

The quirk of fate that led to an earldom

Elizabeth, the Countess of Sutherland, has died at the age of 98. Here we chart her long life and how she came to inherit an earldom.

ELIZABETH Millicent Sutherland-Leveson-Gower was born in London on March 30, 1921. Just a month later her father Major Lord Alastair Sutherland-Leveson-Gower died, aged 31. He had contracted malaria while taking part in a big game hunt in Rhodesia.

Ten years later the young Elizabeth also lost her mother Helene Demerast, and was made a ward of her uncle George, the 5th Duke of Sutherland and his wife, and of her father's cousin the Marquess of Londonderry and his wife.

During World War II, she served as a Land Girl and then as a laboratory technician. Shortly after the war ended, she married journalist Major Charles

Noel Janson. It was a happy union that lasted 60 years and produced four children, twin sons Alistair and Martin, daughter Annabel and youngest son Matthew.

Throughout her life she considered the most important things were to enjoy good health, have a happy family and keep in regular contact with friends and acquaintances.

It was never expected that she would inherit the Earldom of Sutherland but the 5th Duke, who died in 1963, left no heir despite marrying twice and, aged 42, she succeeded in her own right, becoming head of her family, chief of Clan Sutherland and the 24th holder of the Earldom of Sutherland. The dukedom



Elizabeth was one of those rare people you felt the better for meeting.

James Simpson

and the other titles that could only pass in the male line were inherited by the Earl of Ellesmere.

Now the Countess of Sutherland, she reverted from her married name to the original family surname Sutherland as did her immediate heir, her eldest son, Lord Strathnaver. Her other children retained their father's surname Janson, in accordance with normal practice.

The new countess inherited the land-holdings in Scotland associated with the earldom, including Dunrobin Castle. She was acutely aware of the responsibilities placed upon her and, as owner of Sutherland Estates, she became one of the major employers across the county. From her childhood days, she had a deep affection for the people of Sutherland and with adulthood an increasing sense of responsibility for their welfare.

During her tenure, assisted by her family, she modernised the running of the estate to ensure it generated sufficient income to maintain and improve the properties and the working lives of those families dependent on it.

She was a driving force behind a number of important businesses across

the county and saw the creation of opportunities for young people as an important way of sustaining diverse rural communities across Sutherland.

Dunrobin Castle itself underwent a number of transitions, from the original family home, firstly into a school and later as a visitor attraction and an increasingly important part

international gatherings every four or five years at Dunrobin.

Her other great love was her home at Tongue with its beautiful gardens which she cultivated over many decades. Every summer she would entertain both locals and visitors to tea, opening her gardens to raise money for her favourite charity.

The genuine affection in which many people from all walks of life held Lady Sutherland has been amply demonstrated by the messages of sympathy to both her immediate family and the Clan Society from all corners of the world. Right up until her final weeks she kept up to date by telephone and letter with what was happening in Sutherland.

Former Dornoch Cathedral minister, the Very Rev Dr James Simpson paid tribute to the countess at her well attended funeral in Dornoch Cathedral last Saturday.

He said: "Elizabeth was one of those rare people you felt much the better each time you met her. I believe that the best tribute we can pay her is our gratitude for the privilege of having known her."

Lady Sutherland is buried next to her husband, who died in 2006, in the family cemetery at Dunrobin.



The Sutherland family cemetery at Dunrobin Castle.



Elizabeth, Countess of Sutherland.

of the tourist economy of East Sutherland.

In 1977, helped by her husband and others, the countess reconvened the Clan Sutherland Society in Scotland, which had become dormant. She attended Highland gatherings and games as far away as Australia and north America and hosted



The Golspie branch of the Royal British Legion Scotland organised a tribute to the countess on the day of her funeral last Saturday. Veterans and members of the public lined up on the pavement close to the war memorial, as the hearse carrying her remains passed through the village en route to Dunrobin.

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