

THE PENNINGHAME FOUNDATION



Penninghame House was built in 1869 and was once an open prison

HOUSE OF WELLBEING

Ray and Marie Butler have restored Penninghame House, near Newton Stewart, and transformed it into a residential centre offering physical and emotional wellness programmes. **Mary Smith** takes a visit

Photography by Phil Rigby and Frank Taylor



Ray and Marie Butler on the mansion's grand staircase

When Marie and Ray Butler were living and working in London, they dreamed of creating a centre where they could run residential courses to help people transform their lives. Their search for a suitable property turned up Penninghame House, just north of Newton Stewart.

The Jacobean-style country house was built in 1869 for the Stopford-Blair family. Edward James Stopford-Blair also built All Saints Scottish Episcopal Church at Challoch as the private chapel of Penninghame House, bequeathing it in 1965 to the Diocese of Glasgow and Galloway. From 1954 until it was closed in 2000, the house was an open prison.

"We were looking at a property on the banks of Loch Ness when Ray, who is a property developer, saw that Penninghame was for sale. It was just what we wanted,

although it needed a huge amount of work," says Swedish-born Marie.

At first, the couple lived in one of the cottages in the grounds and it took more than four years to complete the renovations and restore the main part of the house. Ray carried out the restoration of the original features such as skirting boards and cornices while Marie, discovering a real flair for interior design, chose the colours and décor for the bedrooms, more than 20 bathrooms, and public rooms.

The whole place is stunning. Marie has brought her Swedish influence to the upstairs private apartment which is known as 'little Sweden' with its clean lines, painted kitchen cupboards and open-plan design. Downstairs, Ray, with his passion for all things Victorian, has restored the enormous drawing room to its former glory.

The dining room used by course

participants is also decorated in a Victorian-era style but this time it is Swedish – Gustavian furnishings and lighting all provide a lighter, pared-down but glamorous feel. The views from all the windows are wonderful in every direction with stretches of grounds, the River Cree, the woods, the Galloway hills – all inviting walks and exploration. A new heating system using ground source heat pumps has been installed – 17 different 100m-deep bore holes were dug – to reduce the need for fossil fuels.

A number of transformational courses are offered at Penninghame including the Penninghame Process, where participants focus on early life relationships to understand how their decision-making has been affected from a very young age. It allows people to move on in life, leaving behind low self-esteem. Truth and Consequences aims to enable participants to take responsibility for their lives while the Oneness Experience course is a five-day course to awaken self-awareness and deepen inner connectedness.

"Participants come from all over the world," says Marie. "We've had people from China, Hong Kong, all across the United States and Croatia as well as from the UK. We have excellent teachers and lecturers in physical and emotional wellbeing, who have at least 30 years' experience."

A Health Week is also now offered, where people can learn about how foods affect the body and find out how to eat well without gaining weight. Marie has always been interested in food. She opened her first restaurant, in Italy, when she was 17, going on to open restaurants in London, where she also worked as a luxury holiday destination consultant. She became interested not only in food, but also its effects, when she found the cure for her eczema was to cut out cheese.

"I tried all the conventional treatments including steroids and sunbeds," she says. "When I came to London to open a restaurant, I had crusts all over my face and wore huge sunglasses everywhere. Finally, I met someone who recommended cutting out dairy products. I kept to it strictly for a few months, giving time to let the mucous membranes heal and it cleared up completely. That was when I realised the importance of food and its effects – both to heal or make us ill."

Ray and Marie met through the restaurant business. He had invested in a couple of restaurants and on one of her rare days off Marie was in her favourite eaterie. "I was wearing a sailing jacket – a collector's item from the Whitbread race – and Ray came over to talk to me about it," Marie remembers.

Ray came to share her interest in the effects of food, not least when he was due to undergo an operation for snoring, something he was not looking forward to it. Marie told him to give her two or three months and changed some things in his diet: "It didn't

take long to see the results. A couple of years later he was prescribed tablets for gout but when he saw the list of 16 potential side-effects he was reluctant to take them.

“I put him on a very strict dietary regime for two weeks and it was gone. That was more than 10 years ago and he’s had no recurrence. His only rule about the change in diet was that it had to taste good. It did and he was completely sold on the idea.”

Pursuing their joint passion for food, nutrition and the body, the couple established an integrated medical clinic in London which, based on a combination of alternative and complementary healing, provided a holistic approach to health.

Food plays a major role at Penninghame, with course participants and residents enjoying freshly prepared meals based round wholefood-based modern macrobiotic cuisine. If anyone thinks that sounds like it might have too much emphasis on health and not enough on what tastes good, they’d be wrong. This is gourmet food which would not be out of place in top restaurants. It’s no wonder top chefs are coming along to the Health Week courses. “They know about the importance of good, fresh, locally sourced produce,” says Marie, “but now they are becoming more interested in what effects food has on the body.”

Course leader for the Health Week is health consultant Ken Prange who, like Marie and Ray, is passionate about food. He has over 10 years’ training in naturopathy, acupuncture, silva mind control – a specific course which concentrates on visualisation and suggestion, working with the subconscious.

Ken was born in Dumfries and when he was 16 he had a blood disease which resulted in his spleen being removed. By the time he was 18 his quality of life had gone downhill. “It was so bad I sometimes had to lie down on the ground to recuperate,” he says. “I was diagnosed firstly with haemolytic anaemia and then acute lymphatic leukaemia. A friend said I wasn’t looking well and told me about a book by George Ohsawa called Zen Macrobiotics. I read it overnight and was inspired.”

Although Ken firmly believes the change in his diet contributed to his recovery, the medical profession is not so easily convinced – and diagnosed his new-found health as spontaneous remission.

“I have no way of proving it otherwise,” he says. For a year he travelled once a month to London to study with Michio Kushi, his guru, the man often described as the father of macrobiotics. When he was 20, Ken travelled to Germany where he studied electrical engineering plus naturopathy and acupuncture. In 1992, he met his wife, Angela, who is now head cook at Penninghame and also lectures on the Health Week course. They opened a restaurant, in Berlin, which they ran until 2003.



Health consultant Ken Prange and his wife Angela Agrati-Prange, Penninghame’s head chef, are both course leaders on Health Week



Penninghame’s freshly prepared meals taste great and are good for you. This dish comprises black rice noodles with sesame tempeh and miso sauce



Marie in her private family kichen, which is decorated in the Swedish style



A room in the newly built North Lodge on the banks of the River Cree, where activities and seminars are held

“We moved back to Italy to open another restaurant producing gourmet wholefoods,” he says. “I wanted a clientele who appreciated nouvelle cuisine – food that looked good and tasted good and was good for people.”

The Health Week course Ken runs is summed up as ‘good food = good health = good life’. “Usually people on the course haven’t been educated in the philosophy or lifestyle or the way of eating we’re promoting and the first hurdle is for them to get used to a different mindset. It’s not hard,” says Ken.

“There are always results. People start to experience a feeling of wellbeing. The food is a big plus. We’ve moved on from macrobiotics and aren’t so strict. There’s a very wide choice, using as much as possible what’s local – ‘think global, eat local’ is one of our slogans. It’s the things left out that are more important: saturated fats, animal produce, eggs, sugar, milk and dairy products.”

When tucking into the three-course lunch including delicious tofu tempura in a spicy shoyu sauce with ginger and lime juice, salad and vegetables with mouth-watering sauces, tasty rice dishes, avocado dip and dairy-free chocolate mousse served with cheesecake and berries, no one could possibly notice the absence of sugar and animal fats.

The course includes lectures on eating in harmony with nature, understanding the energies of food and creating the desired effects in body, mood and life. Practical



Part of the restored drawing room

demonstrations, documentaries and sessions on valid and effective home remedies which have been passed down through generations provide participants with a tool kit of knowledge and ideas to take home for themselves and their families.

After spending 32 years working outside Britain, running restaurants, studying, and

teaching, Ken is happy to be able to see more of his parents, who still live in Dumfries. “They are 85 and through my influence changed their eating habits. They use miso and brown rice and are convinced it helps them,” he says.

Health Weeks are held every month and the next one starts on April 10. Ken is available for health consultations and there are plans to hold weekend or day cookery classes, while Marie is planning a cookbook of the amazing Penninghame recipes.

The Penninghame Foundation offers volunteer placements working in the house, kitchen or garden which attract volunteers from all over the world – from Newton Stewart to Russia, Sweden, Italy, and the Czech Republic. Accommodation and food is provided, there’s the opportunity to learn new skills and attend evening lectures, the use of gym and a pool car, plus lots more benefits in exchange for 30 hours’ work a week.

Even if not participating in one of the courses or working as a volunteer, it is possible to enjoy the Penninghame experience by booking to stay for a week and relax in the beautiful surroundings with woodland walks, wildlife, and truly scrumptious food.

“If people are interested even in coming for lunch and see what we do here, we’re very happy to accommodate them,” says Marie, “as long as they ring up in advance.”

■ For more information, see www.peninghame.org or tel: 01671 401414.