

# Hostel phase-out marks end of an era

AN ERA in Sutherland's educational history came to an end yesterday when the last residents bade farewell to Earl's Cross school hostel, Dornoch, at the end of the summer term.

B-listed mansion Earl's Cross, named after a centuries-old nearby monument, was home to hundreds of schoolboys from remoter parts of Sutherland for the past 43 years.

It was earmarked for closure earlier this year by Highland Regional Council, because of high maintenance costs, and a reduction in numbers of secondary pupils at Dornoch Academy and Golspie High School requiring accommodation.

Sutherland divisional education officer Mr John Metcalfe said a recent survey had questioned the building's continued suitability as a hostel. If kept open, it would have cost a substantial amount to bring accommodation up to standard.

Although basically sound, Earl's Cross is showing signs of wear and tear from over four decades of hosting boisterous teenage boys.

Yesterday Mr Metcalfe said the education department would first of all offer it for use to other regional council departments.

If no local authority use can be found for the hostel, currently valued at £250,000, it will be offered for sale on the open market.

The hostel originally accommodated over 40 boys,

but in its final days numbers dropped to 21 first- and second-year pupils, with only 17 in residence on the last night.

Next term these boys will be divided between MacLeod House Hostel, Golspie, still a boys' hostel and the two girls' hostels, Mackay House, Golspie and Ross House, Dornoch.

Matron Mrs Margaret MacKenzie moves as matron to MacLeod House Hostel, while warden Mrs Diane Thomson, who was also offered another post, has decided instead to go home to Caithness.

Three long serving domestic staff members are to retire.

■ The last Earl's Cross Hostel boys, pictured on the lawn with warden Mrs Diane Thomson (left) and matron Mrs Margaret MacKenzie, on their last evening in the building. They are (rear, from left) Cornelius Bakker, Lochinver; Gary Howerd, Achfary; Alan Dawson, Kinlochbervie; David Munro, Lochinver; Calum Millar, Drumbeg; Andrew MacKenzie, Stoer; David Morrison, Kinlochbervie; David Shaw, Durness; Niall Robertson, Lochinver; (front, from left) Douglas MacDonald, Stoer; Victor Roonie, Lochinver; Jamie Dawson, Kinlochbervie; Luke Millar, Achfary; Warren Luke, Loch Choire; Lawrence MacLeod, Kinlochbervie; David Cuthbertson, Achfary; Kenneth Clark, Kylesku.



## Distant echoes from the past in the empty rooms at old Earl's Cross



P&J REPORTER and former hostel boy Willie Morrison, who lived at Earl's Cross from 1953 to 1958, made a brief, nostalgic pilgrimage around the building on its last evening as a hostel.

He writes: As its latest residents rushed around, excitedly agog at the prospect of long summer holidays, I roved the rooms and corridors quietly, in another world altogether, along with the laughing ghosts of boys now middle-aged and scattered far and wide.

Pineapple, Panda, Popeye, Pobble, Sheepie, Fido, Grievass,

Bong, Baligill, Stag, Scrizzler — most of us answered, if not always willingly, to our nicknames. My own was Sluggo.

Gaunt Room 7 was still recognisable as the dormitory in which I spent my first, somewhat homesick year, adjusting gradually to the disciplined regime of 7 o'clock rising, making my own bed and helping to sweep out the room before breakfast.

Home to seven boys at that time, it latterly housed five on a more generous scale.

Room 9, where also there

haunted space, where Rodney MacKenzie and Ian Matheson, at an interval of two years, had the weird experience of waking up to see a pair of luminous hands above their beds, was still occupied.

Have any of the many other boys to sleep there since seen anything untoward?

I climbed the fire escape outside, recalling with horror hanging backwards over the topmost railing for a dare, supported only by the backs of my knees.

What touched me most,

opposite wall from the wash-hand basins, was a mirror I stood in from the first time I used a razor, a downy-face old on the threshold hood.

It was the same mirror many of us had also long ago to tease our curls, with lash Brylcreem, before se for the pictures in Church Hall on S nights.

If the mirror com