

Barn again

Not so long ago, a farmer kept his horses here. Now, thanks to an owner and an architect both determined to maintain its agricultural heritage, this building has been resurrected as a warm, welcoming family home

Words **Caroline Ednie** Photography **Nigel Rigden**

DETAILS

What A stone-built barn, completely restored and modernised

Where Kintail, Lochalsh, in the Highlands

Architect Rural Design, Skye, 01470 521555, www.ruraldesign.co.uk

Construction Approximately eight months

“**T**hese traditional farm buildings are at risk of disappearing in Scotland. So from the outset it was important to us to strive to retain its original character,” says Alan Dickson, an architect with Skye-based Rural Design. The building in question, Leachachan Barn, once a byre for horses, is now a bespoke family home for Linda Wilson and Peter Quicke and their two teenage children. But if you view it from the road outside or from the shores of Loch Duich which lies before the building, it still looks to all intents and purposes just like a barn.

Alan’s modest account of his laissez-faire approach to the design isn’t the whole story, though, as the conversion of the barn also required some fairly full-on interventions before it re-emerged as a deceptively spacious single-storey home with a double-height living area at its heart. The reinvented space also features an open-plan kitchen and dining area and a ground-floor master bedroom. Additional living and sleeping accommodation is included in a newly created mezzanine, while a new lean-to extension provides storage and an area for utilities.

The journey from dilapidated barn to bespoke but’n’ben was quite an adventure for Linda and her family, who now split their time between the Highlands and their London base. “My family are Scottish – I was born in Dumfries,” says Linda, who works as a set decorator for film and television. “About five years ago we spent a holiday near Fort William and had a really magical time. It was then that I thought that it would be a dream if I could eventually settle in Scotland.

“So I started searching on Plotfinder to see if there was anything suitable for us. It was nothing more than a gentle browsing process for around a year, but then one Saturday afternoon I came across a plot that overlooked Skye. I got very excited – it looked so idyllic – so I showed it to my partner Pete. The barn had been used as a byre for working horses and the previous owner had won outline planning ▶

“What tends to happen when these traditional agricultural buildings are converted into houses is that new windows are punched through and new doorways are introduced, and immediately you lose the underlying character. It becomes something that is obviously a house rather than a barn,” explains Alan. “So what we did was maintain the three openings that were already on the main loch-facing façade. And we retained the shutters – actually, they’re new, but they are in the spirit of the originals. We were also pretty mean in terms of intervening in the roof. We didn’t put Velux windows in, as that would have destroyed its character. Instead, we went for smaller, traditional rooflights. I’m pleased with the results – I drive past the building quite often, and it really does still look like the barn that has always been there.”



[Opposite] The loch-front façade shows how little has changed – no Velux windows or new doors, just repointed stone and a roof tiled with the original slates. [Left] Looking down on the living area from the mezzanine. Linda’s gorgeous oak parquet, from Hargreaves Reclaimed Flooring, takes pride of place

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permission to turn it into a house, but he had decided to sell rather than develop it himself. So I booked the sleeper and headed north. I picked up a hire car and drove to Loch Duich – it was mid-October and I was driving through horizontal rain. But it was worth it: when I arrived I thought it was too good to be true, even though the barn was derelict and full of wood and coal and bits of old machinery, with nesting swallows and other things evidently having a good time!”

The upshot was that in late 2009, Linda and Pete bought Leachachan Barn plus the surrounding two thirds of an acre. All Linda had to do was work out how the building could be transformed into a family home. “I went to Rural Design because I loved what I’d seen on their website. And when I got talking to Alan Dickson, he brought up a picture of the barn on his screen and said, ‘We’ll take good care of that for you.’ It was a winning line. He understood why the barn was so great in the first place. I needed to know that I would be able to have a good relationship with the architect, as it would be me driving the project,” she says.

“In terms of the brief, I knew that we wanted open-plan spaces with triple-glazing and lots of insulation. I also knew I wanted my dream oak parquet floor. I was busy trying to work out how I’d be able to get a front door on the barn when Alan



[Above] The utilities are neatly contained in the extension at the back of the house, which is where the main entrance is too. [Middle] Like various treasured pieces of furniture around the house, the kitchen units came from Pete’s family home in Devon. There’s a glimpse of the mezzanine above. [Right] The antler chandelier was a junk-shop find that fits the space well



suggested putting the entrance round the back. I thought, ‘Brilliant!’ We would never have used the front anyway – people always tend to use the back entrance.”

Following a straightforward journey through the planning process, the project to convert and restore the barn went on site in 2011. “Besides retaining the original character of the façade, there was one other key aspect to this project and that involved the gable wall that points towards the Five Sisters of Kintail on Skye,” says Alan Dickson. “There were no major openings in the gable, but, since one of the main reasons for buying the property was to bring in the views, this had to be addressed. We were pretty surgical in the way we went about opening the gable up, effectively taking a scalpel to it and cutting a big yet precise opening in it. We didn’t demolish it, we just cut into it, inserted a galvanised-steel beam for support and created shutters to echo those at the front of the building. Having created that opening, it then made sense to place the living space in that section of the house since it now had the knockout views.”

Organising the interior was, as Alan puts it, “a wee bit of a puzzle, really”. Since it had previously been a barn, there were very few internal walls to work with. The only one that was still there, and still intact, has been retained. And as it’s a very low-roofed building, the design had to be very precisely detailed in order to make sure the stair up to the new mezzanine slotted in and that there was enough headroom up there to allow you to stand upright.

The decision was made to increase the barn’s footprint by ▶



[Above] The combination of old and new that is a hallmark of this house is reflected in the furnishings too, the antique tallboy and chest sitting happily with the modern bed. [Right] The barn's sole internal wall was kept and repaired and now looks great against a white staircase



extending out at the back of the building so that the changes wouldn't be visible from the road. "One of the challenges of keeping a building like this as open-plan as possible is what to do with all the small spaces," says Alan. "So in the extension we were keen to incorporate the entrance, utility room and storage space. That would allow us to keep the character of the large living space."

The architects chose the form of a traditional Highland cottage lean-to for the extension. "These lean-to structures are pretty straightforward to build," says Alan. "There is a steep slope at the back of the house which meant we didn't have total freedom to extend as far as we wanted, at least not without having to build retaining structures at the back. Obviously we weren't keen to do that. So we chose to slot in this timber-framed, timber-clad extension with a roof of corrugated metal sheeting as this was the best way of keeping it simple and affordable."

In terms of the interiors, the open-plan living area, which now benefits from spectacular views of the Skye mountains, features locally sourced douglas fir structural beams and Linda's much-loved oak parquet flooring.

"I bought some reclaimed oak parquet from the Natural History Museum but it got delivered mistakenly to another house and laid there. So I was given this reclaimed oak instead. It is much paler but I've ended up loving it – it's serendipity, I suppose. The only problem we had throughout the whole build was the initial laying of the floor. It was newly kiln-dried so it warped slightly. But the father-and-son team from East Lothian that I had contracted took it up around the edge and re-laid it and it's perfect now."

Although Linda was based in London during the build she came up on the sleeper about once a month. "It really surprised me just how easy it was to work on the project from London. The architects kept us posted by e-mail with photo references and the builder talked us through everything on the phone a few times a week."

In fact, Linda admits, the whole experience "was like a dream doing what I do for a job, except doing it for myself. We found it easier than we thought to make fairly instant decisions (such as not glazing the window between the main room and the extension). The whole process would have been a lot more difficult had we not been decisive." ▶

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[Above] This gable end saw more intervention than the rest of the façade. It faces the Five Sisters of Kintail and it was essential to open it up and let the views in. [Below] Antique furniture and old stone walls contrast beautifully with the smooth new floor

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Linda is particularly pleased with the way the kitchen turned out. It was built around units that came from Pete’s family home in Devon. Many of the antique pieces are from there, such as the tallboy and table in the bedroom which were a wedding present from Pete’s parents. These have been cleverly combined with contemporary fixtures and furniture such as the bespoke sofa, and the dining table and benches. “I think the antler chandelier was a fantastic purchase! I bought it in a junk shop in London. Alan was fine about my mad choices!” laughs Linda. “And I love our Nordan triple-glazed windows – they are fantastic.”

Alan is also happy with the results. “Perhaps the biggest achievements are the reinstatement of the repointed stonework, which is seamless, and the roof, which we managed to finish in reclaimed slate. We were keen to reinstate the Ballachulish slates, many of which were carefully taken down from the existing roof, and we supplemented these a wee bit. If we’d had to use shiny new Spanish slate, the building would have ended up with a very different character.”

Linda agrees: “There are lots of features, such as the stone walls and slate roof, that we wouldn’t have been able to recreate in a new build. I couldn’t believe how lovely it looked when it was finished. I was blown away. I’d always wanted to build a new house, but I didn’t realise how fantastic it would be to renovate. I really enjoyed the build – it was an amazing sense of achievement at the end.” ■