

Thinking outside the broch

The adventurous reconstruction of farm outbuildings in Angus is a draw as much for its eye-catching design as its luxurious facilities

Words **Nichola Hunter**

Diversification has been the buzz word in farming this century. The norm is a converted steading or a small self-catering unit. But that's certainly not the case at Balbinny in Angus.

David Milne's family have been farming at Balbinny for 25 years, but when it became apparent that his sons weren't keen to take over the traditional aspects of the family business, he started looking at ways he could make life on a farm more appealing.

"We were looking to diversify but it kind of grew arms and legs," David recalls. "The initial grant application allowed for 20 beds to be created from a steading and two old barns. It started as a couple of self-catering units but soon my wife Lynsay and I started talking about a gym and a swimming pool. We knew it would extend our season, which was the main thinking behind it. Angus is a bit of an undiscovered area so we thought if people were searching for accommodation with a swimming pool and gym they might find us rather than if they were just looking to stay in Angus."

Aside from raising the bar in the facilities they could offer, the couple were also keen to create something a bit special. "We worked with Montgomery

The circular brochs with their distinctive grass roofs



Forgan Associates and it was they who suggested the grass-roofed brochs. We really liked the idea. They fit in very well with the landscape where they're situated. We would have liked to build more of them but the planners wanted the steadings to be part of the overall build as well."

The building of Lethnot commenced in November 2012 with the second broch being completed in June this year. The former steading has been split into three separate properties with two en-suite bedrooms on the ground floor and upstairs a spacious open plan kitchen/living/dining area. Adjacent is the pool, spa and fitness suite, which command stunning views over the surrounding farmland and beyond. Down the hill the two brochs are nestled into the landscape, but in common with hobbit

houses, they are deceptively large once you go inside.

The couple were keen to recycle wherever they could and the stone from the original 300-year-old steading was carefully preserved and used in the new buildings. The old stone stairs to the hay loft were incorporated as window sills, while the massive wooden lintels were preserved then cut to two-inch boards at a local sawmill to be used in the bedrooms and bathrooms of Lethnot. The original steading flooring has been upcycled to form headboards and the stone dairy cubicle walls used as hearths. These older elements were mixed with aluminium roofing, which blends into the backdrop of the Cairngorms, and cedar wood cladding to create a unique effect.

"We're both keen on upcycling. We've

also travelled extensively and a lot of the ideas for the interiors came from our travels," says David. "There are elements of Berlin – the pocket doors which we saw in Lux II; from Copenhagen, the clean lines and design; and from the Greek Islands, the incorporation of indigenous stone using traditional methods from Bill & Coos in Mykonos. Added to it all this is a flavour of Scotland, with stags' heads and Anta throws and cushions. It's a real mix but I think our look serves a dual purpose, a minimalist style but with low upkeep as well."

Luxury was also a key consideration. Designer sofas, stylish wood-burning stoves, Sonos sound systems, boutique-style bathrooms with rain showers and Swedish wood-burning hot tubs all add to the brochs' inimitable

Clockwise from above: the panorama outside is the focus of each living room; the kitchen; the swimming pool; neighbouring Balbinny farm; a bedroom using upscald timber; Angus scenery through the floor-to-ceiling windows of another bedroom

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charms. However, whilst the interiors are certainly easy on the eye, the one thing each property has in common is stunning views and David and Lynsay have done everything to maximise this for their guests. "If you visualise the broch like an egg, the back is all stonework and the front is floor-to-ceiling curved windows and views, it's an amazing rounded aspect."

The pool, which is eco-friendly and air-source heated also benefits from views on three sides, but it's the steading accommodation that has been the most surprising hit with guests when it comes to the views, as David explains: "I was sceptical of north-facing balconies but they've been a huge success. Lynsay came up with the idea of fitting electric heaters on them and they're incredibly warm and sheltered. We regularly have

guests sitting out there at 11 o'clock at night in November. It works brilliantly."

The project has been a slow and steady one but the five years of hard work have paid off. "Our pool won Best Commercial Pool in the UK last year and Lethnot was named as one of the Top 50 Best Cottages by another survey. I think there is something for everyone here and all year round, which was the main aim. Recent additions have been the tennis court and a children's play area. In the end, we project managed it ourselves, we used a largely local workforce and we've kept it as green as possible. I think we've created something to be proud of." Balbinny – perhaps a new buzz word for diversification?

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