

THE PALACE OF THE BISHOPS OF CAITHNESS AT DORNOCH.

The remains of the episcopal palace of Caithness, known today as Dornoch Castle, stand in the ancient Cathedral City, on the south side of a pleasant tree-girt green, having opposite to them the imposing mass of the High Church, while in their rear a beautiful and well-kept garden looks out over the spacious links to the shores of the Dornoch Firth, with Tain and the long low coastline running out to Tarbatness seen clearly across the narrow waters.

In the thirteenth century the diocesan seats were at Skibo and Scrabster, and there seems to be no clear evidence of an episcopal residence at Dornoch before the year 1557, when Bishop Robert Stewart appointed the Earl of Sutherland and his heirs hereditary constables of the Palace of Dornoch, "situated in the Irish (Gaelic-speaking) country among the wild, unbridled, untamed and savage Scots," granting him and his heirs "the lands or crofts and acres of the City of Dornoch, extending yearly to £10, for their expenses in maintaining and keeping the said palace, to be built and furnished by the Bishop at his own expense while remaining there." In 1570, when the city and cathedral church were burned by the Master of Caithness and the Mackays of Strathnaver, the remnants of the townsfolk held out gallantly for a week in the tower of the cathedral and in the episcopal palace.² It is not stated that the palace suffered damage on this occasion, but at all events the building which remains appears to date from a subsequent period, and it is probable that the palace was reconstructed at the same time as the restoration of the cathedral carried out between 1614 and 1634, under the Caroline episcopacy. It was certainly habitable in 1615, as John, thirteenth Earl of Sutherland, died in the palace in that year. In 1720 it was largely repaired, but by 1760 it had become ruinous, possibly as a result of Lord Cromartie's occupation of the town during the Forty-five. About 1812 a considerable portion was removed and what survived was re-fashioned. The palace is described as having formed a courtyard, of which the building still extant formed the south side, with its tall flanking tower or wing at the south-west corner. This building, which forms a complete structure in itself, would always seem to have been the principal residential part of the palace. East and west were ranges of offices, or "laigh-biggings", and on the north side the courtyard was closed in by a high curtain wall with a gatehouse. There are said to have been three towers in all.³ In 1922 the castle was purchased by Mrs. Sykes of Boroboll, who is carrying out judicious alterations and repairs, under the skilful superintendence of Mr. David E.A. Horne, architect, Golspie, by whose courtesy I am enabled to reproduce the annexed plans. For the photograph, which was taken by the late Mr. William G. Jamieson, I am indebted to Miss Elsie Jamieson, Drumgarth, Aberdeen.

In its present state the castle, or what remains of it, is designed on the common L plan found in late Scottish houses, consisting of a main block measuring about 69 feet 6 inches by 25 feet, with a wing 21 feet by 24 feet 6 inches attached to the west end of the north side and a round stair-tower set in the re-entrant angle. The interior of the castle has been largely modernised, but the ancient dispositions may still be clearly traced. The door is in the round tower and is straight-headed, with a half-engaged roll set on a chamfer, continued the lintel and jambs. A short passage, carried under the ascending steps, leads through to a corridor traversing the main house from east to west and serving the various apartments in the basement, which have all been cellars except the large kitchen at the east end. This kitchen still retains its huge arched fireplace, about 11 feet 6 inches broad, which has been partly built up. Outside, the chimney projects as a great breast, and is reduced by a stepped intaking at the old roof level forming a picturesque and truly monumental feature of the building. All these apartments in the basement are vaulted and some of the doors are moulded in a fashion not usual in the cellarage. In the tower at this level are found crosslet loops with an oilette termination below.

On the first floor there was originally a fine hall, about 39 ft. by 21, in the eastern part of the main house, having a withdrawing room beside it to the west and a private room adjoining in the wing. These rooms are now much altered and cut up by partitions. Recently a moulded jamb of the old fireplace in the west wall of the hall, with clustered and filleted shafts and caps finely wrought, has been exposed. Above this in the main building there are two more storeys, the uppermost partly in the roof. The rooms here were similarly arranged, but have been greatly pulled about. Previous to the alterations now in progress, the main house finished off (see supplement) with plain, high pitched gables and roof. The buttress and round tower in the south front are modern, the latter dating from 1881. In the wall here has been inserted a panel with the date 1814 and two shields, of which the dexter one is blazoned:—Quarterly, 1st and 4th, barry of 8, argent and gules, over all a cross floretty sable, for Gower; 2nd and 3rd, azure/

azure, 3 laurel leaves or, for Leveson. The sinister shield has gules, 3 mullets or, within a bordure of the last, charged with a double tressure flory-counter flory of the field, for Sutherland.

The wing and stair tower are carried up two full storeys higher, and the former finishes picturesquely with crow-stepped gables, the crow-steps of which themselves have gables, as sometimes occurs in late work. At the angles are open bartisans resting on continuous corbellings, very similar to those found on the cathedral tower. The corbelling of the south-west turret has sprung from a human mask. An interesting and very beautiful feature of the castle is the pronounced entasis or batter which is found both on the wing and on the great chimney.

As it now stands the castle, apart from modern alterations, may be described as substantially a building of the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century and doubtless was erected (as suggested above) after the conflagration of 1570. The massive north wall of the basement, which is 9 feet thick and extends westward beyond the present building, may perhaps be the remnant of an older structure, but the configuration of the loophole piercing it (see plan) suggests rather that the thickened part is an addition designed to carry the terrace which rests on it, opening from the first floor of the castle and overlooking the garden.

I have to record my indebtedness to Mrs. Sykes for access to the castle and to Mr. D.F. McLeod, Dornoch who kindly verified certain particulars at my request.

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1. Sir William Fraser, "The Sutherland Book", Vol. III, pp. 116-24.
2. Sir Robert Gordon, "Genealogical History of the Earldom of Sutherland," pp.156-7.
3. Full particulars about the later history of the castle will be found in H.M. Mackay's "Old Dornoch, its Traditions and Legends."