

# Laird from the steppes buys ruin to keep up with Joneskis

Martin Hunter

by Julie Smyth

SCOTLAND has long been accustomed to its rolling hills, glens, grand manors and romantic castles being snapped up by the highest bidders — the English, Germans and Egyptians. But the Russians?

A wealthy Muscovite, said to have close connections with President Boris Yeltsin and to be a member of Russia's new moneyed class, has become one of Scotland's newest barons. The secretive businessman is expected to arrive this summer, lay claim to his title and begin restoring his ruined medieval castle and manor in Sutherland — although he may be surprised at how much work needs to be done.

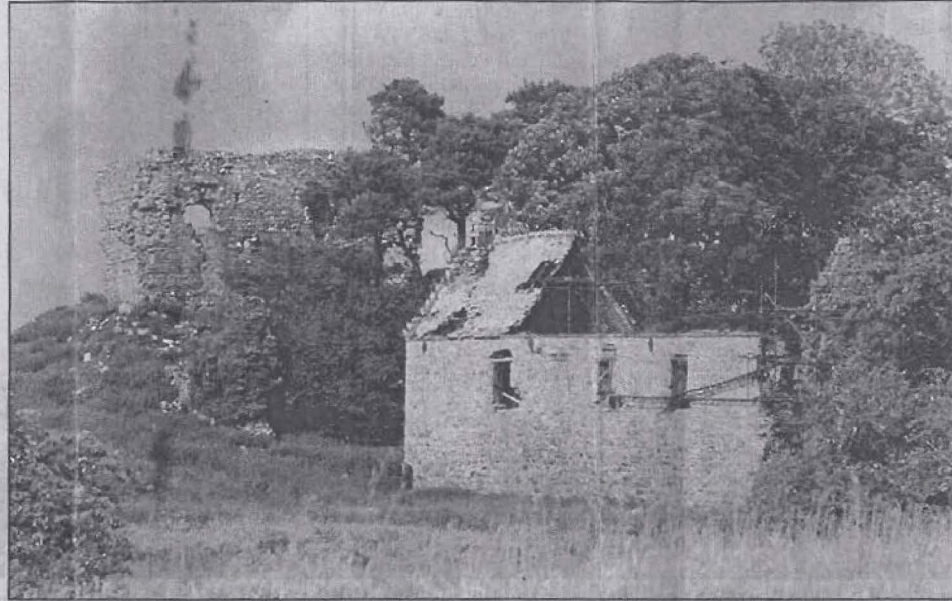
Mikhail Debouar has bought Skelbo castle, once a seat of the Sutherland clan, sight unseen for £75,000 cash, and is understood to have the hundreds of thousands of pounds needed to restore the site. He has also bought rights to salmon fishing and minerals (though none exist) and the luxury of being known as Baron Debouar of Skelbo.

To the untrained eye, Skelbo, though set in a picturesque site overlooking Loch Fleet, is little more than a pile of rubble. The

13th-century castle is a pillar of stone lying next to the shell of the 17th-century manor house, which is propped up by rusting scaffolding and surrounded by knee-high weeds and "Danger" signs.

The cost of restoring the building to a habitable state is estimated at up to £500,000 and previous owners, including an American doctor, have been anxious to free themselves of the liability. To Russia's new money there appear to be exciting perks attached to such investments. Debouar will, according to baronial prerogatives, be entitled to use his new title on his passport, decorate himself with baronial robes, chapeaus, wands, and, if so desired, kilts, and boast two personal pipers.

Skelbo was sold to Debouar by Michael Alexander, the Colditz hero and writer. "It would cost £180,000 even to do the basic restoration," said Alexander, from his London home. "It is a pretty rotten building and I was quite happy to get rid of it." Alexander never used the title, but added:



Cold comfort fame: although Skelbo castle is virtually a ruin, it confers a title on its Russian owner

"I imagine it will go down well in Moscow."

Debouar was put in touch with Robert Smith, chairman of Manorial Auctioneers, in London, by a business contact, Lord Whaddon, the Labour life peer. Smith said Debouar was not the first Russian to buy into Scotland. "It seems that if

someone has a barony in Russia, their friend has to have a better barony," he said.

The Skelbo property near Dornoch is in a sought-after pocket of Scotland, just north of Skibo castle, the luxury retreat owned by the millionaire entrepreneur Peter de Savary; and Balnagown castle, the very

private residence of Harrods owner Mohamed al-Fayed.

As a foreigner, Debouar will be in good company because his immediate neighbours include a Yorkshireman, an American and a semi-absentee landlord from Hertfordshire.

Skelbo, though overshadowed by Skibo, commands an important place in history; in 1290, Edward I's commissioners for the marriage of the Maid of Norway received the news of her death at the castle; and in 1746, the Jacobite force of the Earl of Cromartie stayed. It later fell into a state of disrepair and in the 1920s was taken over by gypsies.

Mark Sutherland-Fisher, president of the Clan Sutherland Society, gave a cautious welcome to the new owner: "In

an ideal world we would obviously still like to see the whole of Sutherland owned by the Sutherlands, but the days of Victorian Britain are gone. If it means someone is going to come and spend money restoring the place, good luck to him."

He also offered the Muscovite some tips as a new laird. For starters he should not get funny ideas about adopting the Sutherland kilt or parading around in baronial robes. "It certainly would be frowned upon if he started to do that sort of thing in Sutherland. That is what Americans or second-hand car salesmen from Essex do."

He said that members of the Sutherland family, which owned Skelbo for more than 700 years, would want to ensure Debouar did not restrict access to the ruins for locals or tourists.

Many neighbours, who were reluctant to comment about the mysterious Russian, were sceptical about any suggestion of an impending visit. "I am sure we will never see him. He was probably only interested in the title," said one, who asked not to be named.

John Bethell, chairman of the Scottish Seed Potato Development Council, a frequent business traveller to Russia, believed Debouar's purchase could mark a trend. He said: "There is a lot of money available and people are determined to be the first. If one Russian goes back with a barony, all of his friends want one. It is pure keeping up with the Joneses. Buying Scottish castle ruins may become the in thing."



Happy vendor: Michael Alexander, with his wife Emily

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