

# SKIBO CASTLE, DORNOCH

FOR 1000 YEARS THERE HAS BEEN A CASTLE ON THE SITE AT SKIBO AND BETWEEN 1898 AND 1902 SKIBO CASTLE WAS REMODELLED AS A PRIVATE HOUSE BY STEEL MAGNATE AND PHILANTHROPIST ANDREW CARNEGIE, WHOSE FAMILY RETAINED ITS USE UNTIL THE EARLY 1980s.

PHOTO CREDIT - Credit Richard Bryant/arcaid.co.uk 2008



“Skibo is ‘top of the ladder’ in terms of the service we offer and is quite unique in that it affords the historic experience of staying in a house remodelled by a man who was then the richest in the world using good taste and the finest materials,” says Managing Director Peter Crome.

“Guests also experience the Scottish country estate, which offers 8,500 acres of stunning Sutherland scenery while staying in an exclusive resort signalled by the electronic gates, personal greeting on arrival and a ‘waving off’ on departure.”

Recent refurbishments include 21 bedrooms in the Castle and 12 one to four bedroom lodges in the grounds, 50 rooms in total. Also on site is a spa, stables, golf course and a new enclosed swimming pool is in the early stages of construction.

There is a variety of food and beverage offers including Mr Carnegie’s Dining Room, which seats 70 and features one table for 30. A number of private dining rooms are also available, including Andrew Carnegie’s study with views over the loch and waterfall that he had ‘created’ to improve the view. Food can also

Above  
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be delivered to the lodges and guests can cook in the kitchen where the chefs will happily help out with instruction or lessons as required. Lunch and barbecues are provided at the separate golf clubhouse.

Skibo service is highly personal as there are 120 full time staff, an average of three to every guest.

"We have taken Skibo from a hotel/club five years ago to what is now a strictly private members club," says Crome.

"There is no expansion programme, we don't have a dedicated brochure and there is very little about Skibo Castle on the web. Marketing is word of mouth and business comes from members referring friends. Slow it might be, but we are full and operate a waiting list. It is not about money, it is about passion and providing the right feel, the right ethos."

Crome moved to Skibo five years ago from the highly rated Chewton Glen Hotel where he was crowned Hotelier of the Year by the industry in 2000. Prior to that, he was with The St Andrews Old Course Hotel and The Savoy.

"When I arrived the view of the food here was functional and I wanted to improve it. We are serving well travelled customers who understand fine dining. We have no Michelin star or other ratings because we are a private club, but the people who dine here rate the food very highly.

So what is the secret to the success of the Castle's cuisine?

"We are blessed by bountiful local produce and like to showcase the ingredients and have the finest beef; Dornoch used to supply The Savoy Group. It can also take only 20 minutes from the water for a lobster to reach the pot! We use local suppliers and the Castle also grows its own vegetables and fruit. Wild mushrooms are also found on the estate."

Executive Chef Craig Rowland says: "My food philosophy is whatever we can, as locally as we can. We have excellent relationships with our suppliers who often point the way, saying the lobsters are plentiful and a good price, or that the lamb is particularly good, for example. We know Mary who picks the lobsters and Angus who shoots the beasts; top level traceability if you like."

Skibo Castle is a Grade A listed building and was never designed for or intended to have a commercial kitchen layout. The task of foodservice consultants Andrew Powis FCSI and Elaine Powis FCSI from Sterling Foodservice Design was to rationalise and modernise the kitchens, which dated back to 1900, taking into consideration the fabric of the building and strict Historic Scotland regulations. This involved the retention of the tiled walls and floor and other features and finishes, all of which required encasing for posterity.

"We spent three years thinking about the new kitchens," says Rowland.

Above  
The kitchen's centrepiece is a 3.2 metre long Elro Induction Cooking Range with a separate Elro Pressure Bratt Pan



“They are a big chunk of the ground floor and we took time to discuss the scope of the project which became wider than just the kitchen and came to include the F&B departments as well.”

By this stage, reinforcements were needed.

“Andrew and Elaine Powis from Sterling were recommended via word of mouth and in fact a total of three consultants were interviewed. They were all very good but Andrew and Elaine bounce well off each other and we felt quite comfortable very quickly. They listened intently and they don’t miss anything.

“It is very hard to picture a new kitchen, especially to get a feel for how big it is going to be. One of the first things Andrew and Elaine said was, ‘Where is the flow?’ The hot plates are now at the closest point to the end destination for the food. The kitchen is like a new car; there is somewhere to put everything and everything is in its place. The kitchen is not about the range but about the flow.

“They paid great attention to detail and made the best use of space in each zone. You may not notice now because it looks so natural but originally we were not sure where to place the walk-in fridges. It seems obvious now but we built a fridge into the old pastry room as we were not able to knock walls down and then built a freezer next door. A fascia over both makes them look like one unit, which also makes cleaning more efficient. The original kitchen was then redesigned as vegetable, pastry and mise-en-place storage and preparation areas.

“There were no headaches because they solved any issues before there was a problem. We would not have achieved so much without Andrew and Elaine.”

An area adjacent to the original kitchen was identified as being suitable for redevelopment. This included a light well, corridor and goods-in area with access to the main dining room. Sterling recommended the infilling of the light well to enable the integration and enhancement of existing areas and to provide improved workflows.

The design for the newly formed area included cooking and service functions. Key equipment included a Wimbock Vaulted Ventilated Ceiling which can be adjusted to provide heating or cooling. The centrepiece is a 3.2 metre long Elro Induction Cooking Range with a separate Elro Pressure Bratt Pan “which makes the clearest stocks for sauces”.

Two Bonnet Combination Ovens stand at knee height off the floor making them comfortable to work with and water filters on slide-out runners maximise space and ease of servicing. At each end of the range is a hot pass for the two dining rooms.

Stainless steel fabrication, bull-nosed edging to match the Elro profile was manufactured by specialist contractor Stellex and workstations incorporate Gram refrigerated counters.

In other areas the undulating nature of the building fabric created a challenge to the stainless steel fabricators in achieving a

*Above*  
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high quality finish. The majority of the equipment in all areas was mounted on plinths to provide a streamlined and hygienic finish.

The existing dishwashing area was redeveloped to include storage for delicate crockery along with a Meiko hood dishwasher, passthrough utensil washer and their associated handling equipment.

The remodelled dispense bar gained a separate glasswashing facility provided by a Meiko hood glasswasher incorporating a reverse osmosis unit, which was necessary to deal with the high peat content of the water supply.

Diane Munro, Food & Beverage Manager, says she is a fan of the new facilities.

"I was asked what I would like to see and described the issues we had with service and cleaning, particularly the 'stop-start' benches in a narrow service area for the restaurant.

"Sterling designed a new service counter so long and narrow it had to be brought into the Castle via a window.

"Task lighting has also been fitted above this unit so as not to distract guests when the door is opened for the service of drinks."

Two supporting pantries adjacent to the dining rooms supply the still room function for breakfast and dinner.

Features of all areas included Tournus knee operated hand wash basins and Technocater stainless steel roll grids and floor channels. The grids can be easily lifted, rolled up and sanitised in the dishwasher.

"The unsung hero is the stainless steel floor drains, which make

cleaning so much easier," says Rowland. "We can hose down and deck scrub, then roll up the drain covers for washing."

There are 13 chefs split over the two kitchens with one chef situated at the golf clubhouse and one dedicated to the staff catering facility.

Rowland explains: "The new design provides exactly what is needed for the size of our operation. We are very well equipped and can serve up to 120 covers, usually with three courses but they could all require service at the same time."

Building work and installation were carried out between January and February, when Skibo traditionally closes.

"We are always conscious that people come here for the peace and quiet so we would rather close than inconvenience them in any way," says Crome. "I remember the final meeting to move forward on the kitchen. There were close to 30 people in the room: architects, builders, designers, M&E etc. Installation went smoothly and I think it was relatively easy because of all the meetings, which took care of the detail and looked at everything more than once."

The complex installation was project managed by Graham Massey, Managing Director of GS Group. They also provided the majority of the remaining equipment under the direction of Sterling who appreciated the co-operation of all those involved in the complex and unique project.

[www.sterlingfoodservice.com](http://www.sterlingfoodservice.com)

Above  
Guests can experience the Scottish  
country estate with 8,500 acres of  
stunning Sutherland scenery