

Craigietochoer Tower – a grand design!

Craigietochoer Tower

by Gordon Craigie



WHO AMONGST us hasn't watched and listened to Kevin McCloud waxing lyrical about yet another 'innovative' building project with an 'unrealistic' budget and an 'unachievable' timescale and thought, "I could do that"? For most of us, that's as far as the thought gets and, entertaining as it is to watch over-stressed people running over-budget and over-schedule before finally arriving smugly/deservedly (delete as appropriate!) at the front door of their newly-finished dream home to welcome Kevin back to wax even more lyrically about the aesthetic beauty of their magnificent achievement, most of us are too busy just keeping the roof we've got over our heads to be bothered with all the faff! The Channel 4 institution that is *Grand Designs* started back in 1999 and is still going strong more than 200 episodes later – that's a lot of grand designs, and who knows how many people are inspired by the programme to start on their own ambitious projects? And, it's not the only show in town, with the many copycat variations appearing on the scene on a regular basis contributing to an entire genre of televisual escapism known simply as 'property porn'.

One ambitious building project that doesn't quite fit into the tight scheduling required by television is that undertaken by *iScot Magazine* reader Phill Plevy who decided back in 1992 that he would quite like to build or restore a small tower or castle, like you do, preferably within 75 miles of Aberdeen. He was surprised to find that there was no shortage of opportunities but, perhaps less surprisingly, most of them came with hefty price-tags that were well outside his budget. Phill also found that, "Prices seemed to go up proportionally with how much interest we showed or, if we did seem to be getting somewhere with a particular purchase, I'd be informed by *Historic Scotland* that the building was not considered to be of any historic importance and therefore no grants were available. However, if I did decide to buy and restore, then they'd require me to firstly carry out a detailed site survey to record every detail

of the structure and foundations prior to starting any work on the site. This, of course, would have to be carried out by a professional body, at my expense."

Undeterred, Phill ploughed on with the search and, 3 years later, thought he'd finally found his dream project when he agreed to the asking price for Balquhain Castle, around 3 miles north-west of Inverurie. However, when the asking price jumped by £50,000 overnight, he declined that kind offer and decided that, as by now he believed he knew more about Scottish castles than most people, he would build his own. "I based my plans on a sixteenth century style Scottish fortified tower house – it needed to be harled because I couldn't afford to build in stone – so I did all the basic drawings of what I wanted, then contacted a good friend of mine, the Glasgow architect John Wetten Brown, and asked him to make up the drawing to submit for planning approval. There were four objections to the build, three from local residents and one from the Green Party, but the Planning Committee dismissed all of them in about 5 minutes flat as they said it was wonderful that someone was building to a true Scottish design in Scotland. Buoyed by that success I bought the land, a little over 2 acres in a small glen a couple of miles south of Turriff in Aberdeenshire – two small burns run through it and form two of the three boundaries of the long triangular site.

An entire genre of televisual escapism known simply as 'property porn'



Site before and during clearance



Marking out and starting foundations



A tower begins to emerge

This is the bit on Grand Designs when a worried looking Kevin delivers his "have they bitten off more than they can chew?" piece slowly to camera

"Obtaining Building Authority Approval was not as easy as obtaining Planning Permission, mainly due to me trying to build a tower house in the true sixteenth century style while meeting twentieth century building regulations! We had problems with window sizes – gun loops were not considered to be windows – and required extra stairways, as one spiral stair was not sufficient to meet Fire Safety Regulations. The actual height of the tower was the biggest technical problem – progressive collapse calculations are needed for buildings over three storeys and the foundations had to be changed to a 'raft form' instead of 'strip foundations' due to the high water table on the site. All of these problems, plus many others, were overcome with the help of the Planning Officer in Turriff – he renamed rooms and added small internal fire walls to meet the building regulations, and we were able to have a second stairway hidden in the thickness of the double walls (original towers had 6ft thick walls and I had incorporated this style in the design of the tower) – and without his help our project wouldn't have got beyond the planning stage."

Phill was born in Germany, where he spent the first 5 years of his life – his father worked for the British High Commission in Hanover – but his fascination with castles started when the family eventually moved to Wales. As a young boy, he would regularly cycle from Llandudno to Conwy Castle during his school holidays and he reckons that's where his love affair with castles originated. After serving 11 years travelling the world in the Royal Navy, he built a new career in the oil industry and continued his globetrotting as an offshore diver. It was while he was based in Aberdeen, working for Shell, that he first fell in love with Scottish architecture and, in particular, Scottish castles. "I started buying up antiquarian books on castles, and any engravings I could find – I've got, literally, thousands of engravings which I've still got to sort out!"

The actual building work started in 1997, with Phill building the log store himself after attending evening classes to learn how to build in block work and random rubble. He learned how to slate by reading, and by asking questions of a local slater in Turriff, and over the next 3 years he completed the garage, in the form of a traditional Scottish doocot, and prepared the tower foundations – clearing the site, draining and deepening the original pool, building a bridge and weir, running in mains water and electricity, cutting down about 50 trees, and laying a field drainage system to try and dry out as much of the land as possible. But, by 2003, progress had effectively stalled – this is the bit on *Grand Designs* when a worried looking Kevin delivers his "have they bitten off more than they can chew?" piece slowly to camera. Phill still needed to raise more money to complete the build and, as the original planning and building permissions had now expired, he realised he would have to go through a fresh round of applications. Fast forward another 4 years...

"In 2007 we finally got back to the project, dealing with water issues with the pool and burn, planting a few trees, levelling the old rutted road with hardcore, and stabilising the land around the tower foundations ready to accept scaffolding. After vetting a few builders and other trades



The log store – built by Phill

The doocot – also built by Phill

I took on a young local builder, Graham Buxton, who was very enthusiastic about the project and along with him and my architect, John, we commenced the building of Craigietocher Tower in February 2008. Initially progress was slow as we had to make remedial repairs to the foundation and the new Building Warrant meant Graham had to extend the original foundations, which was not an easy task and consequently an expensive undertaking. Having overcome this hurdle, the real building work eventually started in early April, only to be held up again by problems with the mouldings we'd commissioned and getting the correct colouring for the stonework. At the same time, I was contracting with a spiral stair company to have the main staircase cast in sections to look like Turriff Red Sandstone, an underfloor heating supplier, and sourcing a ground source heat pump as I wanted the tower to be as green as possible. With the tower having three live fires plus the Aga kitchen stove I needed to employ a specialist chimney company to design all the flues – also not cheap, I can tell you! I wanted the inside of the tower to be as authentic as possible, so I ordered Caithness flagstones for the kitchen/dining room in the vaulted cellar, and also for the Great Hall floors, which had to be compatible with the underfloor heating.

"As the Great Hall will be the show room of the tower, I wanted a special fireplace and spent quite a number of weeks trawling through all my old photos of Scottish castles we'd visited over the years, some 600 in all, to find just the right fireplace for our tower. It had to be 2.5 metres wide by 1.5 metres tall and I eventually found the one we wanted at Crichton Castle, sent photos off to a specialist company and they did a wonderful job in reproducing an exact copy. We installed the sewage works, an underground oil tank (as a backup to the ground source heat pump system) and, excitingly and importantly, started the building of the tower itself. But, one of the worst summers for rain on record combined with early snow resulted in the project being months behind schedule again but, just a wee bit overly optimistically as it turned out, I was still hoping to have the tower liveable by the end of summer 2009..."

The following 9 years – yes, 9 years! – would prove to be an emotional rollercoaster for Phill as continuing with a large-scale, complex building project in a remote site



The tower in 2012

OCTOBER 2012



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A fine looking yett!



Window with gun loop – just in case!

during the aftermath of the financial crisis and with climate change making our Scottish weather even more unreliable was, well, challenging! He was, incidentally, based in Brunei with his partner Meryl and her daughter Catherine at this time, which made project management particularly challenging! There were unanticipated problems with rainwater ingress, which were eventually traced back to an oversight on the original plans, and a hugely expensive error with the ground source heat pump system. “Even though an engineer

Back door, complete with sixteenth century catflap?



Phill relaxing in the almost finished Laird's Room

The small windows in the spiral stairwell, to allow light in, were in the wrong place

had been on site originally to see what was needed, it now transpired that we did not have the room to run the double loop pipework on the land. So the entire system had to be ripped out and a much bigger oil-fired boiler installed now that the tower was to be heated only using oil. This was another major expense that had not been accounted for. In 2019 I eventually managed to sell the complete ground source heat pump system for the paltry sum of £500, the best price I could get for it. I did my best not to cry, as that represented a loss of £13,000 added to the cost of installing a huge oil-fired heating system!” There were many other challenges to overcome as the work progressed, like discovering that there had been, “miscalculations on the plans meaning that the small windows in the spiral stairwell, to allow light in, were in the wrong place with the stairs actually crossing the windows! This meant that the window stonework had to be dug out and new window positions worked out to match where the spiral stairs were. This took quite some time as all the damage had to be repaired and the spiral stairwell plastered again as required. We also discovered a



One man and his tower

settlement crack on one of the open rounds, so we had to bring in a structural engineer to assess the implications of this. Luckily, it wasn't serious and, with ties installed, the crack was repaired ready for harling”.

Phill, Meryl and Catherine, actually moved in to live in the tower in... 2018! But, is it finished? “We finally moved in on 22 August 2018 – this was a day to remember, though the tower was not really ready for us, but we managed and got settled in. Through 2019, our time was mainly spent getting the tower fully habitable and laying out the land ready for landscaping. One big job is still outstanding – we discovered back in 2017 that the open rounds and wall walk area flooring had completely rotted through with dry rot, mainly due to poor workmanship during the installation period 8 years previously. We'll have to rip up all the flooring and have it replaced but we needed a long period of good, dry weather first – this is a major expense that we hadn't accounted for. There's still lots of little

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First family Christmas in the Great Hall



Catherine, Meryl and Phill working in the pond

things to do at the tower but building Craigietocher Tower was the fulfilment of a lifelong dream for me – OK, with the odd nightmare in between! – but, looking at the tower now, it's all been worth it. After spending the past 45 years globetrotting – thanks to the offshore oil industry I've worked in more than 30 countries! – I think it's now the right time to sit back, for a wee bit anyway, and enjoy my retirement in this beautiful part of the world. And, best of all, as Meryl and I have now been together for almost 20 years, we've finally decided to get married – at least we'll have a decent backdrop for the wedding photos!”