

HIGHLAND REGIONAL COUNCIL



FIELD MONUMENTS

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS RECORD

4 DISTRICT SUTHERLAND		5 PARISH DORNOCH		1 SITE CODE H N H 7 9 N E 0 2 0	
7 AREA STATUS		8 SITE STATUS		2 NGR N H 7 9 2 0 9 5 1 8	
11 CONCORDANCE os NH 79 NE 20		12 FORM STANDING STRUCTURE		3 QUAL CE	
16 RELATIONSHIP OF ELEMENTS TOWER HOUSE ON SITE OF EARLIER MOTTE AND BAILEY		17 CONDITION INCOMPLETE		6 SITE NAME S K E L B O C A S T L E	
20 LAND USE ENCLOSED = LAND BUILT UPON		21 GEOLOGY		10 GENERIC TYPE CASTLE (MOTTE AND BAILEY + TOWER HOUSE)	
22 SOILS		23 VEGETATION		14 PERIOD/DATE 14th=17th CENT	
24 HYDROLOGY/DRAINAGE		25 RELIEF KNOLL AT END OF RIDGE		15 DATING METHOD AD TYP	
28 EXCAVATION (EXCAVATOR: DATE: EXTENT: QUALITY)		26 ASPECT 360°		18 SHAPE	
29 BIBLIOGRAPHY (AUTHOR: DATE: TITLE: JOURNAL OR PUBLISHER: VOLUME: DETAIL)		27 ALTITUDE 23 = 30m OD		19 THREAT AND DATE	
30 GROUND PLAN NO.		31 GROUND PHOTO NO.			
32 SLIDES NO.		33 HR. AP. NO.			
34 NMR. AP. NO.		35 OTHER AP. NO.: SOURCE			
36 ARCHIVE AND LOCATION		37 GEOPHYSICAL SURVEY		38 SAMPLES	
39 PALYNOLOGY		40 NUMERICAL DATES: RANGE: LAB NO.			
41 SMALL FINDS		42 MUSEUM/LOCATION			
43 OTHER		44 NAME & ADDRESS OF OWNER		45 ATTITUDE OF OWNER	
46 NAME & ADDRESS OF TENANT		47 ATTITUDE OF TENANT			
48 ACCESS & RESTRICTIONS FROM CARPARK AT NH 7925 9537 THROUGH FIELD. ACCESS VIA SW CORNER OF ENCLOSED AREA		49 NAME & ADDRESS OF FINDER/RECORDER: DATE AM: 4.6.1985		50 CHECK: DATE AM: 10.6.1985	
52 TEXT "See over for text."					

Can We afford to lose Such History?

THE gaunt and battered remains of the ancient and powerful stronghold of the Sutherlands, Lords of Duffus, stand on a defensive rocky site above the South shore of the tidal Loch Fleet, four miles North of Dornoch.

There is, however, an early 17th Century house still standing within the broken curtain walling of the old castle, and although one of its gable ends is now in an almost total state of collapse and would require very careful rebuilding, the proprietor does not exclude the possibility of restoration.

Dating from so much later than the rest of the castle — which may be of the 14th Century — and on a lower level of the uneven site, this building was seen to have been a

by Nigel Tranter

more or less new construction, erected against the old curtain wall, rather than merely a wing added or altered. It is a lengthy oblong block of two storeys and a garret lying approximately North and South, and containing a range of vaulted cellars in the basement.

The first floor now contains only the one large chamber, though it probably was subdivided originally, and the garret floor above has gone.

There are signs that there may have been further buildings to the South. The masonry is of rough red sandstone rubble.

The building has obviously been greatly altered and adapted at various periods, most of the win-



Skelbo House and Castle from the West, showing the extent of repair required to the South gable and roof. The castle ruins are to the left, overlooking Loch Fleet.

dows having been enlarged or built up with new doorways opened. But certain original features remain. The arch doorway towards the North end still retains its slot for a massive door-bar. A relieving arch surmounts the windows to the South, and a small loop-hole window survives between the doors at the South end. The walling is topped by an eaves course and both skewputts bear interesting carved masks.

Internally, little of interest

remains, but there has been a large arched fireplace in the North gable, presumably the kitchen.

The Sutherlands of Skelbo were a branch of the same family as the Earls of Sutherland, who likewise sprang from the famous Freskin de Moravia, founder of the Moray or Murray family. They seem to have gravitated north from Moray at an early date, no doubt marrying heiresses.

The Skelbo line, however, in due course went back, or at least re-established contact with Moray, for they inherited the great Lordship of Duffus in the 14th Century.

They seemed to have continued to make Skelbo their main domicile however — and a turbulent line they were. William Sutherland, the Lord of Duffus, was killed by Clan Gunn at Thurso in 1530 in a squabble over the Bishopric of Caithness, and his son and heir was thrown into prison by the Privy Council for the seal of his reprisals.

His son, Alexander, attacked and sacked the nearby town of Dornoch in 1567 and again in 1570. Oddly enough, we read that the next year, having put to death certain hostages held as sureties who had surrendered to his ally the Earl of Caithness, he became overcome with remorse and pined away to his grave.

The Laird who succeeded in 1616 was rash enough to carry off the teind-sheaves already paid to the young Earl of Sutherland, depositing them in his own barns at Skelbo until forced by the Sheriff to disgorge.

The part of the castle with which we are concerned seems to have been built by the son of this Laird, created a peer by Charles I.

The first castle on the mound

would have been mainly constructed of timber, surrounded by a wooden palisade.

According to Bentinck's "Dornoch Cathedral and Parish" (1926), on Sunday, October 1, 1290, the English and Scottish Commissioners appointed to meet the Maid of Norway held a conference at Skelbo Castle and it was there that they received the sad tidings of her death on the voyage from Norway to Orkney, which changed the course of Scottish history.

From then on Skelbo is documented in great detail, particularly in Bentinck's book in the chapter on "Old Houses and Families."

Another great authority on Scottish castles, Dr Douglas Simpson, in his article on Skelbo Castle published in "Scottish Notes and Queries," October 1924, describes the construction and this is echoed in far greater detail in the survey carried out by the Royal Commission for the Recording of the Ancient and Historic Monuments (of Scotland) in the Autumn of 1982, as they considered Skelbo to be an important historical site and worthy of detailed recording.

In "The Middle Ages in the Highlands," published by the Inverness Field Club in 1981, John Dunbar describes Skelbo in his paper on "Highland Architecture" as "the principal surviving structure in Ross, Sutherland and Caithness, that can be ascribed with any degree of confidence to that period" as being Skelbo — "whether any portion of the cur-

tain walling is 13th Century is uncertain, but the stone keep or hall that crowns the summit may well belong to the period of the Wars of Independence."

It is clearly a site of the greatest historical importance to the whole area, matched but not surpassed by Ardvreck Castle with its associated ruined mansion house of Calda on Loch Assynt.

These are both B Listed buildings, despite their state, therefore subject to some degree of protection, which Skelbo at this moment lacks. Even though the mansion house within the walls is listed, the whole site is not scheduled as an Ancient Monument with which its setting and construction deserve.

In Lochinver, there is talk of an interpretive centre for the "Campaigns of Montrose" situated by the roadside between Calda and the castle, where he was taken after capture and from whence he began the long ride to the scaffold in Edinburgh.

This thought deserves real consideration because Ardvreck is also an important and visible part of Sutherland's past.

It would be pleasant to hope that out of the present discussions might arise solutions to the problems posed by both these deeply interesting ruins.

In today's climate of interpretation for tourism, with grant aid from various bodies for important restorations and the emphasis on the interpretation of our past by audio-visual displays, such a hope is not impossible.



Very recent storm damage to the south gable of Skelbo House has put the entire structure in danger.

NIGEL TRANTER is the distinguished author of "The Fortified House in Scotland" (5 Vols) 1962-71 as well as a mass of books about Scottish history, genealogy and topography in the past 45 years.

(6). N. TRANTER.

"The gaunt and battered remains of the ancient and powerful stronghold of the Sutherlands, Lords of Duffus, stands on a defensive rocky site above the south shore of the tidal Loch Fleet, four miles south of Dornoch. There is however an early 17th C. house still standing within the broken curtain-walling of the old castle, and although this is in a bad state of repair, the proprietor is at least considering restoration.

"Dating from so much later than the rest of the castle - which may be of the 14th C. - and on a lower level of the uneven site, this building would seem to have been a more or less new construction, erected against the old curtain wall, rather than merely a wing altered or added. It is a lengthy oblong block of two storeys and a garret, lying approximately N-S containing a range of vaulted cellars in the basement. The first floor now contains only one large chamber, though it probably was subdivided originally and the garret floor above has gone. There are signs that there may have been further building to the south. The masonry is a rough red sandstone rubble.

"The building has obviously been greatly altered and adapted at various periods, most of the windows having been enlarged or built up, with new doorways opened, but certain original features remain. The arched doorway towards the north end still retains its slot for a massive door bar. A relieving arch surmounts the window immediately to the south and a small loophole window survives between the door at the south end. The walling is topped by an eaves course, and the north eastern skewputt is decorated by a carved mask. Internally, little of interest remains, but there has been a large arched fireplace in the north gable, presumably the kitchen."

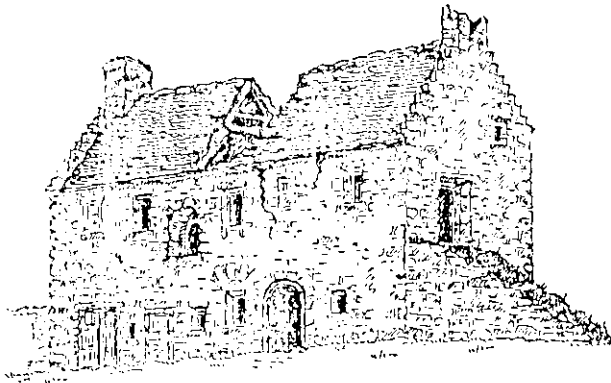
The ruins of Skelbo Castle occupy a commanding position overlooking Loch Fleet. Dr Simpson, Aberdeen, who carefully explored the ruins, describes the site as "a fine example of an early Norman fortress of the mount-and-bailey type." The more ancient ruins are those of a square keep, of which only a section 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 slapped 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."

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Bid to save Skelbo Castle from total ruin

A LAST-DITCH effort is being made to save the historic castle of Skelbo in East Sutherland from total collapse.

The castle — a one-time seat of the Earls of Sutherland — is now a virtual ruin with the walls that remain being constantly undermined by the weather and the attentions of grazing sheep.

Restoration of the castle, which overlooks Loch Fleet on the Moray Firth, would now be a massive undertaking.

But some hope has been given after a meeting this week between Skelbo Trust, the Clan Sutherland Society and a number of local and national preservation bodies.

Official historian for the society Mr Daniel Sutherland said yesterday that discussions had centred on three possible options to save the castle.

A basic preservation scheme would make it safe and prevent the risk of further collapse.

This would include repairing the damage caused a year ago when a sudden collapse of several walls resulted in the castle being officially designated as a public danger.

A more elaborate scheme would in addition provide future visitors with some perspective about the historical importance of the coastal castle.

A third scheme — by far the most expensive option — would involve reconstruction work restoring the castle to a habitable condition by building around the present ruins and reroofing it.

The meeting was chaired by Mr Michael Alexander of Skelbo Trust, who own the castle.

(NH 7920 9518) Skelbo Castle (NR) (Ruins)

(1)

The ruin of Skelbo Castle has occupied the NW corner of a walled enclosure, and has been a rectangular structure measuring internally 43 ft from E to W by 29 ft 6 ins transversely with walls 4 ft 9 ins thick. The wall of the enclosure, which is 4 ft 6 ins thick, in great measure remains standing. Abutting the SW end of the castle has been a range of buildings, now completely ruined.

(2)

The site is a fine example of an early Norman fortress of the motte and bailey type. The older ruins are those of a keep and barmkin probably of 14th century date although a large section of the N curtain wall has been rebuilt with characteristic 16th - 17th century work, which type of masonry also appears in the 17th century ruin which stands in the SW corner of the courtyard (3). This ruin was repaired and slated in 1809 and used as a dwelling-house for some time (5).

Generally as described above, the castle stands at the N corner and highest part of a triangular walled enclosure within which, to the SE of the castle, are three scarps ranging from 0.5 m to 2.5 m in height. The range of buildings to the SW appears to have measured some 17.0 m by 9.0 m. Apart from a fragment of standing wall on the W, it has been reduced to a rubble bank 0.5 m high.

The building in the SW corner of the enclosure still stands two storeys high and is about two-thirds roofed. Some older local inhabitants recall it being in a habitable condition, and believe it to have served as a distillery.

Footings of another building, 9.0 m by 5.0 m and 0.5 m high, adjoin the S wall of the enclosure. Fragments of walling are exposed in several other places and a great deal of rubble is strewn over the whole site.

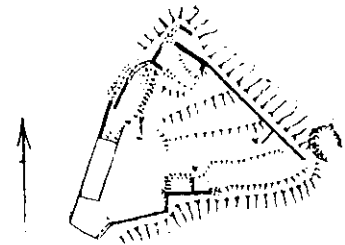
Access has been from the SW corner of the enclosed area. See Illustration Card. (OSFI:RDL:4.4.1964)

This castle was the seat of the Sutherlands of Skelbo, prior to their inheriting the Lordship of Duffus in the 14th century. Even after this inheritance it seems to have continued as their main domicile.

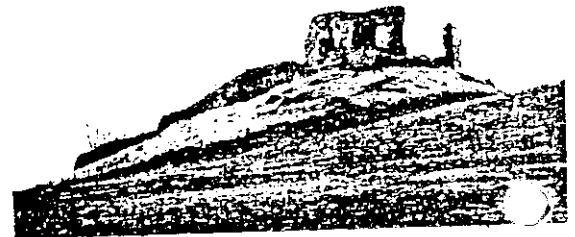
No change to the previous field report. (OSFI:JB:27.5.1981)

Published survey (1:10,000) revised.

SKETCH 1/2500



from NE:



from W:



from NW:

(6)



