

DORNOCH CASTLE

Sutherland

A Brief History

DORNOCH CASTLE

A History

When the Earl and Countess were poisoned at Helmsdale Castle one night in 1567 the walls of Dornoch Castle trembled.

When the Earl of Caithness, the chief suspect, took possession of the surviving boy-heir, the Earl Alexander, the walls of Dornoch shook.

When the Murrays of Dornoch, allied with the Gordons, snatched the young Earl Alexander from Dunrobin Castle where he was being held, the northern heather was set ablaze. The Clans marched, and for Dornoch Castle there began four centuries of ruin and restoration.

During the terrible siege of 1570 all the records of the Castle – or Palace – were destroyed, so that it's earlier history is uncertain – except for what can be traced in other documents and through legend. Some authorities think that the palace was originally built in the 14th Century and rebuilt and added to in the 16th Century. The vaulted dungeons below the tower would have been part of the original construction.

THE FIRST PALACE

The Castle is almost certainly on the site of the original Bishop's Palace of St Gilbert, who founded the Cathedral in the early 13th Century, but it is not known when the oldest surviving part of the present building was put up. In 1557 the Palace was given to the Earl of Sutherland by his brother in law, Bishop Robert Stewart. It is clear that the building was erected before that date and may well be of the late 15th Century.

Although the Castle commands extensive views along the coast, seawards, and across the Dornoch Firth to the purple hills of Ross and Cromarty beyond; although it withstood siege and has been used as a garrison; although it has been a Courthouse, Jail and Schoolhouse, it was never intended for military purposes, or as a public building. It was built as the residential Palace for the Bishops of Caithness. Later it was given to the Earls of Sutherland who liked their "Fair Castel" and used it as their home for many years. Until 1947 it was in private hands, since then it has been a hotel.

The earliest surviving documentary evidence of the Palace is the Charter of 1557 by which the Bishop Robert appointed the Earl of Sutherland and his heirs to be hereditary Constables for Dornoch "situated in the Irish (Gaelic speaking) Country among the wild, unbridled, untamed and savage Scots". The appointment was made by the Bishop who was alarmed by the progress of the Lutheran doctrines and wished to safeguard the property of the Church by putting it temporarily in the care of his relations. He cannot have visualised that the Church would never own its property again.

The Palace remained in Sutherland hands until it was sold in 1922.

Apparently the Castle was once a large stately building. It had three Towers forming a courtyard, which was enclosed on the north side by a high wall with a gatehouse in the northeast corner.

The present Tower was at the southwest corner and it was this Tower and the Tower of the Cathedral, which were the only two strong points to out during the siege of 1570.

The other surviving portion of the Castle is the big chimney – the Bishop's Chimney – adjoining the Tower, which was the kitchen

chimney to the Bishop's Palace. Part of the kitchen of the Palace is now the hotel Bar, and the great fireplace forms almost the whole of one wall.

The south wall of this basement, believed to be over five hundred years old, is nine feet thick.

Both the Bishop's Chimney and the south wall of the main building are built on a "brander of Oak" – a raft of oak to stop them sinking into the sandy soil.

SIEGE OF 1570

The siege of 1570 following the rescue of Earl Alexander from Dunrobin Castle was the most violent and dramatic period of the Castle's history. Even by Scottish Clan warfare standards it was bloody and strange.

The Earl of Caithness, having obtained guardianship over the young Earl Alexander, had married him off to his daughter who was twice the boy's age, and proceeded to rule the Sutherland and Caithness estates jointly with an iron hand.

The Murrays of Dornoch, who were implacably opposed to the Caithness and Mackay rule over this wild and remote northern area of Scotland, helped rescue the young Earl by means of a trick. Although pursued from Dunrobin Castle they managed to get him across the Meikle Ferry, despite a sudden storm that blew up – and into the safekeeping of the Earl of Huntly.

In the absence of the Earl of Caithness, the young master of Caithness gathered a great force of the Caithness and Mackay Clans, allied with the Sutherlands of Skelbo and Evelix – and descended on Dornoch. After days of bitter fighting, the Caithness forces entered and sacked the town. The Dornoch people still held out successfully for another week in the towers of the Castle and Cathedral.

Then the invaders went too far. When St. Gilbert, the last Scotsman to appear in the Kalendar of Saints, founded Dornoch Cathedral in 1214, he laid a curse invoking the wrath and indignation of Almighty God in eternal damnation on those who might "distract and injure" the Cathedral. Not only was the Cathedral, except the Tower, now sacked and burned,

but St Gilbert's Tomb was desecrated by William Sutherland of Evelix. The results were fearful. Sir Robert Gordon, a famous historian if Sutherland who was born ten years after this event, described William Sutherland's action and fate.

"He opened Gilbert his grave, burst St Gilbert his coffin with his foot, and threw the ashes of that holy man with the kind which enormitie the Almighty God did most justlie punish; for that same foot that burst St Gilbert his coffin did afterwards rot away and consume, to the great terror of all beholders, whereby, this William Sutherland grew so lothsum that no man was able to come neir with him, and so he died miserablie".

A terrible account has recorded of his last moments when the Devil came to claim the victim.

In a peace settlement between the Caithness and Mackay Clans and the Dornoch people, three Murrays were demanded as hostages. On being handed over there were promptly beheaded by the Laird of Duffus, *"against all humanitie and the laws of nations duellie observed amongst the greatest infidels"*. Again retribution was swift and uncanny.

"Immediatlly after the death of the pledges, the Laird of Duffus sickened, and never rose againe out of his bed through the sting of conscience which he had conceaved, and through the strange visions which appeired unto him, for being accessorie and participant of the shedding of their blood".

For the sacrilege in the Cathedral the young Master of Caithness was punished by his father, *"whom God, in his just judgement had appoynted to be his scourge, for burning the Church of Dornough"*.

The Earl threw his son into a dungeon where, after seven years, he died at last and *"by famine and vermine"*.

Finally, a few months after the Master of Caithness was imprisoned, his confederate the Mackay of Strathnaver died, *"partlie through grief and pairtlie through the torment and trouble of his conscience which he had conceaved for his by past actions"*.

So was St Gilbert's curse fulfilled.

A curious sequel to the dispute of 1570 has come down over the years. One of the Moreyes who was wounded in the cheek when defending the

Castle and Churchyard, afterwards fled to Lewis in the Western Isles. He was Gho-gorm, the “Blue Smith”, because of the colour of his scar. A descendant of his, Dr Donald Murray was later to become member of Parliament for the Western Isles, and his daughter Aleen married a past owner of the Castle, Alan MacDonald.

EARLS' RESIDENCE

Despite the sacking of the town and the siege of the Castle, the building does not seem to have been too extensively damaged. It then enjoyed a period of relative peacefulness.

In 1573 the Earl Alexander, now in his early twenties, divorced his Caithness wife and married Lady Jane Gordon, Countess of Bothwell. A few years earlier Lady Jane had divorced the Earl of Bothwell so that he might marry Mary Queen of Scots after the murder of Lord Darnley. One of the sons of the marriage between Earl Alexander and Lady Jane was Sir Robert Gordon, the historian.

The Earls of Sutherland lived in their “fair Castel” for nearly 150 years. They also entertained well in it. In 1604 the Earl of Orkney was “*honourable interteyned with comedies and all other sports and recreations that Earl John cud make him*”. Earl John died in the Castle in the autumn of 1615. His son married and lived in the Castle, where most of his children were born.

He was succeeded by Earl George, who died in 1703, and who was followed by Earl John. It was his son, William, Lord Strathnaver, who seems to have been the last member of the Sutherland family to live at the Castle. He stayed until 1715; his father, Earl John, was the last Earl buried at Dornoch.

By 1720 the Castle seems to have needed extensive repairs and Lord Strathnaver spent 2,300 marks on renovations. But in 1760 it was in a derelict state again.

Bishops Forbes in the narrative of his visit to Dornoch reported that the building was in a ruined condition and a blacksmith had set up his forge in the basement. The damage is attributed to the Jacobite soldiers of the Earl of Cromarty, an ardent supporter of Prince Charles Edward Stuart (Bonnie Prince Charlie). The Earl billeted his troops in the Castle in 1746

and it is suggested that the forge was originally set up for making and repairing their weapons.

THE ROYAL DORNOCH GOLF COURSE

One of the more peaceful innovations of this period was the founding of the Golf Course. Its first mention was in 1616. It is the third oldest in the world after St Andrews and Leith, and is still one of the finest. It runs along the curve of the coast behind the sand hills overlooking the great golden beaches around the bay. It is attractive and deceptive, and draws northwards many connoisseurs of the game.

REPLANNING DORNOCH

By 1800 the ruinous Castle has become a nuisance to the town planners of the day, who wished to provide better lay out for the town centre. The Tower was roofless, and adventurous schoolboys used to climb the lofty Castle walls looking for jackdaws' nests.

The Castle still formed three sides of a square. On the south side were the Tower, vaulted kitchens and Bishop's Chimney, and this part extended to the residential quarters, which were where the present Courthouse building stands.

At right angles to this was a wing, known as the Record room, which stretched across what is now Castle Street. A strong wall with a gatehouse ran along on the north side to near where the fountain is now. The whole area was known as the Castle Close and contained an unwelcome huddle of small houses built in among the ruins.

The Council decided they needed a new market place and wider streets. Proper school premises were required and, above all, a better Courthouse and Jail were a necessity.

In 1812 the new work began towards clearing the old houses away, moving the market from the High Street to Castle Close, straightening the burn and building a bridge over it in Castle Street, pulling down the old Chapter House and Council House as it stands today with wide, clean attractive squares and spaces.

The residential part of the Castle was pulled down to make way for the present Courthouse and Public Buildings, and the north wall was cleared away. There was, however, a hitch in acquiring some of the old houses in Castle Close, and with other delays the new Courthouse and Jail were not built until 1850. In the meantime the Castle Tower, with its spiral stone staircase, was re-roofed, and hurriedly turned into the Courthouse and Jail. A new building was erected over the vaulted kitchens, next to the great Bishop's Chimney, and became the schoolhouse. This room is now the Terrace Lounge.

NEW SCHOOL

These school premises were a great improvement over the old – which had been in a rented house, the property of a widow too poor to render it comfortable. In those days the pupils had been summoned to school by the Janitor standing on the School steps below lustily on a post horn. It is not clear whether the practise was continued when the school moved onto the Castle.

The first schoolmaster in the Castle School was dismissed in 1817 as he deserted his charges during term time in order to go back to University himself. The next was more satisfactory. The teaching was better than had been provided formerly and it was agreed that he should be given extra fees: *“For every sett of book-keeping 10.6d; for Mathematics 10.6d per session and for teaching Greek of French 5s per quarter”*.

Some of the vaulted kitchens below the old schoolhouse are still used for their original purpose. They are the hotel kitchens and a neighbouring room is the dining room. The other vaulted chambers below, with their thick walls, were dungeons in the hotel. They were eventually condemned as being too cold and damp to keep prisoners in. Ironically, one of these cells is now the boiler room for the central heating system and is used for drying out bathing costumes and towel.

COURTHOUSE AND JAIL

The reputation of the Castle for hospitality did not end with it becoming a Jail. In 1818 the Jailor complained “that visitors on the Prisoners have at

present access to the Jail at all times of the day and night and use it as if it were a public house". The Council then fixed regular visiting hours and banned the importation of and "Vinous, Malt or Spiritous liquors" into the Jail without permission.

A medical report on the prison rooms in the Tower in 1818 described them as "commodious and neatly furnished, well lighted by three windows in each room and sufficiently aired, and are indeed the most salubrious prison room we ever had occasion to see". Furnishings for the prison were: 20 pairs of blankets; 2 stones of straw for each bed, to be changed every month; 6 chamber pots of pewter; two carron fenders and a set of fire irons; a mop and brush; also a strait jacket.

The courtroom in the Castle was the lofty square room in the Tower that is currently the Magistrate's Bar. The bench ran across the northeast corner. The two rooms above it in the Tower were allocated as debtors' cells, while the dungeons below were for criminals. This spacious state did not last long. When the dungeons were condemned the criminals were moved to the top of the Tower, into the attic. At the same time there was a steady influx of new prisoners through the enforcement of the Excise Laws that prohibited the use of private stills for making alcohol, particularly whisky. Nearly every croft in the Highlands was affected. The unpopular laws struck at the heart of a way of life that it was difficult to stop. More and more rebellious offenders found their way to jail, which soon became overcrowded.

During 1828, of 80 persons in prison, 63 were male, 17 female and 34 of the total were Excise offenders. Apart from the liquor offenders, there were a total number of debtors who caused considerable trouble since their creditors were supposed to be responsible for their maintenance in prison. The Magistrates were frequently petitioned by imprisoned debtors to be set free owing to their lack of maintenance and decline in health.

The two upper floors of the Tower, which contain bedrooms, were each sub-divided by wooden partitions into day and night rooms for the prisoners. The attic room was for criminals. However, it became necessary to use both the day and night rooms for female prisoners and confine the men to the night rooms. Even so, there was trouble in 1828 when a complaint on overcrowding put to the Magistrates revealed that a female prisoner, Mary Ross, was being kept in a room with five men. On investigation it was found that there was one female prisoner with eleven men. Furthermore, one of the men, a civil debtor, was threatening to sue

the Magistrates for damages as he was being classed with criminals. He got out of this undignified situation eventually by escaping.

One of the complaints against the former Jail was that it was not secure. The Castle seems to have been a little better. In 1817 the Council ordered the open turrets in the attic room to be shut up, one to be made into a fireplace, another into a closet and the third closed. Also the two upper prison rooms had to be lined with sheet iron and strongly padlocked. In 1828 after further escapes there was one more criticism of the security, particularly the lack of stanchions on the Courtroom windows. Apparently nothing was done, for subsequently a prisoner charged with cattle stealing escaped. The Jailors were dismissed and a watchman was appointed to be outside the prison from sunset to 5'o'clock in the morning. He was provided with a rattle to give the alarm if necessary. Security improved after this and an escape attempt by Hugh MacLeod, the notorious Assynt murderer, was foiled.

MacLeod was accused of a brutal robbery and murder. There is a story that while in prison in Dornoch Castle awaiting trial he had a dream in which he saw his father digging a grave in the churchyard. He heard his father say to him that this was his grave but he would not need it for a year, by which time he could not escape it. The trial was fixed for September 23, 1830 but owing to the jury being incomplete it was postponed until September 1831; when at Inverness he was sentenced to death and executed.

It would be astonishing if a building with the turbulent history of Dornoch Castle and set in the Highlands of Scotland were "second sight" is accepted by many as a natural fact, did not have some strange legends attached to it.

The Castle seems to have been free from the taint of witchcraft, which had caused concern locally. The witch of Assynt, who flew from Assynt on her broomstick and alighted on the Cathedral Tower in the early 17th Century, left the Castle strictly alone. Fortunately too, the Castle was unconnected with the last public burning in Scotland of a witch. She was a hapless old woman, Janet Horne, who was charged in 1722 with transforming her daughter into a pony to ride to the witches' meeting place, and having her shod by the Devil. She was paraded through the streets past the Castle and burned in a barrel of tar some hundred yards away near the sea.

But the Castle does seem to have had a quite harmless ghost. It was that of an unhappy sheep stealer once imprisoned in the dungeons below. He was reputedly seen by the Minister of Avoch of the Black Isle towards the end of the last Century.

After the Castle ceased to be a Jail, it was the Sheriff's residence for a time. Miss Marion Mackenzie, daughter of Sheriff Mackenzie who was Sheriff – Substitute of Sutherland for over 50 years until he retired in 1912, who lived in the Castle for 17 years, tells how both her mother and her uncle, the Minister, saw the ghost. He was described as having a weird face, long grey hair, a blue coat with two brass buttons, knee breeches, thick grey stockings, buckled shoes and a Balmoral bonnet. He was sitting in the Sheriff's study when Mrs Mackenzie came in from the garden to get some honeycomb for tea. She ran out to tell the family. When she came back the ghost was gone.

Shortly afterwards her mother's brother, the Minister of Avoch, came to stay but left hurriedly the next day. They heard later that he had awoken during the night and had seen the same figure standing by his bed. He told it that if it did not go away he would call the Sheriff. It disappeared. The Sheriff checked through the prison records and identified the ghost as that of a Covenanter, Andrew McCornish, who had been hanged for sheep stealing. The Sheriff did nothing about the ghost but when the Castle passed into private hands in 1922 the new owner took the precaution of having the Castle exorcised, since then there have been no more apparitions as such, but people do report a feeling of discomfiture in a section of the tower and 'lights' have been seen by at least one person.

When some old pipes were being dug up in the Castle area near where the hanging is supposed to have taken place, some bones were found, believed to be those of a Covenanter. Also found were some pieces of Church Place, which are now in Edinburgh.

Tradition has it that during the troubles of the Reformation the Cathedral Clergy hid the valuables of the Church, including a plate of pure gold, in a secret underground passage. From this has grown the legend that when the golden place and the Church treasure is found, the end will be at hand for the present house of Sutherland. No serious effort has been made to find this treasure, if indeed it exists, so the future of the Sutherland line seems safe from this threat at least.

Whatever the outcome, the Castle is now attached neither to the Church nor the Sutherlands, though the present owner has to pay a nominal fief to the Earl.

CASTLE HOTEL

When the building passed into private hands in 1922 it was considerably modernised. Further extensive work was carried out after it became a hotel in 1947. Great care has been taken, however, to maintain the character of the Castle as a stately, historic and comfortable residence.

This work continues now with the new owners who took over in June of 2000. They have gone some way to restore some of the former glory to this magnificent and fascinating historic building.

A new restaurant and bar have been completed and all bedrooms have been tastefully refurbished. The Castle is again a focal point of Dornoch and its environs.