

# Cyderhall Farm



A study through time

## A study of Cyderhall Farm's History

I have chosen to construct my farm study on Cyderhall farm which is located two miles outside the town of Dornoch directly off the old coaching road cuthill on the shores of the Dornoch firth giving it a unique location. Today the farm is a single owner occupied estate of around 500 acres but it hasn't always been so simple. The current family, the Munros has owned the farm and grounds since 1995 and had previously rented the farm from skibo estate since 1937. Prior to this the farmland has had numerous tenants and landlords of varying natures. Evidence of occupation at Cyderhall exists since the Viking period with its actual place name of Cyderhall descending from 'sigurthar haugr' which is Norse for sigurths grave mound. Sigurd being the mighty Viking who conquered the shores of the Dornoch firth before coming to his untimely death and being buried in a valley on Cyderhall. Many believe that after his untimely death his men panicked and buried him in the Viking mound hidden from the sight of the Pict enemy who would surely invade if they discovered the jarls plight.

Looking forward quite considerably in time from 873 to the slightly calmer times which came in the 12 to 1700's were the lands of Cyderhall were passed from tenant to tenant and there were believed to be around 200 families of cotters living in huts dotted around the lands. In 1275 the lands of Cyderhall were given as a gift to the bishop Archibald, transaction recorded in Dr Bentincks book refers to the lands as;

'The six davachs of Cyderhall' (Bentincks,G D, 1926,pg 437)

Cyderhall was again gifted in 1557 to the earl of Sutherland; it was then passed to the Gordon family of which Alexander was recorded to have survived until 1630 when he was 95, a very rare age to be reached. Due to financial difficulties possessed by his grandson Alexander the lands of cyderhall were handed back to the earl of Sutherland in 1648. The lands stayed in the hands of the Sutherland family for many years to come and hence became one of the first victims of the much documented clearances. Throughout the next 100 years the lands were leased out to many different landlords who took rents from the individual cotters who stayed there. In 1798 a captain W. Mculloch leased the lands of Cyderhall; he was to be the last of the landlords and the old style methods as his 19year lease was to be cut short in order for the modern high farming techniques to be introduced.

In 1815 the Cyderhall farm which still exists today was created it was to be one of the first of many improvement farms created by the Sutherland estates in search of a share in the industrial wealth which was growing in the factories of the south. Before this time the people of the highlands were very poor and uneducated they lived in primitive ways, surviving of the poor quality lands mainly by keeping herds of cattle however most families could barely feed themselves never mind there animals and with no crop management skills or initiatives which later developed in the high farming methods mortality rates were very high.

' In the spring of 1807, there died in the parish of Kildonan alone, two hundred cows, five hundred head of cattle, and more than two hundred small horses,' (loch, J, 1820, pg65)

Times were very hard for the highlanders and they lived a life of day by day survival, the people who were heavily involved in the clearances at the time would argue they were trying to help the cotters by creating an economic wealth in the area, many of course would disagree.

The estate of Cyderhall was described as one of the most regularly occupied areas through time and so was the best example to show the contrast between the old system of use and the new high farming techniques. In 1815 the poor lands of Cyderhall were put aside as moor land for the displaced tenants to be moved to, there were various exchanges of land between the other farms in the area in order to make them individually better and so the basis of the modern Cyderhall was created.

' It is really disgusting to see the old ways going on, on the old leases, but we shall be rid of them as follows – Cyderhall by 1817...,' (Sutherland heritage society, 1972, pg 248, vol 2)

The plan (fig.1) was taken from James Loch's book on the improvements clearly shows the house and steading which was built at Cyderhall by the duke and duchess of Sutherland. The house and steading's were very good and made of the highest quality in the time, today the house and steading's stand almost identically apart from a few changes which will later be discussed.

'Upon this farm an excellent house and homestead has been just finished, at an expense of two thousand two hundred pounds,' (Loch, J, 1820,pg [a] 3)

During the creation of the farm the 200 families of cotters whose services were no longer required were cleared and some settled on the Dornoch Muir now believed to be the area known as Birichen and many more families chose to head overseas in search of a better life. During my research for this study I found numerous letters from people in Nova Scotia searching for information on their ancestors who were cleared from Cyderhall. See fig.2.

The first tenant of Cyderhall farm in its new form as a tool for improvement system was a Mr. Rule who took tenancy in 1817, he came from Roxburgh and was quoted to have employed the Norfolk process of rotation. fig.3 shows a study completed by Norwich university showing field rotation at Cyderhall from 1829 to 69, this shows how the farm was used over a sustained period of time and what techniques shaped the field systems of the farm as it is today. The details of the people who leased Cyderhall between the time of Mr. Rule and the Munro's are scarce, records of the Sutherland estates leases are held in the archives at Edinburgh and are not otherwise easily accessible. It can only be assumed that Mr. Rule held on to his tenancy for a long period of time perhaps passing it down to the next generation. In 1884 a Mr. Marshall took over the lease he was a cattle



grazier from the south but never seemed to make any progress with developing the quality of the farm lands. Records of the death of the Cyderhall mill tenant Mr. Allard are found to state that in 1890 he drowned in the mill pond, reasons for the occurrence of his drowning are not recorded due to the shallow depth of the pond it may be assumed suspicious. Fig.4. shows where the mill pond would have lay.

Whilst the changes at Cyderhall were being carried out there was many other estates in the area effected by the improvement idea, the nearby estate of Skibo and its tenants had become a safe haven from the clearances due to its humane landlord George Dempster who didn't believe in the abolishment of tenets and introduction of sheep. However when Dempster died in 1819 after owning it for 32 years his estate was split up and bought by the Sutherland estate and then just as at Cyderhall the people began to be cleared from the lands.

'That eviction was especially shocking to them after 32 happy years under Dempster, when they felt really secure,' (Craig, C 1990,pg 133)

In 1898 Andrew Carnegie purchased Skibo castle and associated lands which included Cyderhall farm. Cyderhall remained a part of the Skibo estate until 1995 when separated from the castle by the new A9 road it was sold off to the Munro family who still own it today. Donald George Munro began to lease the farm in 1937 after returning from India where he had been vice president of an agricultural college, at the time Cyderhall had come to be in bad repair and the grounds were over run by whin bushes. There was no source of electricity in the farm at this time and so the new tenet set to with vast improvements. As the plan (fig.1) shows there was a large horse thrashing wheel house at the farm which by 1937 was becoming out dated and so the Munro's installed an electric motor which was used until the portable thrashing machine began to travel around the local farms and then eventually a combine harvester was purchased.

There were three teams of heavy horse working at the farm at the time, they were used to work the field with ploughs, to power the thrashing mill and cart heavy loads until mechanization caught on the horses were essential to keep the farm running. There were several stable within the u - shaped steading none of which still exist today only the old stable doors showing where they once stood.fig.5. The horse wheel is also long since been destroyed, the stone which used to make it up now stands as the base for the farms loading bank. A large blue silage tower built in 1971 now stands in its place. The farm developed and changed with the times and pushes in mechanization and new inventions in farm techniques. Within the buildings which still stand as they were at the farm there is a collection of old machinery and tools which were used on the farm.

Gordon Munro recalls the first tractor bought by his farther for use on the farm in 1937; it was an old Fordson costing the grand sum of £100. then came the war years which shaped the history of most farms in Britain, the lack of labor available pushed on the use of machinery and hire centers for large expensive machines were introduced. Cyderhall hired machines such as the mobile thrasher from Evelix, the bigger and easier to use machines became the more and more they were employed. By the end of the war there

had been a large reduction in labor needs and Cyderhall farm was exploring different methods of production to discover which suited there lands the best. Between the 1950s and 60s Cyderhall produced hens, pigs, cattle and sheep for meat and the steadings were adapted to do so. Gradually the farms operations were rationalized and it was decided that the farm and its grounds were best suited to cows and sheep. The ground was also used for producing high quality seed fro potatoes which would be sold to large producers in England; this however had to be reduced in size as labor again became scarce as other industries were able to pay better wages.

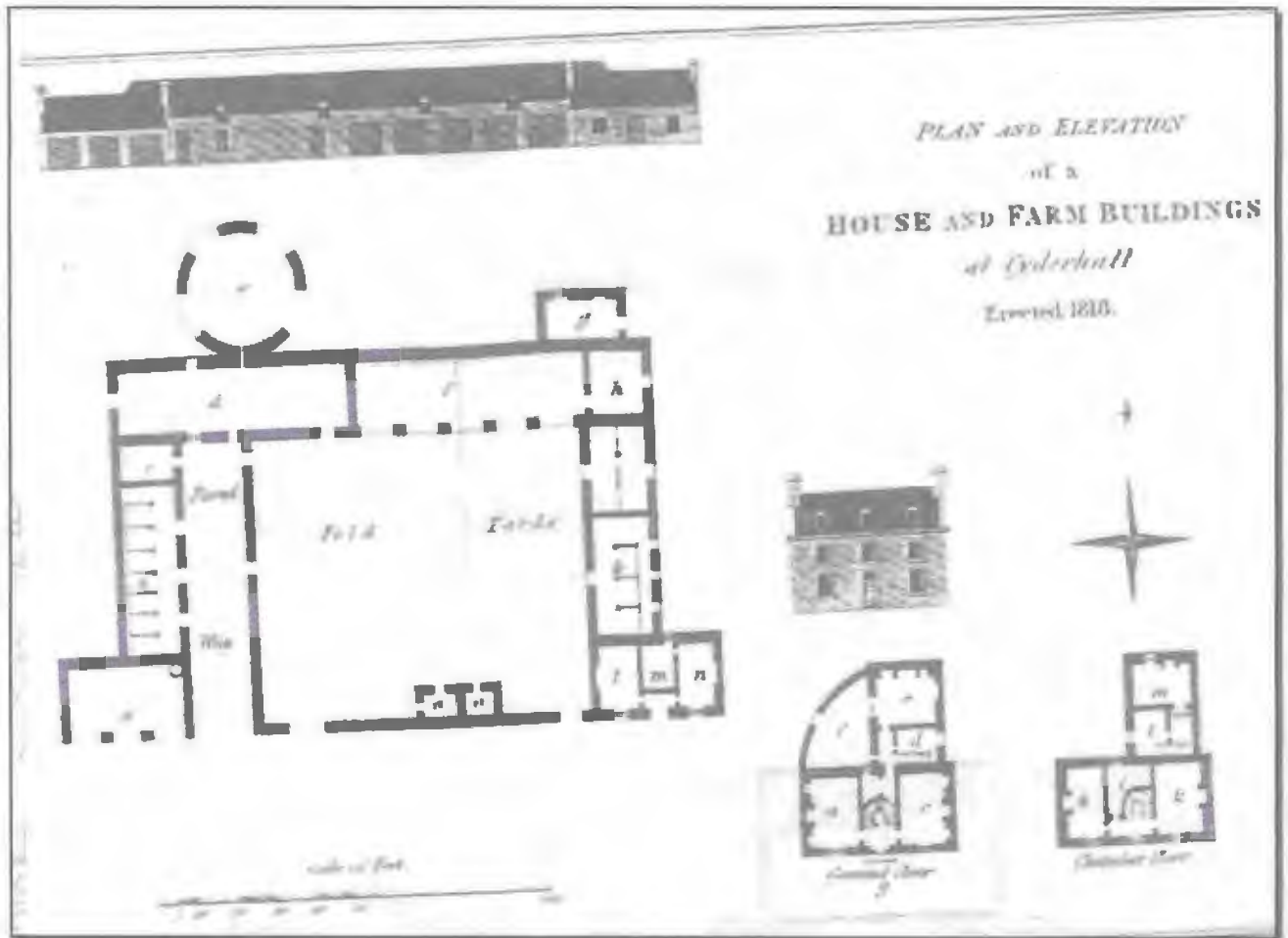
One of the biggest changes at Cyderhall began in 1964 when the Munro's purchased a second farm at Milltown of Evelix, this extra facility allowed for there production of cattle to be increased and instead of having to sell of the calves at a young age they were now able to keep them in the steadings at Evelix and be able to feed them up over the winter. At the same time the old Rosebank steading was accidentally burnt down by children, as this was were straw used to be stored there was a large Dutch barn built at Cyderhall and the u – shape courtyard of the 1815 steading was covered over to increase storage space at the farm for straw and hay.

In 1971 this process was developed further with the erection of two silage towers one at Cyderhall fig.6. and one at Evelix. The tower allowed the farm to produce good quality haylage and to store it successfully for a long period of time.

Cyderhall was finally sold to the Munro family by the Skibo estate in 1995 mainly due to its divide by the new A9 road which cut through the fields which joined the estates. In 1996 the Munro family allowed for quarrying work to begin at Cyderhall a process which has changed the farms landscape forever and seems to be constantly increasing in size. Processes used at the farm have seen little change since until 2005 when sheep became easier to care for as they began to out winter them reducing there reduction costs greatly. Modern influences on the farm are easy to see last year a large 50ft x 100ft steel shed was created. Fig.7. and there are three John Deere tractors which now keep the land in order. There are only two full time workers on the farm now who look after 490 breeding ewes, 102 cows and an area of approximately 400 acres of land fro used for grazing as well as growing a variety of crops.

Cyderhall farm is a classic example of how developments in cultures and the economic world can alter the landscape and peoples way of life for generations to come. The changes to the land over time have created the modern farm which stands today but with the rate at which agriculture and the economy is still developing will today's landscape stay the same for long.

**FIG.1**



**Annotations**

**House - Ground floor**

- a Parlor
- b Lobby & Stair case
- c Family room
- d Pantry
- e Kitchen
- f Yard (open)
- g Flower garden

**House - Chamber story**

- h Bedroom
- i Bed closet
- k Bed room
- l Maid/servant
- m Bedroom

**Offices**

- a Cart house
- b Stable
- c Tool house
- d Thrashing mill & straw house
- e Horse course
- f Cattle sheds
- g Dairy
- h Calf pen
- i Cow byre
- k Feeding do
- l, m, n Bothy for ploughmen
- o Pig styes & poultry above



**FIG.2**

5787 Ogilvie  
Halifax Nova  
Canada  
August 18, 1911

The Owner or Occupant  
Sydera Farm  
Dornoch, Sutherlandshire  
Scotland

Dear Sir

I discovered recently that an ancestor  
of mine David Mackay, was born 1790 at  
Sydera, near Dornoch and emigrated with  
his wife, in 1820 to Nova Scotia (She was  
Christy Munro, born 1800, at Embo.)

I am interested in attaining information  
about Sydera and its history and, also, in  
knowing the ancestry of David Mackay and his  
wife

Any information, or sources of  
information, that you may be in a position  
to provide, would be very much appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Donald F. Maclean





## **Bibliography and Acknowledgements**

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Mrs. Bridget Mackenzie, Lednabirichen, Dornoch

The Munro family, Cyderhall farm and Milltown of Evelix

The Dornoch history links museum, the meadows, Dornoch

**FIG.4**



**FIG.5**



**FIG.6**



**FIG.7**

