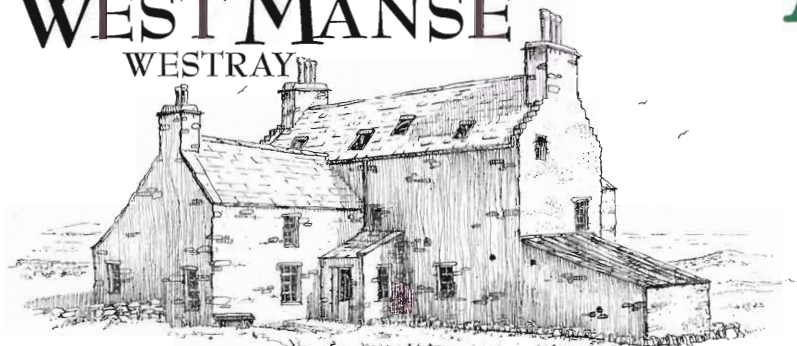


WEST MANSE WESTRAY



Traditional Cookery & Writing Courses

A MISSION FOR THE MANSE!

David Hartley visits a remarkable restoration project to see what's cooking in Westray

Photographs: Kenny Pirie

It was the year of the Queen's coronation, the year Hillary and Tenzing conquered Everest.

There's another reason 1953 has remained in the memories of the three Seatter sisters – it was when they were last together at the manse.

Roll the clock forward more than half a century and the sisters are road testing the restoration of their childhood home, by spending a night under its roof once again.

With four years of hard work behind them, the new owners are keen to hear the verdict of the last family to have lived in a building that stands with a rugged grandeur at the south west tip of Westray.

“We had happy times there as children – but my goodness it was cold,” said 72-year-old Nena Foulis, who happily accepted the invitation for an overnight stay with her twin Bertha Kent and their sister Molly Seatter, who is 76.

“Now, wherever we went in the house, it was so warm. We couldn't get over the transformation. We're so proud of what's happened to our old home – and we'll never forget going back for our very own sleep-over.”

Heading north to visit the manse, it feels like a Monday as the ferry leaves Kirkwall in the early morning rain.

But driving past the Bay of Tuquoy the sun breaks through. The Westray Firth switches from gunmetal grey to an improbable blue. It can be magical in the isles at this time of the year.



Sandy and William McEwen

It's still cold, though. The sort of cold the Seatter girls can almost feel when they think back to the 1930s. The West Manse has big rooms and Nena can remember running and running, dashing from corner to corner, and never feeling warm.

Today it's the warmth you notice as soon you step out of the wind and into the house.

A great deal of thought, a huge amount of effort, and some very modern technology has gone into giving the manse a



Gill Adams, third left, gives a cookery demonstration.

comfortable cosiness generations of shivering ministers could only have dreamt of.

Over used on TV makeover shows, ambitious is the right word to describe the restoration project Sandy and William McEwen embarked on when, with their extended family, they set out to bring the building back from the brink.

However complex the task ahead, they always focussed on one thing: the manse had to have a purpose as well as a new lease of life.

“It’s a wonderful building with a remarkable history,” Sandy said. “We felt we had to do something

and we were encouraged by strong support from the community here.

“People didn’t want to lose the manse. It’s been here too long for that. But there’s a common problem with old houses. What do you do with them once they’re restored?”

An Australian journalist, visiting the island, suggested a cooking school; a culinary showcase where guests can – literally – enjoy a taste of Westray.

“The more we talked over the idea, the more excited we got,” Sandy said. “We feel there’s a real gap in the market waiting to be filled.”

The family are quietly confident that in the manse, they’ve found the perfect place for people who love to cook in inspirational surroundings.

It’s the mission for the manse they were looking for. And when the pans are sizzling, the scents and sounds of good food will offer the clearest of evidence that this is a house with a sense of purpose once again.

At their new cooking school, there’ll be a strong focus on traditional delicacies that have set mouths watering for generations of Orcadians, with an ingredients list made up of fine local produce.

Traditional baking demonstrations and courses for visitors led by Westray home bakers will run throughout the season – revealing the secrets involved in creating perfect fatty cutties, bere bannocks and clottie dumplings.

There’ll be a cooking for kids session, the chance to experience Pakistani cuisine, and a day with Catherine Brown, who’ll be spending a week in Westray with

A RECIPE FROM THE MANSE

Fatty Cutties

You’ll need:

- 3 cups flour
- 1 cup sugar
- a pinch of baking soda
- ½ lb margarine
- 1 cup currants

Cream butter and sugar until soft. Add the dry ingredients and the fruit. Mix to a stiff dough. Roll out thinly and cut into squares or rectangles. Bake on a griddle (not too hot).

From the Westray Heritage Centre Cookery Book and reproduced with thanks. This is the recipe Westray home baker Rita Stout will use in demonstrations at the manse.



Above: Some of those who helped to restore the manse – from the left, Johnny McEwen, Sam McEwen, Graham Leslie, Sandy and William McEwen, Mhairi Drever and her brother Daniel.

Right and below: a glimpse inside the Manse.



fellow food writer and chef Liz Bowie, researching local food and cooking traditions.

Hungarian butcher and chef Zoltan Szogi is teaming up with Westray farmer Marcus Hewison for “start with a pig”, a guide to all things porcine – from slaughter to sausages, puddings and ham.

Taste of Westray weeks will offer visits to the island’s bakery, fish farm and shellfish processing factory. John Harcus, from The Barn, will take visitors out on his fishing boat *Shalair* to haul a creel, or reel in a fish, before heading back to the manse to cook the catch.

It’s all a far cry from the day the McEwens took possession of the manse, having sold Seatters, a studio, flat and gallery in Pierowall, to fund the purchase.

There were no grants to help fund the restoration, so they drew up plans to rent out the Trenabie Mill and Kilnsman’s Cottage – like Seatters, a previous restoration project – to provide an income as they tackled their massive new venture.

It seems likely there has been a manse on the same site for many hundreds of years. The present building is Georgian in origin, with a Victorian wing added in the 1840s. Its links with the kirk ended in 1896, when the Seatter sisters’ grandparents rented the property as a farmhouse.





The restored West Manse in Westray.



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The McEwens' first task was to make the old building wind and water tight. The roof, with its dovetail-joined pitch pine couples and heavy local stone slates – all held in place by wooden pegs – was carefully restored.

Vast amounts of insulation were used in the walls and roof space. A ground source heat pump recycles solar energy stored in the surrounding land to warm the inside of the building.

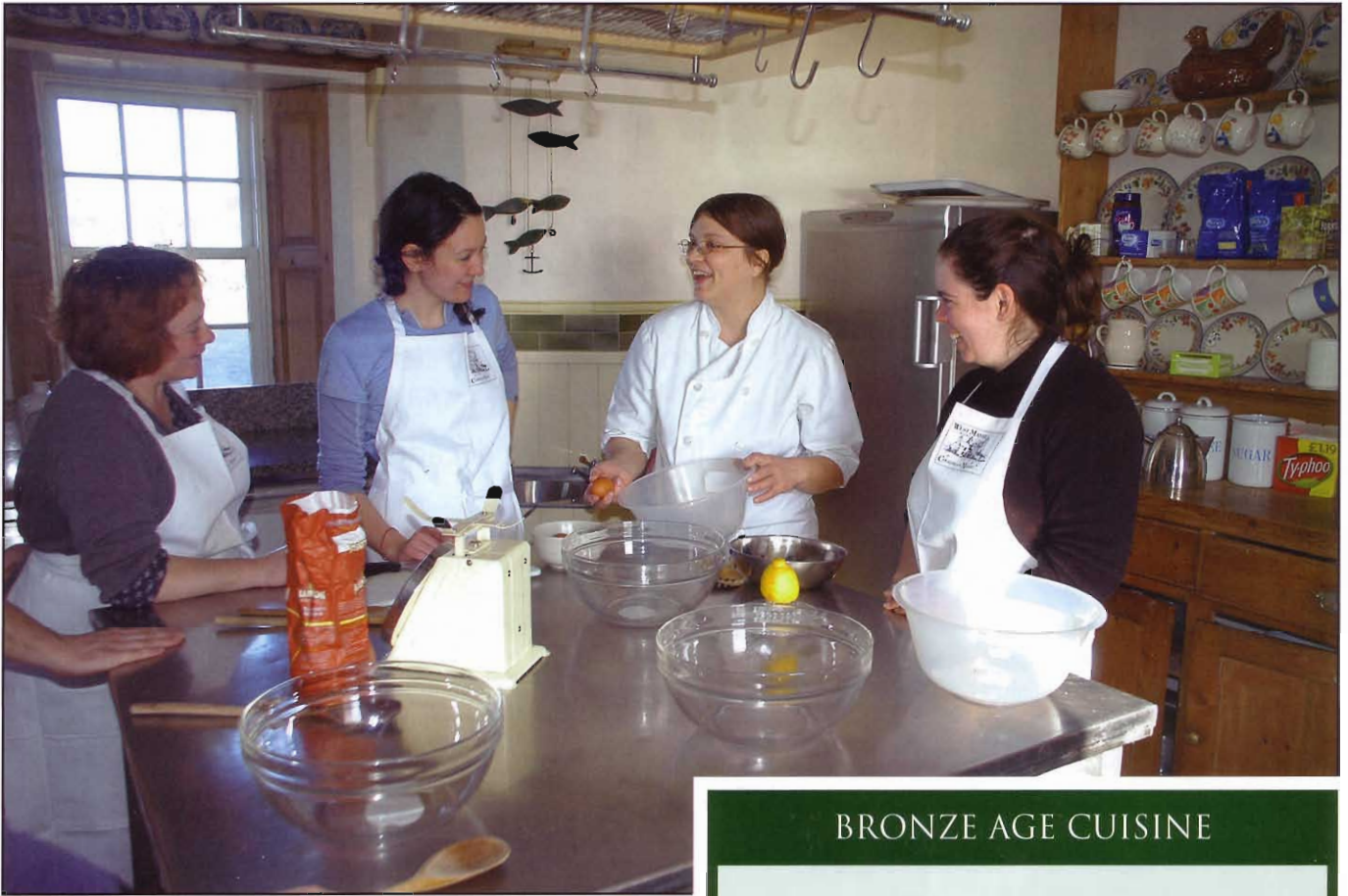
“I feel so sorry for the ministers who lived here in the old days,” Sandy said. “There are written records of one of them begging the presbytery for some glass to keep the wind out.

“We set out from the start to make sure the manse will always be warm.”

Colin Drever and Sam Harcus, who had worked on the mill restoration, rolled up their sleeves again, with Graham Leslie and Bruce Liddle added to the team.

“You need problem solving skills for a project like this – and they had them in abundance,” Sandy said. “It’s been an amazing privilege to work with them.”

Original features within the manse have been preserved and, where necessary, carefully restored. The result is a homely elegance that does nothing to detract from the stunning sea views framed by each of the manse’s many windows.



Above: Gill, second right, partner of Sam McEwen and a former Edinburgh chef, can help to lead cookery classes at the manse.

“We tried to tread gently and listen to what the building had to say to us. It’s like sailing. There’s no point in trying to impose your will. You do what the conditions dictate.”

The restoration team grew again when the McEwen’s son Johnny arrived home with Meghan, a theatre set designer from New York, to join the effort. Older brother Sam did the same. With him was Gill, an Edinburgh chef.

Johnny and Meghan, who got married in the manse with the project still far from complete, now have two daughters, Ada and Violet. Sam and Gill provided Sandy and William with another granddaughter, Ivy.

“It’s lovely to see three little girls playing in the manse once again,” their granny added.

“We’re so pleased the Seatter sisters like what we’ve done and enjoyed staying again at their old home. The manse has a new purpose, but it’s lovely to have that link with the past.” †

For further information go to

www.millwestray.com

BRONZE AGE CUISINE

It seems as if cooking is a long held tradition at the manse. Close to the present day building are the remains of a burnt mound. Dating from the Bronze Age, it could well have been created for ceremonial feasting as long ago as 1,500 BC.

Now archaeologist Hazel Moore is planning a burnt mound cookery course, with dishes last sampled in Westray several thousand years ago.

“It was a spectacular cooking style, with enough noise and pyrotechnics to make it an other-worldly experience on a dark night,” she said.

Bronze Age cuisine will be cooked up in a replica burnt mound, specially built alongside the manse. The originals typically contained a stone sided tank filled with water. Rocks gathered from the shore were heated over a fire and, when sufficiently hot, dropped into the tank in a steady stream until the water reached boiling point.

“We think it would have been a great way to cook big joints of meat and delicacies like haggis and black pudding we still enjoy today,” Hazel said.

“We’ll be trying a range of dishes. This kind of experimental archaeology is good fun. It also provides a valuable insight into the way people lived their lives.”

The Bronze Age cookery course is due to run at the manse in September.