

## RESTORATION OF THE DOGS' HOME

It is generally acknowledged that the small stone building in the woods behind The Heald was the model for The Dogs' Home in *Picts and Martyrs*. For years it was allowed to fall apart and decay, until **Rob Boden** (among others) started agitating to save it - not just for Ransome fans - but for posterity also.



The Dogs' Home prior to restoration commencing. Overgrown, unloved, and slowly falling apart

In early November 2011, Tony Richards posted a picture of the Dogs' Home on Lakeland Cam ([www.lakelandcam.co.uk](http://www.lakelandcam.co.uk)). It showed the roof to be in very bad repair, with tiles off at the edges, leaving the tops of the walls exposed in places to water penetration. Roger Wardale spotted Tony's post and followed it up with a posting on the Tarboard website, which alerted me to the situation. I felt

strongly, along with other Tarboarders, that something should be done about this situation, as the Dogs' Home is one of the few incontrovertibly identifiable locations in the books. It struck me that it would be terrible if we let such an iconic 'Ransome' building fall into disrepair or ruin.

Therefore I took it upon myself to visit the Forestry Commission offices at Grizedale to discuss the matter. They

were extremely interested, though the Estates people hadn't been aware of the literary connection before. However, they had no money to do any work on it. They do employ a building surveyor, and they said they would ask her to have a look at it. I would add that the possibility of them having to pull it down on the grounds of public safety was also raised: the exact words involved 'taking a stick of



The interior of the front wall. No window, badly rendered, crumbling



The front door. Falling apart and off its hinges

dynamite up there’

I also wrote to *Signals* about what I had done and this was published in the January 2012 issue. I suggested that the TARS Board had to decide urgently whether to put some of its reserves

into repairing the Dogs’ Home – initially just to secure the fabric by getting the tiles replaced – or perhaps to support a separate funding campaign. A survey would show what further work might be needed, and an

idea of its cost, which would allow a further decision as to whether TARS could help pay for this, perhaps also seeking matched funding from grants.

I also relayed that the Forestry Commission seem interested in an



Mid-restoration. Scaffolding up and the roof about to come off for repairs to the timbers. Encroaching undergrowth cleared away



View from up the track showing the roof timbers in the process of replacement. Note 'elf 'n safety' signs and caution tape!

information board at Machell Coppice car park. Interestingly, the walker's route that goes from there past the Dogs' Home is the purple route – the background colour of the *Picts and Martyrs* dustjacket!

Regrettably, there was no response from the TARS Board to my letter.

In the meantime I had met up with Mark Birchall, who was the Forestry Warden covering Machell Coppice (and other areas too), for a site visit to the Dogs' Home. Mark knew about the AR connections, and we had an interesting chat as we followed the purple route up to the hut. We went anti-clockwise, which I haven't done before, instead of using the rough track up from the gate near the two forestry houses. It's a lovely walk, and you suddenly come out on the Dogs' Home – it's quite stunning from this

perspective!

Mark identified one major problem: the roofing timbers were rotten, leading to the tiles coming off. Indeed we found a piece of rafter, with some tiles still attached, on the ground at the back! Looking inside, the main central beam wasn't even attached to the end gable. This could have been rot, but was actually indicative of a much bigger problem: that the eastern gable was bowing outwards significantly and had pulled clear of the central beam, leaving this unsupported at the end.

While we were looking round we also looked at the different type of stone used in the construction, with some rough stones, river boulders etc., but also some neatly finished block stonework. Some cement has been applied as well in places. Mark reckons

the Forestry Commission may have already done some restoration work on the rear wall especially, probably using dressed stones brought over from the rubble of Grizedale Hall, which was taken down in the late fifties. This would date any restoration work to the late 50s/early 60s.

However, the bad news was that, in Mark's view, the roof needed a complete replacement; and worse, that the walls needed stabilising. He reckoned there wasn't much point doing a temporary roof repair, nor would it be easy to do, as the rotten and broken timbers wouldn't hold any roof nails.

The good news is that he offered to get the Forestry Commission building surveyor to assess the damage and estimate the costs of the works needed. He thought the Forestry



Immediately post-restoration. Slate tiles back on, scaffolding gone and site beginning to recover



View from the front, post-scaffolding removal, but prior to door and window fitting



Restoration complete. Door replaced. Brand new window. A suitable abode for any number of Picts or Martyrs!

Commission could help with such things as getting tools and equipment and materials up to the site, and even supply local timber for the rafters, battens etc.

And again he had a dire warning that the FC has a responsibility for public safety and it may be that the building would be declared unsafe and levelled. He was surprised that this hadn't happened in the sixties. I asked that it could be fenced off instead.

We did talk about bidding for grants for any works, and we agreed that working in partnership would enhance this, as would be a package with an interpretative noticeboard at the car park explaining the Dogs' Home and encouraging people to walk to it (he said the Forestry Commission has a workshop where a framework might be constructed).

Other ideas we touched on were rebuilding a charcoal burner's wigwam (the FC has a map with all such features identified on it) and TARS

or AR volunteers effectively taking over the route including doing some work on the path – it needs localised drainage – and generally just keeping an eye on it and the car park.

The purple route could even become the *Picts and Martyrs* route, with a separate leaflet talking about AR, *PM*, the Dogs' Home, coppicing, charcoal burning and so on.

I have to say I found all this really exciting! I even wondered about using the drystone wall to create a letterbox as in *PM* for children to post comments and letters.

All these are still possibilities, but would need some funding. I have also noticed recently that the FC is promoting mountain bike tracks through the woods including part of the purple route.

And there, ladies and gentlemen, the trail went cold. The TARS Board did not offer any funding, and I worried that the dynamite might be used.

But in early 2014, out of the blue, Mark Birchall phoned me. He hadn't forgotten about it, and when a project that the FC had received funding for was abandoned, he asked instead that the £10,000 grant be put to restore the Dogs' Home.

He found an additional amount of about £3,000 in FC budgets, and the restoration work was back on the agenda. The work itself took place in February and March 2014. Some might criticise the glazing in the windows (which were originally, and in *PM*, unglazed), but Mark and the FC wanted this building to last and so they were keen to make it weather proof.

And there we have it – and will have it for many years to come! I'd like to thank Mark Birchall for his persistence and imagination in coming up with the funding and preserving this most iconic of AR structures.

**Rob Boden**