

between the
17th & 18th centuries

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One cannot help regretting the ruinous state of the old house at Skelbo Castle, the only building in the county to give some idea of what better-class houses in Sutherland were like in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Dr Simpson, whose report on Skelbo Castle is quoted by Dr Bentinck in his book, 'Dornoch Cathedral and Parish', described the house as 'a dignified example of the latest development of Scottish baronial architecture, when the castellated features, such as corbelled turrets were being dropped.' Pennant, who visited Skelbo in 1769, described it as "a great pile of buildings surrounded by a rampart. The present house is still habitable." This last remark must refer to the old house, as the castle itself was no longer inhabited.

Bentinck
P. 423-

He dated
the house to
the 17th century.

Even in the thirties of this century the walls ^{outside} and most of the roof of the house were still intact. Now, the roof has fallen the west gable is partly down, and the east gable is cracked and looks as if a few more winter storms might bring it down too.

At ground level, two large rooms have a

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Now, the roof has fallen, the west gable is partly down and the east gable looks as if a few more winter storms might bring it down too.

At ground level, two large rooms have a vaulted roof. Though, in the lists of repairs made to the house in the 18th century, these rooms are referred to as 'the cellars', there is a fireplace in both. There is ^{no mention of a kitchen in any of the repairs,} ~~no mention of a kitchen in any of the repairs,~~ cooking may have been done in one of these rooms. The living rooms were on the floor above; three rooms on the first floor and a passage and stair which led to three garrets above. The partitioning walls have been pulled down long ago to make a barn but the rooms must have been of good size and well lit with large windows.

We do not know when the Sutherlands of Duffus, who owned Skelbo and who built this house, deserted the draughty discomforts of the castle for their new mansion house. The family suffered many misfortunes and was overwhelmed with debt. In the Civil War, Sir Alexander

Sutherland of Duffus at first adhered to the Covenant, but later, he^{he} went to Holland and joined ^{King} Charles II in exile. He returned to Scotland with King Charles

(Sutherlands of Duffus. Murray Rose) who raised him to the peerage as Lord Duffus (8th December

Seth Peenast-Balfour -

1650) He was made governor of Perth for the King but was compelled to surrender it to Cromwell, by whom he was fined £1500 as an Act of Grace.

The second Lord Duffus was extravagant and heavily in debt. In a quarrel with one of his creditors, Ross of Kindeace, he ran him through the body. He had to fly the country but he afterwards obtained a pardon and returned. Kenneth, third Lord Duffus, served as an officer in the Navy. He joined the Jacobite rising of 1715, was taken prisoner and confined in the Tower; his title was attainted and the estates were sequestrated. On his release, he went to Russia and rose to Flag rank in the Russian Navy. The sequestrated estates were administered by a factor appointed by the government, but they were so heavily in debt that they were claimed by the creditors and by the Earl of Sutherland as Loyal Superior

Gilchrist papers - Skillo - Waidels.

and by the Earl of Sutherland as the Loyal Superior.

Lord Duffus died abroad in 1734. His only son, Eric Sutherland, landless and poor, returned to Scotland. His claim to have the title restored was refused, but he was allowed to return to Skelbo, which he held as a tack. He married his cousin, Elizabeth Dunbar of Hempriggs, and they brought up their family of five children in this old house. The title was accorded them by all their neighbours who were compassionate for all their misfortunes. Lord Duffus had many cares; he may still have had hopes of recovering his title, but a cramping poverty could not be overcome. When the Jacobites entered Sutherland in March 1746, he left Skelbo, which was occupied by Lord Cromartie's force. From Pulrossie, he wrote to the Lord President Forbes to ask his advice on whether he might come to Inverness, though he could not hope to be introduced to the Duke of Cumberland, on account of his father's 'transgression.'

Handwritten notes on the left margin:

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Life at Skelbo however, had its homely side, as when he begged a friend for the 'loan of a bird cage or two

absence.' In a letter to the Earl of Sutherland dated Nov 29th 1759 Lord Duffus writes " if it was convenient to Yr Lordship to come to dinner we shoul'da all be very glad of it. The afternoons are now short but notwithstanding the badness of this house Yr Lordship will be accommodated with a bed and a friend or two more.' That Lord Duffus apologies for his house were not due to 18th century politeness is evident from the list of repairs made to it some years after this letter was written. In 1760 Lord Duffus left Skelbo having made over any rights he still had in the estates to the Earl of Sutherland for two payments of £500 each. The tack was then given to William Sutherland of Siberscross