

THIS IS MY COUNTRY—

The splendours of Dornoch

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*Ah! seaweed smells from sandy caves,
And woods and fields and moors around;
The long Firth stirred by gentle waves
And Dornoch's mellow towers behind;
Lark song and sea sounds in the air
And splendour, splendour everywhere.*

SURELY Mr John Betjeman will forgive me for paraphrasing his well-known apostrophe to Seaside Golf in such a good cause, for Dornoch inspires that very same sense of physical wellbeing through healthy recreation to which he gave such lively expression.

The ancient cathedral city and county town of Sutherland has enjoyed this year a quite unprecedented invasion of holiday visitors. Time and again it has been necessary to put up "House Full" notices at the caravan site. And really, is it any wonder?

For the multitudes of family-car touring parties from south of the Border and across the seas have discovered at last that Dornoch has all the advantages of the Rainbow West, without the Atlantic rains which so often mar a holiday there.

On its great sandy promontory, at the eastern tip of the narrows of the Dornoch Firth, it is sheltered on every side—away to the east by the Easter Ross headland of Tarbat Ness on the other side of the Firth, to the north and west by the tumbled hills of Sutherland, to the south by the wooded heights of the Morangie Forest across the waters of the Melkie Ferry.

There is a mildness in the air which quite distinguishes it from its other East Coast peers in the golfing world, the historic "big five" courses at St Andrews, Leith, Montrose, Aberdeen and Musselburgh, to which it makes a sixth in mere numbers, not in historical priority, for in that it comes third on the list.

Two great fingers of mellow yellow sandstone signal one's approach to Dornoch from any angle—the tower of the Cathedral, with its squat spire, and the soaring five-storey keep of Dornoch Castle, originally the Bishop's Palace and now a most excellently conducted hotel. These two landmarks define the central area of the ancient burgh.

The Cathedral, with its venerable graveyard, stands on an inviolate island site, bounded on the north of the High Street and on the south by Castle Street, separated from it by a tree-girt lawn; and facing it is the Castle itself, and the range of buildings including the Sheriff Courthouse and the Old Jail, which, with very considerable good taste were appended to it in 1850. To the east of the Old Jail, Castle Street then opens out into a splendid spacious square lined with handsome modern buildings with timbered gables in the "old English" style, which yet succeed in blending graciously with the whole design.

A noble 'city centre'

After sun-blessed mornings or afternoons on the peerless Dornoch links it is a pleasure to return to the "city centre" here and savour the noble vista of Cathedral and Castle, whose presence is a reminder of centuries of burghal life in this quiet county town. In the past writers on Dornoch have punctuated their descriptions with reminders that the whole place is in reality "just a village." Such a qualification is no longer necessary, for Dornoch today is larger than it ever was in the past.

In 1841 its population stood at 451. Twenty years later it had risen to 647, but in the next twenty years it sank back again to 497. At the turn of the century it was 624. For the next fifty years it remained in the 700s, reaching 793 in 1951. The 1961 census showed a leap up to 933 and today it is probably just under 1000.

Before one gets too cock-a-hoop at this sign of increased prosperity, it is well to remember that during all this period the overall population of the County of Sutherland was falling, until today it stands at all-time "low" of 13,500.

The universal trend for centralisation has swollen Dornoch town at the expense of the rural areas of the county. It houses an important part of the county administration. Its magnificent new academy, opened almost a year ago by the Queen Mother, draws pupils from all over the shire. In addition, the county town naturally has an attraction for folk contemplating retirement and many retired people, beguiled by the beauty and the gracious amenities of the place make it their home by choice.

Apart from the tourist industry the largest employers of labour in Dornoch are the meat exporting firm of John Grant and Sons, Cathedral Square. Founded over a hundred years ago this thriving family business has a staff of 33 and buys Aberdeen-Angus "baby beef" and other meat produce from an area all over the north of Scotland, and exports its, not only throughout Britain, but even to Holland and Switzerland, operating the Dornoch municipal slaughterhouse on licence from the town council.

Let nothing I have said about the tourist boom enjoyed by Dornoch suggest that the ancient quietude of the place has been surrendered. One's final and lasting impression of Dornoch is of peace and beauty, which follows one everywhere like a benediction.

With the splendid East Gable of the Cathedral behind him, the Town Crier of Dornoch, Mr Simon Bain, rings his handbell and strides round the burgh precincts conveying a message to the citizens. And Dornoch has indeed something to shout about. The golfing mecca of the North, it has had a record season this summer—not surprising when one considers its combination of historic grandeur and modern amenity.