

Last day of business in county court marked with ceremony

Five centuries of justice in Dornoch come to a sad end

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MORE than 500 years of dispensing justice in Sutherland came to an end this week with the last day of business at Dornoch Sheriff Court and Justice of the Peace Court.

The court is one of 10 sheriff courts and seven justice of the peace courts across the country to have fallen victim to a cost-cutting exercise by the Scottish Court Service (SCS).

The SCS says the closures will allow investment to be made in order for a "modern structure of courts" to be created. Cases arising in Sutherland will now be heard at Tain Sheriff Court.

Some 39 people connected with the court in recent years gathered in the courtroom on Tuesday to mark the end of an era with a series of speeches recalling past times.

The ceremony was sandwiched between the final court cases to be heard at Dornoch, with eight cases on the list and 16 custodies.

Among those present was Derek Pyle, Sheriff Principal of Grampian, Highlands and Islands; former Dornoch sheriff David Sutherland and sitting sheriff Andrew Berry.

The historic day was described by Sheriff Principal Pyle as "sad and emotional".

The gathering was told that justice had been meted out in Sutherland for 510 years since Parliament passed an Act in 1503 in the reign of James IV to install sheriffs in the Far North.

Professional sheriffs and a sheriff court house were established following the 1745 rebellion.

Famous historical figures who have

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Sheriff David Sutherland

appeared at Dornoch Sheriff Court include Sutherland Estates factor Patrick Sellar, reviled for his role in the Highland Clearances.

He appeared on petition in Dornoch before being committed for trial in 1815 at Inverness High Court.

Another famous defendant was Loth resident Janet Horne who was the last woman to be lawfully executed in Scotland for witchcraft in 1827.

In more recent years, a case which hit the headlines in 2001 was that of Robert Podesta from Hereford who hid in the

organ at Dornoch Cathedral in order to film the christening of pop star Madonna's son Rocco.

Mention was also made of flamboyant former procurator fiscal cum local innkeeper Hugh Lesley who, it was said, would interrupt overwhelming legal argument against the Crown case with the words: "Och, such lies. Did you ever hear the like," before leaving the sheriff to maintain order.

Procurator fiscal Roderick Urquhart told Tuesday's gathering: "Justice has been dispensed here for four centuries, possibly five, but there comes a point when courts, like those at Inveraray and Cromarty, are simply in the wrong place.

"You cannot base justice on where we have a Victorian market town or the like and it would be difficult to argue against closure here but all of us are sad and will take many happy memories of Dornoch Sheriff Court away today."

Representing the local faculty of solicitors, John Gunn, of Arthur and Carmichael, said he believed a

community needed an "establishment focus" such as a court or local authority office and that "certain aspects of our lives should be above economics".

Mr Gunn said Dornoch would miss the custom brought to the town by the court, which sat four days a month.

Sheriff David Sutherland became sheriff at Dornoch in 2001 and served on the bench for 12 years before being replaced by Sheriff Berry three years ago. He said that the death knell for Dornoch Sheriff Court came with the opening of the Dornoch Bridge, cutting the distance to Tain down to just eight miles.

He said: "Today is an emotional day. The sheriff court that served the county well over the last four centuries will no longer be in session.

"However, courts and administration of justice have always endeavoured to move with the times. We live in different times and society has different expectations."

Sheriff Sutherland formally instructed sheriff clerk Ruth Thomson to enter into the books of the court that

"Dornoch Sheriff Court and Justice of Peace Court in the Sheriffdom of Grampian, Highlands and Islands, ceased to conduct business at the end of Tuesday, 26th November 2013."

■ Tribute was paid on Tuesday to court officer Donald Mackenzie (82) who has been in post for the past three decades but who was unable to attend the closing ceremony due to illness.

■ The final case at Dornoch Sheriff Court page 3.

Marking end of an era at Dornoch Sheriff Court (from left) Sheriff David Sutherland, Sheriff Principal Derek Pyle and Sheriff Andrew Berry. Photo: Bill McBryde

