

# THE OLD HOUSE OF EMBO HOME OF THE GORDONS

## Inventory is Fascinating Reading

(From a Special Correspondent).

**I**N the 18th century, when the only road in Sutherland was a rough and stony track along the coast, and all travellers had to cross the Little Ferry, the old house of Embo, for 200 years the home of the Gordons of Embo, was not isolated as Embo House is today, but stood close to the road from the ferry to Dornoch. It is believed that the house was burned down towards the close of the 18th century, and the last of the old family to live there was Sir John Gordon, 5th baronet, who died at Embo on January 24, 1779.

Sir John was succeeded in the baronetcy by his brother, James, a major in the Dutch Service, who lived in Holland; but Sir John's will was drawn up in favour of his sister, Charlotte, who was not married and lived at Embo all her life.

### CHARLOTTE'S PLIGHT

Poor Charlotte! She had been Miss Gordon of Embo for so long, but when her brother died the creditors of his estate descended on her in a flock, determined to recover the last £5 owing to them.

Her legal adviser was Mr Alexander Mackenzie, who had so much to do with the management of the Dunrobin Estates. In a letter from Edinburgh, dated 3rd February, 1779, he gave advice "as to what it is proper for you to do on this occasion . . . we think it proper that you confirm such effects as Sir John left, before the Commissary; making up a fair inventory thereof, to be accountable to all concerned, after which you may dispose of the effects by roup or otherwise and out of the first and readiest pay Sir John's funeral expenses and servants' wages. I gave the usual short notification to the newspapers which is no place of publishing a panegyric on men of real worth.—Madam, I am respectfully, your most obedient humble servant, Alexander Mackenzie."

### BED IN EVERY ROOM

So Charlotte had an inventory made of everything in the house. Inventories are fascinating, if they are old enough. As we read the inventory we can enter every room in the old house of Embo.

Including the kitchen, the house had only six rooms. Highland families were usually large. Charlotte's father, the 4th baronet, married twice and had 10 children—four by his first wife, Elizabeth Sutherland, sister of Kenneth, 3rd Lord Duffus, whose title was attained in 1715; and six by his second wife, Margaret Sutherland, widow of James Sutherland of Proncy. For such a family the accommodation must have been very cramped.

It is not surprising that travellers from the south complained that Highland houses had a bed in every room. This was true of Embo, which had only one sitting-room, and a bed even in the cellar.

### INVENTORY

The inventory begins with the dining-room. The main items were:—12 chairs, 2 armchairs, an easy chair, 2 "square wainscot tables," an oval table, a tea-table with drawers. On the walls—3 guns, a small sword, long square looking glass, clock, 2 brass sconces for candles.

In a cupboard, 12 silver spoons—weight 30oz.—4 silver salts, 12 silver teaspoons, silver milk jug, 2 punch bowls (clashed). Wine glasses, decanters, etc., 5 dozen yellow dinner plates. Another cupboard held the tea equipage. There were many oddments, such as japanned trays, brass candlesticks, 2 coffee pots, 2 tea kettles,

spin a certain amount of linen thread which was sent away to be made into table linen and sheets. Scottish houses that could afford no other luxuries were well supplied with linen.

The house had cellars and a vault which were the brewing utensils, brewing vat and casks. A candle vault, of course, a tent bed.

The valuation put on the furniture would not have covered the expenses of Sir John's funeral, which came to £75, but Charlotte's brother, Sir James, sent her enough money from Holland to settle the tradesmen's bills. A year's wages for Donald Grant, Sir John's personal servant, came to £2 5s. Donald Pope, the gardener, had £3. Isobel Mackenzie and Marion Matheson, the two maids, were each paid £1.

The debts on the estate were another matter. Sir John Gordon succeeded in 1760. The debts had accumulated in his father's time, and he had done his best to pay off some of them. But the rental of Embo, including Hilton and Achintreasurer, was only £68, after taxes had been met. Of this, the money rent was 6/8, the rest was paid in kind: 166 bolls of victual, 7 wedders, 136 hens which were valued at 3d each. Rent varied from that of John Menzies, Achintreasurer, 24 hens, 24 bolls victual down to Margaret Sutherland of Embo who paid only 1 hen and 1 boll of victual.

### NO HILL PASTURE

A letter dated July 7, 1777, gives a general description of the estate, which it says "is but poorly accommodated in intown grass and has no hill pasture, or grazings belonging to it. There are no mosses belonging to the estate, the peats it is provided in is from the Estate of Skelbo, the liberty whereof was obtained from Kenneth Lord Duffus by a letter to the late Sir John, about 1714, he being then married to a sister of Lord Duffus . . . the biggings are but ruinous and there are no woods on the estate."

The principal creditor was Robert Hume Gordon, who afterwards acquired the estate and who built the present house of Embo. For the origin of this debt one must go back 30 years, to Robert Hume Gordon's father, Dr John Gordon, a grandson of Sir Robert Gordon, 2nd baronet. Doctor Gordon lived at Golspytour, where he was practising as a doctor by 1730.

### SIMPLE REMEDIES

The doctor was on very friendly terms with his cousins at Embo, and many were the calls he received for treatment of their various ailments. For a fixed charge of £1 1s a year he attended the whole family, including the servants. His remedies were simple—pills, blisters, plasters, purges, vomits—but he seems to have been successful and the Embo family, at any rate, survived to an active old age.

The doctor held two bonds on the estate—one for £700 and the other for £300. The interest on the bonds was much in arrear, and by 1776, the debt amounted to £1909. Robert Hume Gordon inherited these bonds from his father.

Another burden on Sir John was the jointure for his father's widow and provision for the children of the second marriage. Each of the younger children was left 514 merks—in sterling £28—and though old Lady Embo had died in 1777, the daughters had only received part of what was owing to them.

The claims on the estate were still not settled in 1784, but between that year and 1790, the whole estate was bought in by Hume Gordon who had