

Queen Victoria would have been Amused

The newly cleaned portrait of Queen Victoria which has dominated Sutherland District Council's debating chamber since 1903 is to be returned to its former position, despite attempts to oust it to the staircase.

The full district council agreed this week to follow the recommendation of their policy and resources committee despite objections from Helmsdale councillor John Mackay that they had been "lumbered" with the 9ft 7in x 6ft 6in picture.

Dornoch Heritage Society and Dornoch Community Council have protested at such moves, asking how the council, which avowedly supports art and culture, "can contemplate the removal of this fine artwork from its present and proper location."

The painting has been missing since 1990, when it was sent to Edinburgh for cleaning and repairing.

But members were asked to consider where it should be rehung as, in its previous position at the rear of the top table in the council chamber, it had been scuffed and damaged.

Graeme McLaughlin, director of housing and technical services, suggested three options: in the committee room, on the staircase or as before in the chamber. Some members felt the staircase was the best place: "Why", asked Kinlochbervie's Leila Mackenzie, "should we deny the public access to see it every day when they come into the library?"

But local member David Shepherd argued that the painting had hung in the chamber since 1903, and it should be returned to the same place.

Mr McLaughlin said that it would be fixed to the wall so it could not be removed, but David Mackenzie, Bonar Bridge, still feared it might be defaced there. Mr David Macrae, Golspie, mused that Dornoch Common Good Fund might pay for the provision of bullet-proof glass, then suggested the painting's worth be established.

Finance director William Sutherland was cagey about discussing its value in public. Mr McLaughlin reassured members that, in the meantime, it would be returned to council premises and would lie safely in a crate until members made their decision.

Mrs Mary Fielding, Brora, practically, suggested finding out, then selling it. Mr Shepherd, outraged: "It's not yours to sell!"

He said that councillors were custodians of the painting, which had been gifted to Dornoch by the

then Duke of Sutherland. He had commissioned it from 19th century artist Franz Winterhalter but, because Queen Victoria was depicted with a twisted hand, he gave it away and had a second portrait done (with straightened hand), and hung in Dunrobin Castle.

In Mr Shepherd's opinion, the twisted hand probably made the painting more valuable.

The council had become respon-

sible for it on local government reorganisation in 1975.

And, said Mr Shepherd, "We have no more right to dispose of that than we have to dispose of this building!"

Mr John Allison, administration director, pointed out that, actually, members did have the right to dispose of the building, and if the painting was judged one of the council's assets, to dispose of that, too.

Mr Ron McDonald, chairing the policy and resources committee, was more concerned about the painting's security. Oblivious of the painting's measurements, he thought anyone could simply walk off with it: "There would be no difficulty in someone picking it up and walking out. Anyone in dungarees would be mistaken for a workman and wouldn't be stopped."

Mr Shepherd thought that, since this hadn't happened since 1903, it was unlikely to happen now.

His proposal that the painting return to its old place on the chamber wall was agreed after a vote.

The matter was aired again at last Monday's meeting of the district council when Mr Mackay said that, as he understood it, the district council was "lumbered" with the picture and it should more appropriately hang in a heritage centre.

He was opposed to its return to the council chamber and was supported by Mrs Mackenzie, who again argued that it should be hung somewhere more public.

But as the debate continued, Mrs Alison Magee, Lairg, pointed out that the picture would still be around "long after we've gone", and Mr Iain MacAulay, Assynt, who said he neither liked nor disliked the picture, said "We are the transient ones and the picture's permanent."

Mr Mackenzie said it would be "irresponsible" to shift the picture from the chambers, for insurance and security reasons.

Mrs Sheila Board, Dornoch, repeated the views of Dornoch's heritage society and community council: "We are responsible people, let's act like it!" she scolded.

A vote resolved the issue, and the picture will be rehung shortly.

Soldiers of the Queen with the Twisted Hand



Two former chairmen of Sutherland District Council sitting at the feet of Queen Victoria's painting — Colonel Sir Allan Gilmour (left) and El Alamein veteran John O F Mackay.