Mirror for the community

The mirror behind the bar in the Stein Inn reflects the community commitment to the Waternish pub that has been a focal point for the people of the area for centuries.

The mirror takes pride of place in a bar that also has more than 130 malt whiskies on display because it is the only surviving artefact that links all the owners in the last 80 years or more. It was saved by and for the community on more than one occasion.

Looking back 200 years, it could literally be said that all roads led to Stein. Around 1800, as modern roadbuilding spread across the Highlands to the Islands, the Great Stein Road was built from Sconser, via Sligachan and Ullinish, paid for by several of the local landowners. Presumably Stein was the focus of the road because of the British Fisheries Society plan to develop the area as a planned new town like Ullapool and Tobermory. The Stein Inn itself was built and established a few years before - although there have been claims that it existed even earlier – in one of the few buildings actually constructed out of Thomas Telford's grand plan for the area which is still displayed in the inn.

Certainly the Stein Inn was well established by the time of the Napier Commission investigation into crofting in 1882. Captain Allan Macdonald was asked at the hearing held in Portree whether more whisky was drunk in the area than 40 years ago. He replied: " A great deal more, I am sorry to say. I believe that at the small inn in the village of Stein, there is nearly as much whisky consumed as the value of the whole rent they pay to me."

Was it the crofters who were drinking all this, he was asked. "Yes" he replied. He went on to explain that he could not be sure that all the whisky landed at Stein was drunk in the inn, which had been there as long as he had known the area. The inn served the steamers that called at the village, there were also inns at Edinbane and Dunvegan, and finally, asked whether local people were aware of the risks of drink, he replied: " No doubt the heads of families are, but the young people are not sensible of them."

Fast forward 100 years and a young couple, Angus and Teresa McGhie came up from near Stirling to stay at the Stein Inn for a weekend in 1984. At an era when pubs often closed as early as 10.30 pm, the Stein Inn stayed open late into the night and the tiny bar, still the original size, was crammed with crowds overflowing outside. The seafood being served was tremendous and the "craic" was great, too. Angus and Teresa went home thinking that when they retired, this was the place they would like to come to.One morning in 1992, they opened the Glasgow Herald newspaper to discover the Inn was for sale. They decided to send for the particulars of sale. Both Angus and Teresa went to schools in various places in Scotland and met for the first time in Edinburgh. Angus got involved in the hospitality business as a summer job, starting out as a kitchen porter, scrubbing pans when he was 15, and later working as an assistant bar manager. Teresa's parents had a guest-house in Troon and she studied at Newcastle University before getting a diploma in social work at Edinburgh University. They first met when she was 18 and then she moved to Essex. She returned to Scotland a few years later and they were re-introduced by mutual friends. In the meantime Angus had spent time working in Australia and visiting Hong Kong.

When they saw the advertisement for The Stein Inn, they had been living in Stirling for seven years. Teresa was a social worker and Angus was providing crisis debt management advice with the Citizens Advice Bureau in Denny, near Falkirk. After having had various holidays in the West of Scotland, they had talked of running a country pub. Applecross was the alternative to Waternish in their dreams but suddenly there was the chance to make the dream come true much earlier than they had ever imagined.

Putting art and music together

It is often said that a successful relationship needs a solid foundation - and for Diana Mackie and Alan Cleobury-Jones, there is also a first floor, a shared music and arts project and a good view thrown in as well.

Diana, a professional painter and qualified designer, came to live on the Isle of Skye in 1992. She took three years out to study for a degree in Interior Design, later bringing that and all her other artistic skills to bear as the overall designer for the Three Chimneys restaurant and its accommodation, the House Over-By.

Alan was a peripatetic percussion teacher in Edinburgh for 18 years and has been working with Diana for more than two years on writing music to accompany her paintings so that her views, themselves reflecting the changing weather of the Skye skies, can develop into a even more varied form of art.

Now they have the chance to work together - and apart if their artistic demands require - within the expanded and extended home, gallery and workshop that is 10 Borreraig Park, near Dunvegan, set beside Loch Dunvegan with views of the Waternish peninsula. The new extension, running at right angles to the original house, is designed in such a way as to appear to have been built years ago – in fact, the layout of the site suggests that the original house is the extension. The new part includes holiday accommodation for two, plus a gallery for Diana and a music workshop area for Alan. The holiday accommodation, called Number 10, has been awarded five stars, which recognises the quality of the design work that Diana put into it.

The couple's first music/visual art project called Breaking Weather was successfully completed and recorded at Napier University and they are now working on an even bigger project involving five paintings. Diana would like to see the project taken up by a dance or ballet company who could interpret the music and visual displays in three dimensions of movement.

This challenging and varied approach to artistic expression comes as less of a surprise when you consider how Diana attended a variety of London schools and colleges studying subjects ranging from hairdressing to silversmithery as well as more conventional subjects such as watercolours. She was also tutored by the eclectic Irish artist Paddy Nevin who worked for Motor magazine, did comic graphics for Eagle Comic and painted impressionist art as well.

For Diana, the extension of the house has been a professional triumph and solved practical problems as well. "Alan and I work at opposite ends of the building which is handy if he's thrashing around on a drum kit." There were planning and other problems to overcome – and nothing would have been possible if neighbours had not offered part of their adjacent field to fit the extension on. Now there's just the challenge of getting a musical score, a display of paintings, and a dance company to synchronise themselves. Should be a pushover, really!