The Campaign to SAVE Seafield House in Ayr

“Ruined castles tower houses and mansions have survived centuries of abandon and neglect all over Scotland and during the past 60 years not just dozens but hundreds have been brought back to life and use by enterprising new owners. Seafield House must not be allowed to join the long list of over 200 major historic houses demolished in Scotland since 1945.”

With these words, Marcus Binney, President of SAVE Britain’s Heritage, makes succinctly the case for saving Seafield House, the former home of renowned Scottish engineer and contractor of the Forth Rail Bridge, Sir William Arrol. The campaign, supported and spearheaded by SAVE, was launched in October 2012 in direct response to an application for Listed Building Consent (LBC) by NHS Ayrshire and Arran to demolish this important B listed building, which forms part of its surplus property holding. Neglect by its owners and a fire in 2008 caused damage to the building, but the structure still stands proud, a testament to Sir William Arrol’s engineering and construction, innovation and expertise. In building his home in Ayr, Sir William Arrol integrated techniques that he had devised in constructing such iconic structures as the Forth Rail Bridge and London Tower Bridge. Faced by strong local and national opposition, the NHS Trust withdrew its application to demolish. The seeds of a single-issue group were sown; those involved agreed that a focused campaign to SAVE the building was imperative.

From its establishment at a meeting in Ayr on 15 October 2012, Friends of Seafield House (FoSH) has campaigned to save Seafield House. At that inaugural Steering Group meeting, over 15 of Scotland and Britain’s leading conservation architects and engineers, architectural historians, academics, authors, entrepreneurs and local residents met to launch the campaign and establish the Friends of Seafield House. The meeting was attended by Marcus Binney, President of SAVE Britain’s Heritage, who gave the opening address, and by representatives of Historic Scotland, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historic Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) and Strathclyde Building Preservation Trust (SBPT).

Academics present included Dr Nina Baker and Dr Beatrice Colin of the University of Strathclyde. Leading conservation engineer Charles Blackett-Ord was also present together with two listed building owners: Robert Clow and Mark Gibson, and Rob Close, author of the Yale Pevsner ‘Buildings of Scotland: Guide to Ayrshire and Arran’, who agreed to become the FoSH Chair. Two Arrol family members are involved: leading conservation architect Andrew Arrol, who has become a Patron, and Kirsty Menzies, who became a Founding Friend and FoSH Committee Member. The meeting was chaired by Patrick Lorimer, ARPL, Architects who has become the FoSH architectural adviser.

Marcus Binney has described Seafield House as “a poignantly beautiful roofless ruin that stands empty and neglected and slowly decaying”. SAVE swiftly put into action a commitment to fund work that would halt further deterioration of the building by offering moneys for gutter cleaning. Thus far, the building owners have refused this offer. FoSH continues to call for essential maintenance to be undertaken.

The house that Arrol built for himself between 1888 and 1890 is in the Italianate style. In my view, it is one of the best houses of that style in Scotland, and extremely well constructed. The architects were Clarke and Bell, of Glasgow, with Robert A. Bryدن the partner in charge.
but as Sir Robert Purvis noted in his biography of Sir William Arrol, “[I]n its general features the new building was designed by Sir William himself’. I agree with our architectural adviser, Patrick Lorimer that: “Not only is the building iconic in the light of its original owner, it is also a critical and vital element within the historic landscape of this unique part of Ayr, it should and can be rescued.”

This view has been put most clearly by Andrew Arrol who, as Surveyor to Yor Minster, is in charge of one of the most important and ambitious repair and restoration programmes in the British Isles: “In my view Seafield House can certainly be saved. It is very well built of good durable materials and potential has many years of life ahead of it.”

In February, FoSH Committee members, Friends and supporters – including Peter Drummond, AHSS Chair – attended a debate at the Scottish Parliament on Chic Brodie MSP’s motion on Scotland’s Historic Buildings. The motion included mention of Seafield House and our campaign to SAVE the former home of Sir William Arrol. In her response to the debate, Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs said: “Conservation projects that are based around historic buildings benefit communities and can be outstanding architectural projects in their own right...When a derelict historic property is given a new lease of life in a community, we all feel good. Let us not wait until important historic buildings get into a poor state of repair. The key to good management is planning and early action...I thank Chic Brodie for lodging the motion so that this important subject could be debated in the Parliament, and I extend my best wishes to the Friends of Seafield House.”

An important recent development is the setting up by NHS Ayrshire and Arran of a Viability Group on which South Ayrshire Council and Historic Scotland are represented. As a result, two consultant reports were commissioned with funding from the Scottish Futures Trust. FoSH has consistently called for a full options appraisal to be undertaken, but this has been turned down. Instead, a new marketing phase – including a tailored Developers Day – will be undertaken by selling agent Ryden.

Notwithstanding our calls for an options appraisal, FoSH is working in support of the latest marketing campaign in the hope of finding a sensitive restoring owner for the house. There is a concern that this marketing campaign is to prove that no purchaser will take on Seafield House with its acres of beautiful tree-clad grounds, eventually leading to a second listed building consent application for demolition.

Our preference is to bring the building to as wide a public as possible: Seafield House would make a superb residence, hotel or care home. Proposals for engineering colleges, homes for Veterans and flatted development have been put to us. All required funding that, so far, has not been forthcoming. There is considerable interest in this unique house. We will continue to make the case for Seafield House to be SAVED.

Those wishing to see the house in its fine original condition will want to visit the RGAHMS photographic record (Canmore ID 120298). Sad though it is to see what has been lost, the collection gives such insight into the life of one of Scotland’s pioneers.

Rob Close, Chair
Friends of Seafield House

We would welcome the interest of, and support from, AHSS members in our campaign. We can be contacted on info@friends-of-seafield-house.org.uk or visit our website www.friends-of-seafield-house.org.uk. Facebook page www.facebook.com/FriendsOfSeafieldHouse or Twitter feed @FriendsSeafield.