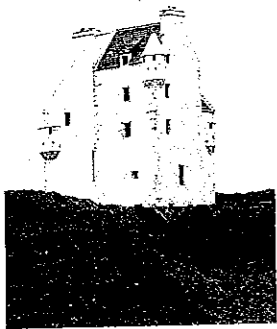


A monument to hardwork

When Annie and Lachlan Stewart created a family home from the bare stones of Ballone Castle, they did a thorough job – mixing their own paints and mortar and living in a hut on site for six years. By *Angela Cran*



IT'S just another day at the Anta pottery in Fearn, Easter Ross. In Annie Stewart's office, her middle child, nine-year-old Archie, scribbles rude phrases about his sister Stella on a piece of paper, while his spaniel Canna scampers at his feet. "What I like about living in a castle," grins Archie, "is not having to see my sister."

Such a privilege has surely been worth the wait. Annie and Lachlan Stewart, the husband and wife team who run the Anta design company, producing handmade ceramics and contemporary tartan textiles, bought the ruins of 16th-century Ballone Castle in 1990, the year Archie was born. Lachlan – an architect who specialises in restoration – drew up plans and they waited three years for permission from Historic Scotland to start work. The next six years or so were spent working on the restoration, and now the Stewarts have a fairytale home seven miles from their Fearn workbase, on the Tarbat Ness point which juts into the sea between the Cromarty and Dornoch firths. It's certainly exposed, but the castle in its commanding new sand-coloured guise looks capable of withstanding all that the wind and North Sea can throw at it. "It is designed on a traditional Z-plan," says Annie, "with a shorter main tower and then two towers – one round and one square – on diagonal corners. To have one of the towers round is very unusual."

Sitting in the kitchen off the splendid medieval main hall, it's hard to imagine this as a roofless pile of stones. A placemat shows what Ballone was like when the Stewarts bought it – more fresh air than fortified house. This was a project that required commitment, vision and passion.

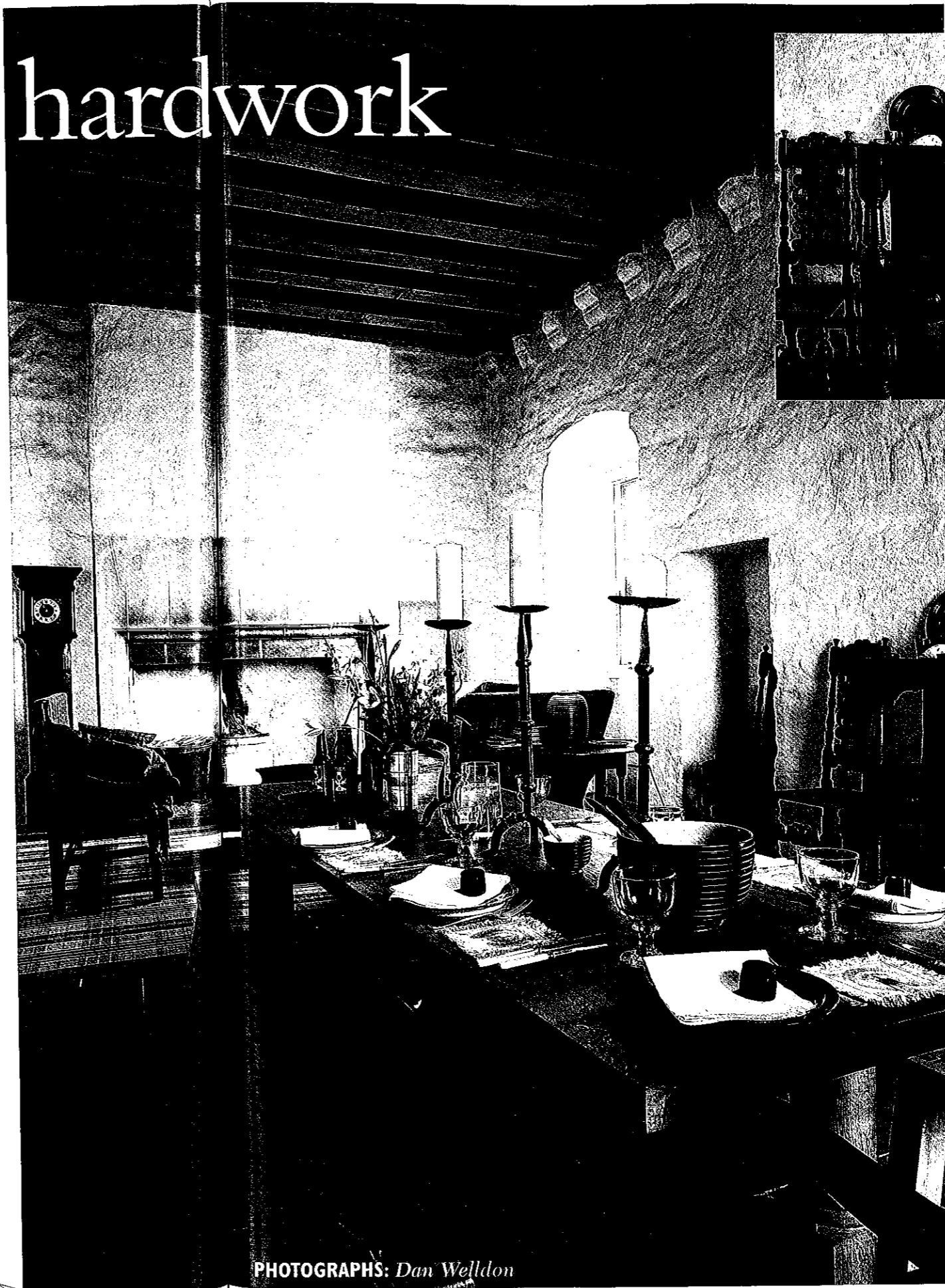
"We'd decided as students in Edinburgh that we were going to do up a castle," says Annie. "Then we

bought a derelict house in London and redid that." After looking at scores of castles throughout Scotland, none of which was exactly right, Lachlan remembered Ballone, which he'd visited as a schoolboy. It was still owned by the same farmer, and they struck a deal. At the same time, the couple moved their Anta business from London to Fearn, where production started in the old airfield buildings in August 1990. Now with a recently launched website complementing the business generated through Anta's shops, the pottery at Fearn employs a sizeable local staff. "Lachie was very keen that the children be brought up as Highlanders, as he had been," says Annie, but the move was also a gamble. "In business terms, moving from London was a retrograde step, no doubt about it. The design world revolves around London."

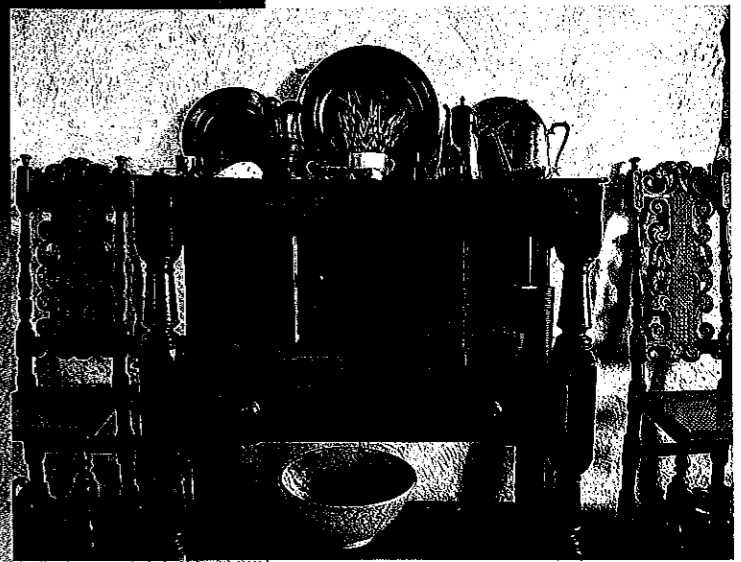
Undaunted, the Stewarts moved into a wooden shack built by Lachlan. Annie explains: "We wanted to live on-site so we could oversee the restoration. We employed two masons, and Lachie acted as architect and clerk of works. And for six years we lived in the hut, first with two small children – Lachie and Archie – and then with Stella."

The Stewarts dug their own lime-pit, made lime mortar and plaster and mixed limewash paints. Although the castle was in ruins, much of the stone was there, or could be sourced nearby. The flagstones on the floors were cut from the same stone as that used to face the new Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, and supplied by the same Elgin quarry. Underfloor oil heating runs throughout the castle and there are no icy draughts. The huge hearth in the main hall is a copy of one found in another ruined castle.

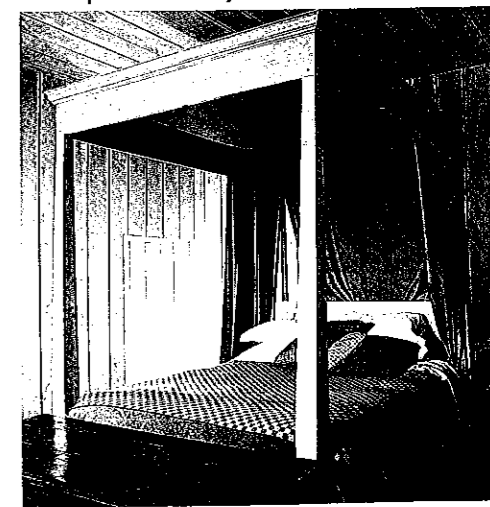
The Stewarts were determined not to use plaster board, so the walls are either limewashed



PHOTOGRAPHS: *Dan Welldon*

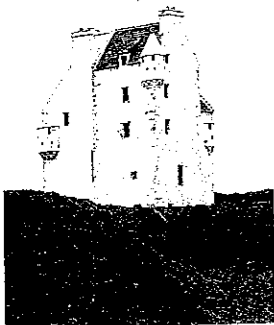


Ballone Castle transformed – clockwise from left: the hall with its oak table designed by Lachlan; a 17th-century dresser; rough panelling in one of the bathrooms; a four-poster built by Robert Blake



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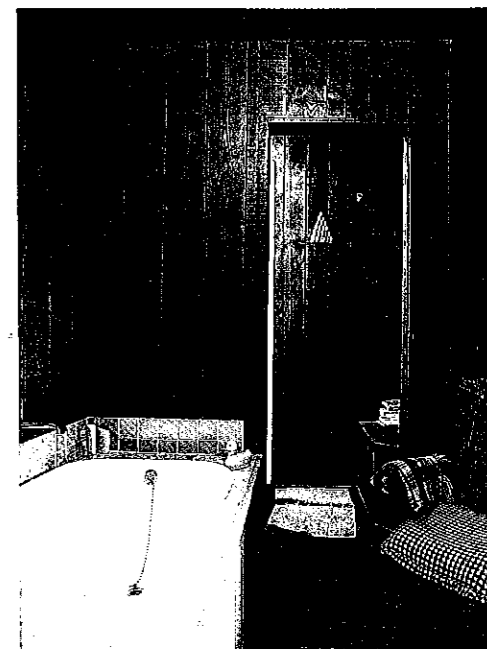
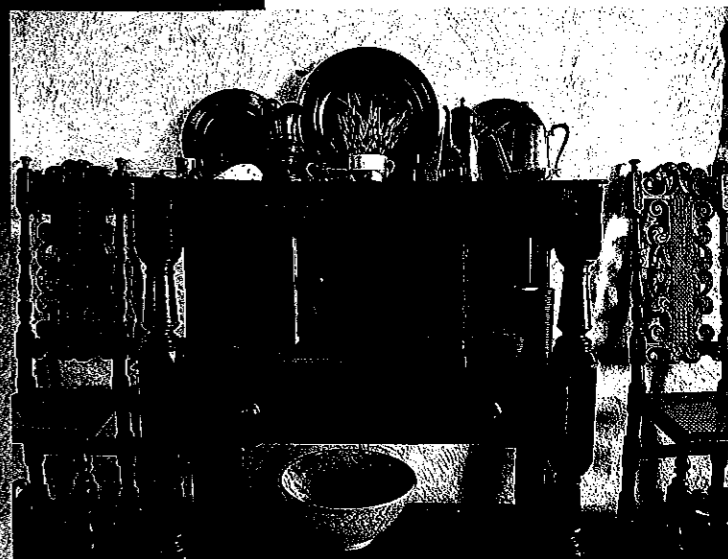
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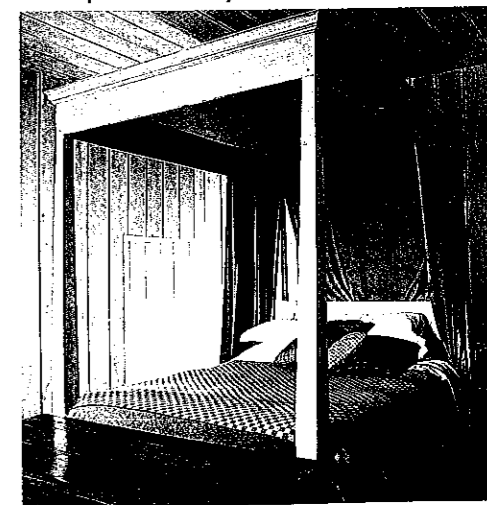
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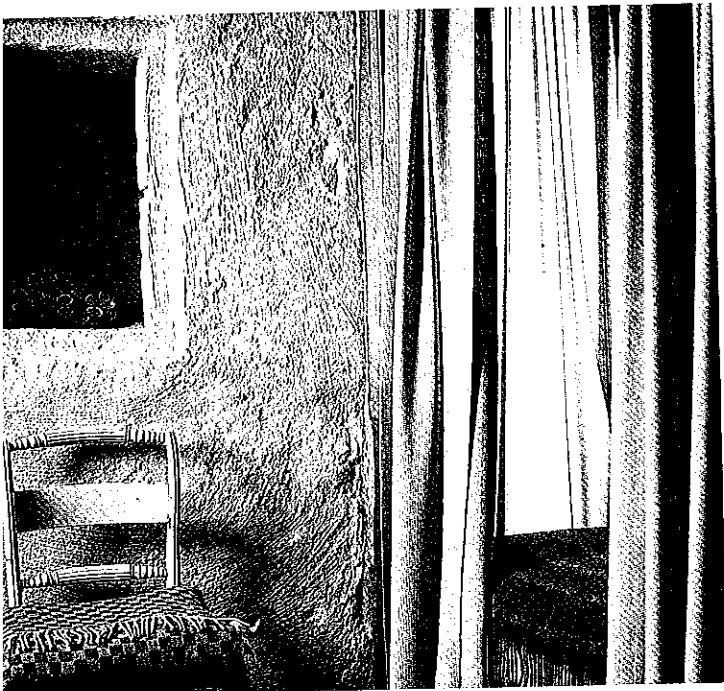


PHOTOGRAPHS: *Dan Welldon*

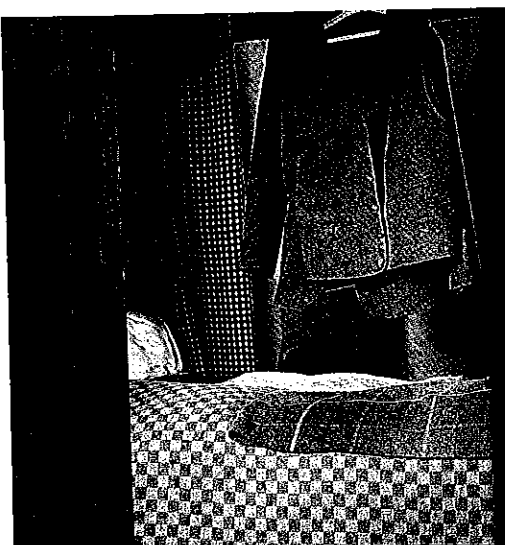


Ballone Castle transformed – clockwise from left: the hall with its oak table designed by Lachlan; a 17th-century dresser; rough panelling in one of the bathrooms; a four-poster built by Robert Blake





Top: young Stella's bed with its drapes, ideal for hiding inside; above and right: examples of the Anta fabric and upholstery that fill the house, acting as a showpiece for the company



➤ stone, rough timber – stained or painted – or insulated in woven Anta fabric. Throughout the castle, the cheerful limewash paints mixed by Annie – pink in the twisting staircases, yellow in the main hall, apricots and greens in the bedrooms – are enhanced by the light which reflects off the sea and in through the small but numerous windows.

“The aspect of the castle in relation to the sea,” explains Annie, “does allow for slightly darker colours. We don’t have to paint it white, because it’s incredibly bright for a building with such small windows.” The doors, dining table and benches are made from oak – much of it from a friend in Essex who lost a tree to the storm in 1986. The roof timbers came from Strathpeffer sawmill, including the 16 beams on the hall ceiling which were cut from two Caledonian pine trees.

The modern four-poster wooden beds were constructed in situ, and the large bath tubs were lowered in by hoist before the roof went on. The windows are uncurtained – Lachlan didn’t want the shape of the recesses to be interfered with – so Annie has made stylish curtains round the beds instead, some in bold checks, others in soft limegreen and lilac. Anta’s mark is everywhere, from the hardwearing tartan floor

and wall-coverings and woollen throws to the cheerful china and lamps. The furniture is a mixture of inherited pieces and things picked up at junk shops or home made. “When there’s a gap, we just make something for it.”

Clever use has been made of the castle’s features: in the kitchen, a dishwasher is concealed under an old-fashioned sink, a fridge is tucked in an alcove, and a dustbin hides in a narrow oak-doored cupboard. The overall effect is of a welcoming family home, bursting with character from the barrack-style cellars to the wood-panelled bathrooms.

“Our aim was to make a modern house suitable for modern living,” says Annie. “Neither of us was interested in any kind of theme-park idea about living in a castle.” Outside, a formal garden is planned – “a cross between a knot garden and a maze” – which will follow the design of a Pictish stone discovered in nearby Portmahomack. The remains of the 17th-century bakehouse have been earmarked as a studio.

On another level, the castle cannot help but function as a showpiece for Anta. The Stewart’s gamble in moving north continues to pay off. “Doing up the castle has inspired a huge amount of interest,” says Annie. It’s not hard to see why companies such as Trusthouse Forte and Edinburgh jewellers Hamilton & Inches are keen to have Anta help redesign their corporate brands. Sofas which can withstand the wear and tear of a young boy and a spaniel are surely as good an advert as anything you’ll find in the design magazines.

● Anta has shops at 32 High St, Edinburgh (0131 557 8300); at Fearn pottery, Tain; in York; and at Skibo Castle, Sutherland. For commissions and interior design requests, call 01862 832477. Website www.anta.co.uk.

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