

SKIBO

“HEAVEN ON EARTH”



SKIBO CASTLE

J.A. Simpson, former Minister of Dornoch Cathedral, recalls Skibo in its heyday.

In the spring of 1897, Louise Carnegie, the wife of America's "Steel King," Andrew Carnegie, gave birth to a daughter, Margaret. The Carnegies had been married for ten years, and as Andrew was now in his sixties, there was understandably great rejoicing at the birth of their first and only child. "Margaret must have a Scottish home!" resolved Andrew. Though he had made his fortune in America, he had never lost his love for his native land.

That summer, during a visit to Scotland, he began his search for a suitable Scottish home. His estate agents were instructed that it should have a view of the sea, a private anchorage for his luxury yacht the *Sea Breeze*, a trout stream and a waterfall. Skibo, an estate on the banks of the Dornoch Firth in Sutherland, was soon drawn to his attention.

The estate was steeped in history, having originally been a 10th century Viking stronghold. During its thousand-year history, Skibo Castle had undergone many structural changes. When Carnegie first saw it, it was an attractive, average-sized estate house in good condition. The terraced garden, the lime and laburnum trees, the banks of rhododendrons, the Monk's walk, the great beech hedges dating back to the 13th century, were all very much to Carnegie's liking. The sea was clearly visible, anchorage was possible at Newton Point only a mile from the Castle, the trout were jumping in the nearby rivers and the sun was shining. Although there was no waterfall or pier, both could easily be built.

For Carnegie it was love at first sight. Purchasing the estate for £85,000 he began making plans to build the baronial castle of his dreams. No expense was spared. The best craftsmen were hired and the finest stone and wood used. Though she was still only two, Margaret Carnegie starred with her mother in the ceremony of laying the foundation stone of the new extension which was to dwarf the

original building. The inscription on the corner stone reads, "Margaret Carnegie laid me, 23rd June 1899 A.D." The "Upstairs" with its luxury bedrooms was designed to accommodate the many dignitaries, prime ministers, archbishops, authors, musicians, university principals and royalty, who would be invited to enjoy Carnegie's lavish hospitality. The "Downstairs" was designed to accommodate the huge staff that would be required.

The panelled entrance hall is dominated by the great central staircase, made of magnificently carved oak, on the half-landing are five stained-glass windows recounting the early history of the castle, as well as Carnegie's own life-story.

The central window depicts Bishop Gilbert who, in 1186, while Archdeacon of Moray, had been given the lands of Skibo by Hugh Freskyn, the first Earl of Sutherland. In 1224, when Gilbert was appointed Bishop of Caithness and Sutherland and set about building nearby Dornoch Cathedral, he made Skibo his home.

To the left of the bishop, a Viking chief is depicted, a reminder of the early Viking connections. (The name Skibo is of Viking origin, meaning probably either "the place shaped like a bird" or "ship-place.") On the bishop's right stands the Marquis of Montrose.

After his arrest in West Sutherland, the Marquis spent a night at Skibo on his way to Edinburgh for trial and execution.

The two remaining windows depict scenes from Carnegie's own story: one shows the little weaver's cottage in Dunfermline where he was born, and the small sailing ship in which he and his family emigrated; the other, by way of contrast, is of Skibo Castle and the great ocean liner in which Andrew Carnegie returned from America, determined to give away the vast wealth which he had accumulated, "for the enlightenment and betterment of mankind." Butt and ben to baronial castle, weaver's son to multi-millionaire! Truth can be stranger than fiction.

During his four, sometimes five month annual residence at Skibo, Carnegie carried on an intensely active social life. The castle guest

book reads like a Who's Who - Rudyard Kipling, Paderewski, Edward Elgar, the Rockefellers, Lloyd George, Helen Keller, King Edward VII. Margaret still vividly recalls Helen Keller standing at the entrance to the dining room, gently feeling the faces of those who entered, thus forming her own image of each guest. With less enthusiasm she recalled the visit of King Edward VII. At the age of five she did not like being kissed by bearded men, not even bearded Kings! As Buckingham Palace was being modelled at the time of the King's visit, Edward was intensely interested in the Carnegie's newly installed comforts and conveniences.

Interspersed with such illustrious names in the visitor's book, one finds the names of old Dunfermline friends and relatives. Carnegie mixed his guests with complete disregard for their social background, politics, religion, nationality or colour. As Margaret sat one day by the peat fire in the entrance hall, I asked her who among the famous Skibo guests had most impressed her. Her reply surprised but delighted me. Without hesitation she said it was Booker T. Washington, the coloured American educationist. Margaret's father had helped him to found the Tuskegee Institute, the first college for negro students in the United States.

Not only did Carnegie provide considerable financial aid to the college, he also gave Mr Washington, as principal, a private salary. At a later date, he arranged for him to holiday at Skibo, all expenses paid. From the moment of his arrival, he and Margaret were drawn to each other. His love of children was obvious. At the end of his stay he wrote in Margaret's autograph book the thought-provoking sentence: *My dear young friend, I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life, as by the obstacles which one has overcome while trying to succeed.* Booker T. Washington, Nov 8, 1908.

Every guest, no matter how distinguished, had to conform to the castle rules. Each morning at 8 o'clock a piper marched slowly round the castle. If that failed to rouse the sounder sleepers, they were later

wakened by the majestic tones of the castle's pipe organ, for breakfast at Skibo was to the accompaniment of background organ music. Carnegie put great stress on the importance of a good musical beginning to the day. Breakfast to the accompaniment of Radio 1 or Radio 2 would have been an anathema to Carnegie. Writing about the appointment of a new castle organist he said:

We are particular about the music... no fancy pieces... the music is to be played slowly, feelingly, no bounce... Pay the best prices for the best is the rule... You ought to know a real musician from a claptap slurger.

Thanks to Margaret Carnegie's generosity, The Dornoch Cathedral organ was rebuilt in 1979. While work was in progress, Margaret, a loyal supporter of the Cathedral, invited the organ builder to see the Skibo instrument. What thrilled him was not the pipe organ itself, but the magnificent carved woodwork of the organ case. He had never seen anything quite like it. For Carnegie, the pipe organ was the prince of musical instruments, not, as many Highlanders believed, a "kist of whistles." It was because Carnegie held the organ in such high esteem that he responded so generously to requests from all over the world to help finance new organs in churches and halls. Altogether he gifted more than 7000 pipe organs!

Sunday evening at the castle always ended with a hymn-singing session to the accompaniment of the organ, or the Bechstein grand piano which stood in the spacious drawing room. Though Carnegie never became a member of the church, he greatly loved singing the old Scottish psalms and hymns.

Carnegie was ahead of his day, not only in his concern for the negro, but also in the anti-smoking campaign which he conducted. 'No Smoking' notices were common throughout the castle and resulted in the gun-room often being the most crowded place in the castle! There, of an evening, distinguished raconteurs like Sir George Adam Smith, the Principal of Aberdeen University, would delight the other guests with their stories.

Aware of the Highlander's fondness for whisky, and the social havoc often caused by excessive drinking, Carnegie offered his Skibo employees a 10% salary bonus if they signed the Pledge. Again the result was not quite what Carnegie had hoped. Instead of making total abstainers of his employees, the promised bonus resulted in a great deal of dishonesty and secret drinking. As the local shopkeepers knew, many of those who signed the pledge used the annual end of the year bonus - paid out when Carnegie was 3000 miles away in his New York home - to stock up for the New Year festivities.

To the man in the street, the name Carnegie was synonymous, not only with vast wealth, but with free libraries. Having presented 3000 libraries to towns and cities throughout the world, Carnegie not surprisingly wanted a good one for himself and his guests at Skibo, a library that would contain the classics in the fields of history, philosophy, literature, political science, sport and travel. Lord Acton was given the job of selecting the books, and Hew Morrison, the librarian of the Carnegie Library in Edinburgh, had the job of making the purchases.

Carnegie wanted it to look like a working scholar's library, not a rich man's hobby-horse and he was angry when he received a bill from Morrison for rebinding the books in magnificent gold, brown and green bindings. In a letter to Morrison he did not hide his displeasure.

I asked you to get the best editions of a list of books Lord Acton would furnish you. I never said one word to you about changing the bindings of these gems. Now I learn that you have spent more money on bindings than the precious gems cost. This is to my mind not only a waste of money, but an insult to great Teachers from whom I draw my intellectual and emotional life, my spiritual existence... I really am hurt by this affair.

Seventy years later, the books stand on magnificent oak shelves in resplendent condition and for the most part unread. I doubt if there was ever a private library so beautiful or so under-used. While browsing there recently I discovered many uncut pages.

On the large library desk there stood leather-bound copies of the books which Carnegie himself wrote - *The Gospel of Wealth, Round the World, James Watt* and several others including his own autobiography.

Adjoining the main castle library is Carnegie's own little private library. It was here that he answered the hundreds of begging letters he received. It was here also that he signed many of his philanthropic cheques, including the one for £1,000,000 to build the Peace Palace at The Hague.

Golf being an integral part of the Scottish tradition, Carnegie made provision in the landscaping of Skibo for an attractive nine-hole course. The little clubhouse which, at Carnegie's request, had a heather roof, was a joy to behold in the autumn when in full bloom. When the course was completed, Carnegie invited to Skibo the five times Open Champion J.H. Taylor to instruct his wife and himself in the rudiments of the game. Though Carnegie was an average golfer, he played every game as if his life depended on winning. The staff used to warn the guests that if they beat Mr. Carnegie, they would not be invited back! Shooting, fishing and yachting were also available at Skibo, as well as swimming in a full size marble indoor swimming pool.

His wife, Louise, had such an intense love of beautiful and growing things that Andrew spared no expense on the castle grounds. At one stage more than 20 gardeners were employed. The grounds with their extensive lawns, lovely walks, magnificent rose-beds and herbaceous borders were Louise's pride and joy, as were the sizeable greenhouses in which peaches, apricots, grapes, tomatoes and flowering plants were grown. In the early days, distinguished visitors to Skibo were invited to plant trees to commemorate their visit. By the side of each was placed a tablet containing an inscription giving the variety, the name of the planter and the date.

After Carnegie's death in 1919, Louise and Margaret continued to spend their summers at Skibo, but during the Twenties and Thirties the huge castle was seldom utilised. Though a small building would

have served them better, their love for Skibo, the castle, grounds and surrounding scenery never faded. Even after her mother's death in 1946, Margaret continued to spend four months each summer at Skibo, until finally, in 1981, poor health prevented her from making the journey from Connecticut. Though she is an American citizen, Skibo has always been home to Margaret. For her, as for her father, it was "heaven on earth" and the months spent there were the elixir of life.

In a letter dated September 1981, Margaret informed me that the castle was to be sold and the proceeds invested in the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. Then she added, "I pray that Skibo will continue to be used to benefit all mankind, which is what my father would have wanted." I hope her prayer will be answered.