

Douneside House is nestled within 17 acres of gardens deep in Royal Deeside



# Douneside House is a rare architectural gem: a serenely beautiful Scottish country house, but with a tragic story to tell



Lady MacRobert with her three sons, who were all tragically killed

After opening its doors on June 1, the newly-revamped luxury hotel will offer guests a glimpse of a forgotten past

BY KEVIN O'SULLIVAN

With the year-long Festival of Architecture currently underway in Scotland, it is fitting that one of its more interesting yet lesser known buildings has thrown open its doors to the public as a newly-revamped luxury country house hotel.

Douneside House may not be a name that trips off the tongue but after a £5.5m refurbishment the rural Aber-

deenshire retreat is likely to become a very popular destination for weekend breakers, and equally to those who take a keen interest in their surrounds.

In that sense, the property will not disappoint; steeped in the most beguiling history, the property in Royal Deeside was bequeathed to a charitable trust in perpetuity by the late Lady MacRobert on her death in 1954 and now serves as a very vivid reminder of the sacrifice of her three sons, who all died tragically serving their country with the RAF both during the Second World War and in peacetime.

That history has been meticulously preserved by the incumbent trustees who have sought to evoke the memory of the once resident family: there are pictures and portraits of the heroic sons and indeed one of the

guest rooms is named "MacRobert's Reply" after the Stirling bomber Lady MacRobert donated to the RAF as a response to her loss; and until now the property has fittingly been used by serving and ex-military personnel as a place of relaxation.

"Douneside has a backstory unlike no other. A part of a vast 7,500-acre estate bequeathed in trust by the late Lady MacRobert, the property is steeped in history," explains Marcel Wassen, the hotel's newly-appointed General Manager. "The renovations have been extensive but many of its antiques and furniture have been delicately restored to bring them back to life."

The hotel opened its doors on June 1 after an extensive renovation that saw a complete overhaul of the bedrooms,

restaurant, bar, public rooms and leisure facilities. There are 30 guest rooms in total, 14 of which are located in the house itself with a further five cottages (all with cosy log burners) and apartments scattered among the 17 acres of gardens.

"The cottages and apartments are all within a couple of minutes' walk of the house," adds Wassen. "They are almost all self-catering but we wanted to make them feel like an extension to the main house itself; they are ideally suited for families as they are more spacious. They vary from one to three bedrooms, and like all of the rooms in the house, they have been extensively updated. The renovation has been done to the very highest standard; the house is absolutely stunning."

Wassen himself is a Dutchman

whose career has taken him from the former Eton Collection hotels in London to the five-star Glasshouse and Scotsman hotels in Edinburgh.

"After that I worked for a few country houses and I really got the bug," he adds. "It's a much more personalised and friendly environment, and I think increasingly that is what people are looking for." Wassen must have a flair for managing country house hotels – his last role saw his hotel earning the accolade of Country House of the Year at the 2015 Scottish Hotel Awards.

The restaurant is also set to become a very big focus for Douneside House. Wassen has brought in David Butters as Head Chef, who has created a range of menus, from a highly sophisticated 'tasting menu' for lovers of the fine dining experience, to a table d'hôte



The house has undergone a £5.5m refurbishment, which has seen extensive renovations to its guest and function rooms, leisure facilities and dining areas



(house) menu, to a more accessible range of menu options served in the bistro bar area. “The cuisine has been taken to a new level. Chef Butters previously worked with Darin Campbell at Gleneagles and at various high-end properties including the 5-star Longueville Manor,” says Wassen. “We are very lucky to have him on board, and guests will be able to sample some of his finest creations. The response so far has been fantastic and we are now fully booked until the end of June.”

**TO WORK OFF** the calories guests will be able to take advantage of a brand new gym and exercise studio, which has 18 ‘stations’ ranging from

treadmills to power and resistance step trainers; there is also a newly-built sauna and steam room and the swimming pool has been rejuvenated. “We are blessed to have a fantastic health club which has undergone a major refurbishment and is really quite a unique selling point,” Wassen adds. “Within our 17 acres of expertly tended gardens we have a tennis court, putting green, play park and croquet lawn so there are plenty of activities available for our guests to enjoy.”

Throughout the restoration project, the trustees have sought to retain Douneside House’s links with the military, who will still get exclusive use of the property for the last two weeks of

July and the whole of August, as well as a week-long period over Christmas.

“We think that is only right that we continue our special connection with the military, many of whom return to Douneside for their family holidays year after year,” adds Wassen. “At the same time we’re incredibly excited to be opening our doors to the public who we will be welcoming for the very first time.”

The MacRobert Trust itself is an organisation that donates around £1.5m-a-year into a range of charitable activities and organisations, through its grant giving scheme. The decision to upgrade Douneside, and attract non-military guests, was taken in line with

the Trust’s ambitions to create a more sustainable estate; allowing the Trust to invest in more charitable activities, including those which benefit the rural economy.

Rear Admiral Chris Hockley, CEO of the MacRobert Trust, explains: “Douneside House is undoubtedly the MacRobert Estate’s Jewel in the Crown. Opening Douneside’s doors to the public marks a significant turning point in its history and we hope this change will ultimately allow The MacRobert Trust to increase its charitable giving. The transformation has been significant but I’m delighted that we have maintained the character and charm of what was the MacRob-

ert family home. We look forward to welcoming back our returning guests and sharing the special experience and exceptional level of hospitality and service with new guests who will be able to visit for the very first time.”

And time will no doubt tell if the venture proves to be successful, with plans also to use the house as a wedding and conference venue; located some 50 minutes from Aberdeen and in the heart of Royal Deeside, close to fishing and shooting sports estates, and within striking distance of the Cairngorms, Douneside House might soon become a building that earns its place within the ranks of Scottish architectural gems.



## DOUNESIDE HOUSE

ROYAL DEESIDE

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The newly refurbished Douneside House offers everything - and so much more - one would expect from a Scottish country retreat. Its rich history and magnificent location in the heart of The MacRobert Estate in Royal Deeside set the scene for a truly memorable stay. Imagine classic interiors, elegantly furnished and decorated with fine art and precious heirlooms. Breathtaking views of our ‘infinity lawn’

and beyond, over the Howe of Cromar. An exquisite fine dining menu created by our award-winning chef, featuring fresh produce from Douneside’s 17 acres of lovingly tended gardens and perfectly matched by an extensive wine and whisky menu. A state-of-the-art Health Club with brand-new facilities, including a swimming pool, sauna, steam room, game room and all-weather tennis court. This and more, delivered with unparalleled, passionate service. Douneside House awaits you with open arms.

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