

Preserving our Heritage

Many people are concerned that when their homes are "listed" for their historic or architectural interest, they will be prevented from making alterations, with a consequent loss in value or amenity.

Here Miss ANNE GIBBS, Inspector of Historic Buildings for the Directorate of Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments in Edinburgh, who visited Golspie for a re-survey of listed buildings last week, explains here why revision of the Secretary of State's lists is necessary.

The lists were drawn up between 1956 and 1967, when the whole idea of listing buildings was new and the importance of listing within the planning framework was still to be tested.

At the time interest was concentrated on country houses, churches and important urban groups such as the New Town of Edinburgh. It is difficult now, with the benefit of a vastly increased knowledge of our

building history and a much wider interest generally in heritage matters, to understand how limited, in practical terms, the state of knowledge was 30 years ago.

In the intervening time interest has broadened to encompass the smaller buildings which give so much character to our towns, villages and rural estates — the supporting cast if you like — also the growing interest in the social and economic history of Britain has introduced new types of buildings for consideration, most importantly industrial structures.

The lists are made in the first instance for the guidance of the local planning authority, in the case of Highland Region that is the Regional Council. They are part of the planning framework and have a clear statutory basis in Section 52 of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act.

When seen in the context of the overall planning controls the lists are less formidable. Everyone, regardless of listing, is subject to certain planning constraints. The listing introduces more specialised controls, but even these have to be balanced against controls that already exist if for instance a building is within a conservation area.

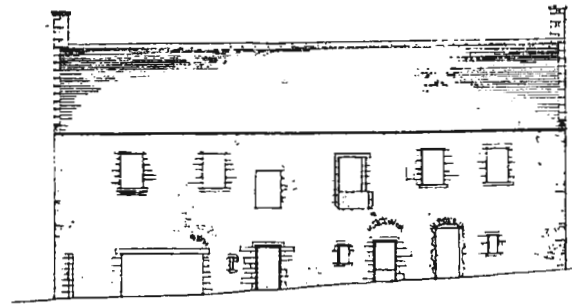
An instant reaction to listing is often a fear that nothing can ever be altered again and that plans for a new kitchen or bathroom or some other improvement will be thwarted. Fortunately this is not the case. What listing does ensure is that

the architectural and historic value of a particular building can be considered when alterations, re-use or demolition are proposed.

In the majority of cases owners are sympathetic to their buildings and propose alterations which are in keeping with or do not detract from their character. In some cases the expert advice available through the planning authority or the Historic Buildings and Monuments Directorate can help to resolve specific difficulties.

Listed building consent is required for alterations affecting the character of a building or demolition and this is obtained through the local planning authority. In all cases the planning authority, if it proposes to grant listed building consent, must notify the Secretary of State. The Historic Buildings and Monuments Directorate case-work inspectors, who have particular expertise in assessing proposals for historic buildings, may recommend that the decision be left to the planning authority; they may propose modifications or they may recommend that special circumstances require the application to be referred to the Secretary of State. It is always wise to contact the planning department to clarify specific proposals and discuss whether or not they require listed building consent.

Given these statutory controls, it is important that national



Elevation looking W.

Front view of what a reconstructed Skelbo House could look like.

Our Old Files

75 YEARS AGO (November 24, 1910)

The Golspie Literary Society had discussed a symposium of popular writers, with papers on Addison and Steele, Alexander Pope, Charles Lamb and Thomas De Quincey, by Misses K F Innes, C A Campbell, C B Grant and E S Mackay respectively.

Mr John Grant, Dornoch, sold 22 cattle from £7-10s to £12-10s at MacAllum Brothers sale at Dingwall. Cheviot ewes and wethers from Mr Sutherland, Kintradwell, had sold at between 21/3d and 22/9d.

A man from the heights of Rogart had been fined 10/- with 21/- expenses and an alternative of 10 days imprisonment for failing to send his son aged 5 years to school. The man had claimed that five of his eight children were attending Rogart school but the one mile to Rhilochan school was a long and unfenced road, dangerous in winter time.

50 YEARS AGO (November 21, 1935)

Seven seats in Sutherland County Council were being contested in the forthcoming election. They were (new candidates listed second):- Golspie Rural — J D Cameron, Kirkton; George Grant, Craigneth, Golspie. Loth — A M Ross, Grand Hotel, Brora; William Gordon Dudgeon, Crakaig. Kildonan South — A R Macleod, Dunrobin Street, Helmsdale; P J Mitchell, Viewmount, Helmsdale. Strathy — John Mackay, Bighouse, Melvich; Alexander Campbell, Melvich.

Farr — George J Christie, Altnaharra Hotel; John McDonald, Newlands and Donald, Bettyhill. Tongue — John Mackenzie, The House, Tongue; John William Irvine, Tongue. Laig — Hugh David Albyn House; Angus Macdonald, Riverview House, Laig. Mr Macdonald of Drumbeg and Mr Morley Hames of Durness have been returned unopposed.

Retired gamekeeper Stewart Warbeck of Dalreavoch, Rogart, had died at Big Barns, Golspie.

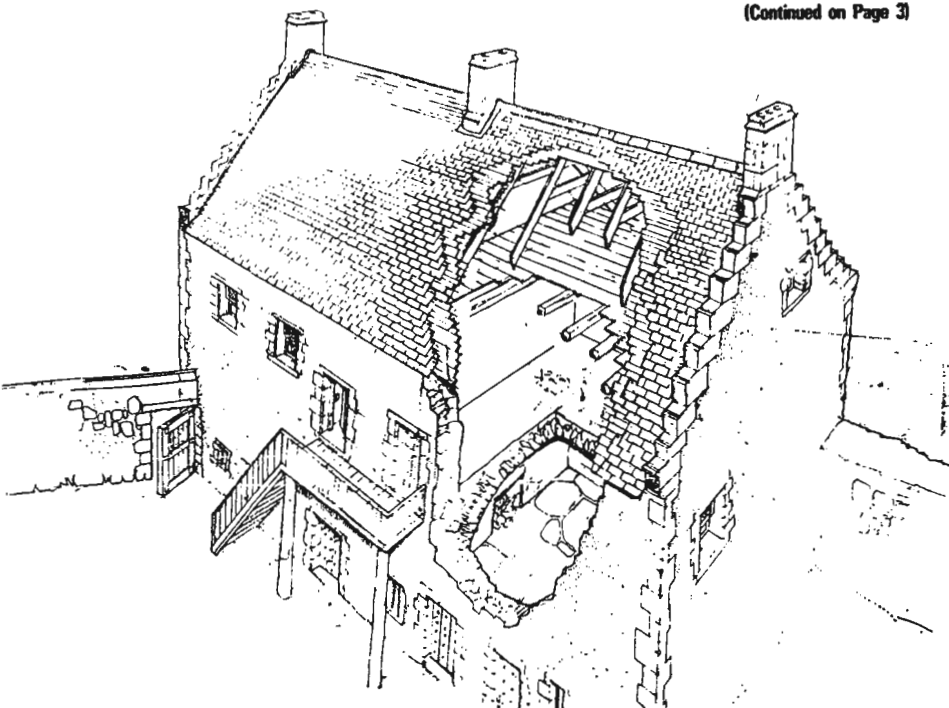
25 YEARS AGO (November 18, 1960)

Reception of Independent Television was being restricted in the north because of difficulties with the vision link from Aberdeen, with the fringe service going as far as Berriedale in the north. Garve and Tomich in the west and Grantown on Spey and Rothiemurchus in the east.

Roads committee chairman George McIver and Mr George Murray, the local councillor, have been asked to have another look at the uncontrolled railway level crossing at Broomfield, Rogart, to see what further action could be taken to lessen the risk of accidents.

Mr George Sinclair, a former Dornoch Academy pupil, has received two special prizes for his leading Scottish Dairy student at Auchencruive, Ayr. He was the son of Mr Jack Sinclair, who was a grieve at Cyderhall Farm, Dornoch, for 24 years.

(Continued on Page 3)



This "exploded" view of the ruined medieval Skelbo House, on Loch Fleet, shows the potential for its renovation — if someone was prepared to spend a fortune on it. It rates a "B" listing, for its local and historic significance.

HERITAGE PRESERVED

(Continued from Page 2)

standards for listing are adhered to. Inevitably there are some local variations; for instance, Pulteney-town in Wick is of modest architectural interest which might not attract attention in Edinburgh's New Town or the West End of Glasgow, but when seen in the local context, it is an unusual place of planning with historic associations with the British Fisheries Society's activities.

In Ullapool, where the Society was also active, the planning lay-out can still be appreciated but the houses were either not built or have now been too altered to permit any real visual experience of the original conception.

Consistency is an ingredient lacking from the first lists which often reflected specific interests of the fieldwork inspectors. Today the scrutiny is much tighter. The fieldwork inspectors, who are all architectural historians, concentrate on substantial geographical areas in order that they can become familiar with building types and techniques, the work of local architects or estate factors. Their drafts are submitted to the inspector with the responsibility for maintaining standards across the country and, after editing, the Principal Inspector has to approve the list and the categories of listing. These categories are used to give some indication of merit. Buildings categorised as follows:—

Category A

buildings of national or more than local importance, either architectural or historic or fine little-altered examples of some particular period or style.

Category B

buildings of primarily local importance or major examples of some period or style which may have been somewhat altered.

Category C

good buildings which may be considerably altered, other buildings which are fair examples of their period, or in some cases buildings of no great individual merit which group well with others in categories A or B.

Where there is particular value in a group of buildings this is indicated and the groups categorised. In this way personal prejudices and blind spots can be overcome.

What happens at the start of a resurvey? The lists are approached district by district and the first action is to contact the local planning authority to explain the purpose of the resurvey and to ask for any information which could assist or suggestions of sites the inspector might visit. Meanwhile the inspector acquires general background knowledge to the area from printed sources and maps. The inspector will then systematically visit every property in the area taking particular care to check those already listed to see whether they reach current criteria.

In towns and villages where it is not necessary to go on to private land, inspectors make their assessment from the street; where it is necessary to go on to private land permission is always sought and where necessary appointments made to visit interiors. The inspectors all carry a personal identity card and visiting cards.

We always go into public buildings and churches and the inspector has to use his architectural knowledge to decide whether to ask permission to see inside domestic, commercial or industrial buildings and we are grateful for the co-operation, interest and enthusiasm we frequently meet. The resurvey is essentially carried out by site visits, the inspectors using their specialised knowledge and familiarity with an area to assess buildings for listing. Wherever possible documentary work is undertaken but within the time allowed it is not possible to check sasines or title deeds for every property, and we are always grateful when additional historical information is sent to us.

It will be obvious that listing includes a very wide spectrum of

buildings. The only guidance from the act is "special architectural or historic interest." "Special" has a generous meaning. It does not refer simply to the obvious — country houses, churches or public buildings — but to those buildings which form the background to major architectural works. Consideration is given to ancillary building on country house estates, for instance at Dunrobin, the dovecot, dairy, stables and walled garden together with monuments, to give some examples, are included.

Town planning can have an important part to play in the character of towns and villages; for instance, Thurso where handsome houses in Janet Street are backed up by more modest dwellings as in Campbell Street with churches playing their part in the layout. This contrasts with the piecemeal growth around old St Peter's Church.

In other areas such as the prosperous farm land of Ross and Cromarty, dignified farm-houses and villas reflect agricultural and commercial wealth. Contrary to expectation the Highland Region reveals an interesting range of commercial and industrial buildings; for example woollen and grain mills, an example of the former Aldie in Easter Ross or the latter at Achingale and John O' Groats in Caithness; the development of the herring fishing industry is seen in the growth of Helmsdale, Lybster, Wick and the tortuous 300 steps to the diminutive landing stage at Whaligoe, while substantial icehouses as those at Helmsdale and Little Ferry indicate the importance of the salmon fishing industry.

Transport has always been a vital factor in the development of the Highland Region. This was recognised nationally by creation of the Commissioners for Highland Roads and Bridges with Thomas Telford, the renowned engineer, playing an essential role. This vast enterprise expanded the road network already developed by General Wade a century earlier. The single arched hump-back bridges of the earlier 18th century are in their way as valuable as the spectacular technical achievements of Telford's bridges such as Helmsdale, now too often taken for granted.

The arrival of the railways was the next important step in the development of the Highlands, linking the northern extremities with southern urban centres and introducing a new architectural dimension. The use of local materials has a powerful visual impact; for instance the use of slate either as varied as the dark grey from Ballachulish or deep shiny browns from Caithness; the techniques used with local materials give particular individuality to the pattern of building in any particular location. Besides local fabrics, innovative materials leave their mark, concrete being an obvious example seen to great advantage on the Ardtornish estate in Morvern.

Individual estates often have their own architectural hallmarks, none more so than the Sutherland Estate with sliding sashes in dormer windows, deep eaves, prominent gable skawputts (brackets at right angles to the gable); and the particular contribution of George Devey who became one of the leading country house architects of the late 19th century.

The new lists for the Highland Region, while larger than their predecessors, clarify former group listings which encompassed whole settlements and take account of vastly superior knowledge or architectural and social history.

All buildings of merit are included and correspond to the standards being used, not only in Scotland, but in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The first man to play an active part in recording Scotland's historic buildings, by the listing process, Ian Lindsay, instructed inspectors that an historic building need be neither old nor beautiful to play an important part in our built inheritance. That still stands, and inspectors today must question and consider everything they see.

THE gaunt and battered remains of the ancient and powerful stronghold of the Sutherlands, Lords of Duffus, stand on a defensive rocky site above the South shore of the tidal Loch Fleet, four miles North of Dornoch.

There is, however, an early 17th Century house still standing within the broken curtain walling of the old castle, and although one of its gable ends is now in an almost total state of collapse and would require very careful rebuilding, the proprietor does not exclude the possibility of restoration.

Dating from so much later than the rest of the castle — which may be of the 14th Century — and on a lower level of the uneven site, this building was seen to have been a

by Nigel Tranter

more or less new construction, erected against the old curtain wall, rather than merely a wing added or altered. It is a lengthy oblong block of two storeys and a garret lying approximately North and South, and containing a range of vaulted cellars in the basement.

The first floor now contains only the one large chamber, though it probably was subdivided originally, and the garret floor above has gone.

There are signs that there may have been further buildings to the South. The masonry is of rough red sandstone rubble.

The building has obviously been greatly altered and adapted at various periods, most of the win-

dows having been enlarged or built up with new doorways opened. But certain original features remain. The arch doorway towards the North end still retains its slot for a massive door-bar. A relieving arch surmounts the windows to the South, and a small loop-hole window survives between the doors at the South end. The walling is topped by an eaves course and both skewputts bear interesting carved masks.

Internally, little of interest

remains, but there has been a large arched fireplace in the North gable, presumably the kitchen.

The Sutherlands of Skelbo were a branch of the same family as the Earls of Sutherland, who likewise sprang from the famous Freskin de Moravia, founder of the Moray or Murray family. They seem to have gravitated north from Moray at an early date, no doubt marrying heiresses.

The Skelbo line, however, in due course went back, or at least re-established contact with Moray, for they inherited the great Lordship of Duffus in the 14th Century.

They seemed to have continued to make Skelbo their main domicile however — and a turbulent line they were. William Sutherland, the Lord of Duffus, was killed by Clan Gunn at Thurso in 1530 in a squabble over the Bishopric of Caithness, and his son and heir was thrown into prison by the Privy Council for the scale of his reprisals.

His son, Alexander, attacked and sacked the nearby town of Dornoch in 1567 and again in 1570. Oddly enough, we read that the next year, having put to death certain hostages held as sureties who had surrendered to his ally the Earl of Caithness, he became overcome with remorse and pinned away to his grave.

The Laird who succeeded in 1616 was rash enough to carry off the teind-sheaves already paid to the young Earl of Sutherland, depositing them in his own barns at Skelbo until forced by the Sheriff to disgorge.

The part of the castle with which we are concerned seems to have been built by the son of this Laird, created a peer by Charles I.

The first castle on the mound

would have been mainly constructed of timber, surrounded by a wooden palisade.

According to Bentinck's "Dornoch Cathedral and Parish" (1926), on Sunday, October 1, 1290, the English and Scottish Commissioners appointed to meet the Maid of Norway held a conference at Skelbo Castle and it was there that they received the sad tidings of her death on the voyage from Norway to Orkney, which changed the course of Scottish history.

From then on Skelbo is documented in great detail, particularly in Bentinck's book in the chapter on "Old Houses and Families."

Another great authority on Scottish castles, Dr Douglas Simpson, in his article on Skelbo Castle published in "Scottish Notes and Queries," October 1924, describes the construction and this is echoed in far greater detail in the survey carried out by the Royal Commission for the Recording of the Ancient and Historic Monuments (of Scotland) in the Autumn of 1982, as they considered Skelbo to be an important historical site and worthy of detailed recording.

In "The Middle Ages in the Highlands" published by the Inverness Field Club in 1981, John Dunbar describes Skelbo in his paper on "Highland Architecture" as "the principal surviving structure in Ross, Sutherland and Caithness, that can be ascribed with any degree of confidence to that period" as being Skelbo — "whether any portion of the cur-

tain walling is 13th Century is uncertain, but the stone keep or hall that crowns the summit may well belong to the period of the Wars of Independence."

It is clearly a site of the greatest historical importance to the whole area, matched but not surpassed by Ardvreck Castle with its associated ruined mansion house of Calda on Loch Assynt.

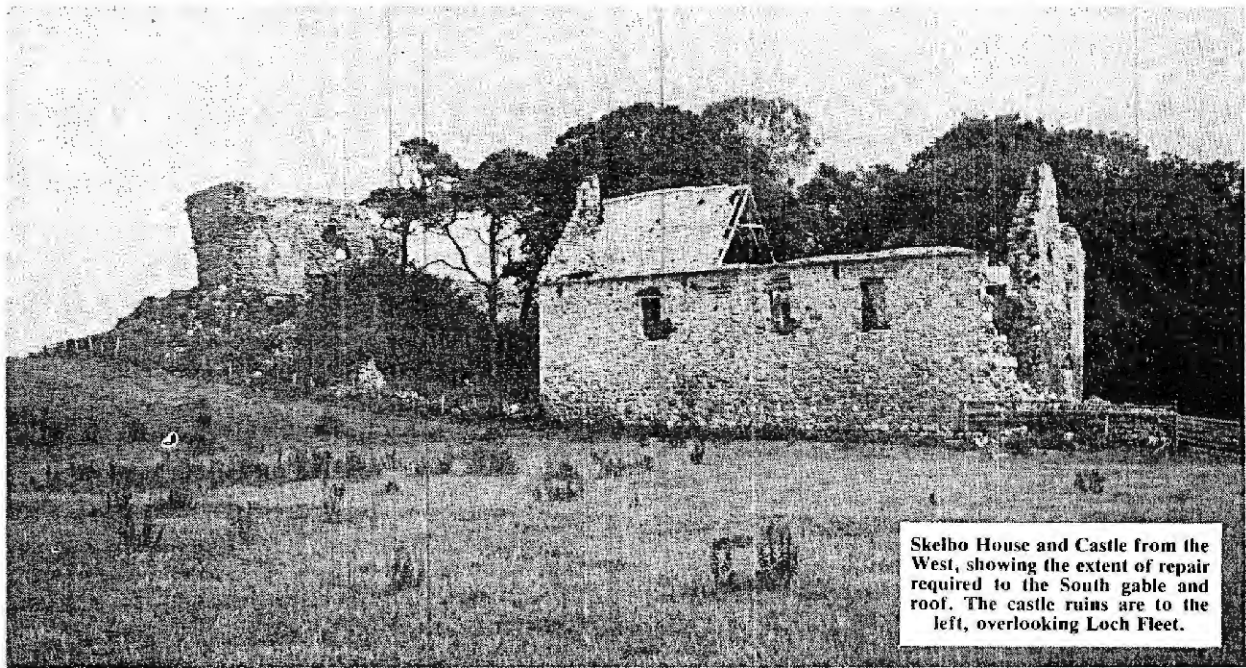
These are both B Listed buildings, despite their state, therefore subject to some degree of protection, which Skelbo at this moment lacks. Even though the mansion house within the walls is listed, the whole site is not scheduled as an Ancient Monument with which its setting and construction deserve.

In Lochinver, there is talk of an interpretive centre for the "Campaigns of Montrose" situated by the roadside between Calda and the castle, where he was taken after capture and from whence he began the long ride to the scaffold in Edinburgh.

This thought deserves real consideration because Ardvreck is also an important and visible part of Sutherland's past.

It would be pleasant to hope that out of the present discussions might arise solutions to the problems posed by both these deeply interesting ruins.

In today's climate of interpretation for tourism, with grant aid from various bodies for important restorations and the emphasis on the interpretation of our past by audio-visual displays, such a hope is not impossible.



Skelbo House and Castle from the West, showing the extent of repair required to the South gable and roof. The castle ruins are to the left, overlooking Loch Fleet.



Very recent storm damage to the south gable of Skelbo House has put the entire structure in danger.

NIGEL TRANTER is the distinguished author of "The Fortified House in Scotland" (5 Vols) 1962-71 as well as a mass of books about Scottish history, genealogy and topography in the past 45 years.

Distinguished architect Nicholas Johnstone is to be invited to join a small action committee to preserve the ruins of historic Skelbo Castle on Loch Fleet.

He is to be invited by Mr Michael Alexander, Skelbo House, to join the small committee to set in action a plan which will make the area more attractive and safe for visitors. He is the trustee of the estate.

Mr Johnstone was involved in the extension of Mr Alexander's Skelbo House and has restored a number of historic buildings.

Others who may serve on the committee are Mr Michael Vickers, a retired London barrister whose home is now at Skelbo Castle Cottage; a representative of Cambusmore Estate; of Dornoch Heritage Association; a locally resident representative of the Clan Sutherland Society, and Mr Alexander himself.

Mr Alexander, on behalf of the trustees of Skelbo Castle, has put forward an application for limited demolition of the ruined mansion house following an order from Highland Regional Council to make the building safe.

In a memorandum which he has submitted to Mr David Polson, the divisional planning officer, he says: "The general plan has evolved since I became an interested party, and it is based on the property as a whole — the 12th Century castle, the 16th/17th Century mansion and the Victorian house where I now live.

"To link the buildings and form a sort of mini-park, the connecting field was bought from Cambusmore Estate. The first part of the plan has now been completed as far as the burn, and refencing and gating is now in hand overall, in conjunction with Cambusmore Estate who have agreed to share the cost.

"This will include the ruin site where their sheep have intruded in the past. Various work has been done on the site, such as de-nettling (twice); collecting fallen slate, and investigating the possibility of reconstruction and conservation.

"The unexpected fall of masonry in the cold winter of 1985 alerted me and, for the first time, others who suddenly appeared to take interest in the place, to the dangers of further deterioration.

"Though I was aware of the unstable nature of the building material, I had taken no major precaution as I had had profes-

A Plan to save Skelbo Castle



sional advice that remedial work was impractical and that much of the building would have to come down before it could safely be built up."

Mr Alexander, author, soldier and survivor of the infamous German Oflag at Colditz Castle, has listed his plan for the ruins, which he hopes will commend itself to local authorities and others interested.

1. Partially to demolish the mansion ruin to a condition acceptable to the authorities. It is hoped that it will not be required to remove any part that might be retained for aesthetic reasons or in the interests of possible reconstruction. Measures against further collapse to be taken.

2. To retain and conserve all material of historical or architectural interest which might be used in reconstruction work in the future or of sufficient interest to record, retain or exhibit and to fulfil the recommendations of the Historic Buildings or Monuments Branch of the Scottish Development Department as far as possible.

3. To clear the site and make it attractive in accordance with the overall plan for Skelbo. This would include cosmetic items such as de-nettling (already twice attempted); clearing residual debris; planting a collection of briar and rambler roses and bulbs; grassing and levelling where necessary; fencing and gating (with the co-

operation of the Cambusmore Estate); making a path to a viewpoint over the loch.

4. Clearing out the forge and stable at ground level and making part available for a display which I would ask the Honorary Historian of the Clan Sutherland Society to organise.

5. To take further advice on the maintenance of the old castle walls. They seem intact at present but may require remedial treatment.

6. To encourage the conservation of wildlife by the installation of bird boxes; the protection of established nesting sites of jackdaws and fulmars and attempt to reintroduce the rock pigeons once shot out by a poacher. There is also a rookery related to the one in the main garden. I am myself a dedicated conservationist, was a founder director of *Wildlife* magazine and was the primary instigator of the designation of Loch Fleet as a reserve.

7. To investigate means of obtaining grants and involving philanthropic individuals or organisations in furthering the above plan, including the reconstruction of the ruin. In furtherance of this plan it has been my intention to open the 19th Century house where I live at Skelbo to exhibit a small interesting collection of Victoriana in aid of a "Ruins Fund".

8. To encourage public access only to the extent that the site is

This shot of 17th Century Skelbo House, taken more than 50 years ago, dramatically shows the extent of recent weathering damage to the structure. The roof has now all but caved in, and the gable walls are seriously damaged.

This picture, taken by Miss Lyon of Ospisdale in the 1930s, is now a valued treasure of the Dornoch Heritage Society.

The proposal by Mr Michael Alexander for limited demolition on grounds of public safety of part of Skelbo House will come before the planning committee at Dornoch on Monday, March 30.

Representations are expected from various conservation bodies against any proposal to knock down more of the historic house, which sits in the curtilage of the ruins of the much older Skelbo Castle, above Loch Fleet.

not compromised, disfigured or abused. Experience of excessive use of "tender" sites has not been shown to be of universal virtue. The south bank of Loch Fleet and the ruins have a virtue of their very existence and should not, in my opinion and the opinion of others concerned in Highland lifestyle, be unduly tainted by the spirit of exploitation and institutionalisation.

Mr Alexander's ninth point is the formation of the small action committee under the title of "Friends of Skelbo".

Skelbo Castle Owner invites Talks

Mr Michael Alexander, writer and distinguished former soldier, has come North specially this week from London to look into the situation of ruined Skelbo Castle, which he owns along with the ruins of the adjoining medieval mansion.

Last month the divisional planning committee discussed proposals to have the old house demolished and the entire site fenced off for safety reasons.

In a letter to this newspaper, following our extensive report, Mr Alexander (of 48 Eaton Place, London SW1) writes from the modern Skelbo House overlooking Loch Fleet:

There are several points I should like to make following the attention drawn to Skelbo Castle in your issue of April 5th. I trust Mr McMillan (divisional



Father, turning away insurance tout at door: "I'm up to my neck in insurance already." Senior son: "You'll need some cover for your head, surely?"

Minister, not a thousand miles from here, heard of the arrest of a person accused of stealing church charity boxes, via his collecting plate. A policeman left a written note there during prayer.

Big surprise for Assynt family this week when, only five minutes after a phone-call from their relatives in Canada, they walked in at the door. They'd used a phone down the road.

Welcome to Talmine's newsletter *Paipear Beag*, with its fund of April Fool japes. But what of the new Ceilidh Band at Melness, described as a quintet but with only four players mentioned?

Attie missed the return trip of the Kyleakin ferry from Skye and had to hire a rowing boat to get back to the mainland, emulating the renowned Michael of the song.

planning officer) did not imply discourtesy or lack of concern on my part or on the part of the trustees of this estate in saying that he had had no reply to his letters. No letters have in fact reached me, though information was just recently passed on to me and upon which I acted at once by asking my representative here, Mr David Macdonald, to contact the appropriate authorities. I have now come up from London to apprise myself of the situation.

The 17th century mansion, where the main problem lies, was set on fire about thirty years ago by gypsies camping there since when, following the collapse of the roof supports, the building has steadily deteriorated. My wife and I went into the matter of restoration or preservation when we first came into possession but short of demolishing and rebuilding we were advised that there was nothing to be done except at impossible cost.

The alternative was to let the building decay and hopefully turn itself into a "picturesque ruin." To this end we did some elementary demolition in the interests of safety and put up notices etc. This building, I understand, is not considered of primary historical interest by Edinburgh, who have twice been up to inspect the site at my invitation.

The castle is of more interest to them but I understand they do not have the funds to apply to it. I do not think it presents a danger to the public but it seems to me to be in need of attention in some places, where a little cement and stone could do a useful "holding" job.

May I use your columns to suggest that the Clan Sutherland organisation, to whom I have given access, could provide some volunteer masons, though this may require some sort of planning approval from some quarter or other?

To return to the 17th century ruin: I agree that it is a hazard to the public, especially following the collapse of an outside wall this winter. I have arranged for new notices to be put up following their removal by, I suspect, young persons. The area is also covered by a public liability insurance. I agree that people should KEEP OUT and to this end, and with the approval of the trustees, intend to fence that area in.

The Council may wish to consider removing, possibly for use as fill-in, the considerable amount of

debris caused by collapse which I have just inspected. A more radical demolition can be considered.

I should be very pleased to discuss the overall issues with any interested party and I should especially like to talk with Jane Durham, whose interesting letter appeared in the same issue as the article.

KEEP RUINS FOR "HISTORY DIGS"

Brora registrar Mr Stewart Maclean — a keen amateur historian — is appalled at the suggestion of taking Skelbo House down to a mere wall.

He said this week: "If, instead of demolishing, they reduced the wall to above the barrel vaulting, above the ground floor, and water-proofed that part, that would help to preserve some unique features of this building. If even the local Archaeological Society could take an interest, there is a marvellous example of what an old Sixteenth or Seventeenth Century kitchen was like, with the fireplace and other facilities still visible but now all in a dangerous condition."

"During the next few years, if it were given over to the Archaeological Society, there could be an educational dig under supervision which might uncover all sorts of interesting artifacts."

"It seems to have been originally an old motte and bailey castle, with a curtain-wall castle built around it. The foundations of the original building appear to be underneath Skelbo House, and it would be a great shame if it were reduced to simply a one-metre wall."

Members of Highland Regional Council were being asked yesterday to overturn a decision by their general purposes committee not to give financial support to the Dounreay Action Group.

Two Caithness councillors, Mr William Smith of Thurso and Mr James Oag of Thrumster, Wick, had suggested that a grant of £200 should be given to the Action Group, following their request for financial assistance.

Chairman of the general purposes committee, Mr Alistair Milne of Inverness, seconded by Mr David Macrae of Golspie, moved that no action should be taken.

NT 5/4/1985

Skelbo Castle — An Assurance

Sir — Following your notice of an application to the planning office to carry out demolitions at Skelbo Castle ruins, it might allay alarm among interested members of the public if I were to point out that the limited demolition to the 17th century building proposed by our surveyor in order to meet the requirements of safety will, if granted, be carried out with the historical and architectural aspects conscientiously considered.

I am informed that no action is required at this time in respect of the 12C walls which make such an impressive circuit of the hilltop.

I should like to assure interested parties that I and the Trustees of the Skelbo Estate are very conscious of the aggravation that might be caused by lack of public access and are considering various proposals for the improvement and maintenance of the site. —
Michael Alexander, Skelbo House,
Dornoch.

16/1/87

Bold Plan for Skelbo Manor

THIS drawing, by Edinburgh architect Benjamin Tindall, of a proposed reconstruction of the Skelbo Manor House above Loch Fleet, has been sent to the retired American army general who has shown interest in purchasing the ruin and restoring it.

Mr Michael Alexander, of nearby Skelbo House, whose daughter's trust owns the ruins, said that he was expecting a visit from the possible American buyer this week to finalise the purchase of the building for restoration.

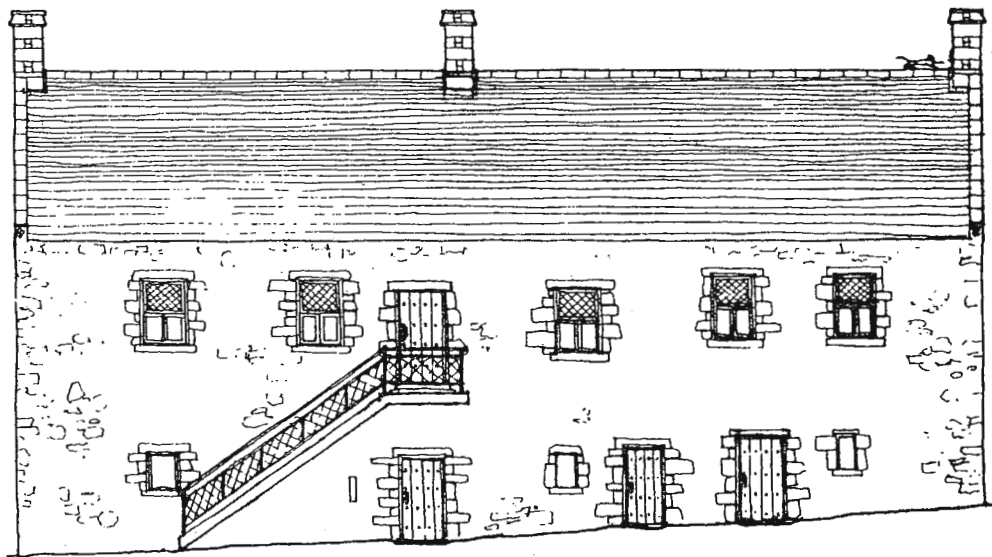
The Scottish Historic Buildings Trust, who had been investigating the possibility of a guardianship agreement with the government, are believed to be favourably disposed to the sale of Skelbo manor House to a sympathetic restorer. It is felt that there are so many other buildings throughout the country in greater need of guardianship, that Skelbo House would stand little chance of government funding.

Mr Alexander had reacted sharply to news that a petition was being circulated by the Dornoch Heritage Society asking for the Skelbo Castle ruins to be placed under the guardianship of the Secretary of State.

He said in a statement:

‘This petition followed an application by the owners to “make safe”, in accordance with official requirements, the dangerous parts of the late 17th Century mansion house (badly damaged by fire earlier this century and subsequently in need of remedial work) that lies within the remaining walls of the 13th Century castle.

These picturesque ruins lie at the bottom of my garden and are



therefore very much my consideration. I might here point out that the old castle walls, which are not endangered, are the only part visible from the very minor road which runs along the southern shore of Loch Fleet. The ruined mansion lies in a hollow and is best visible from my house which lies on higher ground.

Our planning application referred to above, which was seen by the Dornoch Heritage Society, asked for very limited removal of masonry in the interests of safety and the retention of material against future possible reconstruction. This necessary and innocuous application was, it would seem, used by the Dornoch Heritage Society and a more committed interest, in a manner that might be described as opportunist, uncalled for, and premature: their petition, circulated without informing the owners, emotively suggested that

the place was to be demolished and that the only alternative was enforced guardianship by the State.

I have no doubt that the petition as worded, could have obtained, given the necessary finance for postage, etc, an unlimited number of signatures. A number of people

have told me that had they known the facts they would on no account have signed. At a meeting between Mr James Bell, another official of the Dornoch Heritage Society and our Friends of Skelbo group, the former accepted that the petition was misleading under the cir-

cumstances and agreed to clarify the matter publicly.

Meanwhile, mainly due to the perpetrators of the petition, planning permission to make the place safe and improve it in a manner more appropriate to the situation, has been held up. During this time the owners and others have not been idle in seeking an acceptable restoring purchaser and despite Mr Bell's dismissive and, if I may suggest, unseemly, statement that “nothing appears to have come of it”, I can report that negotiations are at present in progress between solicitors to finalise a firm offer of purchase and restoration as a residence.

Some brilliant plans for restoration have been prepared for our consideration by an architect specialising in this sort of work. We can therefore, despite Mr Bell's ill-informed pessimism, hope for a happy resolution of Skelbo ruins without recourse to the Secretary of State who, I understand, has many more deserving cases to absorb the limited public money at his disposal.

I might add that the Friends of Skelbo and others feel that the excellent restoration work undertaken by the Scottish Office with attendant car parks, toilets, etc, would not, at this time, be appropriate to the delicate ecology of this particular site. 9

Mr Gordon Edmond was to succeed Mr Walter Sutherland as county road surveyor for Sutherland.

* * *

Assynt parents said they believed it was imperative that the existing status of Lochinver Junior Secondary School should be retained.

* * *

A survey was to be carried out in Sutherland to find what areas might be suitable for ski-ing as a sports attraction.

Our Old Files®

75 YEARS AGO
(January 9, 1913)

Farr native Mr J Abrach Mackay, former magistrate of Dundee, had a lucky escape from death when he was struck just above the left eye by a stray shot

Well known Sutherland athlete M M Christian of Invergordon had come third in the Dingwall to Strathpeffer walking race on New Years day.

* * *

Mr Ian Campbell who had been

Skelbo Castle Owner Under Siege

Skelbo Castle owner Michael Alexander — a former SAS officer and survivor of Colditz — has accused Highland planners of “harrassment” and “provocation” over demands for its repair.

Having learned that the regional planning committee proposes to go for compulsory purchase of the castle and its medieval manor house if repairs are not carried out within two months, Mr Alexander said that he already had Edinburgh architect Mr Benjamin Tindall working on emergency repairs on the gable end of the house.

Writing to Mr David Polson, the divisional planning officer, Mr Alexander said: “It was obviously necessary to involve the architect to design scaffolding that would be appropriate to future restoration work rather than purely remedial. Mr Tindall was to have reported back following a visit in September, which apparently did not take place. We agreed that there was no immediate architectural urgency.

“I had hoped by now to have completed the sale in which case it would have been the responsibility of the purchaser. But in view of the oncoming winter and the possible effect of frost, I instructed Mr Tindall to proceed. Had either of us been consulted before your recent meeting, I should think that your committee would have deferred any draconian decision which would seem to be a further example of harrassment.”

On the question of compulsory purchase, Mr Alexander said that he had already informed the

regional planners that the ruins had been sold, subject to exchange of contracts, to an American General.

“He is of Scottish descent and should make a good neighbour and be an asset to the community. He has twice visited the site and the contract stipulates restoration under appropriate auspices.

“I do not wish to start a skirmish with the planners in my defence of Skelbo Castle, but I cannot help but feel, despite your statutory duty to carry out the provisions of the act (which seem to allow some discretion under circumstances), provocation is in the air.”

Two military men are in the field to buy the castle and restore it. Mr Alexander's deal is with a General Humphries, who comes from the Mid West, and who is keen to take over the barony which goes with Skelbo. This is in the possession of the House of Sutherland and would entitle him to call himself “General Humphries of Skelbo”.

A retired British Army major, with Highland connection, had indicated to Highland regional council — but not to the owner of the castle Mr Alexander — that he would be interested in purchasing at the district valuers' valuation. This has been put at £2500.

Scottish historical novelist Nigel Tranter has joined in the battle to

save the manor house along with Highlands and Islands Euro MP Mrs Winifred Ewing.

Mr Tranter, who is the author of a book on Scottish forts and fortalices, which includes a reference to 12th Century Skelbo, was invited by Mr Daniel Sutherland of the Clan Sutherland Society to give Mrs Ewing support over the ruined castle, “which so many are grieved to see deteriorating in condition and neither being restored nor preserved. I share this regret not only for Skelbo of course, but for all saveable fortalices. It has long been my concern to try to preserve these irreplaceable monuments of our nation's history, and I have been in one way or another involved in saving over thirty of them, down the years,” he wrote Mrs Ewing.

Mr Tranter, author of *The Wallace* and many other stirring tales from Scotland's past, said in his letter: “They are all important, in one way or another, representing much in Scotland's story, for the people who built these castles and towers were apt to make that colourful story. But Skelbo is especially important in that Sutherland is strangely impoverished in this respect, there being so very few of such surviving as it is — only three others, indeed, where the main features survive — Dunrobin, Dornoch and Balnakeil in the far North-West.

“Efforts to save Skelbo have, as you know, been going on for some considerable time, but with scant success. The owner seems to be not very interested, and attempts to have a compulsory purchase order put on it have not as yet borne fruit, in order that somebody else might buy and restore it. Sad it is that in this day and age, drawn-out struggles of this sort have to be waged. And meanwhile the structures suffer deterioration if not collapse.”

18/11/1988 NT



Our Tenerife correspondent reports that, whenever the young Sorleys come on holiday, they moan about the lack of farming news in the Raggie. They'll have to make it to read it, as we once told a sheriff.

Skelbo may be taken by Force

Historic Skelbo Castle and Manor House, where commissioners from King Edward I learned of the death of the Maid of Norway in 1290, could be compulsorily purchased for only £2500 — and then sold to a restoring buyer at that price.

The Regional planning committee were told this last week in a report from director of planning Mr Richard Cameron on the unsafe condition of the buildings above Loch Fleet.

The 16th century Manor House is in a very poor state of repair with the free-standing South gable in a particularly dangerous condition, he told members. The site was only partially secure and required additional notices to inform the general public that the building was dangerous.

Sutherland divisional planning committee had recommended that a repairs notice should be served on the owner of the site, Mr Michael Alexander, whose home is the modern Skelbo House. If he did not comply with the order, this would involve the planning authority in a compulsory acquisition of the building at a cost set by the District Valuer.

Members of the regional planning committee agreed that officials should investigate the possible costs to the planning authority of carrying out minimal essential works with a view to recouping their costs from the owners.

Mr Cameron's staff considered that the minimum measures considered immediately necessary to preserve the building included the fencing of the entire site to prevent access by the general public, and

scaffolding to stabilise the South gable wall on a temporary basis.

This would be in accordance with a report prepared in December last year by Edinburgh architect Mr Benjamin Tindall, with an attempt to salvage cut and dressed stones, roof slates and timbers under expert supervision at an estimated cost of between £2000 and £3000.

In August Mr Alexander was informed about the views of the regional planning committee and asked if he would be prepared to authorise the necessary works as soon as possible.

Although a stockproof fence had been erected around the site by the Trustees, no other works had been carried out and Mr Alexander had stated that, if the authority wished to undertake the emergency works, it would do so "at its own risk and responsibility."

Mr Cameron reported that the erection of scaffolding and other temporary measures would give a useful "breathing space" in which the future of the building could be properly considered. But the best long-term solution for the 16th century house at Skelbo Castle would be to find a suitable use for the building and its grounds.

Interest had been expressed in writing to the planning authority by a prospective purchaser, who wanted to restore Skelbo for use as

a private dwelling. He had stated that he had taken detailed advice and intended to take full account of the historical and aesthetic significance of the buildings and their environs.

Mr Alexander said from his London home this week: "I have given instructions to an approved architect to put up scaffolding so that we can effect repairs. And I have already spent £1500 on safety fencing. What more can they expect me to do when I have a deal with a prospective purchaser just waiting to be completed?"

The purchaser he refers to is a retired US Army officer who has shown interest in buying the castle and restoring it.

The planners are talking of a ser-

ving British Army officer who has expressed a wish to renovate Skelbo House and assume the title of Baron Skelbo.

Mr Cameron recommended to his committee that they should follow the decision of the divisional planning committee and go for a repairs notice which, if not carried out within two months, would then lead the council to acquiring the buildings at the district valuer's estimated compulsory acquisition cost of £2500.

Subject to the confirmation of a compulsory purchase order by the Secretary of State, the buildings will then be sold to the restoring purchasers at the agreed price.

"Its restoration could turn the present liability of decay and disuse into an asset, and an attraction to visitors," the planners reported.

TV Advert taken off after Complaint

Seventy-five years after the death of Capt Scott and his companions returning from the South Pole, a TV commercial advertising Kit-Kat chocolate bars using Capt Oates' famous farewell has been withdrawn.

The decision was partly due to a complaint from a Sutherland viewer.

Andy Wilson, advertising control officer for the Independent Broadcasting Authority, has admitted that when scripts for the advertisement were first presented for clearance, some IBA staff themselves expressed concern "that implied references to the story of Capt Oates and the Scott Expedition could prove offensive to viewers."

As a result, a deliberate decision was made to make the equipment

mercial from the actual historical events which clearly were the original inspiration," he wrote.

This was not enough to placate viewer Valerie Scott of Lonemore, Main Street, Golspie and a number of others throughout the country, who protested to the IBA and the Advertising Standards Authority.

Said SSPCA worker Mrs Scott this week: "I thought the TV commercial was grossly offensive to a courageous chapter of modern British history."

Mr Wilson wrote her: "Once this has been made public it was

4/11/1988 NT

US Captain orders film on "His" Castle

A film on Skelbo Castle's ruined 17th century manor house is being made by a US Cable TV company for the prospective "restoring purchaser," Captain Herbert Humphreys.

Jack Sherry, director of special projects for International Expeditions Inc of Vero Beach, Florida, was in Sutherland recently with a camera crew shooting film around

Royal Dornoch golf course and Skelbo, on Loch Fleet.

His guide at Skelbo was Mr James Bell, chairman of the Dornoch Heritage Society, whose

members have been expressing anxiety about the ruinous state of the former mansion house within the walls of the ancient castle.

Captain Humphreys has been in negotiation with the principal trustee, Mr Michael Alexander of Skelbo House, since last year. A property developer, he is keen to rebuild the old house for his own use because of ancestral connections

with Dornoch.

Based in Memphis, Tennessee, he is a businessman with a keen interest in history and archeology, according to film director Mr Sherry.

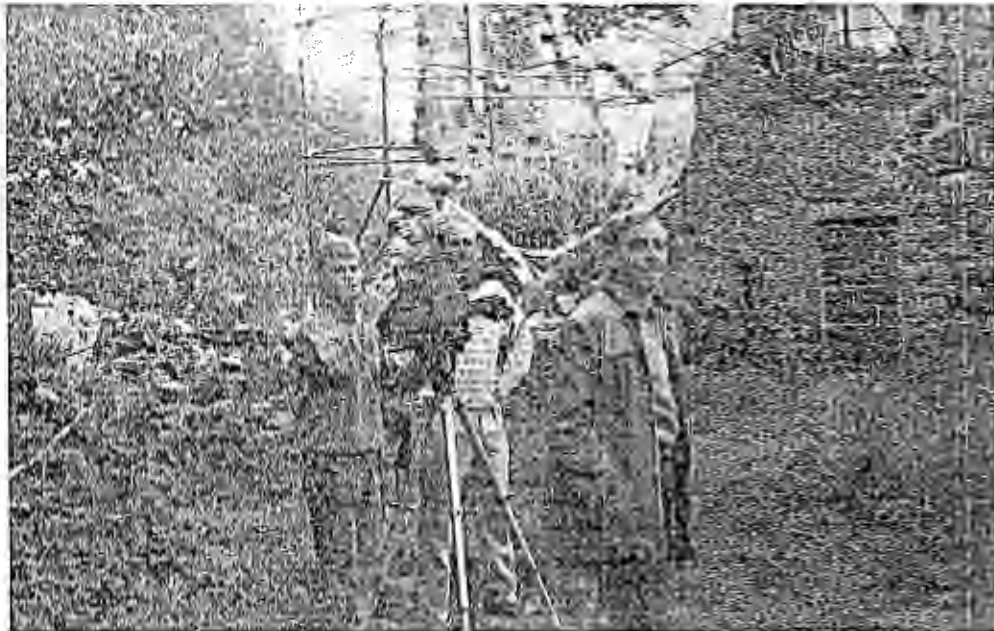
"I have been making a documentary about the recovery of a Spanish galleon which was lost in 1656, with 700 passengers on board in the Bahamas. He is keenly interested in this project.

"Captain Humphreys has also traced his own history and heritage back to this particular site where we are now standing, at Skelbo in Sutherland.

"He is hoping to purchase this site and restore it to something of its former glory. What needs to be done is the rebuilding of the 17th century house, because the castle is beyond all restoration.

"From a visual stand point of view, what affects me the most is the site itself overlooking the water of Loch Fleet, and the inlet where the Norsemen must have come in, seen the hill and immediately decided that this was where they were to build their fortifications."

Does Captain Humphreys have any desire to assume the title of Baron Skelbo? "Yes, I think he is very much interested in this because he has talked to me about it for more than two years now, so we are making this little film for him and a story to go along with it, which I am sure he will be most interested to see."



Dornoch Heritage Society's James Bell (right) with US cameraman and film director Jack Sherry in overgrown grounds of Skelbo Castle.

God made

GLS