



JACKIE ROBERTSON WRITES ABOUT



Delectable Dornoch

A RESORT IN SUTHERLAND WHICH IS GROWING IN POPULARITY EACH YEAR

MANY PROFOUND OBSERVATIONS, mostly apocryphal, I fear, have been attributed to Mr. Gladstone. But one I am prepared to accept unequivocally is that he regarded Easter Ross as the garden of Scotland, and the lands fringing the Dornoch Firth as unsurpassed in grandeur anywhere in Britain.

Andrew Carnegie is another who gave a glowing tribute to the serenity and climate of Dornoch. Little has changed in the 42 years since Mr. Carnegie strolled about the quiet streets, enjoying the cathedral calm of the royal burgh of Dornoch. It was this old-world charm, the freedom to wander unbuttoned, that induced Lord Rothermere to create the summer retreat of Burghfield for himself during the early 'thirties.

A colony of 68 council houses has been tucked away out of town-centre sight on elevated Bishopfield. Fewer than a dozen modern houses have been built since the war, bringing the town's total of private residences to 277. One or two shops have taken on a chromium and strip lighting look over the last few years; several hotels have extended to meet the growing popularity of Dornoch for holidays; only this summer have street names been re-introduced on gable-ends—they were removed in wartime to fool German spies!

The station is still there, although the rails of the single track which also linked Embo and Skelbo with the junction at The Mound are rusted and weed-choked since, on a sentimental impulse, I assisted the guard to open and close the level crossing gates on the train's last journey in June, 1960. And the climate remains as dry and mild as it was in Carnegie's time, thanks to nature's creation of the Struie Gap, high above the Kyle of Sutherland, to funnel the fury of south-west storms away from Dornoch.

As he carries in my luggage each June, Sandy Macdonald, sole occupant of the hotel during its eight months' closure, assures me it's been another snowless winter, although the Wick road was occasionally blocked. His brother Willie, who's keen on the garden, shakes his head despondently at the

lack of rain to bring on his roses and vegetables.

If the greens of the Royal Dornoch Golf Club weren't saturated continuously from May till September, they would quickly deteriorate into sandy wastes, so surface-rooted is the grass. Anyone with the skill to slot putts on those jet-fast greens has my unstinted admiration. Everyone familiar with the course—and that goes equally for the Prime Minister and Lady Dorothy, who played there in the summers of 1957-58 with the Duke of Portland—must envy the record 68 returned in 1958 by young local player, Dennis Bethune, now professional at Hags Castle, Glasgow.

Dornoch, claim the locals, comes third in Scottish golfing antiquity—1616, or 64 years after St. Andrews. The first reference to golf at Dornoch is the hint conveyed by Sir Robert Gordon, the historian of Sutherland, who wrote in 1630:

"About this town along the sea coast there are the fairest and lairgest Linkes (or green feilds) of any pairt of Scotland, fitt for Archery, Goffing, Ryding and all other exercises; they doe surpass the feilds of Montrose or St. Andrews."

It was this same Sir Robert, a favourite with Charles I, who influenced royal burgh status for Dornoch on July 14, 1628. But not until 1877 was the golf club instituted. The original town council charter granting the club the use of the links is framed in the substantial clubhouse, which Andrew Carnegie opened on July 3, 1909, an occasion well remembered by the clubmaster, Jim Macdonald, for he was among the boy caddies featuring on the fringe of the official photograph.

The original enthusiasts were Chief Constable Alex. McHardy, who subsequently transferred to Inverness, and Dr. John Gunn, a native, who learned the game while studying at St. Andrews. Even so, it was a do-it-yourself effort, the 5s.-a-share members reputedly cutting the greens and new hazards themselves. It remained a nine-hole course till 1886, when old Tom Morris was invited

to extend it. Three times since, the course has been altered or lengthened.

As one pauses thankfully on the 7th tee, known as Pier, on the High Course, recovering from the steep pech from the 6th green, the peaks of seven counties serrate the blue horizon on a clear day. It was there that I fell in with lithe, mahogany, sun-stained Chris Murray, who winters at the whaling and summers at the greenkeeping, a fresh-air extrovert. Like all Dornockians, Chris is proud of the club's new deeply-carpeted and tastefully-furnished lounge bar, built out from the entrance inside three months, and only opened this June.

Evidence of Dornoch's upsurge in popularity is the record £2202 taken in visitors' fees by Jim Macdonald last summer. How favoured are the 400 members in belonging to a championship course for a mere three guineas a year.

But not all holidaymakers play golf, as Mr. William Christie Wright, the town clerk, quickly points out. As a swimming enthusiast, he labels the miles of wonderful sands and safe bathing as Dornoch's No. 1 attraction for families. The beach, he maintains, was "discovered" during the marvellous summer of 1955, and has never looked back. It gladdens his heart to see anything up to 700 people scattered around the waterfront on a sunny Sunday.

In time, I have no doubt, Dornoch will branch out with the provision of desirable amenities. But the really urgent improvement is the installation of a proper sewage plant. At the moment, the town's sewage runs untreated directly into the sea. With certain winds, a residue returns to the recognised bathing centre. The cost of circumventing this has been estimated at £12,000—a cheap investment for a resort that in other respects exudes health.

Down through Littleton and adjoining the beach is the official caravan site, the receipts of which have gone up each year, Mr. Wright tells me.

Dornoch is one of Scotland's smallest burghs. The population, including school

children in the two hostels, was only 933 at the last census. The town's income from rates is merely £8900, so that expenditure is carefully budgetted by the council. A scheme of water purification costing £25,000 has been approved for the reservoir at Lansaidh, seven miles north-west of Dornoch, to remove the peaty colour of the water and increase the flow via a 6-inch main.

There is now modern street lighting in the town. Indeed, it is not generally appreciated that it was Lord Rothermere who introduced electricity into Dornoch. Of the £5000 given by the newspaper magnate, £2000 was spent in running a cable from Tain

The church is strongly represented on the nine-member town council. Mr. Fulton is a bailie, and the provost for the ninth year is the Rev. William MacLeod of the Free Church, who is also convener of Sutherland. Freed of the crippling incubus of education and roads—critics add: "And a more realistic approach to council rents, which, at 7s. 4d. a week, are ridiculously low"—the burgh would have funds to effect an improvement programme without destroying the old-world appeal of the town.

For it is that relaxed away-from-it-allness that lures back the faithful coterie of visitors each summer, especially from the south.

Since Dornoch lacks a public hall of desirable dimensions, some residents feel the town has slipped up in not agitating for one to be incorporated in the new Dornoch Academy, as Golspie has done. What prospects of work await the academy leavers as they take farewell of their teachers and Rector Allan Frew Robertson? Farming and forestry, meat exporting, the building trade, Highland Omnibuses, garages, offices, shops and hotels are the main outlets for them.

With a little imagination, much could be done to acquaint visitors with some of the historical background of Dornoch. Few are



across the firth to Meikle Ferry, and another £2000 in paying off the water debt. Rothermere also interested himself in welfare, so part of his munificence went in providing a social club and scout hall.

When he was in residence in Burghfield, which is now a hotel, Rothermere had copies of the *Daily Mail* specially flown to Dornoch. He influenced publicity for the resort by having pictures of the Highland Games "wired" to Manchester—reputed to be the first time this had been attempted in Scotland.

Dornoch has been outstandingly fortunate in benefactions from Rothermere and Andrew Carnegie. The latter provided a library, which also serves as the council chambers, as well as giving liberally to cathedral improvements. Yet neither is accorded a word of appreciation nor yet even included in the "glimpses of an historic past" in the official guide.

St. Gilbert Street perpetuates the memory of Bishop Gilbert who built the cathedral in the first half of the 13th century. The present incumbent is the Rev. Frederick H. Fulton, who came from Drymen, Stirlingshire, a few years ago. How he would welcome another Carnegie or a Rothermere, for he has £6000 plans to move the organ loft to the west-end and build a new session house.

Only a few weeks ago, the director of a world-famous concern likened Dornoch to me as "one of the few surviving outposts of Victoriana, leap-frogged in the mad march of time."

No one seems to mind that there's no Sunday golf—you go to Tain or Brora if you want that. No hoardings disfigure the wide, ancient streets lined with solid yellow sandstone buildings of considerable vintage, like Dornoch Castle, opposite the cathedral, or the county buildings. To my knowledge, there is but one Halt sign in the town. Cars can be left anywhere—and are. The police are friendly and tolerant under Chief Constable Douglas G. Ross, who administers the peaceable county from here, all 1,297,914 acres of it, with a force of only 27 men.

Mr. Ross is in his final year of service, and he is so attached to the place and the golf course that he is likely to spend his retirement in Dornoch. In his long connection with the county, he has never had to cope with a major crime. Indeed, Mr. Donald Macdonald, the sheriff clerk, records that there was no jury trial in Dornoch between 1938 and 1960, and only one since. Mr. Macdonald's hobby is ornithology. He has listed 165 wild birds in the area, and declares that practically every type of habitat can be found in the immediate vicinity, except high mountain and sea cliffs.

A general view of Dornoch, with the Cathedral, which dates from the 13th century. Between the town and the Dornoch Firth lie the caravan site and the airfield

aware, for instance, that the last witch to be burned in Scotland, Janet Horn, was tarred-and-feathered and roasted at the stake in Dornoch in 1722. A stone in the garden of Hunter Donaldson, the golf pro-greenkeeper, in Littleton, commemorates the shocking event. Witch's Walk would surely be a more romantic name for the quiet little road than River Street?

The only 18-foot road in Sutherland is that linking Helmsdale with Bonar Bridge, the other 700 miles of roads being single tracks. They're now in process of straightening the main road at Evelix, where one forks for Dornoch. It was at Evelix Regality Court in 1738 that Donald Mackay of Kirkton was solemnly sentenced to hanging, the judge symbolising the death penalty by extinguishing a candle. Poor Donald was taken to Dornoch and publicly hanged on the gallows on Cnoc-an-croich, but spiritedly enlivened the burgh's last execution by dancing a Highland fling as evidence of his contempt for the authorities.



Wide, tree-lined Castle Street, seen from the tower of the Cathedral. On the extreme right is Dornoch Castle, once the residence

of the Bishop and now a hotel. Adjoining it are the County Buildings. Traffic moves easily; there are no parking problems



LEFT: An example of Dornoch glassware, made in the town some 200 years ago. RIGHT: Mr. Bill Everitt, a farmer and keen fisherman, discusses fishing tackle with Mr. D. McLeod, who runs the only tackle shop in the town



Mr. Donald Macdonald, Dornoch Sheriff Clerk and a keen bird watcher



A view of the magnificent sands, one of the town's chief tourist attractions



LEFT: Mr. William Christie Wright, Town Clerk. RIGHT: The Rev. William MacLeod, Provost of Dornoch



LEFT: Dornoch High Street, with the Carnegie Library on right. RIGHT: Royal Dornoch clubhouse, showing the new lounge



Golf professional Hunter Donaldson at the Witch's Stone, which stands in his garden. Here Scotland's last witch was burned