

Dornoch

Marriage stone – The last in the series of Dornoch Heritage Society winter talks was given by Rev Graeme Muckart, whose painstaking work has thrown new light on the origins of the Embo Marriage Stone, an important local carved armorial which commemorates the marriage of Sir Robert Gordon of Embo, and Jean Leslie of Findrassie. Unravelling this puzzle gave the audience a rare insight into the intricacies of Scottish heraldry.

The Embo stone is dated 1677, an attractive, vigorous carving although the heraldry is somewhat puzzling and idiosyncratic. It is technically an "Achievement of Arms" rather than a Coat of Arms and consists of three boars' heads, three crescents, six buckles on a "bend", two lions rampant and the initials of the Leslie and Gordon families.

The helmet has the visor open, which means these are the Arms of either a Knight or a Baronet. The motto sits above the Coat of Arms, probably "Forward without Fear" more usually termed in Scottish heraldry, "Sans Peur". The motto at the bottom of the stone seems to be the Leslie motto "Grip Fast".

In 1631 Sir John Gordon of Embo became first Baronet. It is not clear how he came into the title. He may have made money from the slave trade which was common in these times. The original Gordons came over with the Normans and moved north.

In 1320 Sir Adam Gordon, a signatory of the Declaration of Arbroath, delivered the document to Pope John XXII and was awarded lands in Aberdeenshire.

Sir Robert Gordon of Embo was descended from the same line as the Hon Sir Robert Gordon of Gordonstoun, one of the sons of the 12th Earl of Sutherland.

Gordon of Gordonstoun was a diplomat who spent a lot of time at the English court, and with generous financial assistance from the Exchequer, became Premier Baronet of Nova Scotia, as granted by King James I of England, in order to encourage settlement there.

He was also "The tutor of Sutherland" who records tell us, taught the 14th Earl to play golf.

The Embo Baronetcy continued until the 20th Century when Sir Home Gordon was Baronet. He was a well known cricket writer who died without issue in 1956.

The Baronetcy is now dormant but not extinct. It is probable that somewhere a legitimate heir exists, but as no land goes with the title, perhaps that heir would no longer be interested!

One quirk of the story is that the Gordons of Embo never actually registered their Coat of Arms with the Lord Lyon, so technically, they didn't have one.

The stone was probably originally on the outside wall of the house, perhaps above the door which is the usual siting, but it is now set to one side of the fireplace in Embo House, so it appears to have been moved at some point.

The stone itself is deeply carved and the copy in the Historylinks Museum, created by a

stonemason from Historic Scotland, is a very good one and well worth a look.