

# Sylvia's heart is in the Highlands

Her home may be in Croydon, but DIY guru Sylvia Marshall makes a 1,250-mile round trip every week to visit her croft-style houses at Sand, Wester Ross, writes **Susan Welsh**



**S**YLVIA Marshall describes herself as "an ordinary middle-aged woman", but there's nothing ordinary about her. To begin with, she happily makes a weekly round trip of more than 1,250 miles from her home in Croydon to the place she holds dearest to her heart, Sand, in Wester Ross, where she has had four stunning traditional croft-style houses built. "I'm originally from Belfast, but have lived in Croydon, Wester Ross, then Croydon

again," said Sylvia, who founded a global training consultancy before turning an interest in DIY into a successful business. "My mum's family hail from Wester Ross and, as a child, I regularly holidayed there. I adore the area and promised myself that mum and I would live there one day." It was during one of her regular trips north that she bumped into a chap who noticed her admiring the views. "I said I adored the area so

much I wanted to move up here, ideally building my own house," said Sylvia. "He said, 'Funny you should say that as I'm Alastair Macrae, a crofter and builder, and I've got land for sale'." "I went to view the plot at Tighnafiline, near Aultbea, and fell in love with it. I built a house there for myself about seven years ago. "My home was lovely and I thoroughly enjoyed it, so when the builder said he had more land for sale, it seemed only natural to offer the same standard of home to others. "Mr Macrae sold me a plot at Sand which had two derelict croft houses which I bought with a view to restoring, with his firm doing the building work.

"On investigation, I learned there had originally been four houses there, so decided to build four new houses, using traditional methods, exactly where the originals once stood. "It wasn't easy as I insisted the builders took the stones down, number them, then reuse them.

"I think, at times, they could cheerfully have killed me," joked Sylvia. "It's not the sort of thing a regular developer would do as it costs a lot, but it does make each home unique." The result is four superb modern cottages which have been commended by Scottish Natural Heritage for their likeness to the look and layout of the original crofts which once occupied this site. Perfectly combining modern technology with traditional style, each home sits in generous grounds and has been sensitively designed to take advantage of the special location with views towards Gruinard Bay. Each has an entrance porch,



Sylvia gets busy on a digger

living room, kitchen/dining-room, hallway and two bedrooms, and the finishes are of the highest standard. Sylvia said: "I was determined to stick with the authentic design, so had the doors and windows handmade by a firm in Inverness, the stone was all hand-cut, and we used Caithness slab on the windowsills instead of wood so the inside looks as though it has always been there. "There are authentic stone walls, double chimneys, pitched slate roofs and vaulted timber ceilings." Modern touches include Italian slate and oak floors; recessed lighting; antique-washed oak kitchen units, Belfast sink with swan-neck tap and a host of

quality integrated kitchen appliances; Morso Squirrel wood-burner, and modern bath and shower suites. "The houses are spectacular, and I'm delighted with them," said Sylvia. And while she didn't get down and dirty during the building, she ensured that things went according to plan. "I got into DIY after project-managing the transformation of a derelict Croydon bank into my company's headquarters. "I got ripped off every which way. You could see me crying in the corner sometimes but, all in all, it was great fun and I learned a great deal, mainly how to hold an intelligent conversation with builders.

"Just for fun, I set up a website where people could log on and see my DIY successes and disasters. "It became such a success that, at the end of 2007, I was able to give up my other business and run the website full-time." Her property restorations are an integral part of her website, [www.cosyhomesonline.com](http://www.cosyhomesonline.com) Sadly, her mum took ill and Sylvia had to sell her Tighnafiline home and return to Croydon, and as a result, now splits her time between there and Sand. "I will definitely return to live full-time to Wester Ross at some point, living in one of the croft houses I've built - my heart is in the Highlands." The homes sit in a beautiful

DIY guru Sylvia Marshall



PROPERTY OF THE WEEK



Before ...



... and after



coastal area between the townships of Sand and Laide, a location designated as an area of outstanding natural beauty thanks to its superb scenery, white sandy beaches, diverse wildlife and open spaces. The village of Laide has a shop and post office, while Aultbea, five miles to the south, has further facilities. Secondary schooling is available in Gairloch, about 15 miles to the south.

Each house is for sale at offers over £230,000. For further details, contact Strutt and Parker's Inverness office on 01463 719171.



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