

# OUT *of the* RUINS

INHERITING A ROOFLESS HOUSE WITH FOOT-WIDE CRACKS PROVED TO BE AN *inspiration* RATHER THAN A LIMITATION FOR ONE FAMILY WHEN THEY MOVED TO THE HEBRIDEAN ISLAND OF COLL

WORDS *Caroline Ednie* PHOTOGRAPHS *James Gardiner*



THIS PICTURE The property was the first lime-built house on the island and took on the name The White House to distinguish it from the basic 'black houses'. A glazed link, with a sedum roof, connects the restored ruin to a living-dining space in the new wing



From our living room window, we've seen visitors to the island searching on the beach for "curious stones... like small cucumbers", as James Boswell and Samuel Johnson did when they stayed in this house in 1773,' says Seonaid Maclean-Bristol. She is looking out towards Grishipol Bay on the Hebridean Isle of Coll from the White House, the unusual home she and husband Alex share with their three sons, Archie, eight, Fergus, six, and Xander, three. This is the same house that welcomed Boswell and Johnson when they were stormbound on the island during their famous Tour to the Hebrides. However, today's White House, which emerged following a radical redesign and 18-month redevelopment, is very different from the original Georgian house that hosted the two writers.

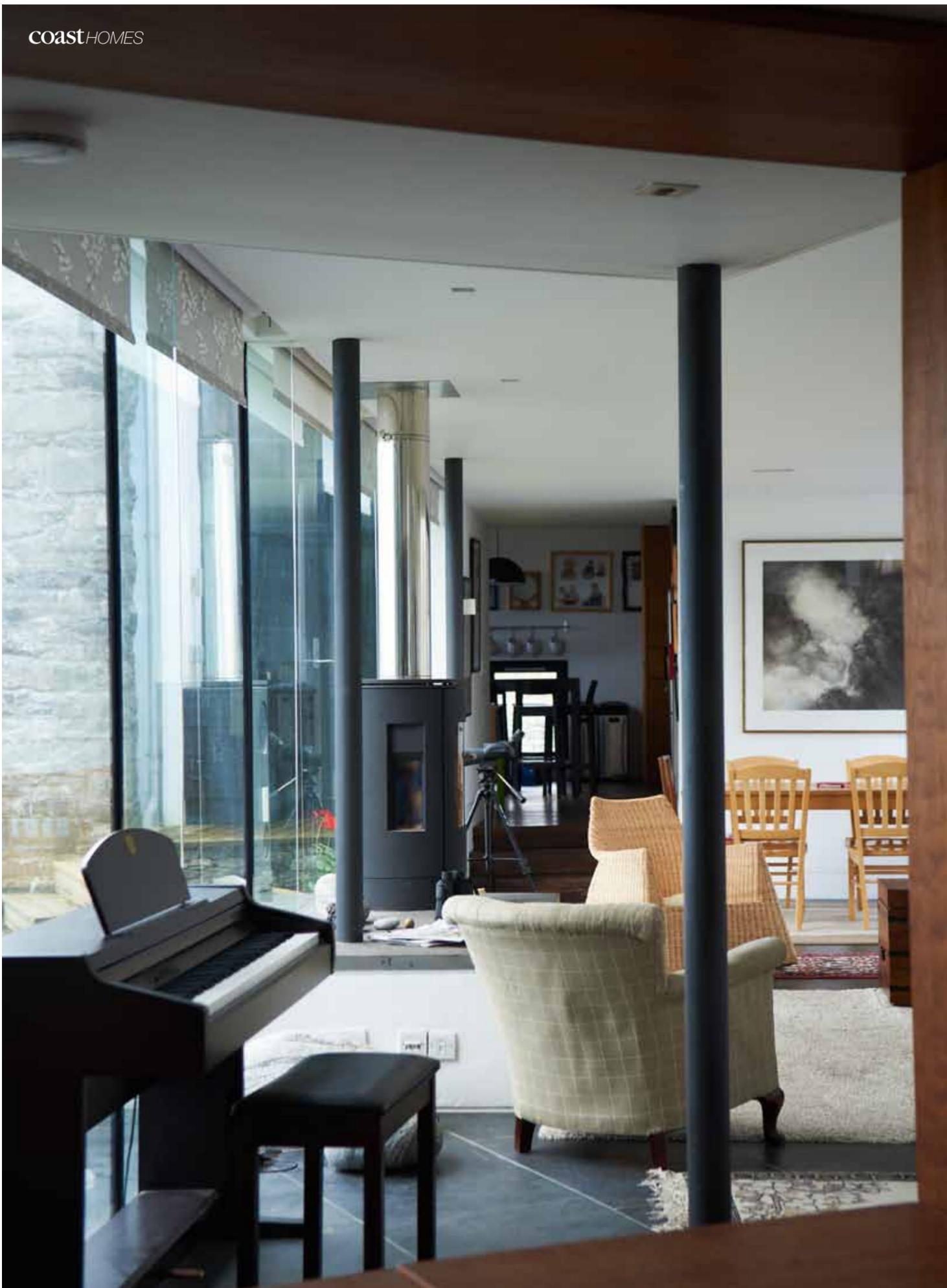
Seonaid and Alex, who is originally from Coll, moved to the island from London more than seven years ago. Seonaid had been working at Sotheby's and Alex was working for Project Trust, an educational gap-year charity based on Coll that sends volunteers overseas. Following an invitation from Alex's parents, Major Nicholas Maclean-Bristol and his wife Lavinia, to help run the family's 800-acre farm, the couple sold their London flat and relocated to the Hebridean island. Initially they stayed in the local Manse house, part of Alex's parents' farm, but when they inherited the site with the 18th-century White House on it, they saw an opportunity to build the contemporary family farmhouse they had always hankered after. The only hitch was that the house they inherited was a stone and lime-rendered roofless ruin with foot-wide cracks in its walls.

### A SCULPTURAL RUIN

The couple decided that rather than reconstruct or demolish the building, they would work with what already existed. 'The White House had been a ruin longer than it had been inhabited so we wanted to celebrate that,' explains Seonaid. It was built in the mid-1700s by the island's Laird, Maclean of Coll, for his son, and was the first lime-rendered house on the island, which explains why locals referred to it as the White House. Unfortunately, it was built on sand and was deserted in the 1800s as it started to

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP The family wanted to celebrate the drama of the cracked gable rather than demolish the building. Seonaid has created a cloister-like area in the courtyard with beach pebbles and lanterns - 'I didn't want to detract from the fact that this used to be part of the interior of the original house,' she says; Alex with sons Archie and Fergus OPPOSITE A view of Grishipol Bay from the kitchen





crack. 'There's a sculptural quality to the ruin and we were keen to preserve that elegance and to make a feature of the crack,' says Seonaid.

To realise this ambition, they enlisted the help of architect Wil Tunnell of South Queensferry-based WT Architecture. 'Discussing the external aspects of the new house with Wil was one of the huge enjoyments of the project. It was a joy,' says Seonaid. 'Our brief was not a simple one. We didn't want a pretty holiday home – we wanted a functioning five-bedroom farmhouse that would accommodate three small children. And we had strong aesthetic demands. Fortunately, we were enchanted with Wil's design from the outset.'

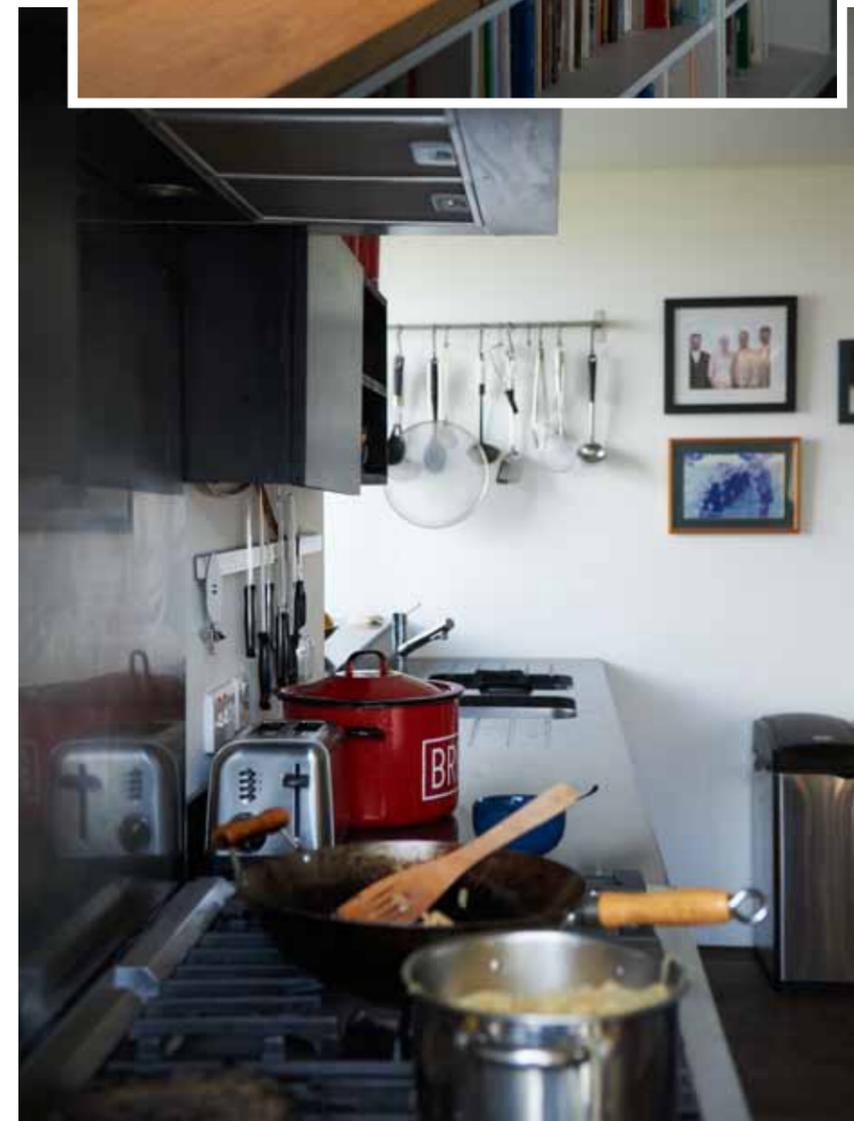
Wil explains their joint vision: 'We wanted to make a building that was carefully sited and belonged to the landscape. There is a grain to Coll – it is a lumpy, bumpy place shaped by glaciers. The coastal outcrop surrounding the house is made of Lewisian gneiss rock, the oldest in Britain and Europe, probably 2,500 million years old. So the enclosure walls of the new house were designed to pick up its pattern.'

The footprint of the house is essentially a skewed H, where one upright is the original ruin – half of which has been retained as an open courtyard – and the other half is the ground-floor kitchen and a large en-suite bedroom that is B&B accommodation. 'It was not originally meant to be a guest area,' says Seonaid. 'The idea evolved because of the lack of B&Bs on the island. As it's in a separate part of the house and is self-contained, it is ideal for guests.'

The other upright of the H is the new accommodation wing, partly constructed from reclaimed stone found on the site. It houses four bedrooms, a family bathroom and a ground-floor, cherry-lined 'snug' where the kids play or watch TV. The bar of the H is the main living and dining area, and has breathtaking views over Grishipol Bay and the Atlantic breakers through its frameless, floor-to-ceiling windows.

The RIBA award-winning house is not only a design tour-de-force, it's also cannily practical. 'As a farmhouse, it's fantastic,' says Alex, who farms 250 black-faced sheep and 45 Highland cattle. 'Traditional houses tend to be quite removed from the animals, but we're at the heart of the farm, so I can see the cows and

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 THIS PAGE, FROM TOP **The White House** is a family farmhouse, not a pretty holiday home. The book-lined landing has a long window seat that looks out over the sheltering west wall and down to Alex's boat mooring; the range cooker in the kitchen is by Westahl OPPOSITE **The living area** in the new glazed link is roomy and functional. The woodburner is by Charnwood





sheep. In lambing season, we keep the more needy sheep in the field around the house so we can keep an eye on them. So, from a practical farming point of view, it's ideal.' The couple are even thinking of running lambing holidays this year. 'Visitors could sit and press their noses against the window and watch the lambing in comfort,' says Seonaid.

### A LIVELY COMMUNITY

Along with Alex, Seonaid also prepares and distributes ready-made meals using the meat reared on the farm, a small enterprise that she'd like to expand beyond the local community. In the meantime, she is putting the finishing touches to her first children's novel written in the cherry wood-lined office in the upper level of the original ruin. 'There were certain elements of the build that we wouldn't budge on,' she says, 'such as cherry-wood finishes in the interior, the frameless windows and the diminishing coarse-slate roof. But we also made a few compromises, such as the lighting and blinds, to meet our budget (with an additional £50,000 to consolidate the ruin).

'Coll is an island with a lot of young families and one of the positive offshoots of this is an incredible can-do attitude. It's a wonderful place for children and it's a great family destination,' says Seonaid. She is very active in the community and has helped set up rugby and football clubs for the island's children. 'One of the most exciting developments is the new community centre, which is due to open this spring. As well as being an important meeting place, there will be sporting facilities, and we're aiming to run music and painting courses. I'm also hoping to organise a book festival and writing retreat.'

Altogether, their new Hebridean life has proved to be an all-round success, thanks in large part to the design of the house. 'We love the exciting, think-outside-the-box design that Wil came up with,' says Seonaid. 'It's a constant source of pleasure to us. I'd happily do it all again.' For more information about B&B at the White House, see [grishipol.co.uk](http://grishipol.co.uk). For more information on the community project, visit [ancridhe.co.uk](http://ancridhe.co.uk).

Visit [coastmagazine.co.uk](http://coastmagazine.co.uk) for house features. Tell us about your shoreline home at [twitter.com/coastmag](https://twitter.com/coastmag) or [facebook.com/coastmagazine](https://facebook.com/coastmagazine)

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP The glass stairs lead to the B&B accommodation; Seonaid with the boys – she is very involved in the local community and plans to run some artistic retreats and courses  
OPPOSITE A large pebble from the beach makes a unique footstool for Fergus to reach the sink. The walnut kitchen cabinets are from the Integrale range at John Lewis



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## SEONAIID AND ALEX's *Isle of Coll*

**What to see** 'There are incredible expanses of deserted beach with crystal-blue seas,' says Seonaid. She and Alex have seen basking sharks and otters, and the island is also good for birdwatching – the protected corncrake has been spotted there.

**Where to eat** 'There is a shop, a delicatessen and the Island Café [[firstportofcoll.com](http://firstportofcoll.com)], which sources and uses local produce. They cook Sunday roasts with our meat,' says Seonaid. 'The Coll Hotel [[collhotel.com](http://collhotel.com)] also uses local produce, including locally dived scallops and langoustines, lobster and crab.'

**Getting there** Fly to Coll from Oban airport, in a twin-propeller plane, in just under an hour ([hebrideanair.co.uk](http://hebrideanair.co.uk)). Catch the ferry from Oban, which takes three hours ([calmac.co.uk](http://calmac.co.uk)). For more information on planning a break in Scotland and to download discount vouchers for places to stay and things to see and do, go to [visitscotland.com/surprise](http://visitscotland.com/surprise). This year sees the celebration of *The Year of Creative Scotland 2012* – a programme of creative and cultural events.

