

HISTORY OF EDUCATION IN DORNOCH

Education in Dornoch remained for some time in the hands of the Celtic Church but by 1222 the Church in Dornoch was Roman Catholic and the constitution of the Cathedral which was in accordance with the practice of the Roman Catholic Church included a Cathedral School. There may also have been an additional school at the Franciscan monastery situated on the site of the present Free Church. The Cathedral School was the dominant partner until the Cathedral was burnt by the Mackays of Strathnaver in 1567, by which time Protestantism was gaining ground.

A new school was established in the Town House at the Mercat Cross in High Street where it remained until 1589 when it was removed to the Castle owing to the dilapidated state of the Town House.

In 1628 Dornoch became a Royal Burgh, and it would appear that a new Town House was built which again accommodated the school until 1730 when the Town House again fell into disrepair. The school was housed temporarily in the Cathedral but by 1738 had returned to the Town House rebuilt by the Earl of Sutherland.

During the 17th and early 18th centuries interest in education was so widespread that three schools flourished in the burgh, and an Act of Ratification in 1641 proves the existence of a grammar school the master of which was paid 200 marks a year. There was also an "English School" conducted by a mistress who was paid six shillings Scots per quarter for each pupil. The teacher at the elementary school received £1 Scots per annum for each "poor scholar" while the fee for each "poor scholar" at the Grammar School was £2 8/- Scots per annum.

By the beginning of the 18th century, due largely to the Jacobite Rebellion, the burgh was in a state of disrepair. The Cathedral was crumbling, the Castle uninhabitable and the Town House a ruin. It is uncertain where, in the midst of this desolation, the new school house was erected. The Presbytery received a bitter complaint in 1810 that the burgh school was inadequate for this purpose and in the winter of that year other accommodation was found by renting for a time "the property of a poor widow, unable to render it comfortable so that masters and scholars suffered in their health in it".

Between 1810 and 1815 vast improvements were made in the town and plans were prepared for the erection of "a new and proper School-room". These plans were never used as accommodation was made available in the new wing of the Castle renovated by the Marchioness of Stafford. School was held on the first floor of the modern house which had been erected between the tower and the original kitchen, and access was by a stone staircase outside the east gable.

The New Statistical Report of Scotland, published in 1845, states that there were then three schools in Dornoch: the parish school, a female school erected by the Society for Propagation of Christian Knowledge and another female school without salary where the teacher depended on the fees. The Free Church founded its own school in the building which is now the Free Church Hall. The Free Church School was amalgamated in 1857 with the Parish School on Schoolhill, and in 1884 the S.P.C.K. School also joined the parish school. The increased school roll necessitated alterations and additions to the building during which time the senior department made use of the Old Free Church School and the junior department the former female school.

The Schoolhill establishment remained in use until 1913 when the school transferred to a site at the west end of the burgh and overlooking the Dornoch Firth. The new Academy was opened by Lord Kennedy on 7th January, 1913. Fifty years later, on 25th September, 1963 a new secondary department was opened by Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. The old building which now houses the primary department stands side by side with the new and together they constitute the present Dornoch Academy.

The records of education in Dornoch may not be complete but the tradition of over a thousand years of education continues unbroken. In 1968 Sutherland County Council took the decision to reduce Dornoch Academy to a four year Secondary school. This change was bitterly opposed. A further de-grading came in 1973. Proposals in the early 80's to close Dornoch's Secondary department were strongly resisted. At that time Highland Regional Council agreed to look at the possibility of upgrading the Academy again when the new Dornoch Firth road bridge is completed. The prospect of this bridge has created something of a building boom in Dornoch already. Dornoch's population looks set to increase and this should reinforce the popular demand for upgrading the Academy.