

HEART OF THE FAMILY

For seven centuries Duart Castle, seat of Clan Maclean, has occupied a commanding position on the Isle of Mull, offshore from Oban on the

west coast of Scotland. *Nicola Taylor* talks to the Clan Chief and his dedicated staff, who make this castle a welcoming home-from-home for the worldwide Maclean family and all other visitors.

Photographs are by *Martin Hunter*.

THE FIRST SIGHT of Duart from the sea is a show-stopper. It stands proud and grey, its stern beauty a counterpoint to the wild, exuberant landscape around it. It gazes imperiously along Loch Linnhe, the Sound of Mull and the Firth of Lorn. Built from the very rock of the island on which it stands, Duart Castle seems as old as time itself, so much a part of its surroundings that it is impossible to imagine the castle not being there. It seems less a man-made artefact than a natural outcropping of the anvil-shaped promontory of Duart Point – the name coming from the Gaelic *dubh ard*, meaning ‘black point’.

As hard and austere as the rocks around it, as chilly and forbidding as the waves below, Duart is a warning to those with ill intent. This is no Disney castle; this is a fortress. Threaten it at your peril.

Over many centuries, the Macleans fought off incursions from rival clans. Inevitably perhaps, superior forces eventually subjugated them and, in 1688, the castle was laid waste after a bombardment from the sea by English warships.

Today, there is no hint of Duart’s violent past, particularly when it is viewed close up. The driveway leads the visitor alongside grassy slopes, and the

castle’s tiled roofs and rows of terracotta chimney pots soften this mighty stronghold, giving it an almost domestic air. In spring, the effect is reinforced by the breathtaking sight of a host of Scottish bluebells, which carpet the slopes to the seaward side of the castle, their intense ultramarine glowing strongly against the background of grey stone.

This contrast between the hard and the soft, the warlike and the domestic, continues inside. As in many other Scottish castles, there is an abundance

Duart Castle has watched over the Sound of Mull since the mid-13th century.





of military hardware on display – swords on the wall over the massive stone fireplace in the Banqueting Hall, a cannon from the Spanish Armada in the sea room – but there is as much prominence given to the more homely details. In the kitchen you can believe the cook is about to walk in, to scrub the carrots, or to collect the coat casually hanging on a hook.

And everywhere there are family photographs – standing on the grand piano in the Banqueting Hall or hanging on the walls. Even the History of Scouting display has a family connection: Sir Charles Maclean was Chief Scout, and there hangs a delightful picture of him bending



LEFT Sir Lachlan Maclean is the current Clan Chief and guardian of the home of the Macleans.

BELOW The Coat of Arms above the entrance was presented to Sir Charles Maclean by the clan in 1986 to celebrate his 50 years as Chief.

RIGHT Portraits of Maclean Chiefs from the past three centuries hang in the Great Hall.

BOTTOM RIGHT The four-poster bed in the State Bedroom was made for the honeymoon of Sir Charles Maclean and his wife during the Second World War.

down for a chat with a be-napped toddler, both in identical poses with their hands clasped behind their backs in schoolmasterly – or should that be scoutmasterly? – fashion.

The present clan chief is the son of Sir Charles. Sir Lachlan Maclean of Duart and Morvern, to give him his full title, became the head of the clan when his father died in 1990 and it is due to him and his wife, Lady Mary, that family photographs now take pride of place in the castle's displays, which is as it should be – Duart Castle was Sir Lachlan's childhood home. He sits in their comfortably 'lived-in' private quarters, coffee and biscuits close to hand, and explains, 'I was a war baby, born in the south, where my parents were married. We returned here after the war, and this is where my sister and I were brought up.'

Sir Lachlan feels his responsibilities keenly, both to the small 'family' of staff that work in the castle and to his wider family, the clan, which has thousands of members throughout the world.

It is for them that he takes on the challenge of keeping Castle Duart in good order, effecting the many ongoing repairs required to hold the wind and rain at bay – and that is quite some feat. Sir Lachlan smiles ruefully as he says, 'Duart is an almost unique building in that it sits on this rock, it gets hammered by the wind, it gets hammered by the rain, up to 100 inches of rainfall, a lot of it driven by 50–60 mph winds. And that's like using a pressure hose on the castle.' His description of living here is characteristically droll: 'Well, on the whole it's pretty cold, and appreciably damp.'





ABOVE The Sea Room is one of Sir Lachlan's favourite rooms at Duart.

RIGHT The turnpike stair leads from the Great Hall in the Keep to the battlements.

FAR RIGHT Visitors can enjoy the view from the top of the Keep, across the Sound of Mull to Loch Linnhe.

He follows in his great-grandfather's footsteps. When Sir Fitzroy bought Duart Castle in 1911, it was an uninhabitable ruin which had been out of Maclean hands since their estates were forfeited in 1691. He set to and had it restored, despite the fact that he was 76 at the time and he was told it would likely be the ruination – if not the death – of him. Thankfully he proved the doom-mongers wrong, living to see his 101st birthday. The restoration was carried out, making the castle habitable once again and a focus for Macleans across the world, one of Sir Fitzroy's main intentions when he took on the task. 'I restored Duart for my family, the clan,' he declared.

Of course, like any family home, humble or grand, you do have to keep on top of the maintenance. 'It's rather like living in any house,' says Sir



Lachlan, 'except everything is on a slightly larger scale. When you have to get the windows painted the estimate seems to be very high because you've got 42 windows to be painted rather than ten. And as the ongoing maintenance has to be paid for out of the business, any work has to be carefully budgeted for.'

Sir Lachlan is a man who believes in a very hands-on approach to running Duart. You are as likely to find him

taking tours round the castle, or unblocking toilets, as hosting an evening reception for the passengers of the *Hebridean Princess* cruise ship. This attitude rubs off on the staff. June Saul, whose main role is castle Tour Guide, also lends a hand cleaning the castle and taking telephone messages, and loves every minute. 'What more could you ask for, working in an environment like this, on Mull? The view that we have here... all the history. And they're a very kind family to work for.'

Neil Wilkinson is another key staff member, whose varied jobs include driving the castle's bus, grounds

maintenance – and anything else which arises. 'One of the girls is off sick, so everybody else mucks in. When I went to get my lunch in the tearoom today, the whole kitchen was full of dirty pots because it was very busy. So you get stuck in and you do your bit.' Neil has been working at the castle for five seasons, and he wouldn't have it any other way. 'It's a perfect job, I can't actually think of anything wrong with it. Suits me down to the ground.'

June agrees enthusiastically. 'I've got a superb job. How many people can honestly say they go to work to make other people happy? I make people

LIVING HISTORY

Sir Lachlan is passionate that Duart should be more than a museum. 'We invite the schools on the island here. It's the only inhabited proper castle on Mull, which makes it rather special.'

The children always ask, 'Do they live here?' and when they are told, 'Yes, they are through there now,' that brings it to life for them.

Lady Mary herself often takes the school trips, a highlight of which is showing the children where the warship *Swan* sank in 1653.

During one such trip, one of the little boys shaded his eyes with his hand and scanned the horizon for an imaginary ship. His voice was full of awe as he whispered, 'Do you think that someone would have stood here, on this rock, when the ship hit the rocks?' 'Oh yes,' said Lady Mary. 'This very rock – it has been here for hundreds of years.'

The little boy's face lit up with wonder as he scanned the horizon even more intently. History had suddenly become alive, and he could see that ship going down.





FAR LEFT June Saul, Tour Guide, takes her turn in the entrance hut, greeting visitors to the castle.

LEFT Neil Wilkinson stands by the Duart Castle bus, which carries passengers to and from the ferry port at Craignure, nearby.

welcome, tell them about the history of the place. I enjoy it.' She laughs infectiously as she adds, 'You couldn't tell that, could you?'

Sir Lachlan is delighted that ten per cent of Duart's many thousands of

visitors are clan members from all round the world. 'We have about eight weddings a year, most of them Macleans, and we have naming ceremonies. We also have a Clan Gathering here every five years and

up to 900 clan members come for that.' Other Macleans come to trace their roots. 'As a clan we're lucky that we have this base, somewhere they can come and start the search if they're wanting to trace their genealogy. We don't have masses of records here but we can point them in the right direction. Duart gives them a starting point.'

He pauses and checks his watch – he has a tour to guide while June has her lunch. 'One time I met an Australian Maclean. He'd worked hard all his life and his objective when he retired was to come here. He stood on the front doorstep with tears in his eyes as his wife took his photograph. And then he said, "Thank you for looking after Duart." You'd feel a wimp if you didn't look after it – you'd let him down, you'd let down thousands of people, and you can't do that.' **BB**

For more information about Duart Castle opening times, telephone 01680 812 309 or visit the website: www.duartcastle.com

RIGHT Duart's imposing features are once again as crisp and dominant as they were when the castle was built, thanks to a programme of restoration begun by Sir Fitzroy Maclean in 1911.

