

FEATURES

Castle for sale

Left to rot for decades, this Highland pile is being restored to the glory that impressed Queen Victoria — and even commoners can afford a share

Alexandra Goss Published: 26 April 2015



The building that originally stood on the site dated from 1550 (James Brittain)

Taymouth Castle is the epic sort of place you'd find in a Walter Scott door-stopper, featuring turrets and secret passages, heartbreakingly beautiful landscapes and royal romance. There's even Hollywood sparkle. After a sad decline from its heyday hosting Victoria and Albert on a belated honeymoon trip to Scotland, the estate is coming to life again as a five-star golf and spa hotel — and, for £30,000, anyone can buy a corner of this reincarnated fortress.

At the foot of the Highlands, close to Loch Tay and the market town of Aberfeldy, Taymouth's 330-acre setting — a vast panorama of green and brown trees, dotted with pheasant and deer and with the snow-tipped peak of Ben Lawers in the distance — is so perfectly, absurdly Celtic that I half-expect a piper to start wheezing Scotland the Brave. The cornflower-blue skies strike the only atypical note.

Queen Victoria, though, had authentically Scottish weather when she came to stay for three days in September 1842, in a wing built especially for her and her new husband. Though it scarcely stopped raining, the 23-year-old sovereign was enchanted by the imposing castle and its "most beautiful" setting — it is said the visit inspired Albert to purchase Balmoral in 1852, and Taymouth was used to stand in for the royal residence in the 1997 film *Mrs Brown*, starring Judi Dench and Billy Connolly.

The castle today is a hive of activity. Cheery lads on ride-on mowers tend to the championship-length 18-hole golf course, which was designed in 1925 by James Braid (who also created those at Gleneagles) and is set to reopen in June. The strains of soft rock blaring from workmen's radios are the only interruptions to the sound of birdsong and the gushing of the salmon-filled crystal waters of the River Tay, more than two miles of which runs through the estate. The pressure is on to get the castle and grounds, branded as the Highland Tay Retreat, ready for a July opening.



The painstaking restoration work has cost £29m (James Brittain)

The building that originally stood on the site dated from 1550; it assumed its current gothic grey-green stone form in the early 18th century. It was the principal seat of the Campbells of Breadalbane until 1922, when it was sold off at a week-long public auction. After stints as a hotel and a hospital for injured Polish soldiers, the property was closed in the mid-1970s, and had lain empty ever since.

After a number of false starts, including rumours that both Madonna and Google were looking to buy it, Taymouth is finally being opened by Robin Barrasford. Some £29m has already been spent on restoring the A listed castle to its 19th-century glory. More than

80 tons of lead was removed from the roof, which has essentially been rebuilt and firmly weatherproofed, while 200,000 slates were removed, redressed and replaced. A team of 10 people spent two years restoring the windows.

“There were strict rules from Historic Scotland about how the workmen made the paint. They had to follow the traditional methods, which involved crushing beetles,” Barrasford says. “They couldn’t just nip down to Farrow & Ball.”



All this painstaking renovation is most evident once you step inside. Beyond a simple carved wooden hallway looms the majestic 100ft gilt and alabaster length of the great staircase. Designed in the early 19th century by the sculptor Francis Bernasconi, who worked on Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace, it has a vaulted ceiling decorated with Campbell clan shield motifs. On a table near the top lies the visitors book, signed by Dench and Connolly. To one side is the Chinese Room, named for its oriental wallpaper and silk panels. The ceilings are gilded with real gold in the style of illuminated 14th-century manuscripts.

The other public spaces are equally opulent yet tasteful. There’s the Banner Hall, in which Victoria and Albert danced during their stay, and where the ceiling depicts 92 coats of arms of the families connected in marriage to the Breadalbanes. The room’s heavy black fireplace is made from one vast hunk of local chlorite slate. Nearby is the library, a mass of intricate carvings by James Gillespie Graham, a Scottish architect heavily influenced by Augustus Pugin. The extraordinary ceiling is insured for £11m, and through a secret door hidden behind a wall of books is the bedroom built especially for Victoria and Albert, the ceiling decorated with the date of their visit and their initials.



There were strict rules on the use of traditional materials and techniques (Andy Lock)

“People can rent a vast suite comprising the library and the royal rooms, though it will be one of the most expensive hotel rooms in Europe — at about £15,000 a night,” Barrasford says.

A total of 52 ensuite hotel rooms are being built in phases in the east wing, at an average of 525 sq ft and in a luxurious yet traditional style to blend in with the rest of the castle. All but 13 rooms can be bought freehold as a whole, or in fractions. Eight rooms have already been reserved and the next phase of 11 is now being released; you

can buy one outright for £390,000, or pay £30,000 for a one-thirteenth share, entitling you to four weeks' stay a year. Any unused weeks can be given back to the hotel, with half the room rate going to the hotel and half to the owner, allowing buyers to cover their costs and, potentially, make a return.

"I don't want it to be thought of as an investment, though," Barrasford says. "It's about bragging rights — being able to say at a dinner party, 'Guess what: I own part of a Scottish castle!'"

The sale of hotel rooms will fund other developments on the retreat, including the construction of a contemporary north wing with 72 rooms and a pool; a Scandinavian spa built over a waterfall; holiday homes and, eventually, the conversion of the dairy, built out of rough-hewn chunks of quartz especially for the royal visit, into a four-bedroom property. "This will be the final thing we do, and will go for millions," he says.

The buzz is spreading — dog walkers and passers-by come to gawp. "We have been following the story of the castle for so long," one spry pensioner tells me. "It's fabulous that it's finally coming to life again."



By royal appointment: Queen Victoria and Prince Albert stayed at Taymouth Castle and found the setting 'most beautiful', despite the Scottish weather (Keystone/Getty)