

DORNOCH - 200 YEARS AGO

by Jane F. MacLennan, M.A., F.P. Manse, Evelix

Although previously a Burgh of Barony, Dornoch was made a Royal Burgh in 1628 by Charles I. As an ecclesiastical centre and a market town it had a very important part to play in the life of the county. In this account, I intend to look at various aspects of the burgh and life within it in the 18th century.

The parish of Dornoch extended nine miles from east to west along the coast of the Dornoch Firth and about 15 miles from south to north. Although so close to the sea, the town had no harbour. This was prevented by a bar across the estuary formed by the lodgement of many centuries of sediment. The soil around the town was arid and unproductive, although the sandiness did decrease in proportion to the distance from the shore.

The main crops raised were oats, bear, pease and some beans and rye. After 1758 when potatoes were introduced by the parish minister, Rev. John Sutherland, they became the chief subsistence of the people for most of the year. The arable land was usually in constant tillage and

very little of it was enclosed. Although returns from crops were therefore poor, the parish, being the most extensively cultivated of the county, did usually raise more than enough corn for its inhabitants, including those of the burgh. Black cattle were reared and in the lower parts of the parish there was a little sheep pasture.

At the time of the 1755 census, the population of the parish was 2780, dropping to 2541 at the end of the century. Of this number about 500 lived in the burgh of Dornoch. Gaelic was then the popular language, although it is now not spoken on the east coast at all. According to the Old Statistical Account, the people were quiet and tractable, not particularly industrious, nor notably law-breaking. They were frugal and quite happy to live sparingly, if they did not exert themselves. The most common sicknesses at the time were colic, rheumatic and sciatric complaints, all probably the result of poor diet, bad housing and lack of fuel.

All in all the circumstances of the people and the state of agriculture would appear to be pretty "average" for the period, not notably better or markedly worse than elsewhere.

As a royal burgh, Dornoch had its own town council, a body of 15, including a provost, four bailies and a treasurer. Like all Scottish town councils before the Reform Act, it was a very close corporation. Although one third went out of office annually, the election was in the hands of the remaining two-thirds who automatically re-elected the retiring members.

Thus it was only on the occasion of a death that new blood could get in. Mackay in his book "Old Dornoch" furnishes us with the interesting snippet of information that the Town Council at those days indulged in an annual dinner at the town's expense, an occasion which began at 4 p.m. and continued until the following morning with plenty of whisky and stories going round!

Despite such apparent extravagance, the Burgh did suffer from financial problems. These were so bad mid-century that in 1744 the whole assets of the burgh were made over to the Provost, Earl William, His Lordship undertaking to meet the town's liabilities on condition that he could draw the customs annually.

This extreme hardship was probably due to the great expenditure on a new Council

(or Court) House, a venture commenced in 1730. Due to the inadequacy of the old one, it was to be demolished and replaced by one containing a grand Council House, a gentleman's prison and clerk's room with four shops in the lower storey and an stairs ascending in the outer wall.

However great lengths had to be gone to, to finance it — the people of the town were stunted; stones from the quarry and shells were sold; the heritors of the parish had to pay £3 to the building fund — the Convention of Royal Burghs contributed £5, and the publicans in the burgh and surrounding district were taxed — truly a community effort.

The type of discipline in that old prison can be seen from some of the old burgh papers in the case of a Hugh Calder, Merchant Burgess of Elgin — he was imprisoned in Dornoch for assault but raised an action of damages in the Court of Session against the Sheriff Depute and the Fiscal for imprisoning "a free liege" in a dungeon with common thieves, and for loss of market.

The result was that the Sheriff allowed the prison doors to be left open all the time Hugh Calder was imprisoned there, and the public went in and out freely to trade with him!

As to the powers of the Town Council, it appears that on occasions they were forced to take account of the feelings of the people. For example, in 1783 they passed a measure to close the old churchyard against further burials and to insist upon the use of a new piece of ground which had been acquired for the purpose.

RESENTMENT

There was, however, such resentment and opposition in the parish that the change could not be made. Whatever their powers, the interests of the Council were not as limited as might be expected; in 1787 they (having presumably considered the matter) opposed the proposed Union of King's and Marischal Colleges in Aberdeen, and agreed that their decision should be published in the "Edinburgh Courier" and the "Caledonian Mercury".

One very important aspect of the Council's work was the election of a Parliamentary representative. Dornoch was one of the five northern burghs — with Dingwall, Tain, Wick and Kirkwall — which had been formed into one parliamentary constituency after the 1707 Union. Each town council elected a delegate (who had to be a burgess) and the delegates met in each burgh of the group by rotation, to elect the M.P. (also, of necessity, a burgess).

Much space is occupied in Dornoch Town Council records by Minutes of such meetings, political feeling at times running very high as the credentials of the various candidates were examined. There are even suggestions that violence was sometimes resorted to, to prevent delegates from getting to the meeting to record their votes.

Clearly the Town Council had an important place, and important work to do, in the life of the 18th century burgh. The cathedral in Dornoch occupied a very central position, not only geographically, but in the life of the town generally. Around the cathedral was the unfenced churchyard; the churchyard was used as a market place, it contained the stocks, which were used as a punishment by civil as well as ecclesiastical courts; and the main county road ran through it — a much frequented part of the burgh.

The cathedral itself was certainly not an impressive building at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Rev. A. Bowie, who was minister from 1702-10, complained that the church was

in such a state of disrepair that the congregation had to gather in a meeting-house which would not even accommodate half the parish. He had also reason to complain about the manse which was "no way fit for living in", and the glebe which was insufficient and "the worst land of any in or about the town".

On top of all this, he often had to enforce payment of his stipend by legal proceedings, the end result being that he left Dornoch in 1710 for a more acceptable parish in Perthshire. The heritors at this time certainly do not seem to have had the interests of the church at heart.

In 1713 a new minister, the Rev. Robert Kirk, arrived. As a result of his insistence, repair of the church was eventually begun. Although it was delayed because of the reluctance of heritors to provide funds, it was finally completed at the end of 1715. Robert Kirk continued to minister in Dornoch till his death in 1758.

REPLACED

Within a year, he was replaced by the Rev. John Sutherland, minister and pioneer in agriculture. (It was he who introduced the potato in to the parish.) In 1769 he had reason to complain to the Presbytery about the state of the church — if it was not repaired he and his congregation would have to desert it. Not until 1772 were repairs commenced.

Obviously such extensive work incurred great expenditure, so undoubtedly all concerned would have been very grateful for the grant of £300 received from the Exchequer in 1775. The state of the Manse was such that it was beyond repair, and despite some difficulties with the heritors a new one was erected in 1775. Mr Sutherland did not long enjoy these improvements, as he died in 1777.

He was soon succeeded by the Rev. John Bethune, who continued to minister in Dornoch for the rest of the century. Under his ministry further repairs to the Cathedral were carried out. These must have endured until at least the beginning of the 19th century, for we have favourable comments from the Rev. Donald Sage when he first saw the Cathedral in 1801: "I was almost breathless with wonder at the height of the steeple and at the huge antique construction of the Church."

As far as the minister, the Cathedral and the Manse were concerned, the century seems to have been one long struggle for more money and more improvements. Apart from these routine affairs of administration, the Kirk Session was involved in almost every aspect of parish life, not only caring for the poor, but also acting as a Court of Justice. The poor of the parish, who seem to have numbered from 40 to 80 people, were provided for from church collections and mortcloth dues. The money was distributed at the church on the Monday of the bi-annual communion season.

It did not amount to much, however, and had usually to be supplemented by begging. Sabbath drinking was a problem that the Session were very concerned about. In 1731 they agreed to buy a large Gaelic Bible which was to be read to the congregation before the minister arrived, in the hope that it would prevent them from visiting alehouses before the service.

Further, two elders were appointed to go round all the alehouses in the town during the time of the service to prevent drinking and Sabbath profanation at such times.

It is interesting that the magistrates of the burgh ordered one of their officers to work with the elders and make a report on the matter, ecclesiastical and secular

authorities co-operating to solve a basically ecclesiastical problem.

The Session also tried to suppress immorality (by what means we are not told) and offenders were disciplined in front of the congregation as well as being fined. In 1732 the Session ordered that all marriage contracts (drawn up previous to a marriage with provision for payment of a fine if either side failed to fulfil their obligations) should be inserted and signed in their records.

Of course, any breach of contract was investigated and penalised by the Session. The power of the Session in the community was such that any stranger who wished to settle in the burgh had to produce a certificate of character which was to their satisfaction, before he was permitted to stay.

Although it may be difficult for us today to imagine the pervasive influence of the church, especially in the form of the Kirk Session on the community, it was certainly a force to be reckoned with in the 18th century.

As far as trade was concerned, the "fairs" or markets, held six times a year, were the most important events in the burgh. Mr Sage describes them as they were at the very beginning of the 19th century, an account which is presumably reliable for most of the 18th: "The public fairs of this little county town made a considerable stir. From the Ord Head to the Meikle Ferry, almost every man, woman and child attended the Dornoch Market. The market stance was the churchyard . . . During its continuance every sort of saleable article was bought and sold, whether of home or foreign manufacture."

From the contemporary petty customs scale we can see the type of miscellaneous merchandise which was brought in for sale; e.g. cows, oxen, tallow, butter, cheese, blankets, plaid, sheeting, country cloth and shoes. Apart from whisky distilling and the spinning of flax, it seems there was little manufacturing in the town. Although there are few mentions of the Dornoch guildry in the records of the town, there is no doubt that guilds of various trades existed, their members possessing the exclusive privilege of trading in the burgh.

Admission to the guilds was carefully guarded, but when one did take place it was invariably celebrated by a Ball — apparently the "brethren balls" as they were known, were great social functions in Dornoch. Thus, although in a remote part of the country, Dornoch was certainly not devoid of trade in the 18th century.

FIRST SCHOOL

Although an Act of 1696 made legal provision for at least one school in every parish, the process of establishing parochial schools in Sutherland took a considerable time. However, Dornoch appears to have been the earliest educational centre in the county, having a grammar school as early as the 16th century.

For most of the 18th century there were frequent changes of schoolmaster, probably due to the lack of adequate provision for the maintenance and encouragement of good teachers.

With a view to ameliorating the situation, we find the Town Council in 1766 making the following resolution:

"Taking to consideration that hitherto there has not been any school fees or dues for teaching the different Branches of Education made, for remedying whereof and for the encouragement of a proper and fit schoolmaster within the said Burgh and Parish, it is hereby resolved . . . and unanimously Agreed upon that there shall be paid quarterly to the schoolmaster of the said burgh for the time being according to several Branches of Education he shall teach the sums following, viz: Eng-

lish in the new method 2/-; English and writing 2/6; English and Arithmetic 2/6; English and Latin and Writing 2/6; with power to Writing 2/6; with power to Andrew Fraser, present schoolmaster of the said burgh, and his successors, in office, to Exact, Demand, Require and Receive from all concerned the quarterly fees according to the several Rates above written, until this Act of Council shall be repealed."

How successful this effort was we do not know, but at least it shows there was a genuine concern in the burgh for an improvement in schooling. Also along these lines, it was interesting to discover that Dornoch possessed a library in the early 18th century — a claim, I am sure, not many towns of the time could have made. As we find two of its members reporting to a presbytery meeting in January 1711, that they had visited the library "and found all the books intire, and that they had marked all the books on the back and set them in order in a press," it would appear it was under the control of the Presbytery.

Its very existence presupposing some demand for reading material, we can surely conclude that Dornoch grammar school was successfully educating at least a section of the population of the burgh.

Despite the influences of education, superstition had a strong hold on the people of Sutherland in the 18th century. The Church courts did their utmost to denounce and suppress it, and in Kirk Session records we find people being charged with such offences as "swearing on the Bible and on iron" and "divining by sieve, shears and comb", all associated with witchcraft.

It was in Dornoch that the last witch in Scotland was burnt in 1722. Her name was Janet Horne and in her old age she became an object of suspicion in her neighbourhood. As people were convinced that she was a witch, she was arrested and tried in Dornoch. The deformity of her daughter's hand was held as proof positive of her guilt.

Despite the mother's pleas that it was the result of a burning accident when she was a child, the prosecution insisted it was due to her being shod by the devil when her mother turned her into a horse! She was therefore convicted, sentenced to be rolled in tar, then in feathers and then to be burned. The place on the links where the punishment was carried out has been marked with a stone.

The last hanging which took place in Dornoch was in 1738, the punishment being meted out for a murder under suspicious circumstances, witchcraft being blamed. So, however "civilised" Dornoch may have been in many ways in the 18th century, superstition was still very prevalent.

Although leisure hours were probably not very frequent in those times, it seems that, at least towards the end of the century, shinty was a very popular pastime. Sage tells us that:

"Men of all ages among the working classes joined in it, specially on old New Year's Day. I distinctly recollect on seeing such joyous occasion at Dornoch, the whole male population, from the greyheaded grandfather to the lightest heeled stripling turn out to the Links, each with his club; and from 11 o'clock in the forenoon till it became dark, they would keep at it, with all keenness . . ."

He also tells us that cock-fighting was a favourite amusement, in February of each year, taking precedence over all others. If nothing else, this does show us that life in 18th century Dornoch did have its lighter moments.

We could not conclude such an account of the 18th century without mentioning the Jacobite Rebellions. Although the town was not directly implicated in the 1715 Rebellion, it seems that the troops raised by the Earl of Sutherland (a royalist) to help suppress the rebellion were,

at least for a short time, quartered in Dornoch.

The burgh was, however, more involved in the "45". Dornoch parish produced 373 men for the royalist troops, a number greater than that of any other parish in the county.

Lord Loudon, who was in command of the royalist troops in the northern Highlands, made Dornoch his headquarters during the winter of 1745-6. Meanwhile the Earl of Cromartie had raised a Jacobite force in Ross, and in March 1746 they crossed the Dornoch Firth, took the royalists by surprise and captured Dornoch and Dunrobin.

The occupation did not last very long for, the following month, a few days before the Battle of Culloden, Lord Cromartie was summoned from Dunrobin to join Prince Charles. On his march southwards he was attacked by the royalist forces at the Little Ferry and, being defeated, Dornoch was then relieved of the Jacobite army.

Thus, in the words of Ben-tinck, "Dornoch, notwithstanding its remote situation, played its own part in the stirring events of the '45, and contributed its own share towards the suppression of the rising in favour of Prince Charles Edward Stuart."

In conclusion, having looked at life in the 18th century burgh — the place, the population, municipal affairs, the church, economic, educational and social aspects — we have indeed seen an important northern town; important in itself, e.g. as a cathedral town; important to the parish, e.g. in being the educational centre; important to the county, e.g. for trading, because of its fairs; and finally, importance to the country at large, e.g. in helping to defeat the Jacobites.

As a burgh it was not only important, but it functioned vigorously in its municipal affairs, its ecclesiastical affairs and its economic affairs. It was not lifeless, but very active.

Thus, Dornoch in the 18th century was an important (though small) royal burgh which functioned with vitality.