

HOW TO MAKE A BORDERS BOX BED

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During the 1790s the great civil engineer Thomas Telford acted as consultant architect to the British Fisheries Society, a semi-charitable body concerned with establishing fishing villages in the Scottish Highlands. As part of his work for the Society he drew up plans and details for a temporary inn for their new station at Lochbay on the Isle of Skye. This was to be a simple building with clay and rubble walls with a heather thatched roof, internal gable end chimneys 'being the only difference from common cottages'. In a letter of 1790 written from Westerhall, Selkirkshire to the Society's agent at Lochbay, Telford suggests that the inn should be equipped with box beds, two to a room, and details their construction.¹ Telford was himself the son of a Selkirkshire shepherd and grew up in just such a small cottage:²

You will see by the plans that it is proposed that closed or box beds be made use of because these serve well as partitions for part of the house. I don't recall that I saw any of these box beds in Skye³ but they are very common in the borders and can be made as follows:

The size is four foot four inches by six foot long, they are boarded on the back and both ends six foot high and covered with boards on the top, the front open for curtains or sliding doors except a flat board about nine inches wide and one inch thick placed with the edge upwards which is fixed from head to foot at the height of about one foot from the ground and in the inside a ledge of wood is nailed along the back on the inside of the nine inch board in front at the same height of 16 inches from the ground. Small spars of wood or straight sticks are laid across the bed upon the ledges about two or three inches asunder over which straw or heather laid lengthways is placed and over that the bed which is generally fitted with chaff and then the bed cloaths; if necessary a mattress may be put over the chaff bed but great care must be taken that neither the straw nor the chaff have any smell and both should be made perfectly dry. The beds to be made two feet high above the floor to allow storage.

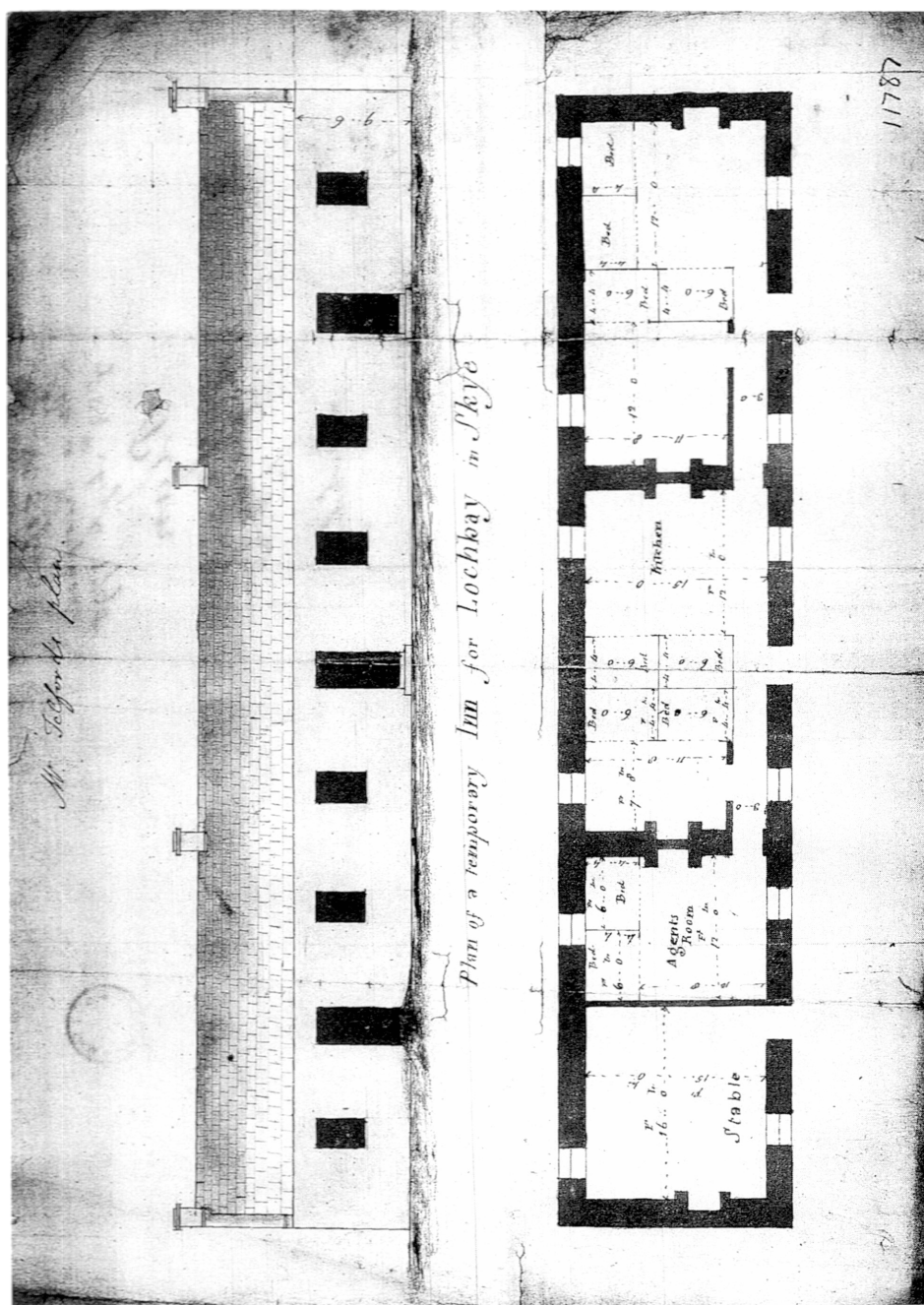
There were to be eight box beds, with two as a partition wall in the kitchen for the inn keeper and his family, the other six in pairs in the three guest rooms. In the kitchen there was also to have been 'a press on the left side of the fire which may project a little, the upper part for kitchen furniture and above it a dresser and further back a press with shelves above for glass, earthenware etc.'.

The inn was completed before the end of the 1790 building season but the mason's and carpenter's particulars for the work only cover the building not its contents,⁴ so it is not known whether Telford's advice was followed and the box beds built.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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i. Thomas Telford, plan for a temporary inn, Lochbay, Isle of Skye, 1790. SRO/RMP/11787
The National Archives of Scotland

REFERENCES

1. SRO/GD9/93/28/8/90.
2. L. T. C. Rolt, *Thomas Telford*, Longmans, London, 1958, p. 2.
3. This supplies interesting negative evidence that box beds were possibly not common in the Islands in the eighteenth century though common by the late nineteenth; see David Jones, 'Box Beds in Eastern Scotland', *Regional Furniture*, v, 1991, p 6. If the beds were made on Skye this would represent an early example of regional traditions migrating within Scotland.
4. SRO/GD9/125.