

# DORNOCH

**Y**ou can reach out and touch history in the little burgh of Dornoch, the spiritual capital of Sutherland.

Its fortunes since mediaeval times were inextricably bound to its striking red sandstone cathedral – 1989 marked 750 years of it being a centre of worship.

By the time Bishop Gilbert de Moravia – later St Gilbert – dedicated the building in 1239, Dornoch was already largely a community of incomers descended from warlike Normans and Flemings.

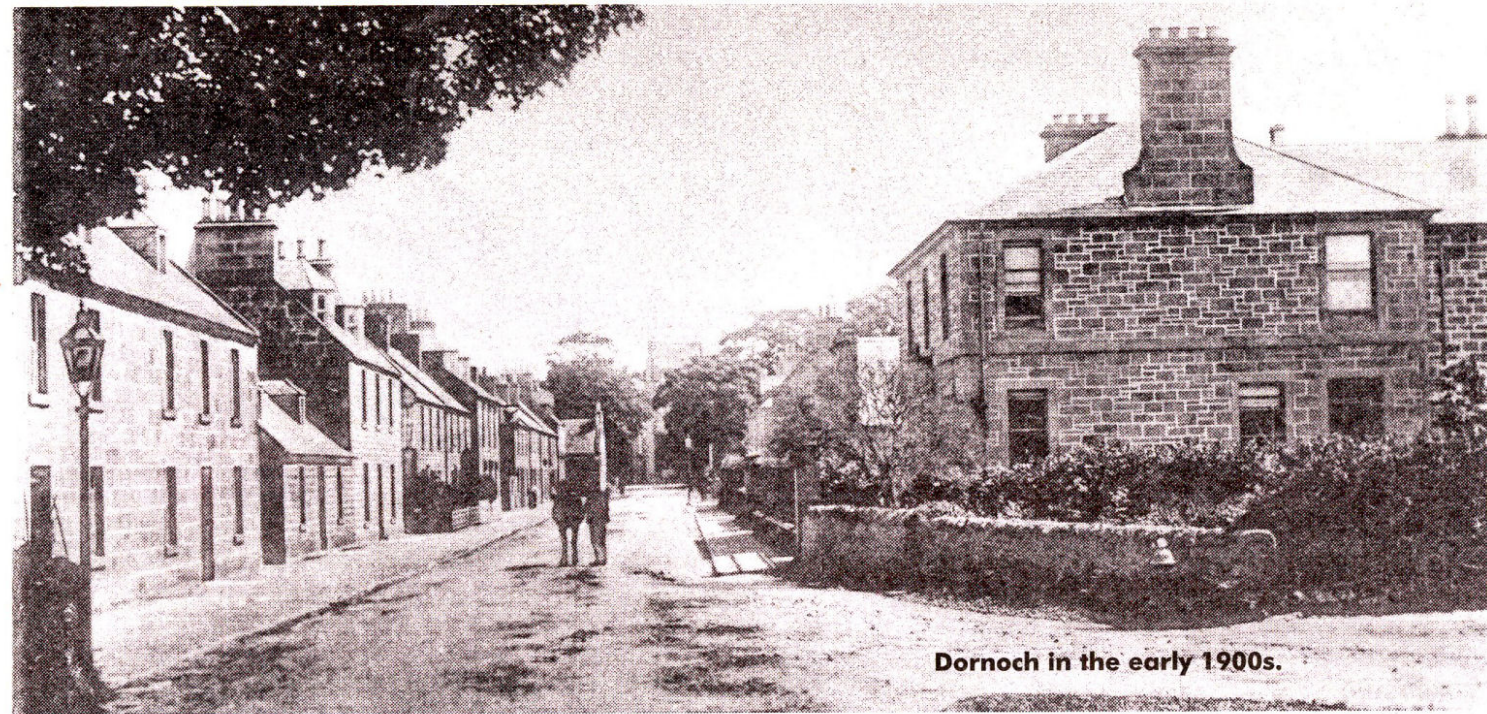
They had been invited by the Scottish kings to settle this hostile land in a bid to keep marauding Vikings and indigenous tribes at bay or in order.

Thus Dornoch, like Fortrose or Elgin, has much in common with many towns of Norman origin or influence at least 500 miles south in England.

Though newcomers to this day settle frequently in Dornoch, descendants of these earlier incomers still live in the town or its outlying area.

They include Murrays, Gordons, Grants, Cummings and Sutherlands, the last-named – like Hugh, first Earl of Sutherland – descended from St Gilbert's kinsman Freskyn de Moravia, also progenitor of Clan Murray.

However, nearly five centuries before Gilbert's creation, Columban monks founded on Dornoch's Schoolhill an ecclesiastical cell incorporating a



Dornoch in the early 1900s.

college to teach Latin and Greek to promising local youths.

It was the start of a sometimes fraught yet nonetheless unbroken tradition of education, through church school and grammar school, which has continued nearly 15 centuries to the present small but excellent Dornoch Academy.

The Mackays of Strathnaver burnt down the cathedral in 1570, when they sacked Dornoch during a feud with the dominant Murrays of the town.

It continued in a ruinous state after the Reformation, until

partially restored as parish church by Sir Robert Gordon, historian of Sutherland.

Between 1835 and 1837 the ruined nave was restored and the entire building thoroughly renovated by Elizabeth, Dowager Duchess of Sutherland, and also Countess in her own right.

Among its noteworthy features are the sarcophagus of Sir Richard de Moravia, brother of St Gilbert; memorials to the Earls of Sutherland, whose remains lie beneath the south transept and in a vault beneath the chancel floor;

a piscine, or recess for disposing of unused communion wine; and a splendid pipe organ, gifted in 1893 by the steel tycoon Andrew Carnegie, who had rebuilt nearby Skibo Castle as his Highland retreat.

Less prominent is a memorial in the north transept to more than 500 men of the 93rd Sutherland Highlanders, killed or wounded at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815.

Also of historic interest is the neighbouring 16th century Bishop's Palace, now Dornoch Castle Hotel, built shortly before

the Reformation for the resident bishops.

In 1503 Dornoch acquired a law court, and in 1628 Charles I created it a royal burgh. Five years later it was granted the status of county town and seat of justice.

Ironically this latter function seems doomed to redundancy in the near future, following Scottish Government proposals to close Dornoch Sheriff Court.

To an 18th century Dornoch court goes the dubious reputation of having been the last in Britain to condemn to death a witch.

A stone at Littleton where crazed old Janet Horne – smeared with tar – was burnt to death in a barrel, bears the date 1722 though some historians believe the execution may have taken place as late as 1727.

To the north of the town stands the ancient Earl's Cross, thought to be a boundary mark with the Sutherland earls' properties.

The town's impressive war memorial, a sculpture of a Great War 5th Seaforth Highlander, at the junction of Evelix Road and Poles Road bears the names of 69 local men killed in that conflict, plus 32 victims of World War Two – including a nursing sister.

Royal Dornoch Golf Club has two excellent courses, one of world-class championship standing, designed in 1886 by Tom Morris of St Andrews, the pioneer of professional golf.

The game's existence was first recorded there in 1616 by Sir Robert Gordon, thus giving the burgh fair claim to being the world's third oldest home of golf after St Andrews and Carnoustie.

Golf, together with Dornoch's favourable micro-climate, and its miles of unspoilt beaches, was largely responsible for its early influx of tourists, and led to the foundation of most of its hotels – now supplemented by several guest houses and caravan sites.

A light railway from the Mound junction, near Golspie, opened in 1902 but its use declined with the motor age and it closed in 1960.



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