

Sentence of new life passed on courthouse

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THE newest visitor destination in east Sutherland is on track to open in time for the summer season, it has been confirmed.

Workers are busy converting Dornoch's historic courthouse into a specialist whisky shop, spa, tearoom and delicatessen.

The activity is creating a buzz in the town, lifting the new year torpor, with residents keen to keep abreast of progress.

Former bank manager Carol Mackay, who is overseeing the project, said: "The town seems to be quite excited about it all. People are stopping all the time as they pass and peeking in the door. We are hoping to open in May."

Prior to work starting, Historic Scotland made an extensive photographic record of the interior of the building, which dates back to 1850.

Its wooden sheriff's bench, dock, witness box and pews on which the jury and members of the public sat have been dismantled, but the wood has been carefully stored and will be used in the redevelopment.

Graffiti was found scrawled on the pews, gouged out during more than a century of court sittings.

The courthouse was one of 10 across Scotland closed in a cost-cutting exercise carried out by the Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service.

It is the only one to have been sold on into private ownership.

Behind the redevelopment project is entrepreneurial American couple Todd and Liz Warnock, who have already turned the town's Links House, a former Free Church manse, into a luxury golfing hotel. They are building an adjunct



Dornoch's historic courthouse is the only one to be sold out of 10 closed down by the courts service.

to it on the nearby site of the bungalow known as Glenshiel, which has been taken down.

Ms Mackay said efforts at the courthouse were currently concentrated on a renovation of the town's service point and tourist information point, housed in a room in the building's ground floor.

The Dornoch community raised £20,000 to meet the costs of improving the service point facilities and also demonstrate their commitment to the courthouse project. The Warnocks matched the funding.

Ms Mackay said: "All the focus is on the service point because we need to reopen it in three weeks."

The work is ambitious. The wall between the service point and the building's

foyer is to be partly replaced by glass.

The same will happen with the room opposite - the former clerk's office, which is now destined to house a specialist whisky shop.

Architects feel the glass walls will open up the bottom floor, giving visitors a sense of space on entering the building, enabling them immediately to see the facilities on offer.

One of the bonuses found at the courthouse has been the strongroom located to the rear of the building and accessed through the sheriff clerk's office.

With its vaulted ceiling and wooden, shuttered windows looking out onto garden space, this room is to be used for whisky tasting sessions. Oak shelving is planned and a conference table will be



Former bank manager Carol Mackay has relished her job overseeing the courtroom renovation. She has been joined by whisky shop manager Michael Hanratty.

placed in the middle. But its graceful lines were not immediately apparent as it was covered in metal shelving.

Michael Hanratty, the newly-appointed whisky shop manager, said: "It is going to be a lovely place to host tastings.

"Normally these would take place on the shop floor, so to have a specific tasting room is special. I know of only one other shop, which is in Edinburgh, that has a tasting room like this."

Mr Hanratty is confident that the room will prove an attraction to local distilleries.

He said: "The hope is that having seven distilleries close by, they might use it."

The remaining rooms on the bottom floor, located off a corridor to the right of the handsome stairs, are to be turned into treatment rooms for a spa to be run by Tain firm Aspen Spa.

The room closest to the stairs contained a cell, where those appearing in court from custody would languish until their case was called.

The cell has now been dismantled and it is planned to install a lift in its place.

Upstairs, the large courtroom, overlooking Dornoch's conservation square, is flanked by two corridors, off which are various rooms previously designated for the use of sheriffs, lawyers, witnesses and jurors.

The courtroom itself is to be turned into the tearoom and delicatessen. A delicatessen counter will occupy the space where the bench once was.

Wood from the bench will be used to clad the deli counter and a wood-burning stove will make the room welcoming and cosy.

Ms Mackay and Mr Hanratty are to have what must be one of the most unusual office spaces - the viewing gallery high above the courtroom. Mr Hanratty

said: "It will be a great place to go and undertake all the paperwork."

Rooms in the corridor to the left of the courtroom will house the kitchen area, a dry store and fridges and freezers, while Aspen Spa is to take over the corridor spaces on the other side for further treatment rooms.

Ms Mackay, who will be running the tearoom and delicatessen, is already planning "trial days" ahead of opening to ensure everything is in place.

She also intends to have a launch event but that has still to take shape.

She is confident the redeveloped courthouse will have a positive economic impact on the town and wider east Sutherland area with the creation of a number of jobs, although exactly how many is not yet known.

Ms Mackay added: "Everything is coming together after all the planning, all the talking and all the thinking it over. It is exciting. I love getting up for work in the morning."

Impressive record

MICHAEL Hanratty has an impressive track record in the whisky industry.

A former Musselburgh Grammar School pupil, he began his career with Edinburgh Woollen Mill at its Waverley Mills in Langholm, Dumfriesshire, where he was responsible for running the whisky department.

He moved on to become assistant manager at Royal Mile Whiskies in Edinburgh, before joining Annandale Distillery Company as its whisky experience manager.

Latterly Mr Hanratty has worked as a tour guide with Glenkinchie Distillery in East Lothian.

He said he was delighted to have been offered the job at Dornoch courthouse and to be in on the start of the ambitious project.



The sheriff's bench in the courtroom has been dismantled but the wood will be reused to clad the tearoom counter.

Carpenter who went to war

THE name of a Brora carpenter who died during World War II was found written in a floorboard lifted during renovation work in the courtroom.

Workers were intrigued to discover the words: "Neil Grant, Carpenter, Brora, 9th May, 1913" on the wooden plank. Manager Carol Mackay posted

the find on the courthouse's Facebook page and from there it found its way on to the Brora village site.

And Brora residents were quick to provide information about the carpenter who, judging by the dates, must have gone to war shortly after working on the courthouse.

Ellen Lindsay posted: "Neil

Grant is sadly commemorated on the war memorial in Brora. He was a Lance Sergeant in the 5th Seaforths. He died at home on 14th March 1917."

And Morag Sutherland, vice chairman of the Friends of Clyne War Memorial wrote: "If I am correct his family lived in Rosslyn Street."