

The Ballad of Larachmhor

An Historic Rhododendron Garden on ‘The Road to the Isles’

**The Dreams of John Augustus Holms :
His Creation of Formakin Estate, Renfrewshire and his
Development of an Extraordinary Rhododendron Garden at Arisaig, Lochaber**

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Larachmhor rhododendron garden remains as enigmatic and elusive to describe as its creator, John Augustus Holms, who nearly a century ago, embarked on the development of a major rhododendron garden in an almost virgin woodland location amidst the rugged, rocky outcrops of Scotland's West Coast. Located around half a day's travel north of Formakin, his Renfrewshire estate, in an age when the journey to Arisaig with a batch of plants would have been something of an 'expedition' for most people over the torturous Highland roads; where did Holms get the inspiration and tenacity to develop a large rhododendron garden in such a remote and difficult terrain? How did Holms acquire the ability to inspire, and heavily infect with the rhododendron virus, all the gardening enthusiasts that crossed his path?

This narrative will look at John Augustus Holms from a different perspective and aims to establish a more cohesive account of the man, the complex projects that he planned and subsequently monitored in 'hands-on' meticulous detail, and his horticultural legacy, through the experiences of people who were directly associated with him, or happened to cross his path, from the early-1900's up to the time of his death in 1938 and the onset of WWII in 1939. As the tale unfolds it will create a perspective of a determined, single-minded 'character' who, whilst being enigmatic and not a little eccentric, was highly organised and gifted in many walks of life.

Research work in respect of other gardens in recent years has uncovered many new 'leads' in regard to Larachmhor and its creator, and these, in turn, have enabled access to be gained to additional sources of information that have resolved a number of long-standing queries, and collectively paint an interesting picture of the trials and tribulations of creating a major garden many, many miles from the populated environs of the Greater Glasgow area.

And yet, entwined in Larachmhor Garden's development, is another 'interesting' character, the Irishman John Brennan, who came to Larachmhor as Head Gardener in 1929, resided in the garden bothy and stayed on for two decades after Holms' death in the self-appointed role of caretaker of the property. Brennan was as enigmatic as his employer, and his background is just as elusive, although recent research on both sides of the Irish Sea has provided some insight to his colourful past.

Larachmhor had suffered twenty years of attrition by the time of John Brennan's death in 1959 and, with its caretaker no longer at the helm; the garden quietly went to sleep. A chance encounter in 1961, during a plant-hunting foray on the 'Road to the Isles', alerted staff from the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh to the existence of an old woodland garden where each spring the spectacle of massive old rhododendrons, their blooms shimmering in the sea breeze, provided a regular attraction for the local community around Arisaig. And, so the garden entranced and cast its spell on a consortium of horticulturalists from the R.G.B., Edinburgh, who leased the garden as expediently as was possible, given the way things were done in the West Highlands, and became caretakers of the legendary, if somewhat wild, garden of John Augustus Holms.

Just occasionally Larachmhor Garden happens to get a passing mention in rhododendron publications, but few enthusiasts are familiar with its location or its origins, so this article aims to a more definitive historical background. But, at the outset, we need to take a closer look at the history of the Arisaig area, and the early development of Larachmhor Garden, as this will become pertinent as the tale unfolds. And, we will then piece together a picture of Holms himself, through his tenacity in taking forward the development of a large country estate on the south bank of the Clyde Estuary which, in turn, will form the foundations for detailing the evolution of Larachmhor Garden itself.

Any historical perspective that looks back over many past generations can never be considered as being complete, and this narrative is no exception. Until recently only a handful of documents written by Holms were available to the researcher, and even today the records that have been perused in detail beg more questions than they answer. Whilst any errors and omissions are the responsibility of the authors, we would welcome any additional details or additional information that helps to clarify and add to the Larachmhor story.

For consistency, the late-20th Century spelling 'Larachmhor' has been used in this narrative, but this is not the spelling used in past records. Larache Moire was anglicised to Larachmore in the mid-18th Century, Larichmore in the 19th Century and Larrachmhor or Larrachmohr prior to WWII; it is Gaelic for '*a big space*.'

The Origins of Larachmhor Garden

Lochaber encompasses some of Scotland's most spectacular and awe-inspiring scenery. Along the coast, intimate bays shelter white cottages from the Atlantic, while rock-ribbed brown moors cloth the high basalt cliffs and the granite glens of Ardnamurchan, Morvern and the Small Isles. North and west of Fort William and the Great Glen, the land lies within an area subject to more intense, prolonged and persistent geomorphological action than perhaps anywhere else on the British mainland. Its surface is riven with faults, punctured by volcanic sills and intrusions and has been scoured by millennia of wind, rain and ice. Its wild, dramatic relief was initiated 400 million years ago by the collision of two huge land masses that metamorphosed and squeezed ancient sediments into a range of mountains known as the Caledonides. Deep volcanic upheaval injected the mountains with granites. The area continued to develop as the land was uplifted and eroded several times. Lavas poured across the surface, volcanoes came and went and were covered by the sea. Around 160 million years ago Pangaea split to create the Atlantic Ocean and the continents of North America and Europe. The West Highlands continued to be shaped by periodic earth movements, erosion and volcanic uplift. The coming of the Ice Age around 2.4 million years ago initiated a spell of intense erosion by ice sheets and mountain glaciers. The last glaciers finally melted about 10,000 years ago at the start of the present interglacial period. Erosive forces continued to lower and smooth the land; and rivers, generally following existing fault lines, dissect the plateau into numerous river glens. These intense forces are, at present, in abeyance, although the occasional earth tremor can be felt. However, our perception of these events is but a blink of a geological eye, and 10 or 20 million years from now this landform will have changed once again, perhaps beyond recognition.¹ The climate too has a profound effect on Lochaber and its landscape, which one minute may be bathed by sunlight, and the next locked-in with storm clouds and blurred by a grey mist of rain.

The influence of colonists from Ireland, who arrived about 500AD is of particular significance to the region south of Ardnamurchan, whereas most of Lochaber remained populated by the Picts during this period. The arrival of Irish missionaries, such as St.Columba and St.Oran, in the 6th Century led to the introduction and spread of Christianity. The Irish 'Scottii' eventually attacked, raided and usurped the communities of Lochaber, only to be raided and plundered themselves by the Vikings in the 8th and 9th Centuries:²²

Bitter and wild is the wind tonight,
Tossing the tresses of the sea to white.
On such a night as this I feel at ease,
Fierce 'Northmen' only course the quiet seas.

The Vikings : Irish, St.Gall, 9th Century

Arisaig is Norse and means 'river-mouth bay'. By late medieval times Highland society had become arranged into a rigid family structure of clans, with each clan ruled by a Highland chief. Since 1180, at the time of Somerled, the lands of South Morar had been in the hands of the MacDonald family when Bonnie Prince Charlie first set foot on the Scottish mainland in Borrowdale Bay, near Arisaig, on 20th July, 1745. Borrowdale House, then owned by Clanranald and let to Angus MacDonald of Borrowdale, served as both as the Prince's headquarters and his living quarters whilst canvassing the support of the local clansmen. He departed from here to raise the Standard at Glenfinnan, only to return briefly a year later fleeing the forces of King George II in the aftermath of Culloden and leaving by boat for the Hebrides. Captain Fergusson arrived at Eileen Bay in *H.M.S. Furnace* on 2nd June, 1746 accompanied by 300 men looking for the Prince and Lord Lovat who had been spirited away, so they burnt down Borrowdale House. The Prince returned to Borrowdale to embark, from a bay in Loch Nan Uamh, on the *L'Heureau* on 20th September, one of three French vessels that had dropped anchor the previous day, some two miles east of Borrowdale. He eventually made it back to France.

Lord Lovat was not as fortunate, as retribution by the authorities was harsh. Lovat was an old man with very restricted mobility and wasn't able to evade capture by Captain Dugald Campbell of Acharossan, Loch Fyne, on 8th June. Campbell was one of Captain Fergusson's party, and Lovat was taken to London where he was tried and executed. All the inhabitants of the Morar peninsula suffered greatly in the aftermath of the Prince's departure, many houses were burnt, assets and livestock were taken away and sold, leaving many of the population destitute.

In accordance with the new economic order that was established in the Highlands in the aftermath of Culloden, the clan chiefs were 'encouraged' to increase the commercial potential of their estates by turning the lands over to the sheep-farmers. Thus the chiefs ceased to be protectors of their clans, becoming landlords instead.

General Wade's and General Caulfield's creation of the 'Military Road' system in Scotland did not extend westwards beyond Fort William and it was not until around 1812 that the 'Road to the Isles' terminated at Arisaig, the old ferry port for the Isle of Skye. In 1793 the *Old Statistical Account* states that Arisaig and South Morar had only three slated houses built before 1780, with another eight built between then and 1793. The situation would have been similar in North Morar.² A rough track gradually straggled northwards from Arisaig over the following years and the torturous bends are testament to the difficulties in carving a highway around the rugged coastline. As late as 1841 there were still only four families, totalling 24 persons, residing in the cottages in Mallaig. But perhaps the most important point to be made is that since man had first colonised these lands, it was the lochs, sea-lochs and the open sea around the Highlands and Islands which had formed the main communications highway between the remote communities.

It is difficult to be certain just how much tree cover there once was in Arisaig and Morar, as it is not uncommon in the Highlands for destruction of woodland to be accredited to an earlier race. In some areas the Vikings were anciently blamed for the removal of trees. Much of the local woodland was broadleaf and included birch, oak, hazel, alder and ash, with ancient Scots pine in some localities. There has always been exploitation of woodland, the problem being that natural regeneration rarely, if ever, matched this; added to which, there are records of the sheep-farmers burning the hills to clear the ground for new grass.³ In the early-1800's Glengarry, Chief of the MacDonells, a branch of Clan MacDonald, and who became a Director of the Hudson Bay Company of Canada, claimed that the burning killed the birch and oak that had been common in his youth. The distribution of woodland shown on General Roy's map of c.1745-55 is strikingly similar to today, as is underlined by David Bruce's topographical account of 1748:⁵

John Gillies Ground Officer Deposes *that there is the following Woods Vizt the Wood of Ardailish, The Wood of Larachmore, the Wood of Lochnanua, and the Wood of Stronanushian, and Several Small Bushes of Wood in different parts of the Country Which hail Woods Consist of Oak, Ash, Birch, Hazel, and Several other Sorts of Barren Timber.*

David Bruce was a government agent who travelled through the Highlands with a remit to value the assets of each Clan Chief, so there would be no dubiety as to what each was worth. As far as is known, this is the first written record of Larachmore and was provided by Bruce in connection with defining the Arisaig Rental that, subsequently, was valued at £1,000 Sterling, a significant sum at the time. More importantly, the account provides details of the types of trees within the woodlands, the 'Barren Timber' being trees that had no marketable value. General Roy's map confirms the evidence set out in the 'Rentals' and that the pattern of settlement was overwhelmingly coastal; each farm consisting of two or three houses and a patch of arable land for crops. The farmer often had landless labourers working for him, to whom he could grant some ground for growing potatoes and grazing rights. And this is likely to have been the origins of the 'Kitchen Garden' at Larachmore, with 'The Old Garden Cottage' located on the high ground alongside the road. Potato planting in this part of the Highlands probably dates from around 1740, and in 1755 Mungo Campbell found that in Knoydart, ' . . . the raising of potatoes is much attended to by the whole inhabitants.' Highlanders paid considerably more attention to cultivating potatoes as they offered a much higher yield than grain crops.

In what became known as the 'clearances' the their long-established tenants, who were deprived of their lands by Ranald MacDonald, 19th Chief of Clanranald, together with neighbours who feared that they may soon suffer a similar fate, decided to emigrate to Canada and in 1772 many of the MacDonalds of Arisaig boarded the *Alexander*, under Captain John MacDonald, and departed for Prince Edward Island, Canada. Interestingly, in the same year, the pressures to exploit valuable resources contained within the lands being 'cleared' were reflected in a new contract between Ranald MacDonald of Clanranald and the Cumbrian ironmasters Messrs. Hartley and Atkinson of Netherhall Furnace, Maryport, for the supply of wood for making charcoal. Clanranald was to make over to them the woods of Arisaig and Moidart and in return the iron-founders bound themselves to:³

' cutt down and manufacture at least Four hundred dozen Sacks of Charcoal out of the said woods annually and to continue to cutt down and manufacture the like Quantity of Four hundred dozen Sacks yearly till such time as the same are totally cutt down at the rate of Four shillings and Six pence Sterling for each of the said four hundred dozen sacks each Sack to be agreeable to practice Seven feet and a half long and three feet wide. Excepting allways and Reserving all the Oaks, Elms and Ash in the said woods and also Reserving such parts or parcells thereof as may be deemed necessary for the use of Tenants or Farmers on the Estates '

The Netherhall Furnace was located a short distance west of Maryport and a tramway ran from the port to the ironworks. History tells us that the numerous iron-founders of the West Cumberland and Furness never lost an opportunity of manufacturing or obtaining charcoal, as most of the available woodland in Cumberland, Westmorland and the Furness District of Lancashire had already been totally cleared. As the iron-founders owned a number of sea going vessels they would have striven to fulfil this contract and ship the full 4,800 sacks of charcoal per year to Maryport.³⁹ One of the problems arising from this type of contract being undertaken in remote locations on the West Coast was that the workers were often unsupervised and they exceeded their contract in a number of ways, including the destruction of young trees. This is very evident in a letter written by the Earl of Breadalbane in connection with a contract let in 1723 on his land:

'I was never so out of humour as yesterday. I went to see all the oak timber the Irishmen have cut. They have not left one standing oak tree in the countrie.'

In 1786 several hundred disenchanted crofters from Morar, Arisaig, Moidart, Eigg, Canna and Uist set sail for Upper Canada. Whilst many of the names of the ships they boarded are presently unknown, there are details of some of the vessels together with the original passenger listings in the Public Archives of Canada.

Another large emigration from the Clanranald's Estates took place in 1790 when the *Lucy* and *Jane* set sail from Arisaig with Scots Catholic emigrants for Upper Canada, followed a month later by the *British Queen* with 80 emigrants for the same destination.⁶ These emigrants were but three of the dozens of groups who departed from Arisaig and the small isles between 1755 and 1855 as a result of the 'clearances', the establishment of the croft system and the potato famine of the mid-1840's. Despite considerable research work on both sides of the Atlantic there is still no definitive record of the number of emigrants and the names of many of the ships that departed from the Arisaig area.

In 1784 the first blast furnace was brought into operation at Netherhall, Maryport and the earlier charcoal furnace was closed down in the same year, so Clanranald's income stream from the manufacture of charcoal would have ceased at this date, if not earlier. Following the death of Ranald MacDonald in 1788 the lands passed to his son, Reginald George MacDonald, and he let another contract for the supply of wood for the manufacture of charcoal in 1794, this time with the Lorn Furnace, sometimes referred to as the Bonawe Furnace, at Bonaw on the north shore of Loch Etive, opposite the south shore village of Taynuilt. Lorn Furnace was built by Richard Ford & Co., a small Cumbrian firm who negotiated timber contracts with Campbell of Lochnell for the unusually long period of 110 years, however the company undertook shorter contracts with other landowners, taking in woods a considerable distance from Bonawe. Distance was not a problem, for the rugged, indented coastline of Argyll, Lochaber and Moray provided easy access for shipping to access the woodlands that were being cleared. Richard Ford & Co., trading as the Newland Company, became the largest iron-making concern in the north-west of England, later known as Harrison Ainslie & Co., who sold high quality haematite ore from their mines on Lindal Moor, near Barrow-in-Furness, to the smelters at Bowawe for the manufacture of pig-iron and cast-iron shot.³ Whilst the 'The Wood of Larachmore' somehow managed to escape being cut down and used for charcoal, the activities of the Clanranald's go a long way to explaining why a significant percentage of the native tree cover vanished from the lands of Arisaig and Morar.

From an entrance gate on the 'Road to the Isles', half a mile east of Arisaig village, a rough track fell away and led down to the only relatively flat and arable area in the vicinity, the small flood plain of Larachmhor Burn [Allt na Larrach Mhor] running north-east to south-west. This area, around 40ft above sea-level, surrounded by natural woodland, probably was the kitchen garden and nursery for Clanranald's House in Borrowdale Glen, two miles to the east. These gardens are likely to have been laid-out in around 1800 in a formal grid of six rectangular compartments and were later surrounded by further regular-shaped plots. Clanranald owned the Arisaig Estate and Clanranald's House was known locally as 'Green Gates' on account of a set of wrought-iron gates that were specially manufactured in Tain, shipped through the newly-opened Caledonian Canal to Fort William, thence sent by sea to Arisaig in 1822. Clanranald's expensive tastes as an absentee landlord led to financial problems with his estates and in 1825 *The Times* (London) carried an advertisement announcing the sale of, 'The Lands and Baronies of Moidart and Arisaig, and the islands of Eigg and Canna.' This was a time when a significant amount of land in Scotland was changing hands and many estates had a number of successive owners, so the transactions were complex and the Arisaig Estate was no exception. The Clanranald lands on the mainland were divided up and the estate of Arisaig was marketed by Clanranald's creditors. Clanranald's second wife, Anne Selby Cunninghame, widow of John Dunning the 2nd Lord Ashburton, bought the Arisaig Estate from the creditors and divorced Clanranald. On her death in 1835 she bequeathed the estate to her maternal cousin, James Edward Cranstoun, 10th Lord Cranstoun of Morristoun, Berwickshire (1809 – 1869). The local community fared no better under their new landlord and the 'clearances' continued; the motto of Lord Cranstoun's family was a rather selfish one, '*Thou shall want ere I want*' :⁴

'The forty families who have no land are perpetually in destitution; and the crofters will be equally wretched as soon as their two or three months' supply of meal is exhausted. There is no work whatever going on upon the estate. Lord Cranstoun and his factor are both absentees. The one lifts the [£1200] rent, and the other carries it off and consumes it; and this comprehends the whole of the relation between the landlord and tenant in Arisaig.'

Lord Cranstoun's activities, as an absentee landlord, in the passage of time resulted in financial difficulties and he sold the Arisaig Estate to Charles MacDonald of Moidart.

Francis Dukinfield Palmer Astley [24 April 1825 – 26 March 1868] was a great lover of sports and leased the Arisaig Estate and Clanranald's House in 1848, and for successive years, from Charles MacDonald of Moidart for the shooting season. The Astley family, and in due course the Astley-Nicholsons, were to become deeply enmeshed in the history of Arisaig, Morar and thus owners of Larachmhor Garden. Most previous accounts have mixed up the lineage of the Astley family, probably due to similar names being given to successive generations of the family. The Astley family came from a long line of distinguished English gentry and can be traced back to 1520. In the 1760's John Astley studied painting in Rome under Pompeo Batoni, returned to London and established a successful artist's practice, then spent three prosperous years in Dublin where he made a fortune, said to be £3000, and married an Irish lady who died in childbirth.³⁸

John Astley later returned to England with his daughter Sophia, and married the widow of Sir Dukinfield Daniel, whose portrait he had painted, in the early-1770's. On completion of the painting she had intimated to him, "that if he was pleased with the portrait he might have the original." Lady Helen Dukinfield Daniel herself died in 1775, leaving John Astley as sole heir to her estate, much to the consternation of her family.³⁸ Around this time his daughter Sophia departed for Jamaica where she came under the sway of a rogue who owned a sugar plantation. There were large estates in Dukinfield and around Cheshire, besides a house on the Thames and another in London. Since the 14th Century the Dukinfield family were Lords of the Manor of Dukinfield, near Ashton-under-Lyne, and to comply with testamentary obligations John Astley assumed the name of 'Dukinfield'. John Dukinfield Astley decided to enjoy his inheritance and bought a house in Pall Mall, London. He then had Dukinfield Lodge built as the seat of the lords of the manor; delightfully situated on an eminence above the River Tame, it had a large heated conservatory that probably contained an orchid collection, at this time Manchester was the centre of the orchid mania.³⁸ However, the discovery of large deposits of coal on the estate opened up a source of enormous wealth.

John Dukinfield Astley died in 1787 and was succeeded by his eldest son, Francis Dukinfield Astley [1781 – 1825] who consolidated the family businesses and fortunes. In 1813 he bought the Fell Foot Estate as a summer home at the southern end of Lake Windermere on the east shore of the lake, adjacent to the Newby Bridge to Bowness Road, which ran between the front of the house and the shore. Shortly after the estate was purchased the road was realigned to run to the rear of the house.

When Frances Dukinfield Astley died in 1825 he left a son, Francis Dukinfield Palmer Astley who was only a few months old, so the family affairs had to be looked after by curator until the son became of age. Fell Foot Estate was put up for sale, but never sold, so it was leased to tenants until he came of age in 1846, married Gertrude Emma Jones in 1847, and purchased the whole 18,000-acre Arisaig Estates in 1851 hoping that the clean air on Scotland's West Coast would help to restore his wife's health. Mr. John Hibbert wrote of him:³⁸

'He was a man who inherited his predecessors' talents and virtues with the advantage of more practical wisdom. As an English landlord many of his class would do well to imitate him in the management of their estates.'

He was a keen amateur artist in the family tradition, and his first family visit to Fell Foot took place in 1851 with his wife, two daughters, Gertrude Susan and Constance Charlotte, and no fewer than fifteen live-in servants. By 1859, when he disposed of Fell Foot Estate in the Lake District, the Arisaig Estate had become the summer home of preference. Victorian visitors usually travelled by the *Grenadier* steamer from Oban to Rhu Point at Arisaig; there was also a steamer service from the Gareloch [Gairloch] near Helensburgh.¹ Arisaig House was a shooting lodge, like most other large houses scattered across the area and, in the best traditions of Victorian and Edwardian era, the Astley family would 'Summer in Scotland.' This usually involved the despatching of an advance party of staff with loaded wagons, to prepare for the arrival of the main party some days later, with all the paraphernalia that was required to support a 'season' in the West Highlands. Prior to boarding the *Grenadier* in Oban the advance party would have purchased sufficient food and supplies whilst in Glasgow and at Oban to support the large social parties held by the Astley's when the men 'returned from the hill'.

Through the 1850's the Astley family enjoyed a comfortable and prosperous life and had links with some of the more interesting and famous people of the time, including the artist William Morris, and the group of Pre-Raphaelites and others who met at Morris's 'Red House' in Kent, which had been designed and built by the famous Victorian architect Philip Speakman Webb (1831-1915) in 1860. So, when Francis Dukinfield Palmer Astley, decided to rebuild Arisaig House at a higher elevation overlooking the sea to take account of his wife's continuing ill-health, it was no accident that the commission was given to Philip Speakman Webb, the famous Victorian architect, to design and construct Arisaig House in 1862; it was to be Webb's first country house commission. In 1856 the Ordnance Survey of Scotland First Series was being prepared and Sheet 61 covering the Arisaig area was published. In terms of records this survey provides the earliest map of Larachmhor Garden that is known to exist and at this date was still likely to have been the kitchen garden for Arisaig House, however, the map lacks detail. In 1876 the 1st Edition of the six-inch Ordnance Survey was published, surveyed 1873, and this clearly shows the compartmentalised kitchen garden covering the whole area of the flood table to the east of the burn. To the west of the burn an avenue of trees runs to a point level with 'The Old Garden Cottage.'

Unfortunately, tragedy struck the Astley family when Gertrude Emma, the wife of Francis, died of bronchial illness on 2 October, 1862 at West Dean in Sussex. She was buried in Arisaig Churchyard whilst the preparations for constructing the new House were just getting started.³⁵ Work commenced the following year and a large portion of Clanranald's House was demolished and the stone used to build the new structure; the remaining portion of the house being renamed Glen House. Completed in 1864, Arisaig House stands at the centre of the extensive grounds, with broad terraces of some 10,000 sq.ft. overlooking the gardens that are completely sheltered from the north and the House enjoys far-reaching view to the south and east. The two-tiered walled kitchen garden was constructed in the same period and thus the main house on the estate would have been no longer reliant on the kitchen garden at Larachmhor and it is likely that Arisaig Mains Farm took over the kitchen garden from this date.

Six years after his wife died Francis also passed away on 26 March, 1868 whilst at Torquay, and was buried alongside Gertrude Emma at Arisaig Churchyard, and his children were taken into the care of various relatives and friends, most of who lived in or around London. The only son Frank, aged 14, took a commission in the army with the Scots Fusilier Guards; Beatrice who was only 10 needed constant supervision and tutoring, but Gertrude Susan and Constance Charlotte, aged 18 and 17 respectively, were old enough to be more independent and led a very active life. Francis Dukinfield Astley (29 May 1853- 2 August, 1880) became of age in 1874 took over as heir to his father's properties.³⁵

Eneas MacDonell (1821-1898), the last laird of the Morar Estate, was born at Morar House and purchased the estate for £11,000 from a Canadian branch of the family in 1856. Eneas lived in Edinburgh for part of the year, but due to financial difficulties and to avoid bankruptcy he was forced to sell the Morar Estate, excluding Morar House and 70 acres, in 1878 to Francis Dukinfield Astley.

In August, 1880 *The Times* (London) announced the tragic death of Mr. Astley whilst on a visit to Canada, "drowned, by the upsetting of a canoe". The official version claimed that Francis Dukinfield Astley died on 2 August, 1880 whilst on a yachting holiday in Canada, having travelled with a group on a fishing trip to the Nattashquan River in Upper Quebec. This is also reflected in the wordage on his gravestone in Arisaig Churchyard where he was buried on 1 September, 1880. Contacts closer to the family indicate that he reputedly died, 'when he plunged over Niagara Falls in a barrel'.³⁵ In the aftermath, the elder sisters, Gertrude Susan (1850-1920) and Constance Charlotte (1851-1935) decided to make Arisaig House their main home. In 1883 *The Times* carried a notice marking the marriage of the late-Mr. Astley's daughter Gertrude Susan to Sir Arthur William Nicholson, K.C.B. (1852-1932), Clerk Assistant, House of Commons 1902-1918. And, thus began the long connection of the Arisaig estate with the Astley-Nicholson family.³⁵

In the 1890's 'The Road to the Isles' finally reached the few cottages at Mallaig facing the Isle of Skye, but other forms of transport were gradually encroaching from the South. In August 1894 the completion of the West Highland Railway northwards from Glasgow up Loch Long and Loch Lomond, then across the barren wastes of Rannoch Moor, provided a connection from the south to Fort William. But west of Fort William the road was still a somewhat difficult journey, particularly over the hard rock strata west of Loch Eilt to Arisaig, which involved constant severe curvature and heavy gradients. Little wonder that this section proved to be too much of an assault course for the 'newfangled' automobiles to traverse in the early years of the 20th Century.

Initially, there was considerable opposition to the construction of an extension of the West Highland Railway westwards from Fort William to a seaport on the mainland opposite the Isle of Skye. This opposition arose mainly from two sources, firstly, from landowners west of Fort William of who many were in reality absentee landlords; and secondly, from the Directors of the Highland Railway who were concerned that the proposed line and seaport would take away a significant portion of their lucrative fish traffic. The Ordnance Survey map prepared in 1900, when the Mallaig Extension of the West Highland Railway was being built, clearly shows a pathway directly connecting the Mains Farm and the kitchen garden. Eventually the coming of the railway to Mallaig in April 1901 led to the growth of the town, and steamers to Armadale on Skye commenced from the date the line opened.⁷ At Beasdale, a mile east of Arisaig House, a private station was constructed to provide access to the House. It was opened for public use from the day that service first commenced, the station kept its own financial accounts and forty years later would get heavily used in a manner that Astley family never dreamed of. Part of Arisaig House was remodelled in 1902 for Miss Astley. Sir William's wife, Gertrude Susan Astley-Nicholson passed away in 1920, and Sir William himself died in 1932, thus the estate passed to his daughter Miss Charlotte Gertrude Astley-Nicholson (14 July 1886 – 8 March 1961).

John A. Holms & Robert Lorimer's Development of the Formakin Estate

Archibald Campbell Holms (1800-1899) of Lanark, the son of a Kilbarchan cottage weaver, was a successful textile manufacturer who, by the age of forty, was able to retire from the mills of Paisley with sufficient means – ‘a moderate competency’- to allow him to purchase a small estate at Sandyford, near Paisley and take up a new role as a respected and influential pillar of the community. The Paisley Weavers were very unusual men, being astute, enterprising, political, radical, strong public speakers and proud patrons of leaning. The first private telephone line in Europe ran between the Sandyford home of Archibald C. Holms and the home of James Reid in Renfrew Road, Paisley in 1876. At the age of fifty-five Archibald C. Holms married Marion Gilchrist (1833-1980), then a young woman in her early twenties who was reputedly the daughter of his first love, and fathered twelve children.¹⁴

John Augustus Holms was born on April 1st, 1866, the third son of Archibald C. Holms. Judged by his father to be the most intelligent of his children, John A. Holms showed an early interest in handling money and kept meticulous records of his childhood expenses. So, perhaps it was inevitable that such an interest would attract him to a career as a stockbroker and, on July 10th 1894, he was elected to the Association of Glasgow Stock Exchange and began to make his fortune. John A. Holms does not appear to have valued money for its own sake, a favourite aphorism being :

‘It’s no what we hae but what we do wi ‘what we hae that makes us happy or miserable.’

In 1892 R.W. Mackenzie asked Robert Lorimer (1864-1929), then a London-based architect, if he would undertake the restoration of Earlshall Castle, a 16th Century tower house in Fife. It was to be Lorimer’s first restoration project, so he took over an office and set-up on his own account at 49 Queen Street, Edinburgh the following year. Mackenzie, a bohemian character and a friend of the Lorimer family, had a leaning towards the Arts & Crafts movement and a passion for collecting antiques and tapestries. It was whilst Lorimer was working at Earlshall that Mackenzie introduced him to William Burrell, the well known art collector, and subsequently the two of them became close friends, competing against each other in the auction houses.¹⁰

As early as 1895 John Holms was already a regularly riding with the ‘Lanarkshire & Renfrewshire Hunt Point to Point’ and was an expert horseman. He had a stable of several horses used for both hunting and racing, and he was a regular winner in the point to point races. However, a much wider benefit was derived from his involvement with hunting as it brought him into contact with the Landed Gentry around the South Clyde Estuary, including the Renshaw Family at Barochan who had an interest in gardening.

By the turn of the century John Holms was becoming well known as a patron and connoisseur of the arts; aged thirty-five Holms was already a millionaire whose ambitions had moved on from ‘the tedious business of making money.’ In 1901 Burrell introduced Lorimer to Holms and their common interest in the arts brought them together as fellow members of the Fine Arts Committee for the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1901.¹³ The two of them became lifetime friends, so much so that when Lorimer married in 1903 he chose Holms to be his Best Man. Together they planned the layout and construction of Holms’ first dream, an ambitious project to create a large country estate where he could pursue and showcase his three main interests, art and antiques, horses and hounds, and horticulture.

Twenty miles to the west of Glasgow, in rolling countryside south of the Clyde estuary near Bishopton, a secluded part of Renfrewshire, Holms acquired the large farm of Millbank in 1902, and as a first step Lorimer altered the farmhouse for Holms to live in whilst the project took shape. Holms also purchased two adjacent farms, Paddockcraig and Gatehead in the same year to create a splendid 170-acre country estate that he called Formakin, the ‘Field of the Hare’, which contained several stands of natural oak woodland.¹⁴ The climate was typical of west central Scotland, the annual rainfall was about 46 inches and the soil ranged from neutral to slightly acid. Formakin was to be last of the trio of commissions for completely new Scottish mansions that Lorimer was ever to be given, the first two being Rowallan (Ayrshire) and Ardkinglas (Argyll).¹⁰

Holm, the creator of this dream-world, was an expert horticulturalist and he and Lorimer tackled the grounds first, preparing a plan of the layout in October, 1903. A huge amount of time, effort and money was spent laying out the formal gardens of the estate; and in the process 23 gardeners were employed to ensure they would perfectly complement the 17th Century style house, for which a ‘hole’ was left in the position where the house would stand. This approach replicated that which Gertrude Jekyll had used when she purchased the site for her new house, Munstead Wood, in Surrey, as it enabled the ‘setting’ of the house and the positioning of the windows to be fixed to maximise the views from the rooms on the main floor of the structure.

Lorimer and Holms spent many long days together on the site and in the early days Lorimer would stay overnight at Millbank farmhouse whilst they thrashed out the details. The farmhouse occupied the ‘hole’ where the main house was to be located, which meant that the farm buildings would need to be demolished when construction of the main house commenced.

The original walled garden to the north of the farm, on a south-facing slope, became the Fountain Garden and was laid out as a formal garden. Here four hand-carved stone lions guard the fountain in the centre of the lawn, each side of the square base at the centre of the fountain being inscribed with one of the four following phrases, which personified Holms' attention to detail:

Yesterday Returneth Not; Tomorrow Perchance Cometh Not; Today is Thine; Misuse is Not.

Adjacent to the east side of the original walled garden Holms laid out a very intricate second walled garden, the Oriental Garden, which was compartmented with many divisions of low yew and beech hedges in the Arts and Crafts style, herbaceous borders and trellises bedecked with roses. A large vegetable garden was put across the northern edge of the walled gardens, above another impressive terrace, and an attractive garden pavilion and tool store with a bell-cast roof was constructed.¹⁰ To the rear of the garden pavilion and terrace was the Sundial Garden, the head of the large, intricately carved, sundial being a lion at rest. An adjacent field was planted with 10,000 daffodils and thousands of various species of snowdrops were planted around the property.

In 1905 Holms was proposed and accepted as a Life Member of the 'Royal Scottish Arboricultural Society', which brought him into contact with the Landed Gentry throughout Scotland, many of whom were expert foresters with collections of specimen trees and plants. This was to stand him in good stead for establishing his own collections.

Lorimer's notes indicate that the regular meetings continued until 1915 and suggest that Holms was given to drawing sketches with his umbrella in the sand, and was apt to change his mind as a result; a habit that he may well have picked-up from Lorimer himself!¹⁰ Whilst a number of reports suggest that Holms was more than a little eccentric, he was also a perfectionist and would not have been an easy client to please. He involved himself with every small facet of the creation of Formakin and this determined pursuit of developing his own ideas made him a very difficult man to work with. Holms directly hired labour through James Grieve, the Master of Works, who had previously supervised the work at Ardkinglas and of whom Lorimer said upon completion of work at Ardkinglas:¹²

'Never in my life have I enjoyed a job like that, it all went with such a swing. I managed to make everyone keen [and I] had the finest clerk of works [a] man ever had.'

James Grieve was highly experienced, having supervised the major reconstruction of Manderston House for the architect John Kinross prior to his work at Ardkinglas, and it is clear that Holms must have sorely tried the patience of both Lorimer and Grieve, for the latter wrote to Lorimer with the masterly understatement, 'Mr. Holmes is not easily beaten.'¹²

The south facing area around the front of the main house was laid out as open parkland, with sweeping lawns running down to a lake designed by Lorimer, that was dug out by hand, the grounds became increasing more natural further away from the house. The sweeping lawns to the front of the main house contrasted with the Fountain and Oriental gardens to the northeast. Beyond the gardens the northern section was mainly pasture enclosed by shelterbelts. The formal gardens contained several plant collections, including 75 varieties of peony. Holms then turned his attention to creating the woodland gardens and planted mixed deciduous trees both native and exotic, a couple of older stands dated from around 1850.

It was somewhat inevitable that the 'Locals' of Bishopton would have a few tales to tell about a 'character' such as Holms. It is said that, in the midst of laying-out the estate, Holms made it known that he intended to be the first to own one of the 'new-fangled' motor cars in Renfrewshire. He ordered the vehicle and sent his emissaries south to collect the car and drive it back north. But at the turn of the century the roads had not been engineered with light motor vehicles in mind and progress northwards was slow, added to which, his emissaries stopped-off and spent time at various locations on the way back to Bishopton. By the time the car had reached Formakin someone else had reached Renfrewshire and became the first car owner! Holm's registration plates are said to have been JH18.

Around this time Holms got severely bitten by the rhododendron bug whilst visiting the gardens of the major landowners in Scotland, such as Sir John Stirling Maxwell of Pollock House, F.R.S. Balfour of Dawyck and Lord Stair of Lochinch, who already owned large rhododendron and tree collections, and had ornamented their gardens with plants raised from the seed collections of Fortune and Hooker, then had recently begun to add seedlings from both Wilson and Forrest collections. Holms had already developed an insatiable appetite as a serious collector in other fields, so it was second nature to him to direct his organisational skills towards acquiring rhododendrons.⁴⁰ Holms followed the example of his friends from the landed gentry and over the years he subscribed to the plant collecting expeditions of George Forrest, Frank Kingdon Ward and Joseph Rock.

In June, 1907 plans were drawn for constructing the stable courtyard, complete with motor and coach house, and construction work probably commenced in the same year. One side of the stable courtyard was formed by a 17th Century miller's house, which Lorimer restored. This was then 'connected' by an arch to the old Mill, thus forming the courtyard entrance. The stable blocks extended from the Mill, which he fully restored,, replacing the waterwheel with a turbine so it could continue to be used for grinding oats. The motor and coach house, together with a stable for visitor's horses, completed the square of buildings.¹⁰

To celebrate the reopening of the Mill, Holms hosted a mock pastoral ball commencing at 10.00pm on the evening of the full moon, 18th March, 1908, with everyone in fancy dress; Holms was dressed as the miller and the guests as dairymaids and shepherds. Holms arranged everything down to the last detail, including the decorated copper-plate hand-written invitations, complete with his seal in red-wax.¹⁴ By this time the formal gardens were beginning to mature in the way that Holms and Lorimer had planned so they turned their attention to the construction of the two gate lodges. It was no accident that the gate lodges were strongly influenced in design by the garden pavilion; Holms wrote to Lorimer on 13th August, 1908:¹²

‘I don’t see how you could do much better than just copy the ogee roof on the pavilion for the gate lodges I know what I am getting in that case and that’s what I like.’

The plans for the Lodges were finally completed in completed in January, 1909; Holms had been concerned that the original size of the archway, with its large mechanically operated entrance doors, may not have been large enough to accommodate some of the landed gentry’s large coaches! Lorimer’s records and accounts are not very explicit and the ‘commencement of work’ date for many of his commissions is not clear, added to which many commissions extended over the larger part of a decade. We will return to this subject later, however, Lorimer’s office documents suggest that the initiation of records for Formakin did not commence until late-1908, which could well have been date of the first invoice.¹² Construction dates for earlier works at Formakin of 1907-1909 fitted in well with Lorimer’s commissions for Ardkinglas [1906], Barguilean [1906], Wemyss Hall [1907 and renamed Hill of Tarvit], together with a long list of smaller commissions. Around this time Holms purchased a fourth farm to the west of the estate, enabling the designed landscape to eventually reach around 284 acres (115ha) in extent, whilst the estate itself totalled around 400 acres. He then turned his attention to the mansion house which was to be repository for his art collection, so the large tapestries and carpets determined the sizes of the rooms that Lorimer planned and subsequently built. The Rug Room was specially designed to display his prized possession, the Garden Carpet, a 15th Century Persian carpet depicting fountains, rivulets, trees, birds and flowers. Holms was buoyant at this time having been elected a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, on 30th November, 1909 and his attention to detail is particularly evident in some of the utilitarian items needed for the house; his specification for the electrical supply switchboard called for:¹⁰

‘polished marble mounted in a polished teakwood frame having a teakwood door with lock and key.’

Lorimer was undeterred by Holms’ hands-on involvement and wrote to Robin Smith Dods, his closest friend from his Oxford days and a fine draughtsman then living in Brisbane, who had done some of Lorimer’s early exhibition drawings :¹²

‘It ought to be an interesting job, I want to make it the purest Scotch I’ve ever done.’

Working drawings were prepared in 1909 and around this date Lorimer altered Gatehead farmhouse for Holms to live in whilst Millbank farmhouse was demolished and the main house constructed. Work on the foundations probably commenced in 1910, the low walls were in place when Holms ceremonially laid the foundation stone in 1911 and the remainder of the shell of the house was built over the following two years.

Here can be found one of Scotland’s most convincing architectural deceptions and one of the most striking examples of Lorimer’s genius, as he designed the estate comprising of a Scottish tower house, stables, renovation of an earlier mill, entrance lodges and the gardens, and integrated them to appear as immaculate examples of 17th Century design. Here Holms’ extensive collection of old Chinese porcelain, English silver plate, art, tapestries and antiques would be perfectly displayed in a specially designed mansion-house set in the most magnificent of gardens, complete with stables and kennels for his horses and hounds.¹¹ Seventy-five men were employed by James Grieve on the construction; the buildings were of local grey whinstone with occasional blocks of Lanarkshire red sandstone that was also used for the dressings. The roofs were of Easdale slates, as at Ardkinglas.¹⁴ The ground floor was to be Holm’s private quarters and contained his business room, cloakroom and billiard room. The main floor above had just three large rooms - the great hall, the dining room and the rug room – and, in the south-west corner, a large open terrace where afternoon tea could be taken in sunny weather. Holms and his sister had bedrooms on the second floor, separated by a guest suite; Holms never married. The longer, lower, two-storey service quarters stood to the east. Around the buildings on the estate are many other artefacts designed by Lorimer, including sundials, gates, fences and ironwork.¹⁴

The turn of the Century marked the onset of the twilight years of the country house, evidenced in the swansong Arts and Crafts designs of Sir Robert Lorimer who brought together in his architecture at both Ardkinglas and Formakin all the strands of the 19th Century together with the technological developments in construction and design. But, other ‘winds of change’ were evidenced in the swansong years of the country house, as no longer could such a house be supported by the agricultural income from an estate of 1600 acres, or less. The house needed to be kept in style by the financial and industrial business activities of its owner. Although Holms enjoyed the company of wealthy and titled people, and envisioned himself as Laird of Formakin, he was no elitist when it came to the value of art, as he indicated in his address to the Paisley Art Institute in January 1910:

‘The tired and jaded man of business, the worried clerk, the exhausted mechanic, not only require food and rest for the body; they require food and rest for the mind. Surely, the fine arts, is a fitting medium.’

Holms' deeds were as good as his words, for he was recognised as "an admirable example of one who was willing to let others share in his art treasures by lending his pictures for public exhibition." It must be said, however, that artists and dealers found Holms a difficult man to deal with on occasion. Louis Davis, a highly skilled stained glass artist in the Arts & Crafts style was born in Abingdon and became one of Lorimer's most trusted tradesmen, being remembered for his glasswork in the chapel of The Knights of the Thistle, in St.Giles, Edinburgh and later in Dunblane Cathedral. To complement Lorimer's restoration work in Paisley Abbey, Davis designed a number of the windows that were completed one at a time as the donors came forward. One of these windows was designed in memory of Holms' father who passed away on June 9th 1889. Davis found Holms most unwilling to pay his agreed fee and wrote in injured tones to Lorimer asking him to intercede on his behalf: ¹²

'Now I want you, if you can, to chase up Holms. I have been waiting for him for months. It is only fair that he should settle up for the work now. I wrote him a letter asking him to kindly do so but have had no reply'

Holms was, however, much more than a shrewd and exacting businessman for, running parallel with these characteristics was a romantic element typified by his love of beautiful things, his deep involvement in art and his passionate interest in rhododendrons. It was no accident that the gardens and policies at Formakin were planned and laid out before the buildings were started and both native and imported trees were planted in the grounds to create lush woodlands in keeping with the 17th Century design of the house. Scots pine, yew and maple stood shoulder to shoulder with exotic varieties such as Persian Ironwood and the Prickly Castor Oil Tree.

In February 1912, just when everything appeared to be going well, disaster struck. Holms fell off his horse whilst hunting and emerged from his severe concussion even more eccentric than before. A few months later Holms' business partner, James Filshill, in his Glasgow stock-broking office absconded, leaving Holms to bear the full financial responsibility for a series of rumoured illicit dealings made without his knowledge, he paid out over £100,000 almost overnight. ¹⁴ The following year he suspended work abruptly on Formakin House, which had just been roofed and made watertight, although little work had been done on the interior. Workmen left their tools in the exact position where they had last worked and Holms instructed that they were not to be touched. Piles of builder's rubble lay un-cleared, whilst blocks of stone waiting to be decoratively carved were left blank where they stood, and steps and hearths remained encased in their protective wooden coverings. It was a tragedy in more ways than one, as the gardens had just reached maturity. Whilst the mansion lay empty without electricity or water, Holms continued to live in the Gatehead farmhouse; ironically, the motto over the living room fireplace, chosen by him in better times, read: 'God help the rich for the poor can beg.'

But worse was to come. In 1914, just as Holms was beginning to pick-up the pieces, Britain became enmeshed in the First World War and his younger gardening staff joined the battalions and boarded the trains that headed south towards the battlefields and trenches of France and Belgium. Most never returned and when the hostilities ceased in 1918 Holms was in deep financial trouble and his gardening staff had been severely depleted; it fell to Hugh Morris, Head Gardener, and three staff to continue the maintenance of the gardens Holms had lovingly planned. ¹⁴ Throughout this period he continued to collect and raise rhododendrons, meconopsis and other exotic plants.

He occasionally opened the garden to the public in aid of charities and he continued to maintain the gardens at Bishopton railway station for the benefit of the passengers. He enjoyed welcoming visitors to his gardens, probably Lorimer's finest landscaping project, and would happily take the time to talk to those who showed an interest in his work.

In 1920 he brought some items to Formakin from the family home at Sandyford, this included the sculpture 'Adam and Eve', which he placed at the centre of a circle of yew trees to the west of the main house. Some minor work was done in the house to protect the art and antiques in 1920 when central heating was installed, but the house was never occupied in Holms lifetime. A report in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* of 1921 praised the gardens at Formakin for their collections of Orchids, Lilies, Delphiniums, Campanulas and many other plants :

'A prominent feature of Formakin is the large group of plants not often seen in such quantities in a private garden Formakin certainly possesses a really superb collection of hardy plants, excellently grown as a whole under the supervision of its owner, with the capable assistance of his gardener, Mr. Hugh Morris.'

In 1927, with Hugh Morris's help, Holms opened a nursery on the estate where heathers, flowers and shrubs were grown and advertised as: 'For sale, long-forgotten plants and shrubs.'

A couple of old documents indicate that Holms had property at Ardneil, near Portencross on the North Ayrshire Coast, and this is confirmed in the article, *Glenarn and the Gibson Family* written by Sir Ilay Campbell in 1983 when referring to Archie and Sandy Gibson:

'Before the family moved [in 1922], Archie and Sandy had already started gardening at Ardneil, but at Glenarn a formidable prospect awaited them. . . . Both young men had always been fond of plants, having been influenced at an early stage, both by an old friend, Sir Thomas North Christie of Blackhills, and their eclectically brilliant, if somewhat eccentric, neighbour, John Holms of Formakin, who was already conceiving his stupendous dendrological venture at Larachmhor, Arisaig.'

Sir Thomas North Christie and Holms had become good friends, probably through meetings of the Royal Scottish Arboricultural Society, and some years later Sir Thomas became a regular visitor to Larachmhor and provided rhododendron species for the garden.

The Development of Larachmhor Garden, Arisaig

By the 1920's Holms' rhododendron collection had become too extensive to be contained in the gardens around his country house at Formakin, and a couple of years earlier he had decided that finding a new site, on which to develop a garden, was a high priority project. Some of the plants he passionately desired also required a more temperate climate than that on the upper reaches of the Clyde estuary and, with this in mind, Holms' attention turned to Argyll where many of the better-known rhododendron gardens were located. He travelled around the rugged, rocky coastline of Argyll for eight years, checking, measuring and recording temperature and rainfall.¹⁵ In the autumn of 1926 Holms' search for a better location in a more natural setting on Scotland's West Coast finally came to an end when he settled on renting Larachmhor Garden from the Sir Arthur William Nicholson of Arisaig Estate, 28 acres (12 ha) of virtually natural woodland about a mile inland from the coast and half a mile east of Arisaig village. The tenancy commenced at Martinmas 1926 (11th November) and Holms later clarified the arrangements in a letter written on 30th July, 1935:⁴¹

'Now, my arrangement with the late Sir Arthur was a very simple one. He granted me a life rent of the place, I being entitled to sell, give away or will away any of my plants, but he on the other hand had a right to insist on my leaving the place in the same condition as I got it. In other words he said he did not want a lot of 'scrubby useless stuff' left, that might be of no use to him, and which was quite reasonable.'

It is not clear how Holms came to hear about the availability of the land, and perhaps its upkeep had proved to be problematic in the aftermath of the First World War when gardening staff were difficult to find, particularly so in the more remoter areas of the Highlands. Holms thought the location was ideal as the annual rainfall was just over 60 inches and the seaward edges of the Arisaig peninsula are very mild in Winter as the climate is significantly influenced by the North Atlantic Drift.

With the exception of the kitchen garden itself of around one acre, which was still laid-out in a matrix of rectangular beds with intersecting paths surrounding each bed, together with a few specimen hardwoods and conifers that had probably been planted in the late-1890's, the entire site was natural woodland. A steep rocky bank surrounds the flat flood plain of the burn, whose swiftly flowing waters find an outlet at the south-west boundary on the last mile of their journey towards the sea. The woodland was made up of large forest trees of beech, oak, lime, sycamore and ash, with birch, alders and some rowan running close by the burn. There were also a few large European Silver and Douglas Firs, and a huge magnolia, planted in 1914, stood on the right of the path leading into the garden from the entrance gate. Above the road and railway line the woodland of the Larachmhor Plantation continued up to the 120ft contour. A substantial timber 'bothy' had been constructed in 1915 at the foot of the east bank with its front facing west to give a commanding view across the kitchen garden. A previous article suggests that 'the garden was started as long ago as 1919'; this is probably the date that work in the garden recommenced after The Great War.⁸

Travelling west from Fort William, along the 'Road to the Isles' in the 1920's, with the exception of the few shooting lodges, there were no other major gardens amidst the rocky terrain, so how Holms happened to find this area of woodland and thought it could be transformed to a rhododendron garden would remain something of an enigma amongst the distinguished rhododendron enthusiasts he met with socially. Equally perplexing is how Holms was able to frequently travel from Glasgow to Arisaig and back to supervise the work in the garden. The roads were mainly single-track carriageways often with continuous bends around the lochs and there were many steep sections with sharp bends through the mountain passes, resulting in extended journey times even for a 1920's motor car. Whereas, the daily train services on the West Highland Railway from Glasgow at around six hours were faster, but infrequent. There were no Sunday services, except the 1930's Special Summer Excursion train for hikers and tourists to Mallaig; at only nine shillings (45p) for a day-return this was remarkably cheap for the period, but required the passengers to return to Glasgow on the same day. In practice the daily timetables were influenced by the boat sailings at Mallaig, so they changed little over the years and the following extract from an old timetable detailing the two services a day in each direction is typical:^{7&9}

Glasgow Queen St. dep.	5.50am	3.46pm	Arisaig	dep.	8.05am	1.27pm
Arisaig	arr.	11.14am	9.32pm	Glasgow Queen St. arr.	1.45pm	7.24pm

Holms had only just acquired his dream woodland location at Larachmhor when, on the night of 27th/28th January, 1927 a major north-westerly storm, which remained long in the memories of gardeners and foresters, and sometimes referred to as *The Paisley Storm*, felled untold numbers of trees and created havoc throughout the estates along Scotland's West Coast and across the Clyde Valley. A very deep depression to the west of Ireland caused widespread gales, which were of exceptional violence and gave gusts exceeding 100 mph on the Isle of Tiree and at other locations on the mainland.

Judging by the impact of more recent storms it is unlikely Larachmhor escaped the devastation, so we can only but wonder as to the scope of the damage that Holms came across when he visited the site. How Holms handled the clearance work in rectifying this demonstration of Nature's incomprehensible power and capacity for destruction is not recorded, as sourcing staff with expertise of handling 'blown' timber on the remote moorland peninsula would have been problematic and he may have sought assistance from Arisaig Estate. Around this time he reinforced the shelter belt by planting major stands of Western Hemlock and bamboos.

Nevertheless, with boundless energy, an amazing attention to detail and an infectious enthusiasm, the 62 year-old Holms set about moving the major part of his rhododendron collection from Formakin, such that wagon loads of plants despatched by rail from Paisley began to arrive at Arisaig Goods Depot where they were off-loaded in the sidings and taken to the garden by lorry. Holms enjoyed good relations with the railway staff, as his gardeners planted-up and maintained Bishopton Station gardens as a service to the local community. Presumably, he split his gardening staff between Formakin and Larachmhor, acquired a handful of additional staff from other sources, then placed Hugh Morris, his Head Gardener, in charge of the unloading, transportation and planting at Arisaig.

In the midst of all this he methodically set about acquiring every species of rhododendron available from the many nurseries and private collections in Great Britain & Ireland, and shipments of large specimen plants, some over eight feet tall and as wide, began to arrive by rail at Arisaig from as far a field as Devon and Cornwall. Others specimen plants came from Holms' many friends in Scotland and acquaintances in the London-based 'Rhododendron Association', of which he was a founder member from its incorporation in 1928. Inexplicably, Holms records suggest that somehow he managed to find the time to visit many of the individuals from whom he was purchasing plants, so he knew what he was getting. All the species had plant collector's numbers and he meticulously recorded their accession details, and the condition of the plants when received. Apart from some 'key' personalities, many of the titles and names of gentleman gardeners, or nurseries, that John A. Holms sourced plant material from will not be familiar to today's horticulturalists and enthusiasts, but the accompanying complete listing of the sources that he used will be of more than passing interest to many readers as it represents a veritable 'Who's Who' of the British rhododendron world of the era.⁴⁰ Indeed, by the time the difficult years of WWII and the harsh post-war economy was over, a significant number of the nurseries had gone out of business, or the garden owners had passed away, or the main house and gardens on their estates had become victims of the lack of financial resources, or the unavailability of staff to support them.

As an example the purchases have been extracted from John A. Holms' three acquisition and planting books in respect of the individual plant purchases he made from Edward John Penberthy Magor, of Lamellen, St.Tudy, Cornwall over the period April, 1917 to November, 1930. 'Mr. Magor', as he was respectfully known to an international brotherhood of rhododendron pioneers, was one of the few 'key' gentleman gardeners who was prepared to produce each year a listing of surplus plants he had available for purchase by the landed gentry.⁴² Holms purchased a total of 14 'batches' from Mr. Magor, the major portion being contained in four shipments that took place between November 26th, 1926 and October, 1927.⁴⁰

As Holms did not lease the land at Larachmhor until Martinmas 1926, the date of the first shipment on November 26th must have been close to date he actually got access to the land.⁴¹ There is little doubt that he was aiming to get the plants shipped to Arisaig railway goods depot for planting before the winter set in. Holms was very particular about his purchases and it would not be unrealistic to suggest that he had previously travelled down to Lamellen to inspect the plants and arrange the details with Mr. Magor. Many of the plants purchased were large specimens and each of the shipments made in November 1926, March 1927 and October 1927 would have required two or more railway goods vans to accommodate them.

In total Holms purchased 162 plants and 122 seedlings from Lamellen at a total cost of £231 .10s 0d. Using the indices for historical costs, this figure equates to an equivalent expenditure of £10,800 .00 at 2010 prices. Inevitably, this mechanism is somewhat imprecise, but it does convey a sobering indication of what it cost to obtain key plant material in the years following the First World War, at a time when plants were still being raised from the wild collected seed sent back by the Great Plant Hunters of the era, and when plant introductions were still being assessed in terms of their taxonomic status. It was also a time when hybridisation was still in its infancy and crosses made between specific species were being carefully assessed. These figures do not include the charges for packing and shipment, which would have been charged 'at cost'. This was but one of the 46 sources that Holms acquired plants from, and there were multiple shipments made by many of these suppliers.

Mr. Magor was also a prolific hybridiser and virtually all his crosses were made with newly flowered wild-collected species. Starting in 1905 with #1, and continuing to his death in 1941, he made 2044 crosses, probably a record for a non-commercial plantsman in Britain.⁴² Holms obtained a selection of the best crosses made by Mr. Magor and in some cases made repeat purchases; surprisingly, these were the most costly plants that Holms purchased. The International Cultivar Registration Authority [ICRA] did not recognise the many thousands of plant registration details and dates originally made by hybridisers prior to 1958, as some names had been duplicated; so, the earliest true registration date is 1958. At that date, under a 'grand-fathering' clause, all known names in the trade, and recorded by the International Rhododendron Registrar [IRR] in the original *International Rhododendron Register* published by The Royal Horticultural Society [RHS] in 1958, were considered to have been registered to prevent the names being re-used. In 2004 the RHS published *The International Rhododendron Register and Checklist, Second Edition*, which incorporates many updates and changes since the 1958 edition was published.

This Second Edition has been used to back-check the names of Mr. Magor's hybrids, as recorded in Holms plant records, and this identified two interesting points. Firstly, the name R. 'Cleopatra' had been registered in 1958, but this name is not recorded in Mr. Magor's hybrid listings in the Lamellen Estate records, although it was introduced prior to 1929. Secondly, and perhaps more pertinent, John A. Holms named and introduced a plant with the name R. 'Antigone' shortly prior to his death, this being a cross of R. 'Doctor Stocker' x *R. arboreum* made by Mr. Magor in 1918. 'Antigone' is derived from Greek mythology and may well have been a name given to one of Holms' horses. Mr. Magor named and registered the same cross himself as R. 'Callirhoe' in 1928, although this may have been a different clone.⁴² This is the first indication that Holms was involved in the naming and introduction of rhododendron hybrids; so perhaps further research is needed on this aspect of his activities.

All the plants delivered to the garden were carefully laid out in positions nominated by Holms, the ground prepared and the specimens were planted in what appeared to be a most undulating, rocky site on which to create a garden, with its massive trees, glen, outcrops of rock, and no accommodation for the gardening staff other than the original timber 'bothy.' Little wonder that the 'Locals' of Arisaig had much to say about the activities of this eccentric stranger in their midst who, from their perspective, was inexplicably spending a fortune on a project that could not possibly be a success in such a difficult terrain.

In 1928 Holms turned his attention to building a large house in an elevated position on an outcrop of rock looking south across the lower section of the entrance drive. This suggests that the terms of the lease were advantageous and that his financial situation had begun to ease. Its planned location was adjacent to 'The Old Garden Cottage', which had changed tenants a number of times in the early-1920's prior to Holms taking lease of Larachmhor, and had been a family home until the hostilities of the First World War left its mark on the Arisaig community. Holms commissioned Thomas Johnston Beveridge (15 July 1888-25 July 1964), with a practice at 248 West George Street, Glasgow, to design the structure.⁴¹ Beveridge became an apprentice at the offices of John Kinross in 1903 and entered the School of Architecture, Edinburgh College of Art, the following year. This was the era when an apprentice worked at the offices during the day then attended the College in the late-afternoon and evening. It was also the era when John Kinross was involved with the elaborate remodelling of Manderston, for which James Grieve was Clerk of Works. Kinross suggested that Beveridge should begin to study woodwork of the period of Christopher Wren, and when Kinross was commissioned to carry out the remodelling of Ardtornish in 1908-1910 Beveridge was employed by Scott Morton & Co to work as a craftsman on the fine carvings of the oak panelling in the drawing room. Scott Morton & Co were employed by Sir Robert Lorimer to carry out internal carpentry work on a number of commissions in the early-1900's and it would be reasonable to assume that Beveridge had some involvement in this work. In 1910 Beveridge became an assistant to John Kinross, and subsequently went to work at the offices of Lorimer, for whom he had a great affection; and for the rest of his life he specialised in domestic architecture in the Scottish traditional style.⁴⁴

This background suggests that Holms would have been acquainted with Beveridge since the time that Lorimer and Grieve were working on the development of the Formakin Estate. Holms may well have discussed his house plans for Larachmhor with Lorimer, who recommended Beveridge for the commission. It is likely that Holms directly hired the labour through a Master of Works, as he had done through James Grieve at Formakin twenty years previously.

Work on the house commenced the following year, but complications arose with the Arisaig Estate, as 'The Old Garden Cottage', an old stone house, was partly demolished and its shell was integrated into the west end of the new brick structure to form what Holms referred to as the 'west wing', which was intended to be servants quarters.⁴¹ It could be conjectured, but not without good reason, that Holms would have sought a 'hands-on' involvement in the detailed design, much as he had with Formakin, and this probably accounts for some of the idiosyncratic approach that was a feature of Lorimer's work at Gatehead, including inset carved panels and roll-moulded chimney pieces. According to D.C. Logan, Factor for the Arisaig Estate whose office was at Ballater, near Balmoral, in Aberdeenshire, 'The Old Garden Cottage' was not included in the Larachmhor lease and Holms demolished the cottage without any agreement being sought; so, at a meeting held in Edinburgh in August, 1929 Sir Arthur William Nicholson insisted that Holms rebuilt the cottage and made it habitable; which Holms agreed to do.⁴¹

However, 1929 was to be a momentous year in other ways. A highly developed 'bush-telegraph' system existed in the horticultural community in Scotland, and this word-of-mouth communication between gardeners was a well-used means of circulating details of employment opportunities. Holms had let it be known in 1929 that he was on the lookout for an experienced head gardener. The 'news' that this position was available at Larachmhor, at the site where a new house and garden were under construction, found its way on the grapevine to the ears of John Brennan, head gardener at Arduaine House Garden at Loch Melfort, Argyll.⁴³

John Brennan, known to his family as 'Johnnie', was born on 1st January, 1888 in the gate lodge of Kilwaughter Castle, in the hills around three miles southwest of Larne, County Antrim. He was the fifth child of William and Mary Brennan, and his father was gardener at the castle and his elder son, William James Brennan, followed in his father's footsteps. Kilwaughter Castle was a magnificent building, constructed around 1803 by John Nash (1752-1835) who also built London's Regent Street. Margaret 'Etta' Mann, John Brennan's great-niece, notes :³³

'I am sure that gardening was in his [John Brennan's] blood after being brought up around Kilwaughter Castle, which had lovely gardens, grounds and a big lake according to his nieces and nephews he was a great character.'

Brennan's descendants have no record of when Brennan left Northern Ireland; however, 'Etta' is continuing her researches into his earlier years. The 1911 Census indicates he was living at Wallacetown Cottages on the southern outskirts of Perth where was working on the Moncrieff Estate as a Head Gardener in the 'Domestic' staff. Brennan enlisted and became a Corporal in the Scottish Horse in the Great War. He may well have returned to Kilwaughter prior to departing for active service as a farewell parade was held at Kilwaughter in 1914 just before the young soldiers, said to include John Brennan, left to fight in the trenches. It was a great sight, according to the locals. He transferred to the Royal Highlanders, and his Regiment No. 292867 was a territorial number issued by the 7th Battalion (Fife) Black Watch. Under this number his was listed in the 'Scotsman' newspaper as being 'wounded' and named on 20th June 1917. He was wounded at Gallipoli in 1915, and then wounded twice in France where he was also gassed twice in action; he had part of a foot blown away in one of these incidents and walked with a decided limp. It is almost certain that Brennan was poisoned by chlorine gas and would have been hospitalised on both occasions; the gas damaged the respiratory system, usually resulting in long-term breathing difficulties. Brennan never returned to live in Northern Ireland after the war ended.^{29 & 33}

J. Arthur Campbell's son Bruce had joined the Territorials [Scottish Horse] in 1908, which he was able to gradually rise through the ranks prior to serving in Europe in WW1, so fulfilling his ambition as a professional soldier despite his disability. He had developed a heart problem whilst rowing at Eton, so could not go to Sandhurst to train as an officer as he had hoped. Bruce also served with the Black Watch and he was wounded in action in 1916 at Gallipoli, but continued his career; so, it is likely that he and Brennan were in the same battalion and that led to Brennan obtaining employment as a gardener at Arduaine following the cessation of hostilities. Brigadier Bruce Atta Campbell spent most of his life in active service up to the time his mother, Ethel M. Campbell, died in 1936. From 1928-33 he commanded the regiment and in 1933 took over the command of the 8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

In the immediate aftermath of J. Arthur Campbell's death in 1929, and with Bruce Campbell away in the Services and his wife Margaret away on voluntary services, there appears to have been a lack of leadership and direction so far as Arduaine House garden was concerned; certainly any further development of the garden was put on-hold indefinitely. Brennan became dissatisfied and decided to seek pastures new, exchanging Arduaine Cottage, a timber home constructed in 1903, for a 'bothy' without running water, drains, or any other form of modern convenience, at Larachmhor.⁴³ Brennan was quite a character, as Robin A. Campbell Byatt, grandson of J. Arthur Campbell, recalls :¹⁶

'The references to the head gardener Brennan, whom I do not remember, reminds me of a story of my mother's. Brennan was an Irishman, with an Irishman's feel for a good tale. Returning from his annual holiday in Ireland one year he told mother that the ferry crossing had been wild.', "I went to the rail for to be sick, and my teeth went from me. But would you believe it, Miss Olga, they struck the side of the ship and bounced right back into my mouth."

Whilst worn-out and resting at home in late-summer of 1929, after an exacting period completing the Scottish National War Memorial, Sir Robert Lorimer was struck down with appendicitis. He was taken to hospital and died as a result of being operated upon on September 13th.¹⁰ His many friends were stunned, and the loss of his lifetime friend and architect was a major blow to Holms. Lorimer's death was followed within six weeks by 'Black Thursday' ('Black Friday' in Britain due to the time difference) when on 24th October the stock-market spectacularly crashed on Wall Street and continued to fall for a full month, signalling the beginning of the Great Depression. The existing economic recession in Scotland immediately deepened, and around this date Holms put the construction of the house at Larachmhor on hold with only the outer skeleton of walls having been completed.

Some partial recoveries in share prices in early-1930 were short lived and the market crashed again; similarly recoveries throughout the year were followed by further crashes. But, undeterred, Sir Arthur William Nicholson wanted Holms to complete the work on the cottage and the house. On 21st December, 1930 Holms replied to Sir Arthur:⁴¹

'I had a letter from Mr. Logan your factor the other day regarding the Cottage and am quite willing to fall in with your suggestion that the west wing or servants quarters be put in habitable condition next spring, and further that the remaining or western portion be made wind and water proof and could be finished internally at a later date, as it is in that portion that any considerable outlay would be necessary in the way of woodwork or fine plaster ceilings. I have also written to Mr. Logan to this effect . . . Trade in the country still in a most deplorable state.'

Holms was struck down severely by an unspecified illness in January, 1931, which perhaps reflected the stress he was under as a city-centre stock-broker in the midst of the worst recession in living memory. Nevertheless, Holms contacted Beveridge who replied in long-hand on 12th February:⁴¹

'I am pleased to know you are keeping better. You will have to be careful for a little, however. Herewith I enclose plans which I trust may meet with your approval but as it is so long since I first saw the place & you seem to have done a good deal of building since then in all likelihood these plans will need alteration. In truth I'd need to see the place before anything definite was done. I feel it will make a very nice house but the question of a damp course in the kitchen is a very awkward one.'

Given Beveridge's opening comments, perhaps Holms had suffered a slight stroke. His office clerk sent Beveridge's plans and letter directly to the Arisaig Estate the following day in response to another request from Sir Arthur for details of Holm's intentions in regard to making 'The Old Garden Cottage' habitable, accompanied with a note to say, 'Mr. Holms has been in town for a little today . . . ' However, the plans did not include making good the cottage, which further infuriated Sir Arthur.

Sir Arthur was fast losing patience, but clearly he had no comprehension of the colossal expenditure Holms had invested since late-1926 to establish his plant collection, and he perhaps suspected that the acquisition of plants was continuing behind the scenes despite cessation of work on the House and the lack of any restoration work to 'The Old Garden Cottage.' As a means to bring matters to a head, Sir Arthur mulled over the possibility of taking Holms to court to seek financial redress, but Dundas & Wilson of Edinburgh, the Arisaig Estate solicitors, advised that a successful outcome was unlikely, as the estate papers did not contain substantive records of the meeting held with Holms in August, 1929, or the arrangements under which Holms had obtained agreement from Sir Arthur to construct the new house.

Holms, who enjoyed a life rent on the land, had agreed with Sir Arthur that any structure he erected at Larachmhor would become the property of the Arisaig Estate when he died, but in the loose way in which things were transacted in the Highlands, this had not been formalised. It comes as no surprise that many years later, the then Estate Factor confirmed in 1966 that there was no lease recorded in the Estate records in favour of Holms. There was also the danger that if legal proceedings commenced then Holms might be found to be bankrupt and the pack of cards would collapse completely. Logan, the Estate Factor, was instructed to write back to Holms requesting he submit plans within three weeks for the replacement of the old cottage and to complete the work for habitation by 31st July, 1931. The new part of the building to be completed within twelve months, and in both cases a guarantee was requested with a penalty for failure. Sir Arthur noted to his Factor: ⁴¹

'I am afraid of being left with bare walls necessitating a building by my estate, which H. knows is what I have consistently refused to undertake . . . What I fear is H's financial position! I wonder whether the rhodos on the ground have been paid for?

Perhaps it might be advisable to add that on completion of the building all building materials should be removed & the place 'tidied'. (At present & for nearly 2 years it has presented the appearance of a bankrupt builder's yard!).'

Holms gave Sir Arthur no cause for rejoicing in his reply of 24th April, 1931:

'I find it extremely difficult to reply to your questions things are no better than when I last wrote possibly worse and until there is more daylight it is all but useless trying to fix a date when I can see my way to complete the work.'

Sir Arthur persistently harassed Holms throughout the spring and summer, but to no avail and by September Sir Arthur was in a nursing home in Edinburgh. He passed away on 30th February, 1932 and one can only wonder how much his altercations with Holms contributed to his demise; however, Holms himself was ill again throughout the spring of 1932 and was unable to carry out work at Larachmhor until the end of July:

'Have not been up at Arisaig for some tho going up as soon as I can "elbow" my way through the Glasgow Fair Folk I suppose the sea will be black with them up there? I've a lot of seedlings to do which are going wrong for lack of room they are by far the most difficult to find space for as they get so easily smothered up with bracken, etc.'

Nevertheless, Larachmhor brought Holms immense satisfaction in many ways, which in turn led him to share his knowledge, plant material and inspire other enthusiasts. Holms continued to live at Formakin throughout the Larachmhor project and by the early-1930's the main volume of plantings were nearing completion. In an incredibly short time, and despite being faced with a daunting task many hours journey away from his home, Holms had assembled one of the largest and finest collections of rhododendrons in Scotland. He also added many other genera to his collection, including *Magnolia*, *Crinodendron*, *Embothrium*, *Trachycarpus*, *Cunninghamia*, *Olearia*, *Escallonia*, *Hoheria*, *Eucryphia* and *Pieris*. ³² That this was achieved amidst the thinly populated Arisaig community was even more remarkable, given that the 'locals' philosophy was, 'When God made time he made plenty of it.' So, when asked for the Gaelic equivalent of *manana*, only a Highlander could say, 'There was nothing in the language to indicate such a desperate state of emergency!'

In the Spring of 1932 Holms began a sequence to letters to the R.B.G.E., some of which enclosed leaves or flowers, with the aim of determining the identification of seedlings raised from wild collected seed he had purchased that only had the collector's number as a point of reference, or in cases where there was doubt that the species had been correctly identified. The initial letter addressed to Harry F. Tagg, dated 24th April, 1932, and written from Formakin, is typical: ³⁷

'I got some plants from Lionel de Rothschild among which seems rather an interesting one No. 14928 I can't trace it anywhere do you happen to know about it? Nothing much doing with this beastly north wind & frosty nights. Trusting you are well.

At this date Tagg was carrying out taxonomic work and he wrote across the letter heading, 'No. 14928 has thick leaves which are bright and shiny green beneath.' This was a 1925-1926 Rock collection of *R. rufum* that had not yet developed its reddish-brown indumentum on the underside of the leaves. Holms used the 'garage' at Formakin as a nursery area for growing-on seedlings prior to moving them to Larachmhor when they had reached sufficient size for planting out.

One of the main highlights began in the autumn of 1932 when Holms and Brennan would have noticed the swelling of flower buds on a *R. sinogrande* seedling planted to the east of the burn, just beneath the West Highland Line viaduct. The flower buds on this seedling from Forrest's 1912-14 expedition, thought to be F.9021 collected in November, 1912 on the Shweli-Salween Divide, would have swollen in March, 1933 and in April a delighted Holms booked his tickets at Arisaig Station for the journey to Edinburgh via Glasgow, having packed his prize truss carefully in wet sphagnum moss.

Next morning he walked from Waverley Station along Princes Street, amidst curious and admiring onlookers, carrying his huge truss of *R. sinogrande*, the first of the introduction to bloom outdoors in Scotland. It is said that a piper had been hired to

accompany the march for around a mile along Princes Street, down Dundas Street, and past the Canonmills Clock Tower by the Water of Leith, then north along Inverleith Row to the Royal Botanic Garden.

Sir William Wright-Smith, the Regius Keeper, is said not to have been overly impressed, stating that a sister seedling had flowered in their gardens the previous year. But, the plant at the RBGE had flowered under glass inside the old Rhododendron House, whereas, Holms' plant had flowered outside. Peter A. Cox provides a better perspective : ¹⁷

'It [*sinogrande*] first flowered in cultivation on a forced and badly checked plant indoors at the RBG, Edinburgh. This unfortunate plant which was planted in the old (now destroyed) rhododendron house, never looked healthy since I first saw it. It took nearly 40 years to bloom again after its first effort.'

What has not been noted in previous reports of this episode is it was co-incidental that Holms' seedling should set flowers in 1932. In early-January of that year Sir William Wright-Smith received a telegram to report the death of George Forrest due to heart failure on 6th January, near Tengyueh in China. Wright-Smith had encouraged Forrest to go on his final expedition, had organised the sponsors and was scheduled to arrange the seed distribution. Following Forrest's death he also had the unenviable task of arranging via the British Consul for Forrest's collections to be released by the Chinese Custom Service, then unpacking the twelve tea-chests on arrival at the Herbarium and distributing the seed. ¹⁸ Gloom and despondency hung over the RBGE as Forrest had worked with the Herbarium staff for 28 years. As the main instigator of the 'final expedition', Wright-Smith probably didn't care for Holms reminding him of Forrest's death and it was left to Dr. Cowan to record the flowering of *R.sinogrande* at Larachmhor. ¹⁹

Miss Charlotte Gertrude Astley-Nicholson (24 Mar 1886-8 Mar 1961) inherited the Arisaig Estate and on 16th June, 1933 she continued to press Holms in the manner of the late-Sir Arthur. Holms reply of 9th August is most interesting as it provides an insight into his intentions for the House: ⁴¹

'I have your letter and am indeed sorry to learn that the red bricks give you such annoyance and I must thoroughly agree with you that they are very much out of place in a whinstone country side, but there is not the slightest fear of a brick ever being seen when the work is completed, it will all be "harled" in the old style, the same as Mr. Grant's house and only the little corbel stones and the stone work around the windows shown, which will give the effect of its being all built of stone, and a very pleasing effect too.

In the meantime, does not the planting I have done compensate to no little extent for the half built house? I feel that times are not rosy enough to run yet another house, I have too many already, and if I put a roof on it, make it wind and water tight and harl it as intended I will be called upon to pay taxes, however, if it annoys you so much I will do so in the Spring of next year, without fail, to please a lady.'

The exchanges of letters between Miss Astley-Nicholson and Holms continued unabated, with Holms still not making any headway at all to meet his 1934 promised completion dates on what he referred to as 'the Cottage' and 'The Ruin'. With Holms having christened the house 'The Ruin', in his correspondence, it is not surprising that over the years the name was taken-up by the local community, and some more recent reports suggest it had actually been built as a 'Folly'!

Beveridge made at least two visits to Larachmhor in early-1935 and subsequently revised the plans of 'The Old Garden Cottage' to meet Miss Astley-Nicholson's requests to detail the scope of the work. Holms then sought a lease of the property to formalise the arrangements, noting that it would cost him two to three thousand pounds before being finished. Each year Holms deferred the completion date for another year, citing the continuing poor economic situation, and the following extract from a letter dated 16th July, 1935 would have done nothing to ease Miss Astley-Nicholson's vexation:

'Of course I am more concerned as to the growth of my plants than the house as time means everything with the former whilst the latter only means further upkeep & servant worries of which I have had a good sample with my gardeners. I wonder if climatic conditions at Arisaig make for good servants, etc., or is it just my luck?'

Clearly, Holms was continuing to have problems keeping gardening staff at Arisaig. Acquiring and retaining staff was a continual hassle on many of the remotely located estates in the Highlands where at least some form of substantive accommodation provided for the staff, whereas Larachmhor had but one wooden bothy, without mains water or drains, etc. Holms also had other problems in the spring of 1935 as a result of a severe frost. Following Harry F. Tagg's death in 1933 he had been corresponding with William Wright Smith at the R.B.G.E. and Holms in the Spring of 1936 wrote from the Arisaig Hotel: ³⁷

'I sent you on as promised a bloom of *R.sinogrande* it's a fine big thing and looks well on the tree. I have some 16 blooms this year it missed 1935 entirely. I also sent you *R.lacteum* for comparison last time I sent it you thought it was quite as good if not better than your form but without having the two side by side it is difficult to say. The morning after pulling these blooms for they had to leave here early I had 7° of frost & a blazing sun which ruined everything & I was most anxious to see some new seedlings in flower. I hope you escaped it but I am afraid it would be general from the forecast.

In the case of Rhodies that have suffered from frost would you shift them now or wait till say August or Sept on the chance of some recovery?'

There is no record of a response to the letter. The last letter written by Holms in the Arisaig Estate records is dated 26th November, 1935 and raises a couple of points in connection with the draft copy of the proposed lease of 'The Old Garden Cottage'. Later events suggest that the lease was duly agreed and signed. Certainly, his health appeared to be on the decline and he was also troubled with recurrences of sciatica after getting cold and thoroughly wet whilst working at Larachmhor garden.

John A. Holms Plant Acquisition Records : Formakin Estate & Larachmhor Garden

Research work carried out over many years has suggested that John A. Holms was very meticulous in everything he did, and the opportunity to closely peruse his acquisition and planting records in late-2009, only serves to confirm that view. Holms clearly understood the significance of what he was writing and some of his notes embody a form of 'shorthand' to save time. Many of the nurseries and personalities he sourced plant material from will not be familiar to readers in the 21st Century, as several of the nurseries went out of business, or the garden owners passed away, either prior to WWII or in more recent years. Holms original 'shorthand' has been interpreted and reworked to provide a complete list of the 46 sources he used for his plant acquisitions. This listing is particularly significant as it is a veritable 'Who's Who' for the Rhododendron World during Holms' lifetime. The main point to note is that Holms sourced a significant percentage of specimen plants from gentlemen gardeners of the era, many of whom were in a higher social class than Holms, a few of whom often prepared a listing of surplus plants each year and circulated the listing amongst friends in the aristocracy, or amongst gentleman gardeners, in the period between WWI and WWII.

A.M. Williams, via R.M. Gregory, Head Gardener, Werrington Park, Launceston, Cornwall.
Alder River Nursery, Iver Heath, Buckinghamshire.
William Bennett, Marine Parks, South Shields.
Butler of Greenock Nursery, owner George Macaulay Butler, Greenock, Glasgow.
Chenault & Fils, Grandes Riseraires, Du Val de la Loire 79, Route d'Olivet, Orleans, France.
Thomas North Christie, Blackhills House, Lhanbryde, Morayshire.
Harold F. Comber, plant hunter, Malta House, Malta Terrace, Edinburgh.
Cuthbert & Co Nurserymen, Southgate, London N.14.
F.R.S. Balfour, Dawyck, Stobo, Peeblesshire.
F.R. Draycott, Heligan, Pentrwan, Cornwall
Sleive Donard Nurseries, owner William Slinger, Newcastle, Co. Down, Northern Ireland.
L.B. Stewart & R.L. Harrow, Propagation Dept., Royal Botanic Garden, Inverleith Row, Edinburgh.
A.R. Fraser, Auchengare, Station Road, Rhu, Dunbartonshire.
Capt. Neil MacEacharn, Galloway House, Garlieston, Wigtownshire
V. N. Gauntlett & Co. Ltd, owner Victor Norman Gauntlett, Japanese Nurseries, Chiddingfold, Surrey.
R. E. Gill & Sons, owner Richard Gill, Himalayan Nurseries, Penryn, Cornwall.
George H. Johnstone, via John A. Skilton, Head Gardener, Trewithen, Grampond Road, Cornwall.
Edwin L. Hillier & Sons, owned by Harold Hillier, West Hill Nurseries, Winchester.
Sir Campbell-Orde, Kilmory Castle, Lochgilphead, Argyll.
M. Koster & Sons, owner P. Koster, Nurserymen, Boskoop, Holland.
Lady Alice Shaw Stewart, Ardgowan House, Inverkip, Port Glasgow, Renfrewshire.
Lodge Gardens, No details found. (Possibly the Godman Family at South Lodge, Horsham, West Sussex.)
Lord Lambourne, Lambourne, Essex.
Lord Headfort, via J.A. Boyle, Head Gardener, Headfort, Kells, Co. Meath, Ireland.
Edward John Pemberthy Magor, Lamellen, St. Tudy, Cornwall.
Henry McLaren, later second Lord Aberconway, Bodnant, Tal-y-Cafn, North Wales.
Lt.-Col. A.H. McNeill, was at Castle Kennedy, Shennanton, Kirkcowan, Wigtownshire.
Lt.-Com. John Guille Millais, Compton's Brow, Horsham, Sussex.
Hugh Armytage Moore, Rowallane, Saintfield, Co. Down, Northern Ireland.
Osgood Mackenzie, Inverewe, Poolewe, Invernessshire.
Pennick, No details found.
Prother & Morris Nursery, No details found.
Charles P. Raffill, Asst. Curator at R.B.G., Kew, The Gables, 39 The Green, Kew, Surrey.
G. Reuthe Ltd, Fox Hill Hardy Plant Nursery, Keston, Kent.
W.H. Rogers & Son, Red Lodge Nursery, Bassett, Southampton.
Lionel de Rothschild, Exbury House, Exbury, Hampshire.
Russell & Co., owner Louis Russell, Windlesham, Surrey. [Not to be confused with James Russell & Family]
Sander Fils Nursery, owner Louis Sander, St. Andre, Bruges, Belgium.
Sir Herbert Maxwell, Monreith, Whauphill, Wigtownshire.
Sir John Stirling-Maxwell, Pollock House, Pollokshaws, Glasgow.
Sir Charles Stephen Bine-Renshaw, via Marjory Renshaw, Barochan, Renfrewshire.
W.C. Slowcock, Goldsworth Old Nursery, Woking, Surrey.
Sir Thomas Buchan Hepburn, Smeaton, East Linton, East Lothian.
Charles Smith & Son, Caledonia Nursery, St. Peter Port, Guernsey.
Thomas Smith, Daisy Hill Nursery, Monaghan Row, Newry, Co. Down, Northern Ireland.
James Smith & Sons, Darley Dale Nurseries, Matlock, Derbyshire.
J.E. Smith, London Fern Nurseries, Loughborough Junction, London SW9.
Mrs. Speirs, the Speirs Family, Houston House, Nr. Paisley, Renfrewshire
Earl of Stair, via R.W. Rye, Head Gardener, Castle Kennedy, Wigtownshire.
John Barr Stevenson, Tower Court, Ascot, Surrey.
Lt. Col. Colin George Pelham Campbell, Stonefield Castle, Tarbert [Loch Fyne], Argyll.
J.L. Marwood, Head Gardener, The Camp, Windlesham, Surrey. (Sale of plants by the estate executors)
C.B. Van Nes, Nurserymen, 143 B.C. Street, Boskoop, Holland.
Robert Veitch & Son, The Royal Nurseries, New North Road, Exeter.
Vilmorin of Paris, Nurserymen, 4 Quai de la Megisserie, Paris, France.
R.W. Wallace, The Old Gardens Nursery, Tunbridge Wells, Kent.
Gomer F. Waterer, Waterer Sons & Crisp Nursery, Bagshot, Surrey.
Harry White, Sunningdale Nurseries, Windlesham, Surrey.
H. Williams, No details found.
J.C. Williams, via N. Michael, Head Gardener, Caerhays Castle, Gorran, Cornwall.

Shattered Dreams

By 1930 the Astley-Nicholson's were letting the Arisaig Estate for the shooting season and the tenancy was taken each year by Samuel Courtauld, whilst the Astley-Nicholson's and staff decamped to Traigh House, which they also owned.⁴¹ Samuel Courtauld was the industrialist who founded the family's textile business, he had French Huguenot ancestry and the family were gold and silversmiths in London. They took holidays in Arisaig, and his niece was Miss Jeanne Barbara Courtauld (1910 – 2003), a highly regarded artist, who lived at Cooke's House, a mansion in West Burton, West Sussex. The Astley family would have socialised with the Courtauld family through their kindred interest in art. In 2003 a large photograph album of Jeanne's was auctioned by Stride and Son, which contained photographs of holidays spent in Arisaig in around 1930. Jeanne much preferred life in the country, enjoyed fishing whilst in Scotland, and is best known for her landscapes in oil, getting much praise for her tonal treatment. Some of her landscapes were painted in the Arisaig area.⁴⁵

John Brennan enjoyed shooting, probably an interest gained during his service in the First World War, and he is depicted in several old photographs recently supplied by the Brennan family.³³ Three photographs appear to be taken at a clay pigeon shoot on the Arisaig Estate at which he won one of several trophies that were awarded, but two other photographs include Brennan with a large Courtauld Shooting Party, which includes Samuel Courtauld. But, the Courtauld involvement with Arisaig goes much deeper than this. The Courtauld Institute of Art, now part of London University, is located at Somerset House in the Strand, London, and this holds the papers of the architect Philip Speakman Webb for the period 1882 to 1907. This includes the Specification of Works, and correspondence relating to the construction of the 'Village Room' at Arisaig, dated 1891 to 1892. The S.L. Courtauld Library also holds an album with photographs of Arisaig.

In 1935 the Courtaulds were in residence when Arisaig House was devastated by fire, the main part of the building was reduced to a shell, and as a family they never returned. There was no electricity in Morar until after WWII and most houses were lit by oil lamps, acetylene gas, or candles, so the risk of fire was a constant concern. From the 1850's until 1981 there was always a member of the MacQueen family of Arisaig working on the Estate, and Iain MacQueen recalled in a recent letter that his grandfather was chauffeur to the estate and his great-grandfather was coachman. John MacQueen, Iain's father, had indicated that the fire was impossible to contain, for one reason, the fire hoses were rotten.³⁶ Miss Charlotte Gertrude Astley Nicholson commissioned the architect Ian B.M. Hamilton in 1936 to design the restoration of Arisaig House on a slightly smaller scale and the work was executed by Orphoot, Whiting and Lindsay. John Wallis Gibson, quantity surveyor, of Morningside in Edinburgh, noted on the back of a photograph now in the possession of the Henderson family, Waikanae, New Zealand: 'One of my reconstruction jobs after a devastating fire, there was nothing but the shell left, which also had to be demolished.'

Work began the following year, but it was not completed until after hostilities had commenced in 1939; unfortunately Miss Astley Nicholson was unable to reoccupy the house as it was requisitioned by the War Office, a subject we will return to later.

Sadly, Holms was never to see the completion of any of his dream projects. John Augustus Holms, variously known as a "proper old rogue", generous host, horticultural expert, antique expert, patron of the arts and an expert horseman, passed away shortly after the reoccurrence of a recent illness on May 24th 1938, aged 72. His funeral service was held at Paisley Abbey and was attended by many of the Scottish rhododendron personalities of the era; he was buried at Woodside Cemetery in Paisley.²⁴

There have been some suggestions in previous articles that Holms frittered away the family fortunes on his various projects, but this is very unlikely as he was unmarried, so there was no immediate family. Holms, the third son of twelve children, ten of whom were still living when his father, Archibald Holmes died on June 9th, 1889; and, as he was not the eldest son, he would have been faced with making his own way in life. As he retained his father's 'Sandyford' estate, and wrote from that address in his role as Secretary of the Lanarkshire & Renfrewshire Hunt, it is likely that he bought-out his brothers interests in the property.³⁷

Holms' art collection was described as one of the most important brought together by a Scottish collector and, with a view to paying-off the massive debts he had accumulated whilst developing his projects, the banks seized Formakin Estate and all the assets. A manager from one of the banks took up residence on the estate to ward off any family members, or other parties, who were seeking to acquire any of the assets.¹⁴ Messrs Mitchells Johnston & Co., of Glasgow were appointed Law Agents in the sequestration of Holms Estate with Mr. Andrew Templeton and Mr. Donaldson being named as Trustees.⁴¹

Holms' death was, of course, a disaster so far as the gardens at Formakin and Larachmhor were concerned, as the services of all the gardening staff were immediately dispensed with by the sequestration Trustees and the construction of the House at Larachmhor had not progressed beyond its 1929 state when work ceased, a two-storey skeleton of brick and stone construction with no roof, connected to 'The Old Garden Cottage'. In its own way, even this was a major achievement given the difficulties of transporting most of the materials long distance to this remote location and gaining access to the site. Miss Astley-Nicholson registered a claim of £1500 via Dundas & Wilson, the Arisaig Estate solicitors, in regard to the matters arising from the Larachmhor lease, which probably took account of the restoration of 'The Old Garden Cottage'.⁴¹

On 17 – 20 October, 1938 an auction was held by Morrison, McChlery & Co., of Crown Halls, Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow, following the circulation of a 'Catalogue of the Holms Collection.' Art and antique collectors from all over Britain, also from

Europe and America, attended the sale; however, the auction attracted thousands of on-lookers, mainly out of curiosity. Ironically, the sale was held in the Great Hall at Formakin, which must have contained the largest gathering since its construction. Holms friend and rival William Burrell, whose fabulous collection is now housed in Glasgow, bought most of the art collection that Holms had spent many years amalgamating.¹⁴

A meeting was held on 13th December, 1938 between the Arisaig Estate solicitors and the sequestration Trustees, when it was agreed in principle that a sale of the Larachmhor collection of shrubs and plants should enable Miss Astley-Nicholson's claim to be settled in full, given that arrangements needed to be made whereby some plants would be retained so that the gardens would not be unduly denuded. The maintenance of the Larachmhor property would be continued for the purpose of the sale, including the gardener's wages as well as all expenses incurred in arranging and taking forward the sale, and these would be a first charge on the proceeds. The payment of the gardener's [Brennan's] wages was to commence from the date that Mr. Templeton was appointed as Judicial Factor, being shortly after Holms passed away, which in practice meant that the Sequestration Trustee took over the tenancy of Larachmhor for the period of the sale of plants. The £1500 claim by Miss Astley-Nicholson, plus interest and expenses, would then be taken out of the balance; any balance thereafter would be payable to the Trustee, Mr. Templeton, for the benefit of the creditors.⁴¹

Miss Astley-Nicholson had acquired, presumably from Brennan, the detailed accession catalogues that had been compiled by Holms as he gradually established his plant collection at Larachmhor, and these had been loaned by Mr. Templeton. These were returned to Miss Astley-Nicholson in late-January, 1939 to enable a sale catalogue to be prepared by a Mr. H. McDonald, who lodged in Arisaig whilst collating the details. It would be reasonable to assume that Holms was as meticulous with his plant labelling as he was with other plant records, but this does not answer the question as to who had sufficient experience and knowledge to realise which plants were rare, unusual or highly sought-after, and was able to price them accordingly. In a letter to Miss Astley-Nicholson dated 25th January, Mr. Templeton noted that he was intending to seek advice re the practicalities of the sale arrangements:

'I note what you say regarding the sale and the time to remove the plants. I have not so far consulted any Nurserymen regarding the question and, in so far as I had thought about it, I had rather inclined towards consulting some English Firm who used to deal with Mr. Holms in connection with Rhododendrons. These Rhododendrons, as you are aware, were rather a speciality of Mr. Holms and it would be important to have the best expert advice possible.'

On 30th March, 1939, Miss Astley-Nicholson returned the draft sale catalogue to Mr. Templeton and had marked in red in the margin the plants she wanted to reserve:

'In regard to the prices I would suggest that considerable discretion be allowed in disposing of the higher priced ones as though the prices may be reasonable enough from a Nurseryman, or collector's point of view they may be prohibitive in a sale such as ours. I refer to the ones priced in pounds. Some of them are not much to look at as bushes.'

Mr. Templeton sent a draft copy of the sale catalogue to Dr. Cowan at the R.B.G., Edinburgh on 14th April and asked for his comments. Four days later Mr. Cowan suggested that Conditions 12 and 14 be amended to avoid any trouble in regard to the condition of the plants sold on the ground that the price had been fixed, having taken into account the condition of the plants. The advice was accepted and the catalogues, under the auspices of the sequestration Trustee, were distributed on 24th April with the sale to remain open until 31st August. Miss Astley-Nicholson had indicated to the Trustee she would arrange to have some of the estate staff available to deal with any exceptional case where uplifting of the plants was difficult. Item 2 in the 'Terms and Conditions of Sale' is interesting in this regard:²¹

'The purchaser will be bound to pay, in addition to the catalogue price of the plants, shrubs, etc. the cost of uplifting them from the ground, together with the cost of packing and transport.'

It would have been a major task to lift many of the large mature plants whose roots would have sent down tentacles into the rocky terrain, to say nothing about securing the root-balls and transporting the plants. But whilst some plants found a new home in several corners of Britain there were many plants that never got moved due the onset of hostilities on Sunday, 3rd September, 1939.

One batch of plants was purchased by Donald, 3rd Lord Strathcona and Mount Royal, who was developing a major rhododendron garden at Kiloran on the Isle of Colonsay in the same timeframe as that at Larachmhor. The family records show that a shipment arrived from Arisaig immediately prior to war being declared and these were found a 'temporary' home in a new 'overflow nursery' that was created amidst the dense *R.ponticum* in Sawmill Wood.

In September, 1939 Lord Strathcona joined the war effort and found himself in London's dockland; he was only able to make sporadic short visits to Colonsay during the war years and development of the garden virtually ceased. In the aftermath of the war, together with the lack of gardening staff in the economic climate, Sawmill Wood was never entirely cleared of the 'overflow' of plants and each Spring the tops of rhododendron cultivars in flower could be seen for many years, lost amidst a sea of tall, mature, *R.ponticum*.²² In the past few years Sawmill Wood has been cleared of *R.ponticum* and it is currently possible to gain access to the 'overflow' plants. Another batch of plants found their way to Glenarn, the garden of the Gibson family at Rhu, near Helensburgh, whilst a few other small batches were moved to new homes, including Stronachullin Lodge in Argyll.

Most 'Locals' have a tale to tell about an enterprise such as Larachmhor, and the Highlanders at Arisaig are no exception to the rule. It would appear that the main creditors included some greedy individuals who instructed John Brennan to dig-up the largest of the rhododendrons, including Holms' specimen *R.sinogrande*, at Larachmhor and have them despatched to Glasgow. A railway wagon was duly loaded in the goods sidings at Arisaig station with the 'large plants' and the wagon was attached to a local southbound freight train; but the load was too tall and the wagon got stuck in Borrodale Tunnel, near Arisaig House. So, the wagon was duly returned to Arisaig station, the shipment never went to Glasgow due to the declaration of WWII, and the plants were quietly 'spirited' back to Larachmhor where they have remained ever since.

It is evident that Brennan co-ordinated the plant orders, organised the lifting of plants, prepared them for despatch and paid for their carriage by train from Arisaig Station. He wrote to Mr. Logan, the Estate Factor, on 12th September, 1939 just a few days after the onset of WWII, and this is reproduced in full as it is the only known letter written by Brennan: ⁴¹

'I have received a letter from Mr. Templeton to say that some of the purchasers wants their plants to remain at Larrachmohr (sic) till after the war.

I have also had a letter from Miss Allan Invergle, Spean Bridge she would also like her plants left. And all these orders have been paid for. I can sell a lot of orders here for some time.

I don't suppose Larrachmohr will do much for me in war time but we must keep it going in some way. By the end of November we will see what orders are left, after that make arrangement favourable to all parties.'

Prior to the onset of war Miss Astley-Nicholson had already recognised the need for Larachmhor to be cared for and she arranged for the Estate Solicitors to draw up a Lease of the garden between herself and John Brennan; and its brief, simple contents suggest that the two parties had discussed the matter and formulated a way of approach that was mutually acceptable to both of them, thus enabling Brennan to continue his residence at the garden and have an opportunity to support himself: ⁴¹

1. The subjects to be let shall consist of the Rhododendron Garden at Larachmhor as possessed by the late Mr. John A Holms, but excluding therefrom the partly finished house and sufficient ground around it for a garden, etc.
2. The entry to be at Martinmas 1939.
3. The duration to be for one year and from year to year thereafter, either party having the right to terminate the Lease at any Tena of Martinmas on giving three months notice.
4. The Rent to be £6 per annum.
5. The shrubs to be taken over on Inventory and handed back in the same way at the termination of the tenancy.
6. The Tenant shall be allowed to take cuttings and seed from any of the shrubs in order to raise plants for sale on his own behalf, but the subjects are not to be let as a Market Garden and are not to be used for that purpose.
7. The Tenant shall keep the garden and precincts tidy and shall take every precaution necessary to preserve the existing plants. In the event of plants dying, the Tenant shall use every means of raising others of the same kind to replace them.
8. The Tenant shall keep the fences and dykes enclosing the garden in tenantable order.

In the event the Sale of Plants proved to be something of a financial disaster and, by agreement with Brennan, Mr. Templeton vacated Larachmhor on 1st January, 1940 from which date Brennan took up the Lease of the ground. In a letter dated 28th February Templeton wrote: ⁴¹

'I am afraid the sale has turned out very disappointing due no doubt to the situation of the country in the Spring of last year and latterly, of course, to the fact that we were at War. The total amount which I received in respect of Sales of Plants and cost of lifting, etc., was £495:19:8, against which there have to be set the Expenses agreed (as shewn in the Annexation to this letter) amounting to £437:6:8, leaving £58:13:0

As a matter of fact, the fee for the Arisaig work alone would amount to considerably more than the balance of £58:13:0 referred to above, and I am therefore suggesting to you that we should treat the account as being square.'

In the last letter written before war enveloped the Highlands, dated 19th March, 1940, it was noted that Miss Astley-Nicholson was also disappointed with the outcome of the Sale of Plants, but approved that the matters be squared. She also asked that Holms' plant acquisition and accession catalogues be returned to Brennan for safe-keeping, noting that they must be left behind should he ever leave the garden. There is a gap in the Arisaig Estate records until some years after the war was over.

In 1937, a year prior to Holms' death, construction began on a major project to build the Bishopton Royal Ordnance Factory, on a 2000-acre site to the south of the Formakin Estate. Three cordite factories, administration blocks, housing and facilities for the personnel were laid out on a green-field site that encompassed high quality farmland. The site included around 250 acres that previously formed part of the Formakin Estate, but being at a lower elevation it did not impinge on the setting of the estate. The gathering clouds of war in Europe were the driving force, such that initial production commenced in 1939 and the full facility opened between December 1940 and April 1941, with bus services for the 20,000 workers. The Bishopton area was no stranger to munitions production having been involved with a large complex known as the Georgetown Filling Factory in the First World War. ³⁴

Albert Ernest Pickard (1874-1963), a Glasgow-based eccentric business genius and self-made millionaire, eventually purchased the remainder of Formakin estate in 1940, said to be around 150 acres. Pickard was continually buying-up property, he was the only bidder for the estate and got a bargain for £7,000, considering Holms spent an estimated £60,000 on labour and

materials, plus around £140,000 on purchasing the farms and on renovation work on the other buildings on the estate. By this time Britain was deeply enmeshed in WWII and people had other financial priorities than empty mansions, but in the event Pickard struggled to maintain the property as a result of the scarcity of labour following the onset of the war and virtually no further work was completed on the estate. Pickard did not live at Formakin, but his daughters lived on the estate, one in each gate lodge with the remit to repelling visitors. Maintenance work had ceased on the gardens following Holms' death and gradually the gardens and grounds became overgrown then, as the property was under-utilised, it is said to have been requisitioned in WWII. No details relating to the purpose and use of the estate during the war have emerged.

The Post-War Years

In November, 1944 the Office of Works de-requisitioned the Shooting Lodges and the difficult business of taking forward the rehabilitation of the properties began. Following an initial inspection of both Arisaig House and Traigh House, the outbuildings and their surroundings, the estate solicitors needed to appoint a firm of surveyors to put in a claim for dilapidation and repairs. Compensation was eventually paid, but this proved to be the relatively easy part of the process. In the period of harsh austerity that followed in the wake of WWII, most builders who were still in business were mainly engaged in remedial work following the cessation of hostilities. With the introduction of post-war restrictions on building work of all types there was a need to be persistent to successfully negotiate all the 'red-tape' to achieve approval to use the scarce resources on structural repairs. Miss Astley-Nicholson would have also been faced with the rigours of high taxation in the post-war economy and the need to live off capital instead of income whilst the Houses were being restored. In any case, it was almost impossible in the immediate post-war years to get live-in servants and gardeners, as all able-bodied persons were required to work to support the fragile economy. From 1946 onwards one by one the shooting lodges along the peninsula were reoccupied and, as personnel were released from wartime service, some sense of normality gradually returned.

Holms' head gardener, the Irishman Johnny Brennan, continued to care for Larachmhor and became a well-known character amongst the 'Locals' of Arisaig. He continued to live in the old wooden 'bothy' that came to be known as 'Brennan's Hut' in the heart of the garden; it was quite devoid of any modern conveniences, and over the years he became well known to many of the numerous visitors to the garden.³³ As the post-war years dragged on the creditors ceased to be interested in Holms' plants and the majority of the collection were left to their own devices at Larachmhor.

John Brennan was a happy natured man who loved his plants and his basic lifestyle, but he was not a recluse. He was a member of the then famous Arisaig Amateur Dramatic Society and played parts in many productions. Visitors to Arisaig were welcome to visit the garden free of charge, but when James C. Gilchrist visited Larachmhor on 17th May, 1950 he noted that Brennan had placed a collecting box near the entrance for anyone who enjoyed the garden could make a contribution to a fund to provide a treat for the old folk of Arisaig at Christmas. By this date the garden had to some extent gone wild, but this was hardly surprising with only Brennan to care for it.⁸ In reality, it is likely that the garden began to return to nature during the war years when Brennan, with little income, had to fend for himself in terms of survival.

Miss Charlotte Gertrude Astley-Nicholson in 1955 gave Arisaig Estate by deed of gift to Miss Margaret Joan Becher (24 Mar 1916-Apr 1995), who then took up residence in Arisaig House. The two families had been friends for three generations and Miss Astley-Nicholson had intended to leave the estate to Miss Becher's brother, but he was killed in 1940. Miss Charlotte Gertrude Astley-Nicholson did not pass away until 8th March, 1961.

Brennan's ferreting expeditions were aimed at keeping the rabbit population down in the gardens, and he kept pigeons as a hobby. Brennan remained at Larachmhor until his death on 29th July, 1959. He may well have had a heart condition, as reports indicate he was taken ill watching a football match on the old pitch down in the 'The Glen', and didn't recover. Etta Mann, his great-niece, after visiting Arisaig in early-April, 2010, noted in a recent letter:³³

'On the Saturday after lunch I met with a villager from Arisaig who wanted to see John Brennan's family. Her name was Morag McDonald and she knew John very well. He went to her house three or four times a week for meals. Her family were very fond of John, as were the people of the whole village. He seemed to be held in high esteem by all who knew him. She told me that he had been engaged before he came to Arisaig and the girl had broken it off. I assume that happened at Arduaine. Seems he was very upset about this and wanted to leave there. It was lovely to meet with Morag and speak to someone who knew John so well.'

Etta Mann has confirmed that John Brennan is buried at St. Mary's R.C. church at Arisaig in an unmarked grave, which is located immediately in front of two war graves with identical headstones. No actual records of his death have been traced, but after he passed away the decline of the garden continued and it slowly went to sleep.³³

In Conclusion

Even today, with all the mechanical equipment and labour-saving devices that are available to the independent gardener, it is still difficult to comprehend how in the space of a few years Holms managed in his spare-time to organise the lifting, packing and transportation of a major plant collection from Formakin to Larachmhor and then lead a team of gardeners clearing fallen trees, felling, cutting-up and taking out timber, clearing the woodland floor, then laying-out and planting 28 acres of garden; added to which was the sourcing, travelling, acquisition and transportation of new plant material from many distant corners of Britain. With tremendous enthusiasm Holms did everything on a lavish scale, be it building country houses, fox hunting, breeding dogs, collecting works of art, tapestries, and antiques, or collecting rhododendrons. He became a recognised authority in all his spheres of endeavour, and the John Holms hound-pack still survives in the West Country, but his love of gardening remained his key pursuit.

Unfortunately, for one reason or another, often financial, many of his major undertakings were never completely finished. And, so it was with Larachmhor. Nevertheless, it is well worth remembering that Holms was something of a perfectionist; everything he was involved in he did exceptionally well. Perfection is an illusion. Those who strive to attain it sometimes fail to achieve their goal, as the concept of compromise is not usually within their grasp. That his death in the Spring of 1938 was not the final chapter in the life of Larachmhor would have in many ways fulfilled the dream of this eclectically brilliant, if somewhat eccentric, character with an infectious love of rhododendrons. The late-Neil Rutherford, who himself created a highly regarded rhododendron species garden at Killarden on the Roseneath peninsula near Garelochhead, explains :²⁷

‘The Gibson brothers were still at school in Midlothian when their father [James Bogle Gibson] bought Glenarn in Rhu, and being advised by his doctor that he had not long to live, put the house in the names of his two sons. They knew and came under the sway of John Holms in Renfrewshire and Ayrshire, who was mad keen on rhododendrons as well as many other things. It was he who filled them with enthusiasm for rhododendrons.

Here were two brothers in their teens with a Victorian garden with little of value in it other than a few trees and two species rhododendrons. It was a big garden of, I should say, twelve or fourteen acres in a glen that was not too deep, so in this almost ideal garden and with the fire of enthusiasm as well as the vigour of youth, they set about remaking the garden with a book to record everything that was planted, in the proper way. We as children and later when we were married, used to visit the garden with enormous admiration, you could say that John Holms worked on us through the Gibsons.’

Years later the Gibsons acknowledged this debt when they named their fine, frost-resistant, cherry to blood-red hybrid R. ‘John Holms’ (*arboreum* x *barbatum*) after their mentor; it received an Award of Merit from the R.H.S. in 1957. This fast-growing cross has the look of a red *R.arboreum* and has inherited the tightly-packed globular truss of *R.barbatum* with twenty-five flowers. It is somewhat rare and can only be found in couple of gardens in Argyll, nevertheless, its frost-resistance suggests it should be propagated and grown more widely.

A.E. Pickard never lived on the Formakin estate, although one of his daughters remained there until the early-1970’s by which time the gardens had become a wilderness. In 1978 Pickard unsuccessfully tried to sell the 150-acre estate for housing development; however, John Dunbar, the astute Planning Officer of Renfrew District Council, formed the Formakin Trust in 1984 and the estate was purchased with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund. The Trust set about the Herculean task of saving the estate, repairs were made to the buildings, restoration of the gardens was taken forward, and the stables and courtyard were provided with a visitor centre, shop, exhibition area, toilets and tearoom.

Unfortunately, when the estate was opened as a public park a steady annual deficit accumulated, which the Trust was unable to support; mainly caused by Formakin being located a significant distance away from public transport. The Local Authority decided it was unable to support the costs of running the estate, so it was subsequently sold for a nominal sum to Kit Martin, a historic building developer, on the basis that he was committed to restoring the buildings and gardens to their former glory, and that the public would continue to have access to the pathways that encircled the estate. Martin completed a restoration and conversion programme in the 1990’s to create a total of 17 homes in liaison with the Glasgow-based architects Michael & Sue Thornley who acted as architects and surveyors, providing all the contract documentation. Intriguingly, Mike and Sue had purchased Glenarn Garden, after Archie Gibson passed away in 1982, and have subsequently spent twenty-five years carefully restoring the garden; so, they too have come under the spell of John Holms.²³ In a way their work on the restoration of the Formakin estate has completed the circle and, in doing so, has not only helped to fulfil another of John Holms’ individualistic dreams but has been instrumental in putting the finishing touches to one of Sir Robert Lorimer’s baronial masterpieces.

In 1987 British Aerospace (now BAE Systems) became owners of the Royal Ordnance Factory; the factory closed down completely in 2002, and is currently the subject of a large-scale planning application to redevelop the site and integrate it back into the local community.³⁴ With the passing of each winter tens of thousands of snowdrops light up the grounds of Formakin, to be followed by hosts of golden daffodils swaying in the breeze and then a myriad of bluebells carpet the woodlands. Lining the drive to the west of the main house, rhododendron hybrids bloom, and Spring is a time to take a walk along the public pathways and enjoy the cascades of colour.

Standing sentinel above the Larachmhor entrance drive is what some have referred to as Holms' 'folly'. But this is no transient 'Old Ruin'; these are the solidly constructed walls of a country residence that is biding its time waiting for someone of substance to provide a roof, weather seals and harling, then install the mains services and the various internal fixtures. Indeed, this is the only part of Holms' dreams that remains unfulfilled. Has this something to do in a spiritual way with 'The Old Garden Cottage' that once occupied the site? Perhaps it was but one of many such structures left behind in the wake of the emigrations.

There is something very unusual about Larachmhor, as there is about the Morar Peninsula and the Western Isles. And, perhaps, this is the all-pervading sense of quietness, tranquillity and solitude; for even today localities such as Arisaig, with a population of 442 in 2005, contain far fewer people than they did prior to the emigrations of 1786. Sat in the garden in the tranquillity of a Spring evening it is difficult to even begin to visualise that 70 years ago Larachmhor was in the midst of training exercises that continued night and day, accompanied by small-arms fire and the reverberations of armaments and demolition charges being fired. In more recent years many of the Norwegian, Czech and Slovak S.O.E. survivors have returned to the West Highlands to exchange their stories with the 'Locals' who have kindly welcomed them into their midst.

On 9th June, 2002 Major General A. Petrak, accompanied by a detachment of the S.O.E's Czechoslovak section, unveiled a memorial plaque during a ceremony held at Traigh House, just north of Arisaig, to commemorate the work carried out by the training schools. He spoke, without rancour, of his persecution and imprisonment in the homeland he had risked his life to free. The ceremony included a poem used by heroine Violette Szabo GC as a key to her personal S.O.E. code; Violette had passed through the training schools in the Arisaig area. The poem had previously been read out at the unveiling of the monument to S.O.E. victims at the site of Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, where Violette was executed on or around February 5th, 1945.³⁰

*The life that I have is all that I have
And the life that I have is yours,
The love that I have of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours.*

*A sleep I shall have, a rest I shall have
Yet death will be but a pause,
For the peace of my years in the long green grass
Will be yours and yours and yours.*

Miss Joan Becher passed away in April, 1995 and the Arisaig Estate was split-up into three lots under the MacMillan/Becher Trust.

Monsieur Namy, a Frenchman, purchased the main body of the estate and new terms were agreed with the 'consortium' responsible for the care of Larachmhor, thus enabling the restoration work to continue

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