

Ghost to lure spooked American tourists



Hotel restaurant supervisor Sheila MacDonald, who claims to have felt the ghostly presence

by Sue Restan

THE ghost of a hanged sheep stealer is to help attract American tourists back to the Highlands in the wake of September 11 and the war in Iraq.

Sutherland's Dornoch Castle Hotel and its resident ghost are to be featured in a holiday programme on haunted hotels on the American Travel Channel.

A film crew will be staying in the hotel for four nights at the beginning of next month and one of the people they will want to talk to is daytime restaurant supervisor Sheila MacDonald.

Ms MacDonald yesterday said she has felt a ghostly presence in the corridor between the dining room and the cellar.

"As I come through the corridor, I sometimes feel that someone is behind me. I turn around thinking there's someone wanting attention and there's nobody there.

"It's not a bad feeling and I've never seen anything.

"I've no idea whether the

ghost is male or female," she said.

Ms MacDonald's mother, Greta Campbell, also worked at the castle, when it was a private residence.

And the supervisor has childhood memories of her mother telling her about a similar experience.

"She felt the same thing, but it was in the tower. She was going up to bed and thought her friend was behind her. She was chatting away to her, but when she got to her room, she turned around and there was nobody there.

"It turned out her friend had gone back down for something," said Ms MacDonald.

Managing director, Colin Thompson, explained that the ghost is believed to be that of a sheep stealer, called Andrew McCornish, who was imprisoned in the dungeons beneath the tower when the castle served as the courthouse and jail.

He is believed to have been hung for his crime in the castle gardens and his ghost was

reputedly seen by the Minister of Avoch towards the end of the last century.

The castle - thought to have been built in the 14th century and added to in the 16th century - passed into private hands in 1922 and the new owners took the precaution of having the building exorcised.

"Since then, there have been no more apparitions, but there is still a ghostly presence," said Mr Thompson.

The film crew from Authentic Entertainments in Los Angeles will be speaking to people who have encountered the ghost. They will also reenact the story of Andrew McCornish.

Mr Thompson said: "We are obviously delighted to be included in the programme. It seems we are to have 15 minutes on a 30 minute show.

"We have quite a lot of business from the States, but it has been down a bit this year due to the threat of terrorism."

Mr Thompson added that, since he and his business part-

ner, Hugh Anderson, took over the hotel three years ago, the number of US visitors has been affected by the petrol crisis, foot and mouth disease, September 11 and the war in Iraq.

"I'm sure they will come back eventually, but this will give us a real boost in the States. I'm sure the ghost will be an added attraction," he said.

In the meantime, Mr Thompson and Mr Anderson are embarking on a £250,000 programme of improvements, including a new conservatory-style restaurant, which will cater for 60 people for dinner and up to 100 for weddings and other functions.

The planned work also includes an increase in the number of bedrooms from 18 to 23, refurbishment of all the rooms, the refitting of the kitchen and improvements to the layout and access.

The restaurant, which is the first phase of the improvements, is expected to be ready to open at the end of June.