

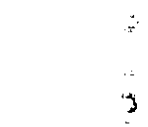
The ruins of Skelbo Castle occupy a commanding position overlooking Loch Fleet. Dr Simpson, Aberdeen, who carefully explored the ruins, describes the site as "a fine example of an early Norman fortress of the mount-and-bailey type." The more ancient ruins are those of a square keep, of which only a section of the north wall now remains. It is of two storeys, neither of which is vaulted. Outside the wall an annexe had been built, to which access, according to Dr Simpson, was "obtained apparently by a door stepped through from the basement, and by another door opening from the annexe into a mural garderobe on the first floor of the keep." A curtain wall descends from the keep eastward to what seems to have been the gatehouse at the south-east corner of the courtyard, where there are traces of a round tower. The west curtain extends beyond the keep, and "has had a building against it with a postern (afterwards built up) in the shoulder." At the south-west corner of the courtyard stands the ruin of a plain oblong building of two storeys, dating from the 17th century, which Dr Simpson describes as "a dignified example of the latest development of Scottish baronial architecture, when the castellated features, such as corbelled turrets, were being dropped."

Dr Simpson, who is an acknowledged authority on medieval architecture, gives his verdict as to the age of the older ruins in the following passage from his article on "Skelbo Castle" in *Scottish Notes and Queries* of October, 1924:—"The original masonry

of the castle shows a very marked character, and bears evidence of considerable antiquity. It is strongly built of horizontal slabs low in the course, with wide joints infilled by rough mortar in which shells have been freely used. Occasionally it is varied by large boulders. As to the date of this original stonework it is hard to form an opinion, owing to the absence of mouldings or other distinctive detail. The type of castle, with its keep-tower and barmkin wall, is one that came into use during the 14th century, after the War of Independence. The simplicity of the design, the scarcity of mural chambers, and the character of the masonry might well betoken this century. On the other hand, the walls are thinner than usual in castles of that date; but this might be accounted for by the uncommon strength and inaccessibility of the site, the walls being everywhere built along steep banks that rendered mining or battering operations impossible. The lack of vaulting in the keep is paralleled by other 14th century castles in the north, such as Forse, Braal and Oldwick. From the absence of bonding between the curtain walls and the keep, and the fact that the lean-to structure against the west wall, though abutting on the keep, is built with a thick gable of its own, it may be conjectured that the curtain walls were the first to be built, while the mount still retained its timber superstructure, and that the latter was replaced by the stone tower. This was quite a usual mode of procedure. A large section of the north curtain has been rebuilt in masonry of a quite different aspect,

exhibiting the rubble-work with frequent small pinnings, usual in 16th-17th century work in the north. The same kind of stone-work appears in the house on the west side.”

The first mention of Skelbo occurs in a charter by which Hugo Freskyn, c. 1211, granted his lands of Skelbo to his kinsman, Gilbert de Moravia, Archdeacon of Moray, who, twelve years after, became Bishop of Caithness, and in 1235 made over Skelbo to his brother. Sir Richard de Moravia was in residence at Skelbo when, c. 1245, the Thane of Sutherland assigned to him the task of holding in check the Norsemen, who had landed at Unes. This he nobly did, but in the ensuing battle of Embo he was slain. The castle from which he went forth to fight the Vikings would have been constructed of earth and timber. On Sunday, October 1, 1290, the English and Scottish Commissioners appointed to meet the Maid of Norway held a conference in Skelbo Castle, and there they received the sad tidings of her death on the voyage from Norway to Orkney. In 1330 Kenneth, Earl of Sutherland, granted to Reginald, son and heir of the deceased Alan Moray of Culbryn, whose son Gilbert married Eustachia, eldest daughter of the Earl, certain lands declared by Sir Robert Gordon to have been those of Skelbo. Before the end of the 15th century it passed into the hands of the Kynnard family through the marriage, about 1440, of Thomas Kynnard to Egidia, daughter and heiress of Walter Moray of Culbin and Skelbo, and was held in succession by Alane, John and Thomas of Kynnard.



In 1494 the Lords of Council found that John, Earl of Sutherland, had wrongly taken and withheld the castle and place of Skelbo, and also two children of John of Moray, and ordered him to deliver the castle to Thomas Kynnard of that ilk, to be held by him according to his charter and seisin which he had produced before the Lords. They also ordained that he should immediately liberate the children, and should pay to Thomas Kynnard one hundred merks Scots for his “dampning and scathis” (*Acta Dom. Council*). That same year William Keith appeared before the Lords Auditors as procurator for Marjory Morat, widow of the deceased John of Kynnard, demanding redress for the injury done her by Thomas of Kynnard in “falsing the charters and letters made to her of the castell and place of Skelbow, and occupying and labouring the demesne lands of the same for that year, and for withholding the dues.” Thomas Kynnard alleged that the charter and seisin of conjunct infirmment of the said castle and lands made to John Kynnard and Marjory by the deceased Alane Kynnard of that ilk, dated 15th January, 1486, were false, and sealed after Alane’s decease (*Acta Dom. Aud.*). In 1518 Andrew Kynnard took seisin of the lands and castle of Skelbo “at the top of the stair ascending to the tower of the castle,” and in 1525 John Kynnard, son of the deceased Andrew, took seisin of the same castle and lands in the hall of the castle.

In 1529 John Kynnard sold the castle and lands to William Sutherland of Duffus, whose baillie, John Murray of Campbussy, received a black ox with grey

born as evidence of the sasine. In 1545 Master John Sutherland is designated "Captain of Skelbo," in the Register of Moray. Alexander Sutherland was a minor at his succession in 1549, and received a charter of all his lands from Queen Mary in 1563, after the Earl of Sutherland's forfeiture of his estates for treason. His younger brother, William Sutherland of Evelix, was prominent in the burning of Dornoch in 1570, and he it was who desecrated the relics of St. Gilbert. Alexander married Janet, daughter of James Grant of Freuchie, and their eldest son, Alexander, succeeded his father while he was still in nonage. The protocol book of William Gray contains the record of a transaction which took place in 1564 in Alexander Sutherland's "chalmers within the castell of Skelbo." He married Lady Elizabeth Sinclair, daughter of the Earl of Caithness, and, dying without issue, he was succeeded, before 1579, by his brother William, who married a younger daughter of the Earl of Caithness. Their marriages were arranged in terms of an agreement between their father and the Earl of Caithness.

On Sunday, June 10th, 1621, Skelbo Castle was invested by the Gordons of Embo and their supporters, who gathered in force to avenge the wounding of young Embo by the Sutherlands of Duffus in a dispute about the marches of Coul and Skelbo. In 1627 Alexander Sutherland, then a boy about five years of age, was served heir to his father, and during his minority was under the care of his uncle James, who was appointed his guardian. He married Lady

Jean Mackenzie, daughter of the Earl of Seaforth, who died in 1648. He was the first Lord Duffus, having been created a peer by Charles II in 1651. When General Middleton landed at Little Ferry in February, 1654, he stored a large supply of arms and ammunition in Skelbo Castle. Alexander died on 31st August, 1674, and was succeeded by his son James, who became a member of the Privy Council in 1686. He had to take refuge in England for the slaying of the Laird of Kindceace, and his estates becoming burdened with debt, he sold them to his second son, James, who was an advocate. He married his cousin—the oldest daughter of Seaforth—in 1674, and died in 1705. Kenneth, third Lord Duffus, succeeded his father. He was a naval officer, and was in the West Indies when his father died. He took part in the rebellion of 1715 and was forfeited. After his surrender he was committed to the Tower of London, but he was liberated in 1717. Thereafter he entered the Russian naval service. He died about 1734. Skelbo Castle was occupied on March 20th, 1746, by the Jacobite troops under the command of the Earl of Cromartie, who made it his headquarters for a time. At his father's death, Eric Sutherland claimed the title, but his claim was rejected by the House of Lords. His wife, Lady Elizabeth Duffus, in 1747 had under her care, at Skelbo, Betty, daughter of the 16th Earl of Sutherland, whose wife died when he was at Bath. A letter has been preserved at Dunrobin in which Lady Duffus gives the Earl news regarding his motherless daughter. He died at

Skelbo in 1768, and was succeeded by his son James, who had just attained his majority. Pennant, who visited the neighbourhood in 1769, says that Skelbo Castle "passed through several hands until at last it came to Lord Duffus's, and now returns to the family of Sutherland. It was a great pile of building surrounded with a rampart. The present house is still habitable. The situation is most beautiful, and a fine house there would have a noble effect." The title was restored in his favour by Act of Parliament in 1826, and in the following year he died. As he had disposed of the lands and barony of Skelbo in 1757 to the Countess of Sutherland, the long connection of the Duffus family with Skelbo ceased with him.

The founder of that family was Nicolas Sutherland, to whom in 1360 his brother, William, Earl of Sutherland, granted the lands of Torboll. He married a daughter of Reginald de Cheyne and May, Lady Duffus, who brought to him her portion of the lordship of Duffus. He gave his son Henry a charter of Torboll in 1408, which was confirmed by Robert, sixth Earl of Sutherland. Alexander Sutherland was confirmed in the lands of Torboll by John, seventh Earl of Sutherland, on 12th July, 1444, and he died before 1487. His third son, Angus, succeeded him, and in 1472 his son Nicholas was given a charter of the lands of Torboll upon the resignation by his father of these lands to the Earl of Sutherland in Dornoch Cathedral. Nicholas died without issue, and was succeeded by his brother, Hugh Sutherland of Pronsy and Torboll, who was infert in Torboll in 1492. He

died before 1525 without male issue, and his daughter Christina was inferted as heir; but the lands of Torboll were granted by the Earl of Sutherland to William Sutherland of Duffus as the next heir male. It was he who acquired Skelbo in 1529 from John Kynnard.