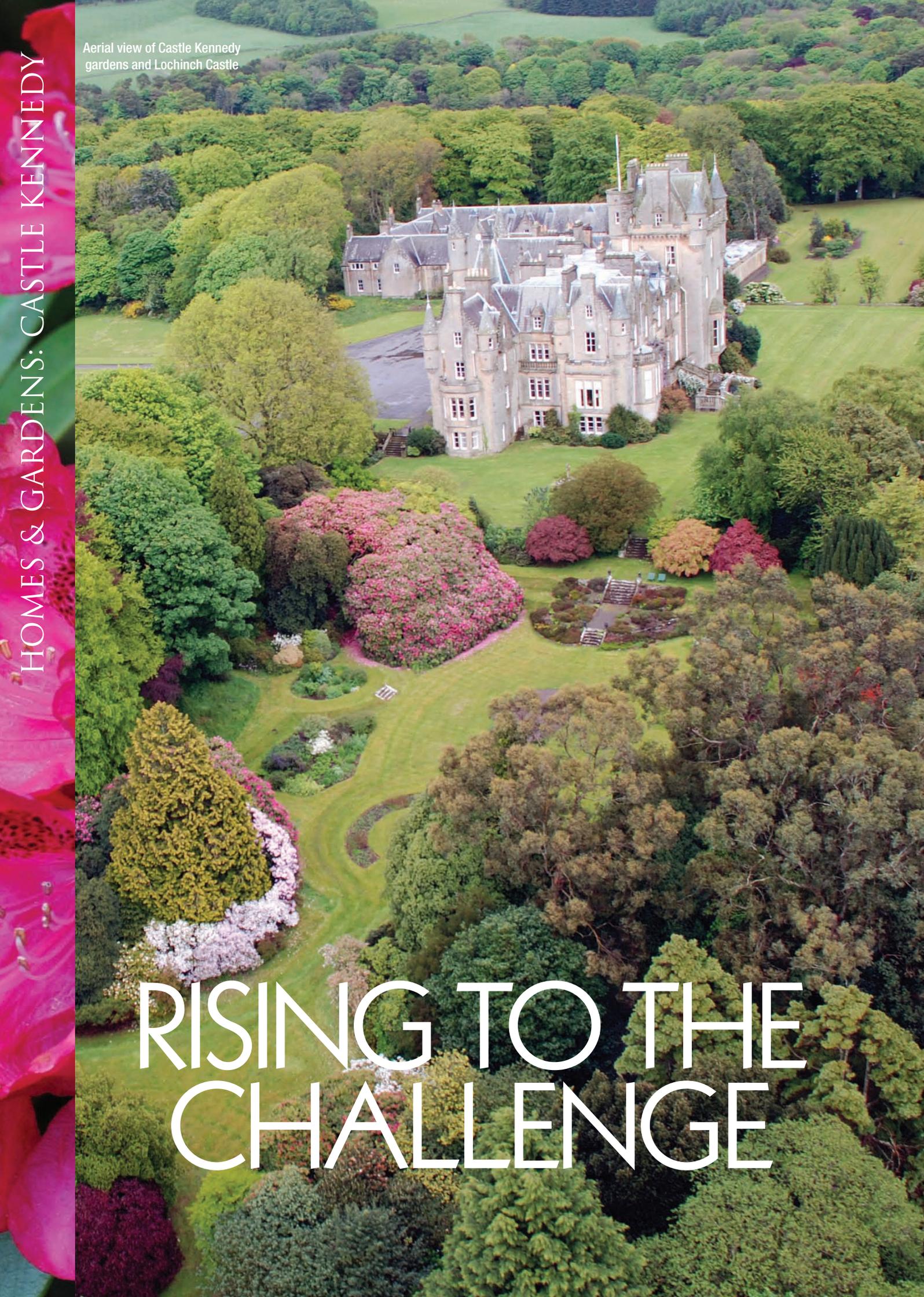


HOMES & GARDENS: CASTLE KENNEDY

Aerial view of Castle Kennedy gardens and Lochinch Castle

# RISING TO THE CHALLENGE





Jamie Dalrymple, 14th Earl of Stair, centre, with his son Jack, wife Emily and mother Davina, and right, Castle Kennedy's gardening team: Tommy Lawson, James Henry, Sam Milbey and John MacArthur of that ilk

You will travel much further than the far west of Galloway to find a garden more beautiful than Castle Kennedy, writes **Tim Longville**, who explores “one of the most magnificently sited, strikingly designed and luxuriantly planted gardens in the whole country” and meets the latest in a long line of earls who have shaped it over the centuries

**Photography by Phil Rigby, Malcolm MacGregor and Jamie Stair**

**M**any gardeners find that after a couple of decades problems arise even in small owner-created gardens, and some find that small inherited gardens pose even more problems. In both cases, difficult decisions have to be taken: what and how to cut back? What to remove entirely?

Now imagine the problems faced by the owners of a garden of 75 acres, made by many generations over 300 years. A daunting prospect? Not to Jamie, the 14th Earl of Stair, and his wife Emily, who seem to positively relish the challenges they face, taking great pride in the garden they care for. Of course, it helps when your garden is the garden at Castle Kennedy, one of the most magnificently sited, strikingly designed and luxuriantly planted in the whole country.

The site is not only magnificent but remarkably favoured, being only a few feet

above sea level and forming, in effect, its own miniature peninsula, since it is flanked on both sides by sizeable lochs: the Loch of Inch (known as the White Loch because it is spring-fed) and Loch Crindil (known as the Black Loch because it is fed by a peaty hill burn). So its winters tend to be uncommonly mild (the occasional blip apart, such as those of 2009 and 2010); a fact which allows many rare and tender plants to be grown. Its striking design, however, is the result of the enthusiasm of three earls and one countess: Jamie's mother, Davina.

The 2nd Earl particularly fascinates Emily, who read history at university before a London career in advertising at Saatchi & Saatchi. In the early 1700s the earl was one of the Duke of Marlborough's field marshals. Subsequently he became the British Ambassador in France and it seems to have been the gardens at Versailles

which gave him the idea of a largely flower-free garden based on a series of enormous grass terraces, in a variety of geometrical shapes. Those terraces are still one of the garden's most striking features. Some – “allegedly”, says Jamie, with proper parliamentary caution – are said to represent the lines of battle in engagements the earl had fought in.

It is also, again allegedly, said that he collared some of his own troops to help in their construction, which was all done by pick, shovel and barrow in those days of course, so hundreds of strong men from somewhere would have been needed.

The earl also began the actual garden, establishing rides through the native woodland around ruined Castle Kennedy, while in the middle of the 19th century the main contribution of the next major innovator, the 10th Earl, was first to add to those rides and then to plant them – not



Four-year-old Jack Stair, who has an avenue named after him in the garden

with native trees but with the latest, newly introduced exotics, one species to each ride, including *Auracaria auracaria* (the Monkey Puzzle), *Thuja plicata*, *Abies procera* (the Noble Fir) and *Cupressus macrocarpa*. As a result the rides became, in effect, ornamental formal avenues, designed to create grand long-distance vistas.

The third important earl, the 12th – Jamie’s grandfather – belonged to a network of aristocratic plant enthusiasts in the first half of the last century, who competed in growing the latest introductions, whether the most unusual, the most tender or simply the most beautiful. He competed regularly in all the big rhododendron shows in London, for which he used to book two sleeper compartments: one for his gardener, one for the exhibits! So during his time the garden’s sheer range of plants increased enormously. He planted hundreds, if not thousands, of his beloved rhododendrons, including hybrids developed at Castle Kennedy, and similar numbers of exotics from Australia, New Zealand and South America, including *Embothrium coccineum*, the spectacular Chilean Fire Bush, now one of the garden’s signature plants. It is his planting which today provides the backbone of the garden’s spring and early summer multi-coloured flowering extravaganza.

Jamie tactfully describes the way he arranged plants as “casual”. ➔



The Victorian Scottish Baronial Lochinch Castle, family seat of the Earls of Stair



The rhododendron-fringed Round Pond, with the sculpted terrace known as The Belvedere on the right and The Black Loch beyond



One of Castle Kennedy's hundreds of fine hybrid rhododendrons; The Cordyline Avenue, one of the garden's most famous features, before the hard winter of 2010-2011 cut the trees to the ground

In other words, he planted whatever he felt like planting wherever he felt like planting it!

Jamie's mother, the fourth major contributor to the garden, cheerfully admits to being the same sort of gardener as the 12th Earl – and she has been vigorously planting ever since she arrived in 1960, ably seconded for the past 24 years by head gardener John MacArthur of that ilk. (What an effortless piece of one-upmanship, to have a clan chief as your head gardener!) What's more, the garden's mild climate means plants hardly ever stop growing, proof of which is a Rhododendron 'Winsome', planted after John arrived, which has already become a solid low mass of flower some 20ft long.

For Jamie and Emily, all that adds up to one of several major problems for which they have to find appropriate solutions. In this case: how to curb rampant growth in places where it's interfering with earlier intended effects, while at the same time not losing too much 'flower power'. For example, the 2nd Earl's terraces facing the White Loch had become overgrown with rhododendrons. Many – hybrids which had reverted to *R. ponticum* – are now being removed, the terraces re-grassed and their sharp edges restored.

For Emily – for whom moving here from a pocket-sized garden in Shepherd's Bush has meant a considerable learning curve (even though her family home, Stonor Park, has its own large and famous garden) – the contrast between the clean, green

geometrical lines of the terraces and the colourful softness of the rhododendrons is one of Castle Kennedy's great glories.

Jamie's aim has been to deal with a major project of that sort each year – dealing with the terraces, for example, or restoring the splendid vaulted boathouse by the White Loch. But subsidiary problems mean the aim isn't always easy to achieve.

One such subsidiary problem is the Galloway weather. As Jamie explains: "We organise in three main streams: routine work, cold weather work and wet weather work, but if the weather isn't co-operative there can be a lot of complicated shuffling of jobs."

Another is the problem of available labour, or, more accurately, of unavailable labour. Whereas in the past the garden has had 20 or even 30 full-time gardeners, now it has four at most. There are two full-timers: John and his assistant Tommy Lawson, whose father was the estate's head gamekeeper. There is one 'half-man', doing jobs around the estate in winter and grass-cutting full-time in summer, three days a week on the tractor-mower, two days with the strimmer.

The family, as far as possible, "fill in the gaps", with Jamie and Emily now largely responsible for the gardens around their home, Victorian Lochinch Castle, at the other end of the gardens. Their son Jack, four, already has his own avenue, named for him and planted, in proper Castle Kennedy fashion, with a newly introduced exotic – in this case, the Wollemi pine.

Jamie's mother, despite her 82 years, continues to tend (again with John's help) to the walled garden which she has transformed over the last 40 years, from dereliction into an intimate and intensely personal ornamental garden. It is so different to the rest of the garden, and has so different a peak season, that it will be the subject of a separate feature in a future issue of *Dumfries & Galloway Life*.

'Devotion' seems a reasonable word to apply to the efforts of everyone involved at Castle Kennedy. If you wonder why they're so devoted, well, just look at the photographs.

The final judgement on any garden is simply to assess how beautiful it is, and you will travel much further than the far west of Galloway to find one more beautiful than Castle Kennedy. DaG

■ *The garden is open from 10am to 5pm daily from the end of March to the end of September, and at other times by appointment, call: 01776 702 024 or 01581 400 225.*

*It has more than 20 trees which are champions in terms of their size either for the whole of Britain, for Scotland or for Dumfries & Galloway, and there is now a Tree Trail which highlights all of these champions. At the entrance to the garden there are those very necessary additions: a shop, a tea room and a plant sales area.*

■ *For more information see: [www.castlekenedygardens.co.uk](http://www.castlekenedygardens.co.uk).*

## Get involved

Castle Kennedy is much-used and valued by the local community but the Stairs would dearly love to have more visitors so they are developing an ever-wider range of events throughout the season, from serious garden tours with John MacArthur

of that ilk, and fun days for children, including an Easter Egg Trail, a Teddy Bear's Picnic Party, pond-dipping and bug-hunting, to open-air theatrical productions.

You can become a Friend of Castle Kennedy through the annual subscription

scheme which offer free entry to the garden throughout the year, invitations to special events, discounts and regular updates. You can also join the team of volunteers, helping as a hands-on gardener, as Garden Ranger, or with the garden's educational and entertainment events.