



Lonely Lochindorb - former stronghold in mediaeval power struggles

Regional Council proposes jetty and boat trips

The ancient stronghold of Lochindorb could be invaded once again, this time by tourists, if a planning application by the Highland Region and now before the Secretary of State for decision, is successful. The application by the Region's Department of Libraries and Leisure services is to make a car park and provide a jetty for controlled access to Lochindorb Castle, a Scheduled Ancient Monument which stands isolated on its little island in the Loch. However wildlife enthusiasts have objected to the proposal on the grounds that it will disturb the area's considerable bird population.

The region is proposing to widen an old "borrow pit" on the eastern shore of Lochindorb and turn it into a park for 12 cars. Trees would be planted to screen the new car park. A jetty, 25 metres long, would be built out into the loch, consisting of stone-filled gabion baskets. The intention is that this would be the basis of a future boat service between the car park and Lochindorb Castle.

OBJECTIONS

However when the proposals were published they drew objections from local wildlife enthusiasts who maintain that nesting birds would be disturbed. C. Taylor of Darnaway objected on the grounds that the proposal would increase visitors to Lochindorb, reducing its amenity value to those who use the area for fishing, birdwatching, walking and general passive recreation. He was particularly concerned about the risk to nesting birds.

Three other objections followed a similar line.

The Region consulted the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds who said that there was extensive ornithological interest in Lochindorb which supports a range of breeding birds, notably water-birds and waders.

The RSPB suggested that disturbance to breeding birds on the island could be reduced by restricting access to only part of the island and by not circling it in the boat. Regular trips could disturb the birds but this could be reduced by using the same route and not using outboard motors. The jetty appeared excessively long but

this was unlikely to affect the birds. They felt the car park would actually reduce disturbance by reducing parking on the lake shore.

FORMER CHAIRMAN

Regional Councillor Nigel Graham who supported the proposal said that to claim that the new jetty and car park would destroy the peaceful environment was untrue. "There are many lochans nearby which have just as interesting a bird population as Lochindorb," the councillor told *The Nairnshire Telegraph*. He is a former chairman of the Scottish Committee of the RSPB.

Objections to the proposal have caused the Libraries and Leisure Services Department to admit that ornithological interest in Lochindorb was greater than had been believed. They said they would take on board the RSPB's comments on public access to the island and the level of operation in any boat service which might be operated.

The jetty length had been calculated to allow a small boat to operate with an outboard motor but they would make efforts to reduce its length.

But they claimed that the car park with adequate advance signposting would reduce what they term "wild" car-parking in the area. Interpretative information would be provided at the car park and this would include the value of the loch for birdlife.

At their meeting of September 14 the Planning Committee of the Highland Region

had before them an appraisal of the project by Richard Cameron, head of planning at the Region.

EROSION

He said that there was now considerable indiscriminate carparking on the shores of Lochindorb and this was causing erosion. Cars were also parking in the passing places on the single track road causing a hazard to other road users. Work was going ahead to make Lochindorb Castle safe for public access. It was part of the public heritage and it was only right that visitors should have access to the castle. But Mr Cameron stressed that this should be in a controlled manner. Through the lease for the park and jetty the Regional Council would have the power to regulate the boat service.

Mr Cameron believed that that the proposal would result in visibility improvements to the public road and the provision of a new passing place. It would provide an opportunity to reduce parking in unauthorised places on the shore of the loch with consequent benefits to breeding waders. He suggested that tree-planting should be reinforced along the northern boundary of the site to ensure that the first view of the loch when travelling south is not affected by the car park.

He recommended approval which was accepted by the planning committee but because of the outstanding objections to the scheme the application has had to be referred to the Secretary of State. A decision is expected next month.

THE WOLF'S LAIR

The lonely castle of Lochindorb is a ruin now, situated in a moorland bowl on the edge of the Grampians. But in its heyday it was a power centre, a strategic base which played a key role in the struggle for the control of Moray and indeed the entire North of Scotland between the Earls and princelings of the north who rivalled and often defied the Kings of Scotland.

The area around was farmed in pre-historic times and the island was possibly occupied by a lake village. Although it is isolated now, Lochindorb was on the ancient routes between the Highlands and the South. Northern Badenoch was part of Moray and its Celtic thanes allied with the successors to Macbeth. The fringes of Badenoch are dotted with numerous mottes (castle mounds) which indicate numerous attempts to control Moray as a whole and prevent access to the Highlands.

Lochindorb was probably a stronghold of the last Celtic thane of Badenoch, Gillespie Mascourlane. He was followed by the Norman Comyns.

In the Wars of Independence the Comyns sided with John Balliol and Edward I of England used Lochindorb as a base in the late summer and autumn of 1303. He re-fortified the castle and like much later visitors enjoyed the hunting in the surrounding hills for about a month. Twenty-six cattle, 26 sheep and 40 pigs were sent from Nairn as supplies for the English king.

The Badenoch Comyns were succeeded by the Atholl Comyns. The widowed Countess of Athole occupied Lochindorb when it was under siege by Sir Andrew Moray. The siege was lifted by Edward III.

Then came the infamous Wolf of Badenoch, Earl of Badenoch and Buchan and fourth son of Robert II of Scotland. He was lord of most of the land north of Perth, bits of Fife and Galloway and through his wife, the Earl's daughter, he was related to the Macdonald Lords of the Isles.

This local prince became embroiled in an argument with the Bishop of Moray not long after he came to Lochindorb. The Wolf held court amidst standing stones at Kingussie and he demanded the rich lands of the Bishop of Moray. The Bishop demurred and the Wolf backed down. But later the Bishop threatened the Wolf with church censure in the matter of a marital dispute. The Wolf had taken a mistress (she bore all his children) which offended church authority. In retaliation he seized all the Church land in Badenoch for which the Bishop excommunicated him. Then the Wolf burned Forres and a month later burned Elgin Cathedral, an act of desecration which he later repented. The Wolf is buried in Dunkeld Cathedral.

A son by his illicit union became the Earl of Mar in 1411 and he gained control of the north after the Battle of Harlaw.

Eventually the Douglas family came to control Moray. With the MacDonnalds who were the Earls of Ross and the Earl of Crawford they rebelled against James II. Archibald Douglas, Earl of Moray, fortified Darnaway and Lochindorb. But the rebellious northerners were routed at the Battle of Arkinholm in 1455. The Earldoms of Moray and Ross were forfeited to the Crown and the Laird of Strathnairn was defeated by Huntly. Around 1476/1477 acting on the orders of the King, William, Lord Cawdor dismantled the gates of Lochindorb, destroyed the hall and the tower, leaving this mountain fastness in much the condition it is to be found today. A new succession of feudal power had swept in and names familiar today such as Cawdor and Rose came to local prominence.

The ruined castle occupies most of the island. It forms a quadrangle and had a tower at each corner. In complete form it would have had a donjon or tower and a "great" hall with a guard room. Although the castle is substantially early to mid 14th century it probably owes much to an earlier construction. It was typical of a mediaeval Scottish castle before the later fortified houses of Cawdor and Kilravock.