



Destination Gothic trail

■ GETTING THERE

Trains leave Glasgow Central Station for Wemyss Bay (50 minutes) about every hour. By car, take the M8/A8 from Glasgow to Wemyss Bay. Regular Caledonian MacBrayne car ferries leave Wemyss Bay for Rothesay (35 minutes). Ferry details, www.calmac.co.uk. The shuttle bus (15 minutes) runs seven times a day every day between Rothesay and Mount Stuart.

■ COSTS AND OPENING TIMES

Composite Mount Stuart Day Out tickets include return trip on trains from any SPT station in the Strathclyde area and include ferry, bus and entrance to Mount Stuart. Adults £16.50 (\$39), children £8.25.

Mount Stuart House and gardens are open from May to September, except for Tuesdays and Thursdays. Gardens are open 10am to 5pm. Entrance to the house is restricted to guided tours between 11am and 4.30pm. Adults £7, children £3, family £17.

■ MORE INFORMATION

Bute Discovery Centre, Victoria Street, Rothesay. Phone (0011 44 8707) 200619.

A wee penny well spent

With a nod to celebrity nuptials, **Bridget Martin** walks a gothic fantasy devoted to the stars.

It costs only 15 pence to visit “the most impressive surviving late-Victorian public convenience in Scotland, if not Britain”. I’m reading the brochure on the loo, but I have been short-changed. The ladies’ section, lovely as it is, was added in 1990.

When commissioned in 1899, the toilets of Rothesay Pier on the Isle of Bute were intended for gents only (I’m still wondering where the ladies went). When no males are using it, lesser mortals like me are allowed to take a peek at the glorious fake marble urinals and colourful ceramic tiles of the original section.

Restored in 1990, this marvel of convenience has starred on television, been voted third best toilet in the world by *Nuts* magazine and repeatedly won the Cannon Hygiene Loo of the Year award.

Earlier that afternoon, I had been standing in the white marble chapel where Stella McCartney was married. Somehow, I think she missed out on this particular throne.

Bute is one of the most accessible islands on the west coast of Scotland. It is just a couple of hours from one of Britain’s largest cities, but a world away from the bustle.

On a day when we are to discover some of the best of Scottish Victorian architecture, my husband and I start our journey, appropriately, at Glasgow Central Station. Designed by James Miller during the Victorian building boom, it is an airy construction of arching steel and glass.

Fifty minutes later, we are treated to more work by the same architect when our train pulls into Wemyss (pronounced “Weemz”) Bay. The smaller scale of this station, with much less

modern clutter, allows us to appreciate its elegant, light-infused structure. Co-designed with Donald Mathieson, it was considered the finest station of its age when completed in 1903.

Following the signs, we descend a curving, steel-and-glass vaulted ramp and find ourselves next to the ferry for Rothesay, Bute’s small township. A 30-minute voyage and 10 picturesque minutes on the connecting bus later, we are at the stately home of Mount Stuart House.

The Stuarts of Bute have been on the

Rothesay. The third Earl, who played a key role in the founding of London’s Kew Gardens, later developed the landscaped woodlands around it.

We gaze up at the portraits of these people as we are escorted around Mount Stuart House. The building we admire, however, is not the original, which burned down in 1877. This disaster gave the third Marquess of Bute, an enthusiastic patron of the arts, the opportunity to employ the skills of architect Sir Robert Rowand Anderson to create a Gothic fantasy.

dows are devoted to the signs of the zodiac. The light streams through them on the south side, dappling the marble pillars with rainbow colours.

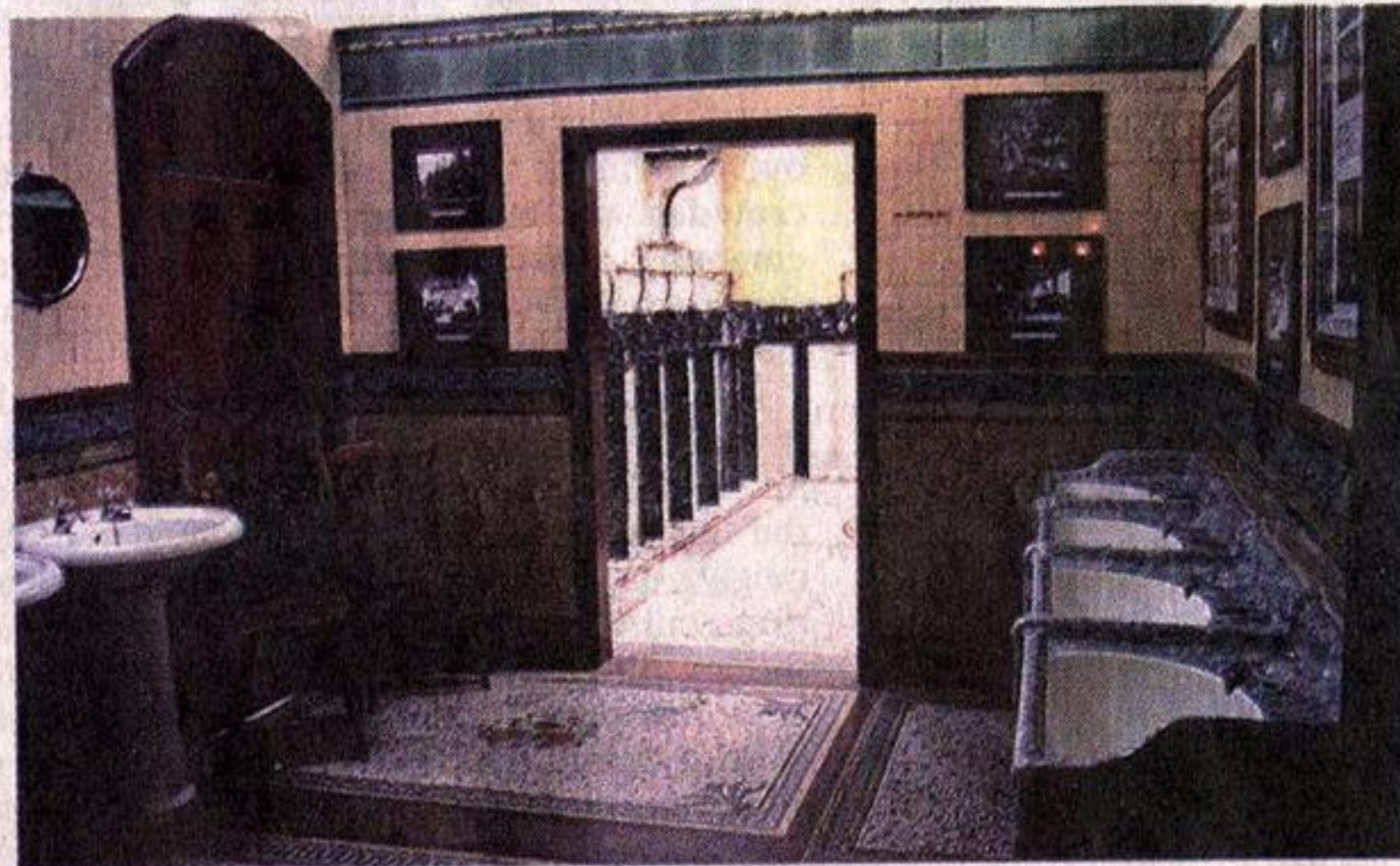
Our guide points out details we might otherwise have missed. Capitals at the tops of pillars have been exquisitely carved with plants found in the grounds, but others remain uncarved. Work was interrupted by World War I, then ceased when World War II broke out.

We are taken through the horoscope bedroom, the Victorian bathrooms and the magnificent dining room, its carved wooden surrounds lively with little birds and squirrels.

Then we reach the chapel. Fashioned in white marble, with an inlaid stone floor, it is full of light and air; I could appreciate McCartney’s romantic choice for her wedding.

After the house tour, we spend several hours following the many trails that lace through the extensive gardens. Various parts of the grounds reflect different fashions. A formal geometric layout is centred on a tall column topped with a mysterious robed figure. Elsewhere, “designer wilderness” takes over. Mature trees tower above the paths and abundant rhododendrons blossom vibrantly in the early summer. The Wee Garden is planted with shrubs from the southern hemisphere. The Kitchen Garden was replanted along formal geometric lines as recently as the 1990s.

Next to the reception area we are treated to a taste of local mead. A blend of pure local honey and apple, it is made in the medieval style and aged in virgin oak casks. Then it’s back on the shuttle bus and on to our date with the loo.



island for more than 700 years. Appointed as Steward of Bute in 1157, the name became Stuart on the marriage of their son to the daughter of King Robert the Bruce in 1315. The product of this union became the first Stuart king of Scotland.

The family prospered. In 1719, the second Earl of Bute chose a site for his new house on 120 hectares south of

As we step into the central marble hall, we gaze up into a vaulted ceiling studded with stars. The third Marquess was a scholar and his passions for astrology, mythology, religion, heraldry and art are reflected in the design of the house. All the star formations visible in the northern hemisphere are depicted on the ceiling and, below them, stained glass win-

Bloomin’ marvellous ... above, rhododendrons blossom in the gardens of Mount Stuart House in early summer; right, Rothesay Pier’s award-winning toilets. Photos: Bridget Martin