

For all their exasperating sloth, their winter dreaming about their peat-fires, their scandalous habit of living cheek by jowl with their livestock, the Highlanders of Sutherland had one virtue on which the nation greedily fastened. This was their courage and their belief that nowhere in the world was there a fighting-man to equal the Gael with a broadsword in his hand. The Countess Elizabeth was the last among the Scottish chiefs who raised their people for service in the Napoleonic Wars, but she surpassed them for volunteers. She did not go among her clan with six pipers, like the Duchess of Gordon, giving a kiss and a guinea to every recruit. She imposed a form of conscription that would have won Bonaparte's approval. She called for a census of her tenants and sub-tenants, and when this was done five hundred able-bodied young men among them were told that service in the Sutherland Highlanders would be a test of their duty to the *Ban mhorair Chataibh* and their loyalty to King George III. Though parents may have grumbled bitterly about the choice they were forced to make between the loss of a son and the loss of their tenancy the young men went willingly enough.

They made an incredible regiment. 'They are all brave,' said David Stewart of Garth. In nineteen years not one man of the light company, for example, was punished for misconduct. And many of those who survived the heat of South Africa, the fevers of the West Indies, or American Musketry at New Orleans came home at last to find their glens empty, their homes pulled down stone from stone, and their families dispersed.

For Mr Sellar and Mr Young and Mr Loch had been busy, improving Lord Stafford's estates.<sup>1</sup>

Though not expressly much to do with Wick, this was a key element of the Sutherland and Caithness background against which the herring industry grew, putting Wick on the map. Among the fishers, packers, carters and coopers working on the Wick, Lybster and Dunbeath fish-quays must have been quite a number of the demobbed and dispossessed Sutherland Highlanders; and among the gutters would have been their wives and daughters.

<sup>1</sup> Prebble, *The Highland Clearances*, op cit pp 57-58. An alternative view of the Duke, as being 'lavish with capital to ameliorate social dislocation' is suggested by TC Smouth, p 92, writing about Helmsdale in *The Landowner and the Planned Village*.

## ROYAL BURGH

TO become a 'burgh' was less an honour for a town than a signal of arrival at a useful and sometimes more prosperous status. Towns of any size and importance during feudal times were few and far between, and the folk of those that existed were usually subject to and often mistreated and overtaxed by their lords. Towns were even fewer in Scotland than in England and their status even more menial. As one Scottish historian puts it, they 'were an almost new feature of twelfth-century Scotland'.

It was King David I, (1124-1153) - former Earl of Huntingdon, and thoroughly familiar with English ways of managing things - who began promoting settlements in Scotland to the dignity of 'burgh', under his Leges Burgorum, which he had copied from the statutes of the borough of Newcastle upon Tyne - a town well known to the Scots, who had overrun it more than once. Among the new 'burghs' were no less than fifteen towns, not all of which have survived, for instance Roxburgh, but including Edinburgh, Dunfermline, Perth and Stirling. A town's status as burgh signified various advantages such as freedom from impositions other than those of the king, certain rights as to customs affecting trade, especially exports, freedoms of town government and rights of association for craftsmen and tradesmen in guilds, with defined powers as to the regulation of manufacturing and trade activities. Also a number of burghs were allowed to set up royal mints. By 1250, during the reign of Alexander III, there were no less than sixteen towns with a mint, including Berwick, Ayr, Roxburgh and Inverness. Trading outside the jurisdiction of the king's burghs came under severe restriction.

Two kinds of burgh came into existence, those established and governed under a royal charter, specifically granted to that town, and known as 'royal burghs', and 'burghs of barony', usually smaller towns granted similar but less extensive privileges by the lord of the county under sanction of the king. As might be supposed, neither burghs of barony nor royal burghs were numerous in the north of Scotland. In Caithness two towns eventually qualified for burgh status, Wick and Thurso. Wick became a burgh of barony some time



evictions and burnings of 1814 when Patrick Sellar, himself now owner of large tracts of sheep-pasture on the banks of the Naver at Skail, supervised the operation.<sup>1</sup> At the same time most of the remaining inhabitants of Upper Kildonan – where the railway now runs from Kinbrace to Forsinard – were evacuated. Summing up the effects of this drastic clearance of Kildonan Strath in 1815, John Prebble writes:

Now it was time for Loch [Stafford's Commissioner, an enthusiastic Utilitarian<sup>2</sup>] to clear away the rest, to drive them down to Helmsdale, where his workmen were building herring-stores, curing-sheds and harbour offices, all bearing Stafford arms and the date of the year in grey Highland stone [some of these buildings are still there]. And if the people were too lazy (in Loch's opinion) to leave the plough for the trawl [this is a bit previous – the 'trawl' came later], they might walk to the emigrants' ships at Wick and Thurso, and the country would be well rid of them.

Unlike Gunns who are numerous in Wick, Mackays do not seem to have come to rest in the county capital or in east Caithness generally in any great numbers, as reference to today's telephone book will confirm – though the town's premier hotel bears the Mackay label. They became, however, like the Children of Israel in the Diaspora, spread widely about the world, especially the north of Scotland. Quoting the contemporary Presbyterian minister, Donald Sage – one of the very few of his kind who took the part, verbally, at least – of the Gunns and Mackays being 'cleared', Prebble's account continues:

The whole inhabitants of Kildonan parish, with the exception of three families, nearly 2,000 souls, were utterly rooted and burned out. Many, especially the young and robust, left the country, but the aged, the females and children, were obliged to stay and accept the wretched allotments allowed them on the

1 In 1816 Sellar was arraigned before the Lord Commissioner of Justiciary at Inverness, on charges of 'culpable homicide', 'oppression' and 'real injury', and with many witnesses against him was completely exonerated. In fact, only a few of the witnesses were called.

2 Adherence to this philosophy was a characteristic of most 'improvers'. Many administrators of relief programmes to the distressed and displaced of these times were of the same cast of mind, notoriously Charles Trevelyan, concerned with relief in Ireland in 1846-1847. The 'greatest good' notion often led them into indifference to cases of individual suffering. James Loch outlived his reputation as a ruthless supervisor of the clearance policies of the Sutherlands to become in later years the repeatedly re-elected Liberal MP of the Northern Burghs from 1830 to 1850, gaining much favourable coverage in the *John O'Groat Journal* as a keen promoter of the interests of Wick.

sea-shore and endeavour to learn fishing.

Perhaps the most poignant irony of this whole episode of the removal of Gunns and Mackays from the lands of their fathers is provided by the story of the 93rd Regiment, the Sutherland Highlanders. 'Frequently described as "the most Highland of Highland regiments"', says Prebble in *Mutiny*, 'it was also the last to be raised in the old way as a clan levy and thus, perhaps, the last real Highland regiment.' Whether or not the Sutherlanders constituted a true clan (the clan was certainly of an unusual kind), this famous regiment was raised directly by the *Ben mhòrair Chataibh*, the 'Great Lady of Sutherland', in response to the appeal in 1793 of Henry Dundas, Home Secretary (1791-1794) and a short time later Secretary at War (1794-1801) in Pitt's government, to the Highland lairds to muster their tenants, ostensibly for the defence of the realm in the war now being waged against the French Revolutionary government.<sup>1</sup>

The first regiment of 'Fencible Men'<sup>2</sup> raised after this call was the Strathspey Regiment of the Grants; the second was the Sutherland Fencibles, re-mustered in 1799 as the 93rd Sutherland Regiment. There had been earlier Sutherland Fencibles, the first raised in 1759 by the then Earl of Sutherland during the Seven Years' War. This had been 'reduced' or stood-down some time later. A second local Fencible Regiment was recruited in 1779 under the command of Colonel William Wemyss, a relative of the Countess, who as an MP had offered to 'call upon the young men of Strath Fleet (behind Golspie), Strath Naver and Strath Helmsdale'. Men from this and the Fencibles of 1793 were absorbed into the Sutherland Regiment, officially dating from 1800.

The circumstances of the recruitment of this famous regiment are well put by Prebble (whose partisanship must be admitted):

1 'Ostensibly', since this appeal was by the Home Secretary, less concerned in 1793 with the war than with the unrest developing in the Highlands as the result of 'over-population' resulting largely from the 'improvements', already advancing in the area under the influence of the British Wool Society, and marked by the arrival in the north of 'the Great Cheviot'. These were, indeed, times of considerable public disquiet, quite apart from the war. Britain was going through a drastic social revolution precipitated by industrial and agricultural changes usually described as the 'Industrial Revolution'.

2 A shortened form of *defensible*, first used in the sixteenth century to describe men fit and able for military service. In the eighteenth century the term 'Fencible men' was used to describe those who could be mustered for training, perhaps 'home guard' activities but most important, men who could be re-mustered or re-enlisted in marching regiments. Most fencibles were promised, in the first instance, that they would not be sent on foreign service, a promise often broken and a cause of the 'mutinies' with which the army was plagued in these times. See John Prebble, *Mutiny: Highland Regiments in Revolt, 1743-1804*; Penguin (1977).