

George Dempster, 1732-1818, of Skibo & Dunnichen

The adjoining colour photograph was presented to the Society by Donald Edward Fraser. It is from a portrait of George Dempster which hangs in the Town Hall at Forfar.

“A true blue Scot”. Such was Robert Burns verdict on George Dempster. Following a career as M.P. for the Perth Burghs, where he gained respect for his independent judgement and involved himself in campaigning for the establishment of lighthouses and fisheries, he withdrew from Parliament to devote himself to the improvement of his estates. Instead of clearing the land to make way for sheep he gave every encouragement to his tenants to improve their holdings. In a letter to his great friend Sir Adam Ferguson of Kilkerran, written from Skibo in 1787 he writes:

“My project is to give this estate what I call a constitution. I fix all the present tenants for their lives at the present rent in their houses, gardens and cultivated ground. At their deaths I give the refusal to the person they name for their successor at a rent to be fixed by two arbitrators – I give leave to any body to settle on the waste ground, paying 1 shilling a year for their lives – I abolish all personal services.....”.

His whole scheme is laid out in the adjoining ‘Constitutions of Creich’.

Also adjoining is an article from The Scottish Field which deals particularly with Dempster’s involvement in establishing the mill at Spinningdale. Dempster’s later years were tinged with sadness. Though happily married, the Dempsters had no children and centred their hopes for the future on a nephew who died in his teens. Dempster’s love for Skibo is evident in the letter he wrote in 1810, on the death of his wife. Writing to her brother Sam Heming he says – “They break up house-keeping at Skibo Castle – Sam, it would mortify any body to leave bonny Skibo at this season (July) in its fullest glory but how much more on so melancholy an occasion”.

The Constitutions of Criech

- 1 *Every settlers will have given him a stone of iron, for making hammers, or other instruments.*
- 2 *Also seed, whether potatoes or corn, for what ground shall be cultivated in the first two years.*
- 3 *The new settlers will be free from all services whatsoever, and from thirlage to the mill.*
- 4 *They will only have to pay one shilling a-year of rent, during the life of the first settler.*
- 5 *Their heirs or children, will, have a preferable right to their possessions, of cultivated and enclosed, at such a rent as shall be fixed at the time of their succeeding to the possession, by arbitrators mutually chosen.*
- 6 *No addition will be made to this rent, during the life of the said heir or children.*
- 7 *The same rule or preference, will be observed in favour of all future heirs of the settler; so that possession may belong for ever to the family of the man who made the first settlement: provided always, that the heirs or children of the first settler, shall build stone houses upon the possession; and that the houses in time coming, be roofed with straw, slate, or heather, and not with divots.*
- 8 *The new settlers will have a right to take peat from the nearest mosses upon the estate for their own use.'*