

RICHES & RUINS

The gardens at Castle Kennedy - laid out dramatically on an isthmus between the remains of the original castle and its nineteenth-century replacement - have a rich history of horticultural development, continued to this day by the family which lives there

TEXT CLARE FOSTER PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREA JONES



The turreted Lochinch Castle (this picture) was built in Victorian times to replace the fourteenth-century Castle Kennedy, burnt to ruins in 1716. The 75-acre garden is laid out between the two castles, and is flanked by the Black Loch (opposite below) on one side and the White Loch on the other. The terraced Belvedere is among a series of earthworks (opposite above), possibly designed by William Adam





As dramatic as any stage set, only on a much larger scale, the historic gardens of Castle Kennedy are unique. Spread out over a narrow isthmus of land between two picturesque lochs, with the ivy-clad ruins of the fourteenth-century Castle Kennedy at one end and the Victorian turrets of Lochinch Castle at the other, it couldn't have a more magical setting, with a romantic isolation that makes the visitor feel far removed from the realities of everyday life. The gardens were started in the early eighteenth century by John Dalrymple, the 2nd Earl of Stair, who inherited the castle in 1707. Tragically, in 1716 the castle was burnt down in a devastating fire – caused, it is said, by one of the housekeepers airing bedding too near to the fire. It has remained in ruins to this day. In Victorian times Lochinch Castle was built nearby, and here the present Earl of Stair and his family still live.

The gardens are on a massive scale, with 75 acres of formal garden laid out in the classic eighteenth-century landscape style, a complex array of interconnecting areas linked by woodland avenues and rides. One of the most intriguing aspects is a series of earthworks overlooking the peaty black loch to the east. Reminiscent of battlements, these huge terraced banks, possibly designed by the renowned Scottish architect and landscaper William Adam, were commissioned by the military-minded earl, a field marshal who borrowed troops from his own regiments to help with the formidable task of building them. Records of this construction, fraught with problems, exist in the form of letters between the earl, who was at the time travelling overseas, and his head gardener, Thomas McAlla, who commanded his own army of garden troops in his master's absence.

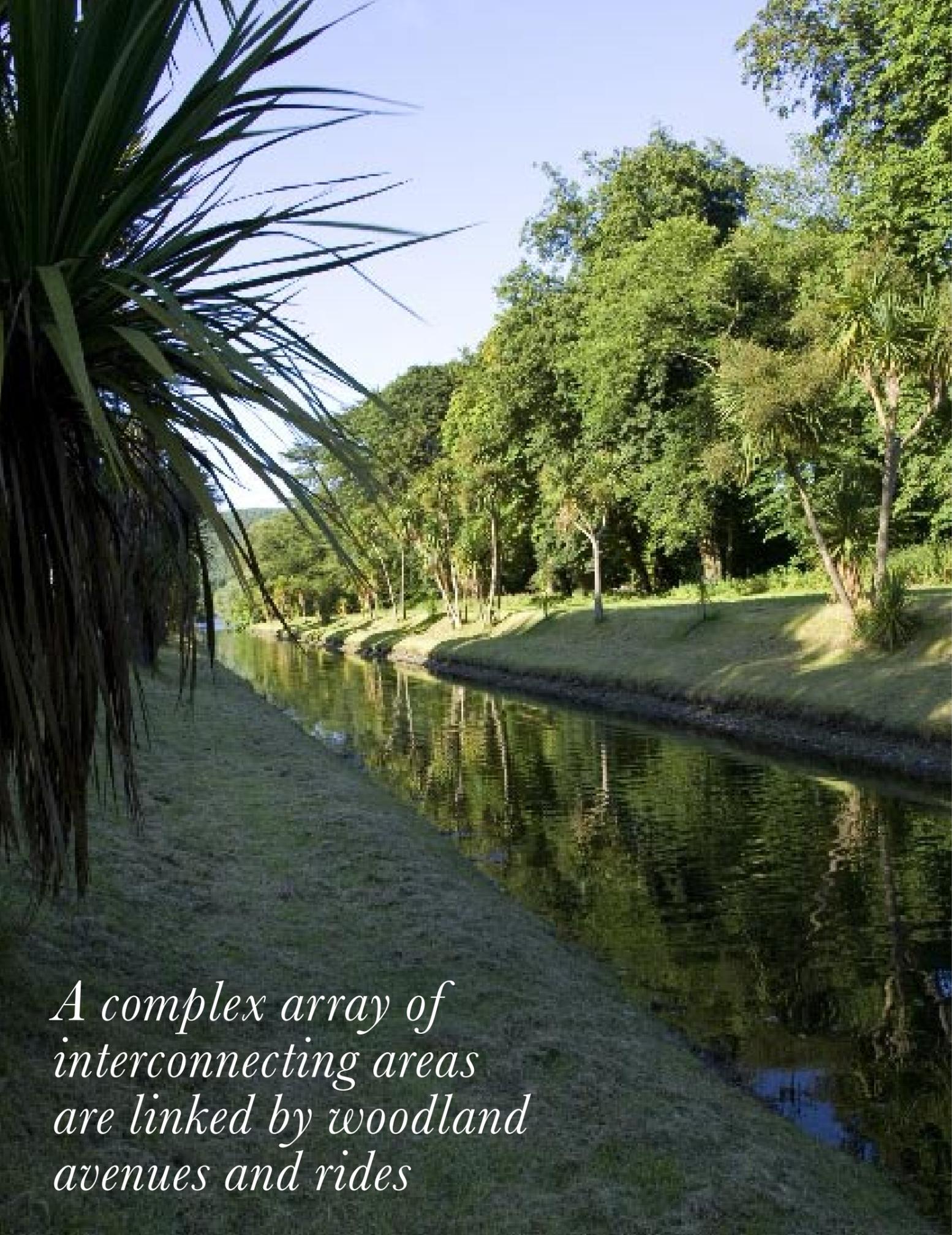
Over the next century the garden's fortunes waxed and waned, with successive earls showing varying degrees of horticultural interest. After a period of neglect, in 1841, the 8th Earl, who had found a decaying copy of the original plans in a gardener's cottage, invited the famous landscaper John Claudius Loudon to restore the overgrown gardens to their original design. The well-connected Loudon took the project on with aplomb, filling the garden with many of the newly introduced plants that were flooding into the country from abroad at the time. Thriving in the balmy Gulf Stream climate, some of these old specimens still survive, including a magnificent *Rhododendron arboreum* grown from seed sent back from the Himalayas by Joseph Hooker, who was a frequent visitor here, and an avenue of monkey puzzles (*Araucaria araucana*), planted shortly after they had been introduced from South America in the 1840s.

Today Jamie, the 14th Earl of Stair, and his wife, Emily, continue the horticultural tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation. Jamie's grandfather, the 12th Earl, was a particularly keen and knowledgeable gardener, who built up a fine collection of plants, bred his own rhododendrons, and regularly exhibited at Chelsea; Jamie's mother, Davina, is still developing the walled garden adjacent to the ruined castle. This two-acre garden, which probably served as the kitchen garden for the original castle, is on a more intimate scale than the rest of the estate. Laid out in a quadrangle bisected with grassy paths, the walled garden peaks in midsummer when its wide borders are flowering – awash with colourful herbaceous perennials

ALL PICTURES With the ruins of Castle Kennedy looming over it, the walled garden was probably originally the kitchen garden for the castle. Bisected by grassy paths, it has wide borders filled with herbaceous perennials and tender shrubs, such as the bottlebrush plant, (*Callistemon subulatus* - opposite bottom), and reaches a colourful peak in midsummer



Adjacent to the ruined castle, the walled garden is on a more intimate scale than the rest of the estate



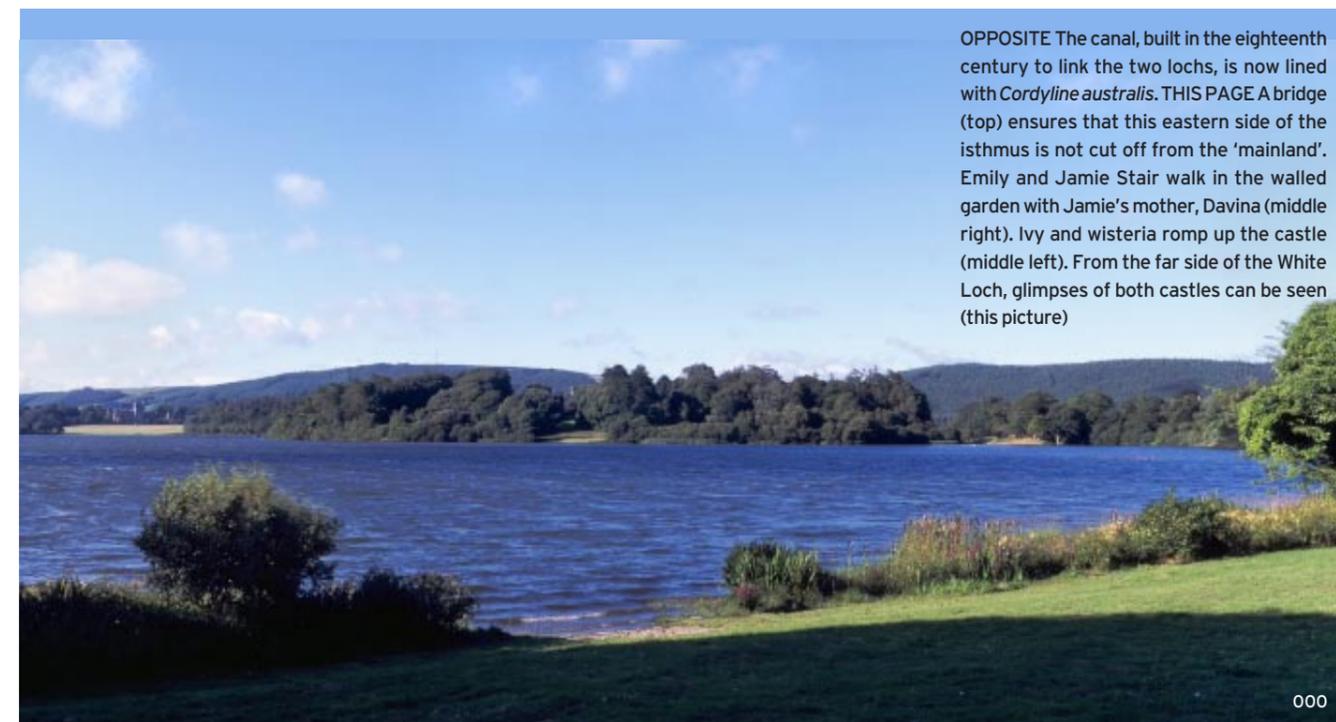
A complex array of interconnecting areas are linked by woodland avenues and rides

and tender shrubs such as the bottlebrush plant, *Callistemon subulatus*. Here and there, to remind one of the walled garden's former use, are ancient, gnarled apple trees, their trunks covered with greeny-grey lichen.

Looking north from the ruined castle, which sits on an elevation above the rest of the estate, there are sweeping views down grassy slopes towards the large circular pond and across to the Belvedere, an earth-sculpted look-out mound with gently descending terraces that throw eccentric shadows in the receding light. Beyond is the evocatively named Giant's Grave – a dramatic raised bank – with the Dancing Green below. To the east lies the canal, built in the eighteenth century to link the two lochs, and now lined with exotic-looking *Cordyline australis*. So vast is the garden that it perhaps shouldn't come as a surprise that there is yet another, even larger, walled garden in this eastern corner. Built in Victorian times as the working kitchen garden for Lochinch Castle, it is now semi-derelict, but plans are afoot to restore it, including the original glasshouses which still line the crumbling walls, currently used by head gardener John MacArthur for propagating plants and trees.

For most people the task of overseeing 75 acres of garden would be at best daunting, at worst unmanageable, but Jamie and Emily Stair have the energy, enthusiasm and dedication to make it work. They are in the process of employing a garden historian to carry out more detailed research into the gardens, have both enrolled on a horticultural course at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh and plan to involve the local community in the restoration of the kitchen garden. It is fortunate that a love of horticulture and landscape seems to run through the blood of this family, and if past generations are anything to go by, the newest addition to the family will soon have a trowel and fork in his hand □

Castle Kennedy, Rephad, Stranraer, Dumfries & Galloway (tel: 01776-702024; www.castlekenedygardens.co.uk). The gardens are open at weekends in February and March, and daily from Easter to September 30



OPPOSITE The canal, built in the eighteenth century to link the two lochs, is now lined with *Cordyline australis*. THIS PAGE A bridge (top) ensures that this eastern side of the isthmus is not cut off from the 'mainland'. Emily and Jamie Stair walk in the walled garden with Jamie's mother, Davina (middle right). Ivy and wisteria romp up the castle (middle left). From the far side of the White Loch, glimpses of both castles can be seen (this picture)