

The build continues, the final chapter – 2019 to 2024.

There is one last issue I have to tell you about that actually came to light at the end of 2017 to which we are still trying to resolve. The open rounds and wall walk area flooring has completely rotted through with dry rot, this mainly due to poor workmanship during the installation period 8 years previously. This will entail us having to rip up all the flooring and have it replaced, we still have to do this, but need a long period of good, dry weather which we hope to get in 2020. I have managed to get a final further extension to my Building Warrant to cover this, but this is a major expense that we did not account for.

So, to 2020, but need to mention a couple of things that we accomplished at the end of 2019, Fraser our more or less permanent site electrician installed the motion sensor lights to the new gate post columns along with me installing the two grotesques that John Wetten Brown, my architect had carved a number of years ago. We are not going to actually install a gate as the toing and froing and constantly having to open and close the gates would be a real hassle. Gateless it will be.

As our cat family had now increased in size to 7 cats we got the joiner in to install a gun loop in the back door which is heavily disguised as a cat flap, the cats love it and now have the whole area and forest around the Tower to explore.

2020 was a mammoth year for Meryl and I, our whole life style changed. In January I went back to work in Nigeria for my normal 3 month rotation, however, at the beginning of March the world was changing with the Covid pandemic just kicking off. I could see the writing on the wall with lock-downs being discussed so on the 18<sup>th</sup> March I told my boss that I would be leaving Nigeria. He was not happy as he said I had not completed my rotation schedule. Not put off by this, I manage to book the last flight leaving Lagos for Amsterdam on the 20<sup>th</sup> March and then after a 10 hour wait in Amsterdam airport managed to get onto the last flight to Aberdeen on 21<sup>st</sup> March. As you know, the UK went into lock-down on 23<sup>rd</sup> March. I just made it home. One more career move was made at this time – I handed in my notice to ExxonMobil and retired, 45 years of working offshore was time enough and as Meryl and I agreed, we had more or less fulfilled our dream of building a castle.

While I had been in Nigeria work at the Tower had continued with cleaning of all the cast stone around doors and windows where the lime wash that had been applied to the plaster work had been left to run down the stone. This was a long and tiring task for a good friend of mine that was staying with us, hiding from Covid. The cleaning of the stone continued through nearly all of 2020. We also contracted the services of a water diviner to locate the underground streams / springs that were popping up on the land we were trying to put to grass seed, these streams kept washing away the seed. I was very skeptical about using a water diviner, but having watched him and also digging in the areas he indicated I have to admit he was spot on with locating the source of the streams / springs and we were able to divert most of them to areas not being seeded.

In February we contracted in Sharps the bespoke bedroom furniture installation company and they made a fantastic job of fitting out the 3 bedrooms in the Tower, well pleased and very happy with the price too. In March, Fraser the electrician was back on site running power to the new chicken coop and adding more power outlets in the Doocot.

As the year progressed and I settled down to working harder than I had ever done for many years in my retirement we completed the problem with water ingress to the prison pit, repairs to the Tower front steps up to the front entrance door. With the good weather in May we successfully completed replacing all the rotten woodwork in the open round wall walk area, and re-laid the paving stones as well as running under floor (5 deg C) heating elements under the paving stones to prevent any buildup of ice in the area.

In the Tower I built lots of book shelves in all the small areas in what we called the 'Thickness of the Walls' these were the cavities between the outer wall and the internal wall which from inside the Tower gave the impression that the Tower walls were 6ft thick. At last a place to display my huge collection of Nigel Tranter books.

To our delight in May we had our 1<sup>st</sup> hatching of Call Ducks which we were over the moon with as we had been told hatching Call Duck in incubators was near on impossible. This added 7 more ducks to our ever-increasing flock of various ducks. Through May and June we continued thinning out trees which were rotten and cutting them up for fire wood as well as installing a new French Land Drain in the area where we had decided on having our raised veg plots. This continued through into July where we also installed a flagpole on the doocot.

Having now been at home for 4 months in lock-down with Meryl, the longest period we had been together for many years with me constantly working away from home, we realized that we did actually get on together really well, and mutually decide on this realism that we after 22 years together should get married. And what better place to be married than in a Scottish Castle..!!

The date set was the 31<sup>st</sup> July 2020 and in the lock-down rules we had the ceremony held in the garden of the Tower with 10 family and friends witnessing for us. I have to say this was the best move I have ever made and now married nearly 4 years the best time of my life.

As the good weather continued for the most part to the end of 2020 we had a local photographer come to site with his drone where he took a set of ariel photos of the Tower which we have had made into postcards and as part of our webpage display on Celtic Castles where we advertise the Tower for B&B guests to stay with us.

Work also continued out and about around the Tower with building another log store and making an outdoor patio, alfresco, dining area by the side of one of the pools. This is a lovely area to spend summer evenings eating out under the stars, with a patio heater to keep any chills well away.

November also saw us erecting a stylistic greenhouse and starting building our raised vegetable plots and shifting tons of topsoil & compost to fill them.

Christmas came around swiftly, but due to Covid it was a low-key family affair as we had to cancel our annual Mulled Wine and Mince Pie open house party. But at least we were able to get about having 2 acres of land to move about and work in. We were some of the very lucky few who weren't stuck indoors all the time.

2021 a year of in and out of lock-down where whenever possible we had contractors in working on site. One big job was running curb stones along the full length of our drive and around the Tower, at last we had a dividing line between chuckies and grass, great boarders for the robot mowers to keep too. Having two of these mowers set up has saved Meryl and I days of cutting grass with petrol mowers and then trying to find somewhere to get rid of the grass cuttings.

On my birthday in October, with a break in the Covid lock-downs we arrange an archery contest with a variety of bows, from antiquarian wooden long bow to modern compound bows, also a crossbow with our neighbors, great day for all with much mulled wine consumed. Have no idea as to who won..!!

And it was Christmas once more, sadly a full lock-down so no mulled wine and mince pie evening again.

2022 was a fairly relaxed work year with the main scope of work being the dredging out of the pool next to the back of the Tower, the last time it was dredged out was back in 1996 so we had quite a lot of silt and debris to dig out. Luckily for us a local farmer allowed us to dump all the dredge material onto one of his fields. Sadly, we lost quite a few of our brown trout as we could not catch all of them. Once dredging was complete and the pools refilled, we restocked with both brown & rainbow trout, much to the delight of Mr. Herron who had been keeping an eye on the ongoing pool work, needless to say we are now back to only a few surviving fish.

Summer allowed us to enjoy our new patio with a few friends, long warm evenings with a tapas style menu and lots of cold white wine.

The veg plots supplied us with lots of fresh salad stuff and lots and lots of onions and garlic, plus numerous herbs. Thanks to a German lady neighbor bringing us some German yellow seed potatoes we had a wonderful crop of these delicious potatoes right through and into 2023.

One major event of 2023 was in July when we went to the graduation ceremony for Catherine, our daughter to see her graduate at a Doctor after 5 years of study at Aberdeen University. She made us so very proud of her.

So, onto 2023. This has been quite an eventful year for us as we decided, as we loved entertaining in our Tower, to register with Celtic Castles, a company who specialize in finding guests worldwide who only want to stay in castles. For us it's been a slow start, but a huge success as we have had a number of guests stay with us and what is nice all have now become good friends, our booking calendar for 2024 is slowly starting to fill up with guests coming from as far away as the USA, Canada and Australia so far.

If anyone is interested in staying at Craigtiocher Tower please log onto the following website:

<https://www.celticcastles.com/castles/craigtiocher-tower/>

This year we saw the back of Covid and held our Christmas Mulled Wine and Mince Pie evening once more. The tradition will continue. Winter this year has been spectacular with the amazing displays of the Northern Lights, known also as Aurora Borealis from the Tower top, something I had never seen before, other than on the TV.

Winter came in at a rush of bitterly cold weather but luckily not too much snow, buying the 4x4 SUV just before the end of the year and having it fitted with winter tires was a really good move, we even had Meryl's little Skoda Fabia fitted with winter tires, so she has been able to get to school with no slip'n slide issues.

2024, a very busy year to come and also an expensive one as we are just getting into a huge landscaping program which has started by removing a lot of trees, the majority of which had been damaged during some of the storms that have raged over our part of Scotland. The project when it gets going fully will have all the land at the Western end of our land totally transformed into secluded gardens, open spaces, an 8m x 3m Summer House and Gazebo, carved tree trunks and a variety of native Scottish trees and shrubs. We are presently having concept drawings made up by a local landscaping company and so far their designs are perfect, another major work which is in progress is the building of a 2mtr wall which will enclose about half of the car turning area in front of the Tower running from the Tower to the doocot and then from the doocot to the stone log store. Which will give the impression of a courtyard style castle finish. We are hoping by end of summer this year all will be finished. And that will complete all we have to do to end our dream of building a castle in Scotland. Will be time to enjoy the fruits of our labors.

I have up-dated the Diary below to reflect the status as now.

## **DIARY**

1992

Started looking for a Tower House in the Aberdeen area to renovate. Not much success for the required money.

1995

Decided to build own Tower House from scratch. Started looking for a suitable plot. Found a plot of just over 2 acres in a small glen known as the Den of Gask. Contacted John Wetten-Brown and got him to make drawings to submit for planning permission.

1997

Having obtained Building Authority Approval, started building. Attended night school to learn

how to build in block work and rubble. Built Log store as a result. Learnt how to slate the roof by reading and asking questions....

1998/1999/2000

Completed the Doocot, which will be used as a garage. Laid the Tower Foundations. Cleared the site. Drained and deepened the original pool, built the bridge and the weir. Ran in mains water and electricity and cut down about 50 trees (not very 'green' but necessary, but I will be re-planting more soon). Laid a field drainage system to dry out as much of the field as possible.

2000

No more major work this year, we will have John Wetten-Brown do some stone carving over the doors on the Doocot & Log Store.

2001/2002/2003/2004/2005/2006

Just general site maintenance - save money. Look to finding more farms with Turriff red sandstone to purchase.

2007

Major landscaping work - Extend the pool, re-route the burn, plant trees. Prepare the site for the start of the main building program.

2008/2009

Start the Tower build to wind & watertight. This to include all external work to the Tower. Complete all the internal fittings in the Tower, complete all the landscaping and finalizing the site for rental in the initial 1<sup>st</sup> year or so or until I retire from the Offshore Industry and also convince Meryl that Scotland is a nice place to live and that 'Cold is just a state of mind that can be overcome by wearing more clothes..!!'

2010/2018

Work continued on the tower to get it a state ready for us to move in. This we did on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2018. This was a day to remember as the Tower was not really ready for us, but we managed and now settled.

2019

The year was spent getting the Tower fully habitable and laying out the land ready for landscaping. We are still waiting to sort out the wall walk flooring but have managed to get one more Building Warrant extension to complete this work.

2020

Completed the wall walk repairs, bedrooms fitted out, cleaning of internal cast stonework, built an outdoor eating area and erected a greenhouse. I retired and Meryl and I got married.

2021

Not a very productive year due to Covid lock-downs, but did manage to install curbstones alongside the entrance road.

2022

Big job dredging the pools, working on raised veg plots. Now have a resident Doctor in the Tower.

2023

Registered with an agency to advertise the Tower out for B&B and generally working on the ongoing preparation for landscaping our garden area.

2024

The end is in sight, complete the landscaping and erection of Summer House and Gazebo.

I know some of you have been asking or wondering how much I have spent building the

Tower over the past 30 years..?? I have to be honest and say we have run a bit over our original estimate and currently we are standing at having spent a little over £1.4 million. But if I had not spent this on the Tower, I would have squandered it on other things and have nothing to show for it. To Meryl and I, building this Tower was a lifelong dream (odd nightmare in between), but looking at the Tower now, it has all been worth every penny of what it has cost me.

We expect to spend another £30k to complete the garden landscaping, but that will be it. Remember, if you have a dream and a bit of money, you can make your dream come true.

Yours aye – Phill & Meryl

February 2024