur whose opinion was well respected. When he died in 1938 his two younger sons, John and Michael ran the Estate together. John and his wife Elizabeth moved into Ardkinglas as their permanent home and brought up their children Sarah, Johnny and Christina there.

Their introduction of contemporary paintings and furnishings combined with their informal hospitality to a wide range of friends and visitors instilled the house with a particular atmosphere which remains a vital ingredient in the house's character. John worked at Bletchley during the war and was away from Ardkinglas for four years. Elizabeth provided accommodation in the house for a large number of evacuees from Glasgow.

After the war, as well as running his part of the Estate, John was active in promoting the arts in Scotland becoming Chairman of both the Scottish Crafts Centre and the Edinburgh Tapestry Company as well as serving on the BBC music committee in Glasgow. He arranged 'musical weekends' at Ardkinglas, with professional musicians. After his death a prize for singers at RSAMD was established in his memory. Elizabeth devoted extraordinary energy to caring for her family and friends and to maintaining the house. From early in the mornings she spent many hours in the large kitchen and working in the gardens.

In 1966 the estate was divided with the Strone Estate being run by Michael and the rest by his brother from Ardkinglas. Michael became MP for Argyllshire in 1958 and in 1962 became secretary of State for Scotland. John and Michael's younger sister Anastasia lived at Ardkinglas for most of her life and became an internationally renowned breeder of Scottish deerhounds. John Noble died unexpectedly at the early age of 60 in 1972 and his only son Simon John (Johnny) inherited Ardkinglas.

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## 2. Obituary of Johnny Noble

*The following obituary was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Independent website at [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk). [www.buildingourpast.com](http://www.buildingourpast.com) website. It was written by Paul Levy and was published in February 2002.*

Simon John Noble, oyster grower and businessman: born London 31 October 1936; died Glasgow 9 February 2002.

John Noble said that his ambition was to make oysters as cheap and plentiful as they were when Dickens's Sam Weller complained that "poverty and oysters seem to go together". When he died suddenly last week, aged 65, his Loch Fyne oysters was selling over a million gigas oysters a year, grown in the clean waters of the loch, which, warmed by the Gulf Stream, is ideal for cultivating shellfish. He was also a moving force in the rapidly expanding chain of Loch Fyne restaurants.

As the laird of Ardkinglas, his Argyllshire estate on the opposite shore of Loch Fyne, "Johnny" Noble lived in a fabulous Scottish baronial pile built in 1906 for his great-grandfather by Robert Lorimer. Though it took only 20 months to build, Lorimer designed every detail of the 80-room house, from its door furniture to light fittings.



*Ardkinglas.*

With its turrets, crowstepped gables and S-shaped roofs, the house epitomises the Scottish baronial style, while inside it contains a bewildering series of kitchens, an oval-domed lime-green-tiled bathroom with a Heath Robinson-inspired shower that can be set to "spray," "shower" or "wave", and a drawing-room ceiling painting by Roger Fry of a confused-looking Apollo racing on a chariot through a very cloudy sky. Noble always

maintained that his Apollo "was suffering from a touch of motion sickness".



*The Drawing Room at Ardkinglas.*

Born in London in 1936, Noble moved with his family to Scotland in 1939, and was at prep school in Fife before Eton, where he was known as "Sammy", and remembered because he and his friend Tim "Pussy" Kimber devised a scheme to win the Eton steeplechase: one of them began the race, while the other, dressed in the same clothes, hid in the shrubbery by the finish line, then leapt out and won ahead of the pack. Noble did his National Service with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, went up for one year to Magdalen College, Oxford, and then to Aix-en-Provence, where he polished up his very serviceable French.

Noble sometimes said that he never married because he'd had so much female company when he was young. He grew up in a house full of women, with two sisters and his Jewish mother, Elizabeth Lucas, who devoted her life to looking after her family, and filled the house with relatives and artistic friends of his father. His grandfather Sir John Noble was a director of Armstrong Whitworth, the armaments and shipbuilding company; when after the First World War it merged with Vickers, he went to live at Ardkinglas.

Johnny Noble began his working life at S.G. Warburg's, but left the merchant bank after a year or so to start a more congenial wine importing business, French and Foreign Wines, which gave him plenty of excuses to go to his beloved France. He liquidated the firm in 1975. His father had died in 1972 and he had inherited the estate which, though it had previously



provided enough income to run and maintain the house, was now failing to produce sufficient revenues. Looking around for a business opportunity, he met Andrew Lane, a marine biologist, who suggested growing oysters in the loch.

Starting in 1977 with a few hundred seed of the Portuguese oyster *Crassostrea gigas*, the partners had four million oysters growing at the time of Noble's death, shipping some 1.25 million each year as far afield as Hong Kong. They also grow mussels on ropes in the loch. The Loch Fyne smokery produces prodigious quantities of justly celebrated smoked salmon, which it sells through supermarkets and by mail order, along with kippers, langoustines and other marine delicacies, and in 1994 Loch Fyne Oysters won the Queen's Award for Export.

In 1980, Noble and Lane set up an oyster bar at the head of the loch. Initially it was little more than a trestle table and an umbrella, then it moved to a disused cowshed. He was very keen on eating there himself, especially as it is open all day, and until fairly recently the patron could often be seen taking breakfast at one of its tables.

He was – with reason – extremely proud that the oyster farming, smokery, mail-order and restaurant businesses at Ardkinglas provide as many jobs (if not more) as when it was a traditional working estate in his great-grandfather's day. Over 100 local people are employed.



Noble was sincere in his belief that everyone should be able to enjoy good food at reasonable cost, and putting this credo into practice was responsible for the rapid success of his subsequent ventures. The oyster bar's fame spread, and Noble and Lane decided to look for capital to expand that side of the business. Lane says, "Johnny had always had to guarantee the loans from the sceptical bank." (Noble used to say that the reaction of the bank

manager when asked for the initial funding was "Everyone must have a hobby, Mr Noble".) They invested their own money and raised the remainder from only 300 shareholders; the issue, said Andy Lane, "was oversubscribed, and the shareholders included a large number of Johnny's friends and relatives".



*Loch Fyne Oyster Bar.*

The target of 20 Loch Fyne Oyster Bars was achieved by last year, with branches in such non-seaside locations as Oxford, Cambridge, Reading, Bath and Nottingham. Several members of his family were involved in the running of the companies; so, says Andy Lane, "the businesses will continue seamlessly".

Johnny Noble had great charm, which he put to good use on the marketing side of his several businesses. He was his own best PR, and he appeared or was interviewed on several television and radio programmes. He was a true bon vivant and a wonderful host in the comfortably casual rooms of Ardkinglas which, as he said, "is not a house where every cushion has to be in place or where magazines are carefully lined up".

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### 3. Andy Lane Remembers

The following article was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Daily Record website at [www.dailyrecord.co.uk](http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk). It was written in June 2008 by Craig McQueen.

It was back in 1975 that Andy Lane met Johnny Noble for the first time on the banks of Loch Fyne. Andy was a young biology graduate earning a pittance working for a fish farm. Johnny was a local aristocrat who'd just inherited the nearby family estate along with a pile of debts. The pair had little in common but soon became friends, with Andy swapping bags of scallops for bottles of Johnny's wine.

And as the wine flowed the pair hit upon an idea. With farming in the area becoming increasingly difficult, the sea loch on their doorstep seemed their best resource. So when Andy suggested farming oysters, Johnny jumped at the chance and Loch Fyne Oysters was born. More than 30 years on, the name is famous around the world, with celebrities, politicians and royalty alike flocking to Argyll.

Now a new book tells the story of Andy and John's struggle to establish the business. Local Heroes explains how it took the pair seven years to turn a profit, how they quickly expanded as their reputation grew and how Andy and his colleagues hit upon an ambitious scheme to move the company into employee-ownership after Johnny's death in 2002.

Speaking from his farm in Cornwall, where he now lives with wife, Liz, and their two sons, Andy, 56, said: "It happened almost by accident. "People tend to be very polite and say it was amazing that we planned all of that but we didn't. "We were just doing something we enjoyed doing and trying to survive." While Andy worked tirelessly on the banks of the loch, Johnny would be putting contacts he had in the wine trade to good use to bring in new business.

Andy said: "Johnny wasn't a conventional salesman and he wasn't manipulative. He just had such a warm character that people were drawn towards him. He was drawn to people, too, and he enjoyed the company of people he respected. "He was just a warm, generous character and there was nothing snobbish about him. So he did that while I applied myself to the practical side of things." That often meant working from dawn till dusk as Andy struggled to get orders ready in time to be taken south by train.

He said: "You had to commit everything and, after a time as you get older, you realise that there's no way back from that commitment as you'd be unemployable anywhere else. But I was also an immensely lucky man living in a beautiful place and doing what I wanted to do."



While Andy speaks fondly of those early days, it took seven long years for the project to break even, the turning point coming in 1984 when Johnny put his entertaining skills to good use by inviting some of the country's top food critics to Loch Fyne.

Andy said: "That was incredibly brave of him. We risked ridicule but it gave us a kind of respectability among restaurant buyers. "We had been subjected to ridicule for many years as the idea of growing oysters in Loch Fyne was mad and the idea of having an oyster bar anywhere outside of London was, too. "So to get some endorsement from some hard-headed journalists helped us locally and helped us in the market."

By the mid-Eighties, the project had spawned a shop, which began as a wooden hut on the side of the road and, as it was realised most customers were eating the produce outside the shop, a picnic area was opened next door. That quickly became the restaurant, and, as the business grew, a chain of restaurants bearing the Loch Fyne name was opened under a separate company.

Celebrities would also be a common sight, even if Andy and his colleagues often didn't recognise them. He said: "The funny thing is that for years you could hardly watch TV there because the reception was so lousy and so customers used to tell us that such and such a person had been in the restaurant. "None of us had a clue because we didn't know what a lot of these people would look like.

"We did get more tuned in later on, though. Robbie Coltrane was a regular and always very popular with the staff. "We saw Billy Connolly a few times, Clint Eastwood was in and poor old Dustin Hoffman got turned away two days running because we couldn't find him a seat. He took it very well." Then there was the famous Loch Fyne Summit between Gordon Brown and John Prescott, who talked in the car park about the future of the Labour leadership in 2004. Andy said: "It was a good bit of PR. And the ironic thing about Brown and Prescott was that on the very same day, Princess Anne was here. She comes calling quite a lot in a low-key way but nobody picked up on it."

As the business expanded, being managing director meant Andy had to spend more time in the office and less time on the loch. "But what you have to do is to hang on to your beliefs and your principles. I certainly wasn't the greatest manager but you've got to do your best."

That included coping when Johnny died of liver cancer in 2002, aged just 65. With only a few close friends, such as Andy, knowing of his illness, his death came as a shock to many and, being the majority shareholder, it also created uncertainty for the company.

Andy said: "It was very very difficult as it felt as if your partner had died and you'd been left to look after the 10 kids. "Things had to go on as before. The sad thing is you don't fully appreciate someone until they're gone. "In a way, the employee ownership was a substitute for Johnny as his mix of character and spirit was able to continue."

With potential bidders showing interest, Andy and his colleagues realised it would take around £4million if the firm's 110 employees were to buy the company. That seemed unlikely until they received the financial backing of the Baxi Partnership, a trust which aims to help employees of successful companies to put together bids for ownership.

Andy said: "Loch Fyne Oysters had a philosophy, a belief and an atmosphere, and it seemed that employee-ownership was the best way of keeping that going. "Then a friend saw an article about the Baxi Partnership and gave me a ring." With the help of the partnership and their bank, Andy and the employees had a bid of £3.9million accepted.

It meant a change in structure within the company and while, the success continued, Andy stepped back from the day-to-day running in 2005.

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## 4. Visiting Loch Fyne

*The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Critical Couple website at [www.thecriticalcouple.com](http://www.thecriticalcouple.com). The Critical Couple are an anonymous husband and wife team of restaurant critics. The article was published in February 2014.*



Roy Brett is one of Scotland's finest chefs, proprietor of Ondine Restaurant in Edinburgh (which won the AA's Restaurant of the Year award for Scotland 2013/14) and an absolutely top notch fella to boot. Recently, he has also taken on the position of consultant chef at Loch Fyne, and given our love of the Scottish larder, we jumped at the opportunity to spend a few days with Roy and the folks at Loch Fyne to learn more about what they are up to. Given that Loch Fyne is famous for both its smoked salmon and oysters, we arrive hungry.

### **Day 1**

Our first stop is the Restaurant & Oyster Bar which remains located on the original site overlooking the loch. Inside however has enjoyed a recent refurb and the menu of course is overseen by Roy Brett. A dozen oysters that have traveled no more than a mile to our plate give us a Loch Fyne welcome and they truly are fabulous. Loch Fyne has exceptionally pure water and the oysters deliver intense salty freshness that is as good as it gets. Roy is in the kitchen today and the food keeps on coming.

Smoked salmon is clearly a must and that too is of the highest quality. Four amazing scallops with venison sausage are delivered while Roy's hot seafood platter that is one of many triumphs at his Edinburgh restaurant is also delivered to the table here and leaves us delighted, but by the end, beaten. Indeed, it wasn't till day three that we could even approach dessert, for me a Glengoyne Whisky Tart that has also made its way from the Ondine menu.

To balance out our lunch, a bracing walk along River Fyne in the afternoon with Virginia Sumison, head of marketing and events at Loch Fyne and niece of founder John (Johnny) Noble filled us in on the wonderful history of her family and the origins of Loch Fyne as an oyster business. Johnny sadly passed away in 2002 but was surely the type of person all of us wish we could know. In the obituary published in The Guardian it states:

*He ate in his own restaurant several days a week... anonymous to the coach parties that surrounded him... he had a gentle manner but a loud whisper, which got him into difficulty. Once, in his restaurant, a woman luncher overheard him discussing another, obnoxious luncher with a member of his staff, and asked that he be removed. Noble left obediently with the words "fair enough" His largest achievement was the prosperity and optimism he brought his own small community in Argyllshire.*

The result is that in Cairndow where Loch Fyne's operations are based, there are more jobs than there are people such that Loch Fyne is as much a community as it is a business and that was demonstrated by the warmth and pride of the many people we met during our time there. As if we weren't already lucky enough to be at Loch Fyne, we must say a huge thank you to the Sumison family who let us stay at their remarkable family home, Ardkinglas, a house that is simply breathtaking as it first comes in to view as you proceed up the driveway. See the pictures below to view just how fabulous this house is and for anyone visiting the area, it is possible to have a private tour of the house, a wedding, or even stay there as we did (details available on the Ardkinglas website.)



*Restaurant and oyster bar.*





*A dozen oyster in the restaurant including natives and rock.*



*Loch Fyne's famous smoked salmon. Below: scallops and venison sausage.*







*Hot seafood platter.*



*The family home, Ardkinglas.*

## **Day 2**

Sunshine. Blue skies and a walk down to the loch before breakfast. It's little wonder we love Scotland so much.



*Loch Fyne, early morning.*

Later that morning we visit the oyster farm and Andre talks us through the process. Despite our years of food blogging our oyster knowledge (beyond eating them) is somewhat (embarrassingly) sparse and we're amazed to learn that oysters are bred initially in hatcheries (not on site) after which it can take up to three years for an oyster to grow to the size that is served in a restaurant.



*Andre and the Loch Fyne oyster beds.*

We're amazed too at the number of oysters packed off each day by Loch Fyne, and that each and every oyster is checked (for being alive) by tapping the shell (dead ones have a hollow ring) and that this is done by just two people, Andre and his colleague Alistair. What's more, despite Loch Fyne having pure enough water to serve oysters without purification, that's done anyway but with Loch Fyne water so that the essence is never lost. It goes



without saying that despite the volume of oysters shipped, Loch Fyne Oysters is a sustainable business.

Andre was amazing and yet another perfect ambassador for the Loch Fyne community and of course, put us in the mood for another dozen oysters at the Restaurant and Oyster bar where some crab also seemed like a good idea.



*Oyster purification.*



*Crab at the restaurant.*

### **Three men and a boat. And us.**

Sea legs for the afternoon as we board a RIB and head out to Loch Fyne's IMTA site to see first hand the very latest developments in sustainable aquaculture. IMTA stands for Integrated multi-trophic aquaculture and the ever useful Wiki describes it thus:

*Integrated multi-trophic aquaculture (IMTA) provides the by-products, including waste, from one aquatic species as inputs (fertilizers, food) for another. Farmers combine fed aquaculture (e.g., fish, shrimp) with inorganic extractive (e.g., seaweed) and organic extractive (e.g., shellfish) aquaculture to create balanced systems for environment remediation (biomitigation), economic stability (improved output, lower cost, product diversification and risk reduction) and social acceptability (better management practices)*

Put another way, Loch Fyne has salmon farms and that leads to a concentration of certain factors in the water surrounding these farms. Can this be balanced out by the encouragement of other native species around the farms for improved environmental practices and enhanced sustainability? Yes is the current best thinking on the topic and therefore alongside the salmon farms marine biologist David Attwood is overseeing the cultivation of seaweed, mussels, oysters, scallops and even sea urchins providing a win-win for the business and the environment.



*Iain, Richard and David.*

We got so see the tiniest baby Queen Scallops alongside the bigger versions. It was really something to see David and Iain bring up some sea

urchins from the loch also, though perhaps the highlight was to pull up the oysters and shuck them while still wet out the water. A bottle of Chablis had even found its way on board to be enjoyed alongside the oysters, but this was a highly educational trip and our thanks to David, Iain and Richard for spending time with us to explain what is very much a leading edge research project.



*Scallops, small and large.*



*a sea urchin from the ITMA project.*





*left to right: David Attwood, Loch Fyne's marine biologist, David & Iain bringing the oysters on board, Iain shucking an oyster fresh from the loch.*



*Loch Fyne oysters at source.*



*Heading back to base as the sun sets on Loch Fyne.*

### **Day 3**

Can't be lucky forever and it's raining again on Day 3 but Ardkinglas looks lovely in all weathers. Fortunately our activities are mostly indoors today.



*Ardkinglas in the rain.*

If you visit the Deli at Loch Fyne and look through a window behind the counter, you might see a machine delivering perfect sides of salmon. This is the smokehouse where all of Loch Fyne's famous salmon is smoked. Donning our shoe covers, white coats and hair nets, Production Manager



Raymond MacAffer walked us through the process of one of Scotland's most famous food products. Again, to see, smell and later taste the finished product (which we of course eagerly did many times during our stay) allows for a much greater appreciation of food that is all too easy to take for granted.



*Left to right: a whole salmon in, two sides out; lighting the smoker; sides of salmon in the smoking unit.*



*The restaurant and oyster bar.*



*A plate of langoustine at the restaurant.*



*The Deli.*



*Oyster plates collected by Johnny Noble.*

With so much going on, we didn't even have time to visit Fyne Ales for the brewery tour (next time!) before it was time to move on, but we left Loch Fyne not only with a deep appreciation of the food they produce and how they produce it, but of the people behind all of this and how Loch Fyne Oysters has brought people together as a community, colleagues and friends. To be welcomed into that family for the duration of our stay was very special.

Our thanks then to all those mentioned above as well as Campbell and Bruce with whom we enjoyed a very pleasant dinner, learning more about Loch Fyne from the top down view, as well as Martin, Richard, Alastair and Moyra in the restaurant and deli who looked after us so well every day and kept those oysters coming. And three years from hatchery to plate: never again will we take oysters for granted.

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## 5. A Tour of Ardkinglas

*The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of Patricia Bracewell at [www.patriciabracewell.com](http://www.patriciabracewell.com).*



*Ardkinglas House, Cairndow, Argyll, Scotland.*

Ardkinglas House is perched on the edge of Loch Fyne in southwestern Scotland, about fifty miles from Glasgow near the village of Cairndow (pronounced cairndoo). It was built in 1907, a relatively new home compared to, say, Highclere Castle in West Berkshire, far to the south where *Downton Abbey* is filmed. Yet as I walked through Ardkinglas house last September, visiting its great rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, servants quarters, and gardens I couldn't help thinking of *Downton Abbey*.

Ardkinglas, with its 50 rooms, is much smaller than Highclere which has something like 200. But the family that lived at Ardkinglas in the early 20th century lived much the way that the fictional *Downton Abbey* family lives in the series. They faced similar challenges in adapting to a post-war world, and the interiors of the houses, especially below stairs where much of the drama of *Downton* takes place, looked strikingly familiar.



We were given a private tour of Ardkinglas by the current owner, David Sumsion. He is the great-great-grandson of the home's original owner, Andrew Noble, who purchased the estate in 1905 and commissioned one of Scotland's leading architects, Robert Lorimer, to design the house. An architect himself, David Sumsion lives on an upper floor of Arkdinglas

with his family in a private apartment. The mud room, just off the Ardkinglas entrance hall, was lined with boots from kid-size on up. This was a home, I realized as I hung my wet raincoat on a peg, not just a big house or a movie set.



*The owner of Ardkinglas points out features of the dining room.*





The estate itself, like the estate at Highclere, dates back to the 14th century. It first belonged to the Campbells, then it passed by marriage to the Callander family until debt forced its sale to Andrew Noble.

One advantage that Ardkinglas had right away over homes built even 25 years earlier was that the designer incorporated newer technology. Elements that older houses would be forced to add through re-design were built into Ardkinglas — phone service, a dumb waiter and central heating. Older technologies are still in place too, although no longer used: bells and buzzers to call servants, cold rooms just off the kitchen for food storage. I could imagine Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes – or, going further back in my memory, Mr. Hudson and Mrs. Bridges – running the show downstairs, answering the phone, ordering the servants about.



*The old stove at Ardkinglas.*

The home was filled with remnants from the lives of all of its previous owners. Andrew Noble made his fortune in armaments, and we saw giant bullets on display as well as toy-sized canon. Artwork, statuary, musical instruments, furniture – some of it strikingly modern, other pieces quite old – jostled each other in the grandest rooms. Bathrooms, of course, had been updated over the years, but nothing was what you would call “modern” by today’s standards.



*The salon.*



*One small corner of the salon.*





*View of Loch Fyne from Ardkinglas.*



Our host did not shy away from showing us parts of the house that were not in the best repair. Upstairs, the roof had leaked in one spot, and the plaster was discolored and peeling. The roof work, we were assured, had been done. The repair on the interior walls would take longer. It seemed to me that the house was rather like a dowager duchess that had seen better days.

Maggie Smith in stone and mortar. Highclere Castle has the same problem on a much larger scale. As recently as 2010 the owners were wringing their hands over the £11.7 million worth of repairs needed. Corporate functions and weddings could not bring in enough money to cover even a tiny portion of it. But then, in 2011, Julian Fellowes arrived with his Downton film crews, and after them, legions of tourists. Highclere is undergoing rejuvenation as a result.

Ardkinglas, too, has opened its doors to bring in funds for needed maintenance. Tours, weddings and musical events are held there. A pop-up dinner for 30 orchestrated by a gourmet chef was scheduled for the month following our visit and was already sold out. Look at their website today and you'll see that there will be bread making classes offered there in early 2014. That made me smile, because I remembered David Sumsion reminiscing about how his grandmother loved to make bread.

But although Ardkinglas has been featured in a number of films and television shows, I don't imagine that the owners are anticipating a visit from Julian Fellowes any time soon. It's true that one of Andrew Noble's other homes, down in Newcastle, has been converted into a hotel, but I did not get the impression that David Sumsion envisioned going in that direction. You can stay in the house, though, if you want to visit Ardkinglas and Cairndow. The Butler's Quarters are available to rent, although it's my understanding that neither Mr. Hudson nor Mr. Carson are part of the deal.



## 6. The Next Generation



*David Sumsion.*

*The following was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Ardkinglas Estate website at [www.ardkinglas.com](http://www.ardkinglas.com).*

Ardkinglas Estate currently covers around 12,000 acres, mostly of hill ground, home to 1,000 ewes, 20 cattle, many deer and other wild animals, sealife and birds. During the thirty years when Johnny Noble was running the Estate he attracted new businesses to the area, as well as starting Loch Fyne Oysters, providing both new employment for the community and new commercial tenants for the Estate.

Since 2002 his nephew David Sumsion has continued this process of change. Future plans include new housing, self-catering holiday accommodation, sites for new commercial businesses, development of the Tree Shop & Cafe, an increasing number of events at Ardkinglas House, major renovation of many buildings and also repairs to the exterior fabric of Ardkinglas House. A new windfarm site has been developed in conjunction with Argyll Estates and nine turbines were commissioned in 2009.

Forestry has always played an important role in the Estate and the commercial woodlands to the south of the house continue to be managed for timber production as well as for their landscape qualities. In addition there are old oak woods on the west side of Loch Fyne, an ancient hazel wood in Glen Fyne and, more recently, a number of natural regeneration schemes and newly planted areas of native species have been established.

*The following article was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Financial Times at [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com). It was written by Carolyn Reynier in September 2007.*



David Sumsion, 49, runs Arbour, an architecture practice based in Argyll on the west coast of Scotland. In 2002 he inherited the Ardkinglas Estate at the head of Loch Fyne from his uncle, Johnny Noble, co-founder of the Loch Fyne Oyster Company. He lives there with his wife, Angela, and two daughters.

*What is the history of Ardkinglas?*

It was built by my great-great grandparents, Sir Andrew and Margery Noble. He was an inventor and became chairman of [armaments company] Vickers Armstrong in Newcastle upon Tyne. They were both in their 70s when the house was built so it was done at incredible speed – designed in a few months and built in 18 months from start to finish. It was unbelievable, really, because that was before there were any proper roads; most of the materials had to come by boat. It was their summer house. Their main house was at Jesmond near Newcastle. Being a summer residence partly explains why it was designed with large windows and a central light well that gives it quite a different character to a lot of earlier Victorian houses, which tend to be dark and gloomy.

*And the grounds?*

In addition to the magic of the building, it has a particularly wonderful site. It is next to the old gardens of the previous Georgian house, overlooking the ornamental lake known as the Caspian, beyond which are the ladies' garden and the vast old walled garden. The approach to the house is through ancient woodland alongside the tumbling waters of the River Kinglas. The most spectacular element is the view down the length of Loch Fyne to the south-west, facing into approaching weather and the sunsets

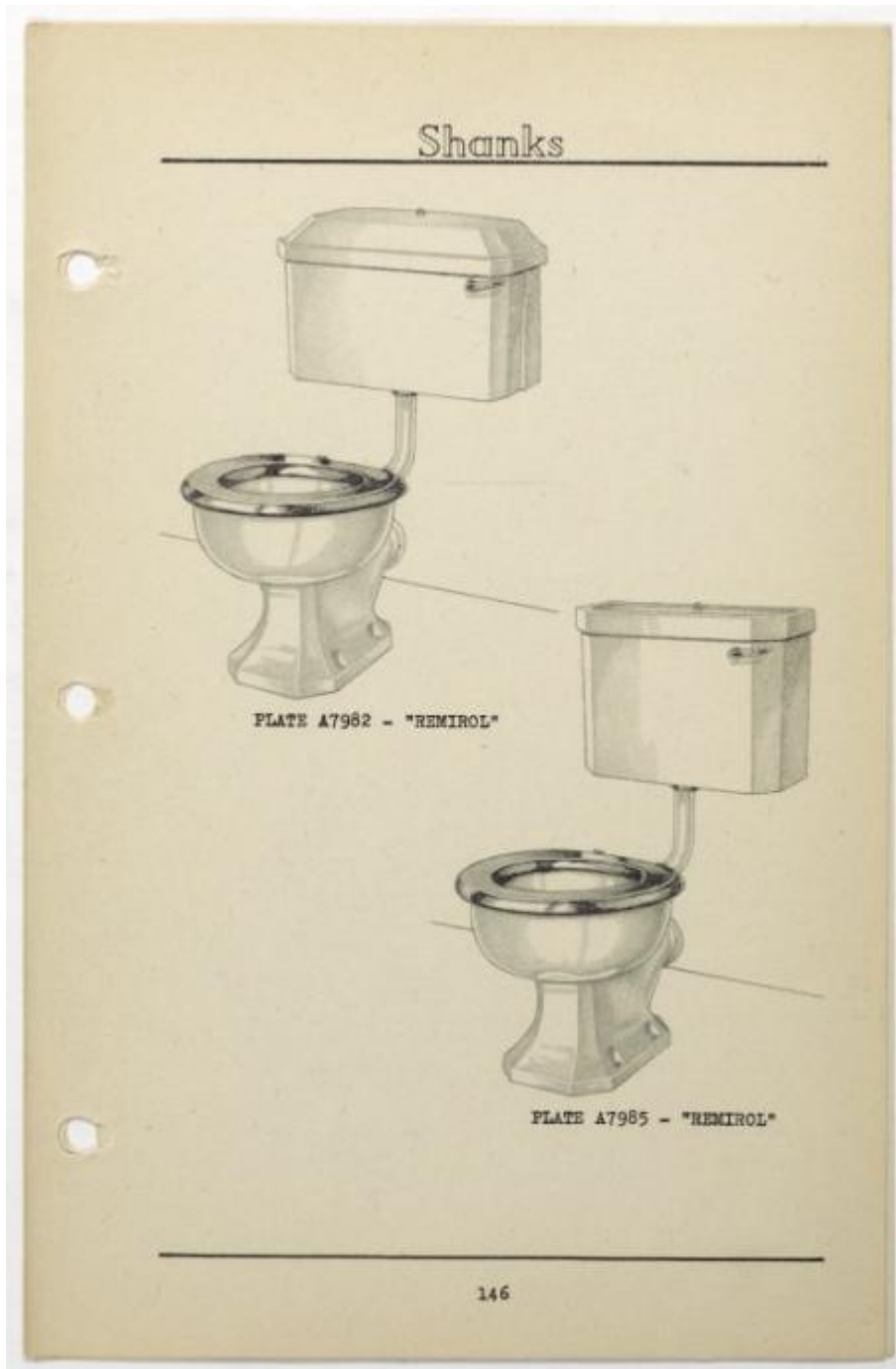
*What do you call the building style?*

It was built in 1906 and 1907, so Edwardian. Some people call it Scots baronial but I think that's almost meaningless. The architect was Robert Lorimer. He had done a lot of work, mainly on restoring and altering existing buildings – old tower houses. There are a dozen or so principal bedrooms, drawing room, dining room, morning room on the first floor, the billiard room, study, morning room downstairs. People comment that despite its size it feels very homely, not overpoweringly large. That's partly due to the hole in the centre for the light well. It's like a courtyard; windows facing into it all have translucent glass. Its function is purely to bring in light.

*You have some great bathrooms.*

Lorimer designed a toilet that was sold under the brand name of Remirol – Lorimer spelled backwards. We have one of those. There were originally two en suite bathrooms and only two or three others. I think most people

still had bath tubs in their rooms. There's one amazing shower. It's an all around framework with a control where you can choose wave or spray. It's an early version of a spa-type thing but this was 1906. It's in what would now be called a wet room, with unbelievably beautiful tiles, all done to an amazing standard.



*The Remirol Toilet, designed by Robert Lorimer, architect of Ardkinglas House.*

*You inherited from your uncle. Tell me a little about him.*

Johnny had to deal with a lot of death duties and an estate that was essentially 19th century in character in the way it was run. A farm was the main business. He started looking for ways of making it more financially

viable. He had a childhood memory of crushing up native oyster shells so when he met Andy Lane, a marine biologist, after a few experiments, they laid down oyster beds and successfully started producing oysters. Initially they were sold from a shed at the head of the loch, then a shop in the old farm building at Clachan, which led to the oyster bar. It became a limited company but remains a tenant of the estate in terms of the foreshores for the oyster beds.

*What memories do you have of earlier homes?*

I've moved around so much. Ardkinglas is about my 30th home. Aged eight, I became a chorister at Westminster Abbey, boarding at the choir school. I don't remember it with great affection but it was a wonderful musical and architectural experience. The strongest musical memories are from the routine daily services, when the sound of the choir merged with the fabric of the building, often producing a transcendental effect in my mind.



*The Kullu Valley.*

*Tell me about India. You stayed with the BBC Delhi correspondent Mark Tully.*

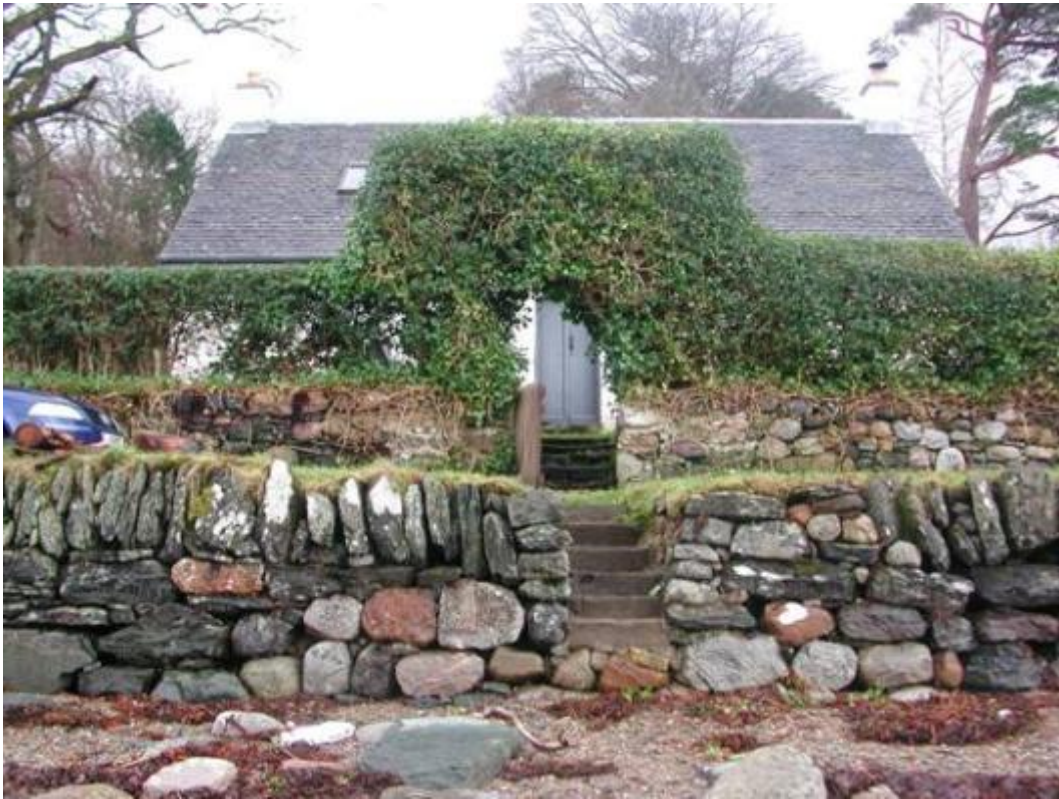
Halfway through my architectural training I worked for six months in Delhi. I stayed with Mark and Margaret Tully in their house in Nizamudin in New Delhi. They introduced me to their friends and favourite places around the city. A friend offered to let me practise on their piano and gave me a bicycle, which I used to commute to work. It was very enjoyable – savouring the wonderful scents in the late evening air as I burred along the avenues on the way back from a film or a meal with friends. The bicycle later went with me by bus to Kullu, where I enjoyed breathtaking downhill rides and breathless uphill pushes.



*Kullu?*

I spent a full year doing measured survey drawings of a group of temples around the area of the Kullu Valley in the Himalayas, where there is a very particular pagoda-type temple, unique to that area and very little known. I was based at my aunt Christina and her husband Kranti's house near Manali. They built a new house among terraced orchards using local materials – stone and deodar cedar. The house has a cool shaded interior that contrasts with an open veranda cantilevered out around all four sides of the second floor, with stunning views of the mountains. From there, rattling buses took me along mountain roads towards the various remote temples that I was surveying and where I camped for four or five days at a time. I felt happy and very much at home in India. I like the people, I like the way of life.

*You already lived on the estate before moving to Ardkinglas.*



*Policy Gate Cottage.*

Policy Gate's a beautiful cottage on the end of the loch, three miles from the main house. I rented it from my aunt Christina before I was married. It's older than Ardkinglas. There are quite a lot of cottages on the estate built by previous owners.

*The house is a venue for films?*

There have been a number of films made. The most recent is called *The Water Horse*. One of the best things filmed here was a television four-part series – an adaptation of *The Crow Road* by Iain Banks.

*Ardkinglas must hold many memories for you.*

I've known it for 49 years – nearly half its life. I remember the sense of discovery that came from gradually getting to know different rooms, stairs and corridors, each with their own individual atmosphere. And memories of people: my great-grandmother on a visit from Edinburgh sitting on the window seat in the drawing room; my grandfather, whom I heard practising on the Steinway before breakfast each day; my grandmother, who devoted extraordinary energy to keeping the house going, making bread, butter, jams and sausages; my great-aunt, who lived in the house until my grandfather died and who was a famous breeder of Scottish deerhounds; and a steady flow of visiting friends, musicians and students whom my grandparents invited to stay.

*And now?*

We live in a small part; the whole house is used for family get-togethers. It's been in a single family for 100 years. Little has changed aside from new furniture and paintings over the years. It's a real family home.

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