

## SKELBO CASTLE, SUTHERLAND

Standing above the southern shore of Loch Fleet, the ruins of Skelbo Castle demonstrate clearly, and probably better than any other castle in the Northern Highlands, the different stages of castle development between the 12th and the 17th centuries. Yet until recently this major castle has remained comparatively un-noticed, and without detailed record. Sadly, it has taken the partial collapse of the most recent, and in some ways the most significant, of its buildings to attract more widespread attention. This small display shows some of the results of a detailed survey of Skelbo carried out by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland in 1983.

The earliest surviving remains are those of a motte, an earthen mound with artificially scarped flanks and traces of an outer ditch. This was probably surmounted by a timber keep or tower which was later replaced by a stone hall-tower of oblong plan and at least two storeys in height; the position, proportions and character of this building bear a likeness to that at Duffus in Moray with which there was a family connection. The castle precincts were also enclosed within a stout curtain-wall which, although repaired and partly in ruins, still makes an impressive northern screen on the slope below the tower. It has to be admitted, however, that the area enclosed by the wall is a low-lying hollow with few obvious physical advantages except concealment and shelter. Built against the south-western stretch of the curtain-wall is a large two-storeyed building, now fast falling to ruin, which has provided domestic accommodation on the first floor, possibly divided into two separate living units, and on the ground floor there is vaulted cellarage, including byre and workshop. Of a type rarely encountered in the Highlands, this building represents an important transitional phase between medieval and modern house-design.

The first reference to the lands of Skelbo occurs in an early 13th-century grant made (probably between 1203 and 1214) by Hugh Freskin to his kinsman, Gilbert de Moray, afterwards Bishop of Caithness. Hugh was of the third generation of his family, and it is likely that the motte was put up well before 1200 and some time after his family's establishment at Duffus. The dates of the hall-tower and curtain-wall are not known, although Hugh's descendants, created earls of Sutherland by King Alexander II, had probably acquired the means to build extensively in stone and lime by or after 1300. The house probably belongs to a period about 1600, and was declared to be 'still habitable' in 1769.

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