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The Press and Journal

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Staying power

Douneside House has a fascinating history and has recently been transformed into a hotel. **Ellie House** finds out more about its inspirational matriarch

Walking through the door of Douneside House provokes a strange feeling – set against a patchwork of rolling green fields, it feels like coming home. There is no slick reception desk or imposing interior – just a close-knit team of welcoming staff and a crackling fire in the grate. Unlike many hotels which go heavy on deer antlers and tweed, Douneside has managed to capture the essence of a Scottish country escape filled with warmth and nostalgia without the stereotypical relics.

It is perhaps to be expected from the once family home, which started life as a humble farmhouse bought by the famous MacRobert family. Their photos and family heirlooms can be found thoughtfully placed throughout what is now a freshly renovated hotel, almost as if they never left. Douneside has undergone somewhat of a transformation in recent months but its heart is very much the same – a beating pulse of history which will hopefully be preserved for decades to come. Owned by The MacRobert Trust, a charitable trust set up by Lady MacRobert, Douneside previously

provided a holiday escape for commissioned officers of the armed services before opening its doors to the public last year.

An extensive redesign has produced 13 beautiful guest bedrooms which all have a subtle nod to the MacRobert family. Within the grounds there are also four apartments, five cottages and health club complete with swimming pool, sauna and fitness classes.

Guests can stroll around the idyllic gardens, browse the extensive library, or enjoy canapes in the bar before dinner. Business is flourishing and Douneside has already scooped luxury hotel of the year



in the north-east regional finals of the Scottish Hotel Awards, alongside small country house of the year. The restaurant is fast gaining a reputation as one of the north-east's best fine dining destinations due, in no small part, to the appointment of head chef David Butters last year. Chef Butters and his team have created a range of menus, such as traditional afternoon tea, a three-course table d'hôte set menu, and their signature six-course tasting menu. Only the finest ingredients are used and almost all the vegetables are grown organically on-site by The MacRobert Trust's gardening team. This year they are hoping for an impressive crop of 80 different varieties of vegetables, meaning Douneside can boast one of Scotland's largest hotel kitchen gardens. But despite the impressive accolades, the team remains driven by the MacRobert legacy and the fascinating story of a family who arrived at Douneside more than 100 years ago. Business manager for the MacRobert Trust, Gillian Currie believes its past must be preserved, but every decision is taken with a view to the future.

We are all incredibly fond and protective of Douneside, it comes with the territory and it still feels like the MacRobert family are with us

Having come to the MacRobert Trust almost three years ago she is clearly passionate about her work. "We are all incredibly fond and protective of Douneside, it comes with the territory and it still feels like the MacRobert family are with us," she said. "We have to think of them with every decision we make because it is in their name. "Before the renovation, it became quite obvious that we needed to do something at Douneside as significant work was required on the structure of the building, and the interior was starting to look a bit tired. "Our trustees took the brave decision to invest significantly in its upgrade. "In addition, to ensure that it can be maintained to this incredibly high standard for generations to come, trustees decided that it should be operated as a hotel, to provide an additional income towards its maintenance. "Any surplus profits are all donated to charities through The MacRobert Trust's charitable schemes. "We've hopefully produced a luxury hotel where guests will enjoy spending time,

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Head chef David Butters



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but it still retains character without any stuffiness.”

It would be difficult for Douneside to lose its sense of warmth if one looks back at the incredible family who called it home. The matriarch of the family, Lady Rachel Workman MacRobert, was perhaps ahead of her time as a passionate and outspoken young woman.

Her American accent, strident opinions on women's rights, and desire to tackle inequalities certainly ruffled a few feathers in rural Aberdeenshire.

She moved in high society and was 30 years younger than her husband, Sir Alexander.

He also possessed a remarkable back story, having originally been a factory floor sweeper in Aberdeen's Stoneywood

Paper Mill before moving to India and making his fortune.

He was made a widower after he lost his first wife to cancer.

In 1906 he made a considerable donation of £25,000 to the Medical School at Aberdeen University for the endowment of the Georgina MacRobert Fellowship.

Upon meeting Lady Rachel, the pair moved back to Aberdeen and had three sons – Alasdair, Roderic and Iain – who grew up at Douneside.

Their photographs still adorn the walls and one can only imagine a childhood spent roaming the 7,000-acre estate.

Completely unaffected by her title, Lady Rachel was also a keen farmer and made sure her boys enjoyed a thoroughly rural upbringing.

Her life was to be changed forever on the loss of her first son, Alasdair, who died in a civil flying accident when he was 26 years old.

Greater tragedy was to follow upon the death of Roderic, who was lost in action during World War II only three years later.

He died leading a flight of Hurricanes in a strafing attack on a German-held airfield in Iraq.

Less than six weeks after his death, Lady Rachel's youngest son, Iain, who was also a member of the RAF, was reported missing when his Blenheim aircraft failed to return from a search and rescue mission which set out from Sullom Voe airfield in Shetland.

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Opposite page: The Douneside House team: General manager Marcel Wassen (front) with Jack Irvine, assistant restaurant manager; Carolanne Duncan, house keeper manager; Jamie Aitken, deputy general manager; Melanie Dalton, front of house, and Tom Bielawski, restaurant manager



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His body was never found.

He was 24 years old.

One can only imagine the overwhelming grief Lady Rachel must have felt upon the loss of all three sons, but her response set her apart as a truly remarkable woman who is still talked about within the armed forces today.

She made a donation of £25,000 to purchase a bomber for the RAF and asked that it be named "MacRobert's Reply". Her defiance against the enemy not only reflects her strength of character, it also started a tradition at RAF Lossiemouth. A succession of RAF aircrafts have since carried the name and today's "MacRobert's Reply" is a Tornado GR4. Lady MacRobert also donated a further £20,000 to purchase four Hurricane fighters, which were sent to RAF operations in the Middle East.

Three were named after her sons and the fourth after her.

"She was very forward thinking and her response to her family's tragedies was incredible," said Gillian.

"She wanted to make sure that the spirit of her sons lived on so she set up various trusts – The MacRobert Trust to capture the determination which she believed drove them to join up for the Second World War in the first place.

"The separate trusts became one in 2001, and it has since donated millions of pounds to different charities, enabled traineeships, and we also run the MacRobert estate, including Douneside House.

"There are little touches from the family throughout the hotel, from Lady Rachel's Louis Vuitton travelling trunk to antique wardrobes and Air Force memorabilia," said Gillian.



Gillian Currie, director of Douneside and business manager for The MacRobert Trust

Indeed, one of the long-serving staff members was previously an army sergeant, and Gillian is incredibly proud of the team.

"We aren't the average hotel and the key here is the brilliant team who all believe in the ethos of The MacRobert Trust and Douneside," she said.

"We care passionately about our guests, many of whom have been visiting Douneside with their families for years. "We're also incredibly excited that we are now open to everyone – to stay, to dine in our restaurant or even to get married at Douneside.

"This is our own reply to Lady Rachel, her aspirations were heard and felt, and will continue to echo at Douneside for decades to come."

*For more information visit
www.dounesidehouse.co.uk*

