

*Heaven on Earth*

A HISTORY OF SKIBO

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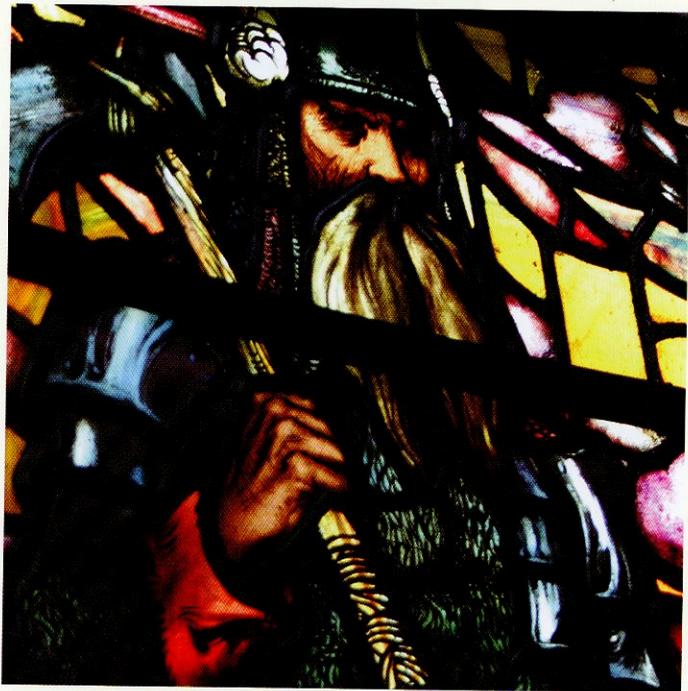


# 4000 BC

THE EARLIEST KNOWN PEOPLE TO HAVE OCCUPIED THE LANDS AROUND WHAT IS NOW THE SKIBO ESTATE WERE FISHERMEN AND HUNTER-GATHERERS.

They were followed by Neolithic farmers and Bronze Age settlers. These people were taken over by the Picts, a race of Celts who occupied Scotland around 400 AD who were converted to Christianity in the 6th Century.





*Sigurd, First Earl of Orkney*

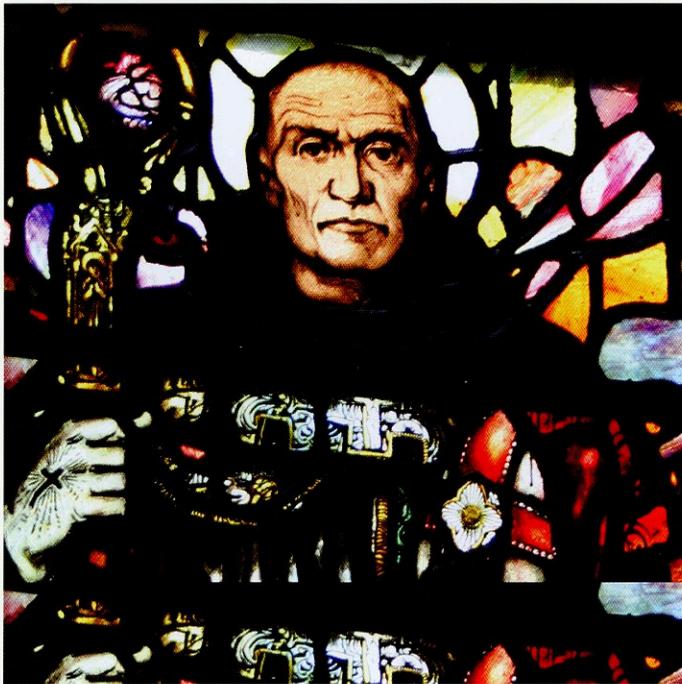
## *Viking Invaders*

THE ARRIVAL OF THE VIKINGS FROM NORTHERN EUROPE  
HERALDED CENTURIES OF STRIFE BETWEEN NORSEMEN  
AND THE NATIVE CELTS.

The land surrounding the Dornoch Firth was the perfect place for the Vikings to settle. Skibo, especially, provided shelter for their longboats and fertile land for establishing farms. The word Skibo is derived from the Norse language – ‘bo’ meaning homestead.

Sigurd, who is featured in the stained glass window in the Great Hall and has one of the second-floor bedrooms named after him, was a Viking warlord who became the first Earl of Orkney around 875AD. He was a feared warrior, who claimed the lands of Caithness and Sutherland (the name Sutherland is taken from the area known as the Southern-lands of Sigurd's domain) and is said to have travelled as far south as Moray.

Sigurd's death was as dramatic and gruesome as his life, although some might say that fate finally caught up with him. After agreeing to meet his enemy, Maelbrihte, each with only 20 men, Sigurd tricked the Scots chief by mounting two of his men on each horse. Maelbrihte knew he had been double-crossed when he saw two pairs of legs hanging from each saddle. He and his men were slain by Sigurd, who beheaded the chief and planned to ride home to Orkney with the head tied to his side. Yet a scratch on his leg from Maelbrihte's tooth was enough to give Sigurd blood poisoning. He never made it back to Orkney and was buried at Cyderhall Farm near Dornoch, which was originally part of the Skibo estate.



*St Gilbert*

## *Bishops and Monks*

IN 1186, MANY THOUSANDS OF ACRES OF SUTHERLAND, INCLUDING SKIBO, WERE GIFTED TO GILBERT OF MORAVIA BY HIS COUSIN HUGH FRESKIN. GILBERT WENT ON TO BECOME THE BISHOP OF CAITHNESS IN 1222, GIVING HIM CONTROL OVER THE PEOPLES OF BOTH CAITHNESS AND SUTHERLAND.

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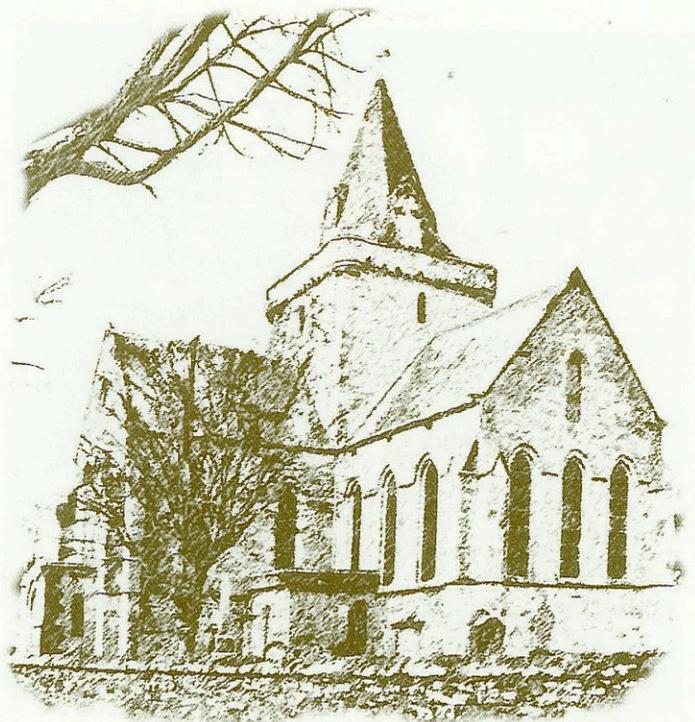
The diocese of Caithness was one recognised by both the Church and the Crown and was therefore a position of great power. Gilbert was the perfect choice for such authority and it made sense for him to have two palaces from which to govern the huge amount of land covering his domain. Skibo was chosen for its closeness to the new Cathedral St Gilbert built in Dornoch and also its position at the southern-most point of the bishopric.

A fortress-like castle was built upon the ruins of the original Viking stronghold, with a high, round keep for protection. Monks tended the gardens and orchards, living a peaceful life in the beautiful surrounds of the estate. For the first

time, Skibo was known as a castle and became St Gilbert's favourite place of residence.

This peace was shattered with the death of St Gilbert in 1245, when, lacking a powerful figurehead to oversee the two counties, the Earls of Sutherland and Caithness struggled for dominance and clans from across the region clashed in great battles, leaving the area ravaged by war for the next 500 years.

The image of St Gilbert can be seen in the centre of the stained glass window in the Great Hall and the Carnegie family also named a second-floor bedroom after him.



*Dornoch Cathedral*

## *Fire and Reformation*

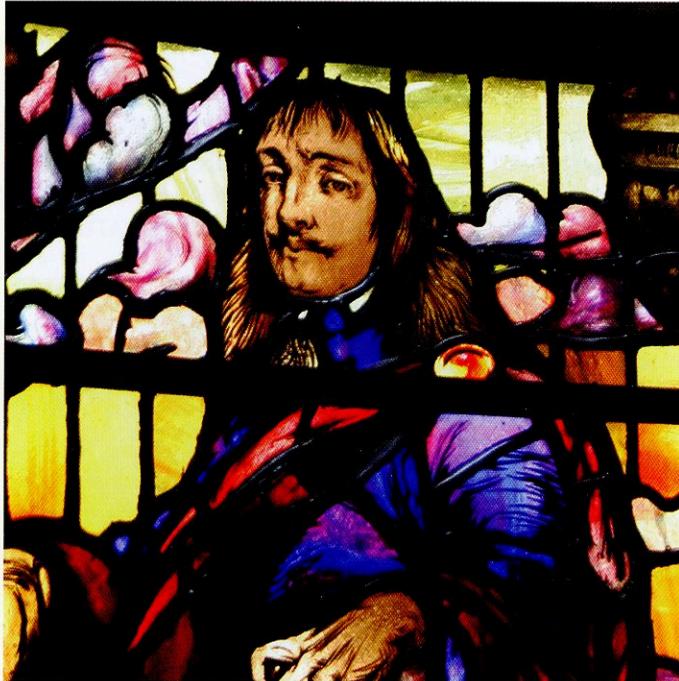
ALTHOUGH THE SCOTTISH REFORMATION DID NOT HAVE AN IMMEDIATE OR DRAMATIC IMPACT ON SUTHERLAND, MAINLY DUE TO LOCATION AND LANGUAGE BARRIERS, IT DID SEE THE LANDS AROUND DORNOCH TRANSFERRED FROM CHURCH OWNERSHIP TO PRIVATE FAMILIES.

In 1545, the then Bishop of Caithness, Robert Stewart, sold Skibo to John Gray, whose family continued to be lairds of Skibo for the next 200 years.

Meanwhile, the warring clans of the North were still fighting for supremacy and, in 1567, the Mackays laid waste the Barony of Skibo and burnt Dornoch. For the following three years, the Murrays of Dornoch entered into a series of battles with the Mackays, leading to a devastating fire in 1570 that completely destroyed the Cathedral.

St Gilbert's pride and joy now lay in ruins as John Knox and the Calvinists swept the Reformation through the Scottish glens.





*The Marquis of Montrose*

## *Civil War and a Leg of Lamb*

FOLLOWING HIS DEFEAT AT THE BATTLE OF CARBISDALE IN 1650, THE MARQUIS OF MONTROSE, WHO WAS LOYAL TO KING CHARLES II AGAINST THE COVENANTERS, WAS CAPTURED AT ARDVRECK CASTLE AND TAKEN TO SKIBO ON THE WAY SOUTH TO EDINBURGH.

The laird at the time was Robert Gray, who himself was currently imprisoned in Edinburgh for supporting Montrose and the King.

Skibo was chosen as a good place for the prisoner's escort to stop for the evening, as the Covenanters knew the man of the house was locked up in Edinburgh and there would only be his wife and her servants at home. What they did not bank on was Lady Gray's spirited support of her husband and Montrose!

Jane Gray asked Montrose to sit at the head of the dinner table that evening, to which Commander Holbourn of the Covenanter Army abruptly told her that, as the prisoner under sentence of

death, Montrose was not to sit in the laird's chair. Holbourn himself went to take the seat, at which point Lady Gray hit him with the leg of lamb that had been prepared for the meal. Montrose took the head of the table after Holbourn had stalked from the room, embarrassed and covered in gravy.

Robert Gray was eventually pardoned by Cromwell, but asked to pay a fine for the damage done by Jane to the Commander's uniform. Montrose was escorted to Edinburgh where he was hung and quartered. His image is painted in the stained glass window in the castle and he also has a bedroom named in his honour.



*Skibo Castle circa 1880*

## *The Mackays and Grays*

IN 1745, THE YEAR BONNIE PRINCE CHARLIE ARRIVED IN SCOTLAND TO CLAIM THE THRONE, SKIBO FINALLY PASSED OUT OF GRAY FAMILY OWNERSHIP DUE TO BAD DEBTS HELD BY LIEUTENANT ROBERT GRAY.

The estate passed to his lawyer, Sir Patrick Dowell, who had neither time nor money for the upkeep of the estate and castle and so it was passed on again to his nephew, George Mackay.

Mackay was an MP and the son of the then current Mackay clan chief. He took great pride in the estate, but the upkeep left him heavily in debt. After only five years of ownership, he sold Skibo to William Gray, a native of Sutherland who claimed a remote relationship to the original Grays of Skibo.

This latest Gray certainly had the financial wherewithal to restore Skibo to its former glory and so he set about an extensive renovation of the entire estate, including the mills, farms and crofts that had lain empty for years. Unfortunately Gray died in 1760, just four years after purchasing Skibo.

His wife, Janet, kept the estate until her own death in 1785. Although the castle received one of the first slate roofs in the county, the rest of William's dreams were not fulfilled. Skibo was again looking for a new owner.



*George Dempster*

## *The Visionary Laird*

BORN IN DUNDEE IN 1732, GEORGE DEMPSTER WAS WEALTHY, EDUCATED, HAD SOCIAL STANDING AS A SOLICITOR AND WAS MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR FIFE FOR OVER 30 YEARS.

He spent time with the intellectual minds which helped create the Scottish Renaissance and became known as 'Honest George' due to his independence in parliament whilst standing up for the rights of his constituents. He was, it is said, the most popular man in Scotland.

In 1786, Dempster purchased Skibo from the Gray estate. The neighbouring estates of Pulrossie, Overskibo and Creich were bought by Dempster's half-brother and combined with Skibo to create a total of 21,000 acres. Dempster also resigned the Feudal Rights on his estates, giving his tenants and their families long-term security with positive incentives for the management of the land.

This thinking was so far ahead of its time that it bankrupted future Skibo owner Evan Sutherland-Walker, who tried to restore the ancient land ownership scheme through the courts.

Dempster built a cotton mill at Spinningdale to provide work for the people of the area, employing 100 hands. There was even a 'model' village built to accommodate the operatives. However, the cost of transport from such a remote area as Sutherland far outweighed the cheap labour savings and the scheme failed. The ruin of the mill building can still be seen at Spinningdale, three miles west of Skibo.

## *Silence and Show*

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SKIBO STAYED IN THE DEMPSTER FAMILY UNTIL 1866 WHEN GEORGE SOPER-DEMPSTER, GEORGE DEMPSTER'S GREAT NEPHEW, DECIDED TO SELL THE ESTATE AS HE HAD NO HEIR. THE PURCHASER, MR CHIRNSIDE FROM AUSTRALIA, OWNED THE ESTATE FOR ONLY SIX YEARS AND, IN THAT TIME, LEFT NO MARK ON THE HISTORY OF SKIBO. IT IS A MYSTERY WHY HE CAME TO SCOTLAND AT ALL.

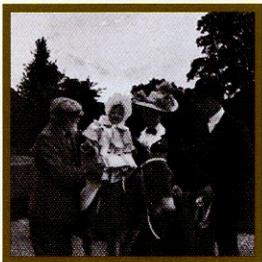


The following owner, however, was not so private. Always dressed in the Sutherland tartan, complete with bonnet and buckled shoes, Evan Sutherland-Walker was a contrast of traditionalism and modernist thinking. After buying the estate in 1872, he set about modernising the farms, gardens and buildings, including the construction of a brand new semi-Gothic mansion to replace the old castle keep. However he longed for a return to the days before George Dempster's land reforms, when the old Feudal Rights system meant that crofters and estate workers were bound to the estate, little more than serfs.

He was not a rich man and so the purchase of the estate and following renovations plunged him into heavy debt. Yet it was his failed legal challenge of the feudal reforms that finally bankrupted him, forcing the Sutherland-Walkers out of Skibo forever.



## The Carnegies




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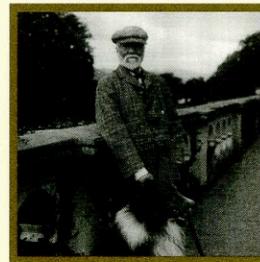
IN THE SPRING OF 1897, LOUISE  
CARNEGIE, THE WIFE OF AMERICA'S  
"STEEL KING" ANDREW CARNEGIE,  
GAVE BIRTH TO A DAUGHTER,  
MARGARET. THEY RESOLVED THAT  
SHE MUST HAVE A SCOTTISH HOME.

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That summer they began their search for the perfect Scottish retreat, insisting that it must have a view of the sea, a private anchorage for their yacht, a trout river and a waterfall. After at first dismissing the very run-down estate, Andrew finally agreed to visit Skibo and it was love at first sight. Purchasing the estate for £85,000 both he and Louise made plans to build the castle of their dreams. No expense was spared; the best craftsmen were hired and the finest stone and wood used. Margaret Carnegie helped to lay the foundation stone of the new building on the 23rd June 1899 and by 1902 the entire property had been transformed, including new houses, farm buildings, an indoor, heated swimming pool and a nine-hole golf course.

During their summer residences at Skibo, the Carnegies had an intensely active social life, with the castle's guest book reading like a Who's Who of the day. Rudyard Kipling, the Rockefellers, Helen Keller, King Edward VII and Lloyd George were all houseguests during these first few years. Carnegie also spent much of his time fishing and golfing, as well as signing many of his philanthropic cheques, including one for £1,000,000 to build the Peace Palace in The Hague.

## After Andrew



CARNEGIE DIED IN 1919, LEAVING THE HUGE CASTLE AND  
ESTATE TO BE ENJOYED BY LOUISE AND MARGARET.

Even after her mother's death in 1946, Margaret continued to spend her summers at Skibo until, in 1981, poor health finally prevented her from making the journey from America. The estate was sold at auction on the 27th July 1982 to an English businessman and the proceeds donated to the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust.

In 2004, Skibo was purchased by its current owner, who immediately began a programme of improvements. At last, after many years of uncertainty, Skibo was in the hands of a family with the vision and means to restore the entire property to its former glory and beyond.





THE CARNEGIE CLUB  
— SKIBO CASTLE —

Skibo Castle, Dornoch, Sutherland IV25 3RQ, Scotland  
Tel: +44 (0)1862 894600 Fax: +44 (0)1862 894601 [skibo@carnegieclub.co.uk](mailto:skibo@carnegieclub.co.uk) [www.carnegieclub.co.uk](http://www.carnegieclub.co.uk)