

# A Highland château

*Dunrobin Castle, Sutherland, part I*

In the first of two articles, Mary Miers considers how the medieval tower house of the Earls of Sutherland became a magnificent ducal palace

Photographs by Simon Jauncey



**T**HE fairytale vision of Dunrobin Castle (**Fig 1**) mirrors the story of the Leveson-Gowers, whose ascendancy in the late 18th century brought fantastic riches and a territorial empire combining virtually the entire county of Sutherland with more than 30,000 acres of England. Fused to a plug of rock that elevates it dramatically above the Moray Firth, this incongruous Highland *château*, with its spired tourelles and formal parterres, is, without doubt, the most magnificent building in northern Scotland. It is an emotive symbol, too, both of the unbridled wealth of one of Victorian Britain's richest dynasties, and of the thorny issue of Highland landownership.

Charles Barry's grandiose scheme of 1845–51 for the 2nd Duke of Sutherland masks the architectural complexity of a building that developed piecemeal from the 13th

century. First mentioned in 1401, the complex centred around a simple, four-storey keep of about 1275, still visible today from internal courtyards. In 1641–4, two harled and crowstepped ranges were added, and the keep acquired its drum stairtower and carved window pediments. We know that it was restored after being 'defast and almost ruined' during the 'late Troubles', in about 1682, and a surviving plan suggests that Alexander McGill was involved in about 1720.

Although the Earls of Sutherland were resident for much of the time in Edinburgh, they nurtured here one of Scotland's earliest known gardens, remarkable for its northerly location. In 1628, Sir Robert Gordon described Dunrobin as a 'house well seated, upon and most hard by the sea, with faire orchards... pleasant gardens planted with all kinds of fruit, herbes, and floures, used

**‘This Highland *château* is the most magnificent building in northern Scotland,’**

in this kingdom, and abundance of good Saphron, Tobacco, and Rosemarie... the fruit here is excellent, and cheiflie the peares and cherries’.

The family's connection with Sutherland dates back to about 1200, when Hugh, Lord of Duffus, scion of one of the ruling families of Moray, acquired large tracts of the region. In about 1235, his son was made the 1st Earl of Sutherland, thereby establishing one of the seven ancient earldoms of Scotland. Over the next six centuries, the family would intermarry with royalty

and spawn tough soldiers and loyal Government supporters, but its influence remained largely localised.

All this was to change spectacularly in the late 18th century, when the inheritance passed (as it had once before) to a daughter. Elizabeth, Countess of Sutherland (1765–1839), was just one when her parents, the 18th Earl and Countess, died of 'putrid fever' in Bath in 1766; her contested inheritance was settled by the House of Lords in 1771. There were rumours that the estates might have to be sold, but, in 1785, she married George Granville Leveson-Gower, heir to one of the greatest fortunes of the Age of Improvement.

This match laid the foundations to the family's ascendancy. She brought with her most of Sutherland—about 750,000 acres of one of Britain's remotest counties; he—already Viscount Trentham and Earl Gower, >

↑ **Fig 1 top: The Victorian addition from the east.** ↑ **Fig 2 above: William Daniell's acquatint, about 1819, showing the 18th-century wing from the south before Barry's remodelling**



↑ Fig 3: The north front, showing the Victorian wing with its entrance through the portecochère. Lorimer's reworking of the tower roofs lessened the visual excitement of the skyline. → Fig 4: The entrance hall, one of the Victorian interiors that survived the fire. The carved and painted heraldry was executed by Alexander Munro in about 1850

who would succeed his father as 2nd Marquess of Stafford in 1803 and become the 1st Duke of Sutherland in 1833 (the year of his death)—was the recipient of the lucrative income of three English estates, the growing profits of the Bridgewater Canal (inherited through his uncle, the Duke of Bridgewater) and share dividends from canal and railway companies, government and private stock.

Descended from Yorkshire squires and baronets (the Gowers) and wealthy Staffordshire wool traders (the Levesons), the Leveson-Gowers had become increasingly rich and powerful in the 18th century as they consolidated their extensive landholdings, invested in England's transport infrastructure and ascended the hierarchy of the peerage.

The liberal-minded George Granville was a progressive agricultural improver and a great art collector, who lavished vast sums on his various houses. They included Lilleshall and Trentham in the Midlands and successive London palaces, where his style of living 'exceeded everything in this country, no one could vie with it' (Lady Beaumont, 1806). A supporter of Catholic emancipation and the Reform Bill, he retired from politics in 1812, to devote himself to 'the improvement of his estates and the patronage of the arts'.

He presides still over the Highland county where he invested so much of his wealth and reputation, his statue by Chantrey, raised up on a monumental plinth, visible from afar on the shoulder of Ben Bhragaidh.

Like several of her successors, Elizabeth

eclipsed her husband. A glittering Society hostess with what Byron called 'princessly' manners, she mixed in a circle that included Pitt, Canning and Scott, assisted a fugitive Marie-Antoinette when her husband was briefly Ambassador in Paris and was the subject of scurrilous gossip.

She visited her Scottish seat for the first time aged 17 and, as a talented watercolourist taught by Girtin, would become a significant early topographical painter of the Highlands. Inspired by William Daniell, she travelled the north coast painting atmospheric panoramas, a series of which were printed as aquatints.

But the reality of Sutherland at this time contrasted starkly with these Romantic views. Economically backward and wary of threats to their ancient culture, many of her tenants eked out a subsistence on unyielding ground in isolated, congested settlements under recurrent threats of famine. And so their landlords embarked on an ambitious series of improvements, channeling vast sums into poor relief and schemes to develop Sutherland's economy.

Rational as well as philanthropic, this capital-intensive programme was masterminded by the family's pragmatic financial administrator and agent James Loch. Between 1812 and his death in 1855, Loch oversaw the development of new fishing villages, harbours, roads and rural industries, further territorial expansion and, most contentiously, the creation of large-scale sheep farms, involving forced evictions and resettlement—the notorious Highland Clearances.

## ‘Dunrobin was transformed into a palace for entertaining during the Highland season’





↑ Fig 5: The north parterre, part of the Barry and Leslie design of about 1850 for the extraordinary microclimate of Dunrobin's gardens

Money continued to be poured into the region by the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Dukes and their wives; yet, despite the substantial benefits it brought, the 19th-century administration of the Sutherland estate was ultimately unremunerative and socially divisive, forever to be associated with the vicissitudes of the Highlands.

Dunrobin Castle itself is the most conspicuous embodiment of the English fortune they lavished in the North. Immediately on marrying, the future 1st Duke and Duchess commissioned a new south wing and had it 'fitted up at considerable expense'; 186 boatloads of freestone were delivered by Golspie fishermen in 1789 and the architect James McLeran was paid large sums.

He recast the courtyard in Classical form, but, for the new wing (Fig 2), echoed the unpretentious Scots manner of the 17th-century ranges. As Gen James Grant of Ballindalloch informed the Countess, Dunrobin was now a 'convenient Lodging for all the Company you are likely to have there without any Pomposity about an antiquated Castle'. Towards the end of her life, the Duchess-Countess, as she was then known, collaborated with

## ‘The gardens are as incongruous a sight in this wild Highland terrain as the castle itself,’

the sculptor Richard Westmacott in adding a castellated service wing to the north-west.

The transformation of Dunrobin into a Victorian palace for entertaining during the Highland season took place at a time when the family's fortune, although still vast, was in decline. The 2nd Duke and Duchess were addicted to building; they had engaged Barry at Trentham Park in Staffordshire and to conclude the lavish works at Stafford House in London, and he would remodel Cliveden for them in 1850–1.

At Dunrobin, his initial proposals could not be fitted onto the site, so the Duke prepared a castellated scheme himself. This, in turn, was abandoned for a design worked up with the Aberdeen architect William

Leslie, with advice from Loch (who was Robert Adam's nephew) and further input from Barry, who is largely credited with the executed design.

Modelled on the Château de Chenonceaux, this building project tripled the castle's size. The new elevations of pale, gleaming ashlar were angled to fit the top of a battered and bastioned granite base, with round towers at their angles to emphasise the vertical thrust (the existing towers were also Frenchified) and a machicolated parapet tying them all together.

The culminating feature, a massive square tower with a *porte-cochère* at its base, had a high pavilion roof in the manner of Viollet-le-Duc, but, regrettably, this lost its French panache when the roofline was altered in 1915 (Fig 3).

Inside the Victorian building (Fig 4), new public rooms on a grand scale were ranged round the first floor of a central stairwell, with a royal suite in a lower linking wing. The complexity of integrating old and new within the constraints of the clifftop site is evident in the number of odd angles, curving corridors and wedge-shaped lobbies.

By 1848, the Duke had spent £41,414 on Dunrobin and further sales of stock were necessary to meet expenses. The extravagance alarmed Loch, who was also critical of Barry: 'Let me beg you to keep your architects in order,' he advised. But, despite repeated calls for savings and retrenchment, the Duke told him: 'You may be sure that I shall be extravagant when I get to Scotland—as I cannot afford *time* to delay paying money for what I wish to have done for me to see.' Eight children and endless socialising were, in part, his justification; there was also the prospect of a royal visit.

In the event, Queen Victoria never made it to Dunrobin with Prince Albert and the suite of rooms that 'had been specially arranged and handsomely furnished by the dear late Duke and Duchess for us both' had to wait until 1872 before she visited. The Queen and Princess Beatrice travelled north to Bonar Bridge, where the 4th Duke, driving his own engine in 'a curious get up', met their train and took them on to Golspie.

In 1902, the castle acquired its own railway halt, with a half-timbered waiting room by L. Bisset. This belongs to a fine surviving ensemble of estate buildings that includes several by the English vernacular revival architect George Devey (Fig 6), who also worked for the 2nd Duke at Trentham, Lilleshall and Cliveden.

In 1915, when the castle was in use as a naval hospital, a fire gutted much of the Victorian building and Sir Robert Lorimer was called in to restore it. Externally, Lorimer's alterations were surprisingly



↑ Fig 6: Tower Lodge, 1865, for the factor William Fowler by the English vernacular revival architect George Devey, who designed a number of buildings on the estate

insensitive to Dunrobin's *château*-like silhouette, but the interiors, to be considered next week, are among his most beautiful.

By the late 19th century, much of the estate was let as separate sporting properties, and the big Sutherland sales of 1912–13 saw many of these sold to their long-term tenants. Reduced further by death duties, its size today is about 100,000 acres.

The present Countess of Sutherland inherited the estate and the ancient Scottish title on the death of her uncle, the 5th Duke, in 1963 (the dukedom went to Lord Ellesmere). Between 1965 and 1972, the castle was run as a boys' school; it opened to the public in 1973. Her son, Lord

Strathnaver, took over running the estate in 1980, and has transformed its economy to one based on tourism, forestry and agricultural tenancies.

He has also done much to restore the formal gardens, finding inspiration on his European travels to enhance Barry and Leslie's original design (Fig 5). Best viewed from the terrace, they are as incongruous a sight in this wild Highland terrain as the castle itself, with its towers and candle-snuffer spires seen from a distance riding above the trees. ↘

*Dunrobin Castle is open from March 29 to October 15 (01408 633177; www.dunrobincastle.co.uk)*



## Dunrobin Museum

In 1878, a summer-house pavilion was converted into a museum. The mastermind of the project was the antiquarian, naturalist and historian local minister, the Rev Dr Joass. Two tiers of galleries groan with a bemusing miscellany of objects, ranging from big-game specimens, zebras, giraffes, elephants, duck-billed platypuses and rattlesnakes to human skulls, Pictish stones, native weapons, Pharaonic relics, coins and seals, African ornaments and musical instruments, Viking, medieval and Indian jewellery, family memorabilia, local crafts, a whale-bone chair and, for sheer oddity, 'a case containing a total of 17 stoats, squirrels, hedgehogs, rats, moles and wild cats with a "piece of roebuck partly eaten by squirrels"'. Threatened with demolition, the museum was restored and rehung in 1980.