

Out of the ashes

*Dunrobin Castle, Sutherland, part II,
Seat of the Countess of Sutherland*

In this second article on the Highland seat of the Sutherland family, Mary Miers considers the outstanding Arts-and-Crafts interiors of the castle

Photographs by Simon Jauncey



HERE can be little doubt that, for all its eight centuries of architectural accretion, Dunrobin's chief glory today is the suite of principal apartments created by Sir Robert Lorimer less than a century ago. These beautiful interiors—among the finest by Scotland's leading Arts-and-Crafts architect—owe their existence to a devastating fire that gutted the larger part of the Victorian wing in 1915. Last week's article charted the evolution of this extraordinary building into the palatial complex we see today; this week's focus is the interior and contents.

An account by Beriah Botfield gives a flavour of the interior as it appeared in 1829, showing how the 1st Duke and Duchess incorporated an antiquarian flavour

into their Georgian remodelling. In his *Journal of a Tour through the Highlands of Scotland*, Botfield describes the first-floor dining room hung with royal (William and Mary) and family portraits, the drawing room above 'a most comfortable and luminous apartment, containing some more family portraits... and several other pictures in indifferent preservation'.

In the study were 'some old swords, steel pistols, Highland targets, and a two-handed room above 'a most comfortable and luminous apartment, containing some more family portraits... and several other pictures in indifferent preservation'.

residence than many a more gorgeous palace'.

Since at least the 18th century, Dunrobin had not been occupied as a sole residence, although, as the seat of the Sutherland family, it continued to be the administrative centre of their vast Scottish estates. During the 19th century, it became a grand shooting lodge—a summer residence where sport and socialising were the principal pursuits. With their passion for building, the 2nd Duke and Duchess transformed Dunrobin into a palace for entertaining during the Highland season.

Their *château*-like addition of 1845–51 (**Fig 1**) provided a new entrance hall leading from a *porte-cochère* on the north-east corner. This survived the 1915 fire, its austere stone walls relieved by an elaborate Jacobean-style chimneypiece and frieze

picked out with carved and painted heraldry by Alexander Munro. So, too, did the arcaded stairhall, also faced with Caen stone, its great stone balustraded staircase carved with strapwork leading up to the principal rooms ranged around it on the first floor.

From the main landing, a triangular lobby and rib-vaulted corridor led to a lower wing containing the royal suite. Queen Victoria, who finally made it to Dunrobin 20 years after its completion, when her hostess was Anne, the 3rd Duchess, her Mistress of Robes, wrote in her journal for September 7, 1872, that her rooms were 'very high; the bedroom is the largest and very handsome, with a beautiful bed with white and gold flowers and doves at each

corner... light blue furniture, and gold and white round the cornice of the ceiling; pale blue and white panels; blue satin spangled with yellow leaves... on the walls; and furniture and carpet to match'.

There was a dressing room and 'pale sea-green satin' sitting room (now part of the drawing room) with light wood furniture, and a boudoir in the turret with a 'small domed ceiling, spangled with golden stars, and the same furniture'.

Little other evidence of the Victorian interiors survives, except for a photograph showing the drawing room cluttered with loose-covered armchairs and potted plants. We know that there was a quantity of marble statuary, for this was taken by the 3rd Duke's controversial second wife, 'Duchess Blair',

↑ **Fig 1: Dunrobin Castle from the east, showing Charles Barry's *château*-like additions of 1845–51**

to Carbisdale Castle, the extravaganza she built in about 1910 to cock a snook at Dunrobin from just across the county border.

When the fire broke out in 1915, Dunrobin was in use as an auxiliary naval hospital. Lorimer's remedial works for the 5th Duke involved rebuilding the roof and damaged outer walls and inserting fireproof concrete floors, but the war caused delays and his reinstatement of the gutted interiors did not commence until 1919. As Christopher Hussey wrote in his book *The Work of Sir Robert Lorimer*, published by COUNTRY LIFE in 1931: 'At Dunrobin of all places a characteristically >



↑ Fig 2: The Green and Gold Room, decorated for the 5th Duchess, with the bed described by Queen Victoria and showing a view through to the dressing room. → Fig 3: Lorimer's dining room, incorporating an Italian 18th-century *grisaille* frieze of Classical scenes

Scottish *décor* was needed, but one that at the same time should be in scale with the stately rooms and in harmony with their magnificent contents.' Lorimer was to achieve this with masterly assurance.

In his commendably impartial and meticulous account of the Sutherland fortune, *The Leviathan of Wealth* (1973), Eric Richards shows how the family's financial circumstances had declined considerably by the 20th century. Yet money was still, relatively speaking, no object and Dunrobin was, for Lorimer, a plum commission. The estimated cost, as he told his architect friend Robin Dods, was 'about 50 thou, and I'm getting 10 per cent on this contract'.

As with Balmanno, the Perthshire tower house he remodelled for a Glaswegian shipping magnate in 1916–21, he had a free run. He was also free from interference by archaeologists as, mercifully, the fire had stopped short of the earlier ranges thanks to the efforts of a chain of sailors, who ran along the roof armed with buckets of water.

The cream of the magnificent portraits that are such a feature of Dunrobin today did not come to the castle until the 20th century. The 2nd Duke (1786–1861), who inherited his father's love of collecting, built up one of the finest private picture collections in Europe and, with his wife, Harriet, transformed Stafford House in London into a palace of art. Their son, George Granville the 3rd Duke (1828–92), began the process of selling off the collection to develop the Sutherland estate, but it was

the 4th Duke (1852–1913) who got rid of the family's English houses and sold off most of their contents.

The main sale at Christies in 1913 raised £18,099; among the paintings sold were the Poussins and Titians from the Orleans collection, now in the National Gallery in London and the National Gallery of Scotland. But the family kept the best portraits and took many of them north, where they formed a key element in Lorimer's designs, notably in the dining room, with its superb works by Romney, Lawrence, Ramsay and Winterhalter.

The other significant feature of the remodelling was the quality of workmanship. Lorimer used his favourite team of craftsmen and collaborated closely with the Edinburgh interior designers Scott Morton & Co. The results include carvings in the manner of Grinling Gibbons, Georgian-style panelling in locally grown timbers, ironwork by Thomas Hadden and some of the finest hand-modelled plasterwork by Lorimer's protégé Sam Wilson.

The billiard room, opening off the landing on the principal floor, was turned into a panellied lounge-hall, its ceiling inspired by the 17th-century Vine Room ceiling at Kellie Castle. For the oak-panellied dining room (Fig 3), Lorimer designed a deep trabeated ceiling with coats of arms in the compartments and vines and local plants rambling along its beams.

Moving clockwise through the interconnecting rooms, the Music Room, as it is now known (originally the library, later the





↑ Fig 4: The drawing room, remodelled and painted white by Lorimer to set off a pair of tapestries depicting the life of Diogenes

billiard room), has overmantel swags carved with books, birds and fruit and a Holyhood-revival ceiling, and the breakfast room (originally the ante-room) another richly modelled plaster ceiling.

But the climax of Lorimer's reconstruction was the 72ft-long saloon that he created by knocking together two unequal-sized drawing rooms (Fig 4). Lit by six windows with views over the parterres and fountains towards the sea, this magnificent gallery runs the length of the south-east range beneath a ceiling laced with vine leaves, birds, foliage and heraldry and a frieze of roses and armorial motifs. The rippling effect of the ceiling's ribs cleverly disguises the room's tapering plan without destroying its formal elements.

The drawing room demonstrates how skilfully Lorimer handled the constraints and complexities of the building and its site, and how subtly he composed the interior in response to its scale and magnificent contents. For him, a room was not a space to be 'forced into a mould and turned out complete, but above all a setting for the life and possessions of the inhabitants', wrote Hussey. Thus, 'he adapted the design of a room to the structural conditions and the effect that he wished it to have when in use'.

Except for the ceiling, he kept the decoration restrained, and had the walls painted white, allowing warmth and colour to come

6 Dunrobin's superb set of Arts-and-Crafts interiors are much as Lorimer left them 9

from the textiles—notably the pair of Mortlake tapestries—the two chimneypieces of Hoptonwood stone inset with green-marble slips, and the pair of 18th-century views of Venice, thought to be by Canaletto, but now attributed to the Russian Fyodor Alekseyev.

The degree to which Lorimer was personally involved in the detail of the interior decoration is shown by a set of colour-washed elevations drawn in pencil onto tracing paper and mounted onto card—presentation drawings of a type that are unique to the Dunrobin commission. But Lorimer must have collaborated with the 5th Duke and Duchess over the furnishings: the high-backed gilt-and-needlepoint chairs, for example, are typical of their taste and were probably bought new by them for the room, perhaps from a fashionable Parisian decorator.

In the linking wing, Lorimer created a new library from the queen's bedroom and dressing room, fitting it up in his Georgian

manner with sycamore panelling and shelves for more than 10,000 books; he also remodelled two rooms in the Georgian range as a suite for the Duke.

All of these rooms were illustrated in a pair of articles by Hussey celebrating the completion of Lorimer's work (*COUNTRY LIFE*, September 3 and 10, 1921). Interestingly, he omitted the Duchess's suite on the floor above, although its glittering Louis XV-style decor (Fig 2), possibly subcontracted from a Parisian firm, was carried out that year. Perhaps all the gilt and mirror was considered incompatible with the cool spreads of Lorimer's wood and plasterwork—or it was not ready to be photographed. Today, it is a highlight of visitors' tours.

The castle first opened to the public in the 1970s, when the present Countess was still in residence. Her son, Lord Strathnaver, who lives on the estate, took over in 1980, since when the circulation route has been reordered to allow visitors to experience the best of every period. The highlight of what they see is a superb set of Arts-and-Crafts interiors on a ducal scale, little altered since the 5th Duke's death in 1963, and thus much as Lorimer left them. 🐾

Acknowledgement: Ian Gow

Dunrobin Castle is open from April to October—for details, telephone 01408 633177 or visit www.dunrobincastle.co.uk