

THIS IS MY COUNTRY

The Repose of Dornoch

By CUTHBERT GRAHAM

With pictures by DAVID SUTHERLAND

THERE is about Dornoch an air of repose. I owe this thought to the man who knows it better, perhaps, than anybody living — Provost Henry Clunie. I use the old title because it is still the title in use by everybody in the little town.

Certainly the atmosphere of Dornoch is quite unique. No county town in Britain is in the least like it. In Castle Street and the Cathedral Square one is overwhelmingly conscious of ancient, well-established peace and civility.

Nothing one feels can break this, so long as the Cathedral stands facing the Castle with trees and lawns and a wide public "place" between, in which it is still possible to park a car unobtrusively and without committing an outrage or a public nuisance.

And beyond the civic centre every road, even those which run uphill, runs to the great sandy links which stretch for miles at the edge of the Dornoch Firth and the Moray Firth coast — links renowned for the second oldest golf course in the world.

In actual fact Dornoch — a name which means "the field of the rounded stones" — is built, or rather grows, on a series of raised beaches. Old Dornoch, of mellow red sandstone on the 25 and 50 feet raised beaches and New Dornoch, comprising the more elevated new housing estates, is of brick on a 100 feet raised beach.

To the west of the town is the Evelix Valley which illustrates a gradual transition from the coastal lowlands to the interior plateau, a transition from fat large farms to the crofting country and moorland of the true Highlands.

These geographical facts make Dornoch a place apart, give it its atmosphere of great beneficent space of shorelands and open sky in which larks are soaring and singing, and one is close to the infinite blessing of nature.

If you go on to say that Dornoch is the Garden of Eden you would not be far wrong, though there are small serpents in this garden. Dornoch, which had a population of 838 at the 1971 census, is so attractive to those perpetual holiday-makers, the retired, that its age-pyramid is a little top heavy. Teenagers and young adults delight to live in it, but there is little it can offer them by way of employment.

Dornoch Firth Bridge Prospect

There is, it is true, one truly organic local industry, the farming and meat purveying enterprise of John Grant and Sons, which started well over a century ago as a croft of only a few acres and the selling of beef and mutton from a cart, and has expanded into a business with a farm of 1000 acres and a trade in beef, hill lamb, pork, venison, game and salmon, supplying hotels and restaurants throughout Britain and as far afield as Malaya, USA, Holland and Switzerland.

And there is a small industrial estate in the former Dornoch station, the terminus of the branch line from the Mound, now long closed. But new industry is difficult to acquire owing to remoteness — a remoteness that would be substantially reduced by the Dornoch Firth Bridge which is now a definite commitment by the Government.

Hydrographic and ecological surveys to determine the best site for the bridge have been going on for months. After that will come statutory processes and the bridge has to be designed and fitted in among other competing claims for the funds available in the trunk road programmes.

But when at last it becomes an actuality it will link Dornoch directly with Tain and all points south. It will be on the main trunk road instead of as at present on a branch from the Evelix crossroads. The long detour round the Firth and across the Kyle at Bonar will be eliminated.

Doubtless the Dornoch Firth Bridge will not solve all problems, but every industry must consider ease of communications and the prospect of new industrial support to the Dornoch economy will be opened up. So far as that long-awaited bridge is concerned for Dornoch it simply cannot come too soon.

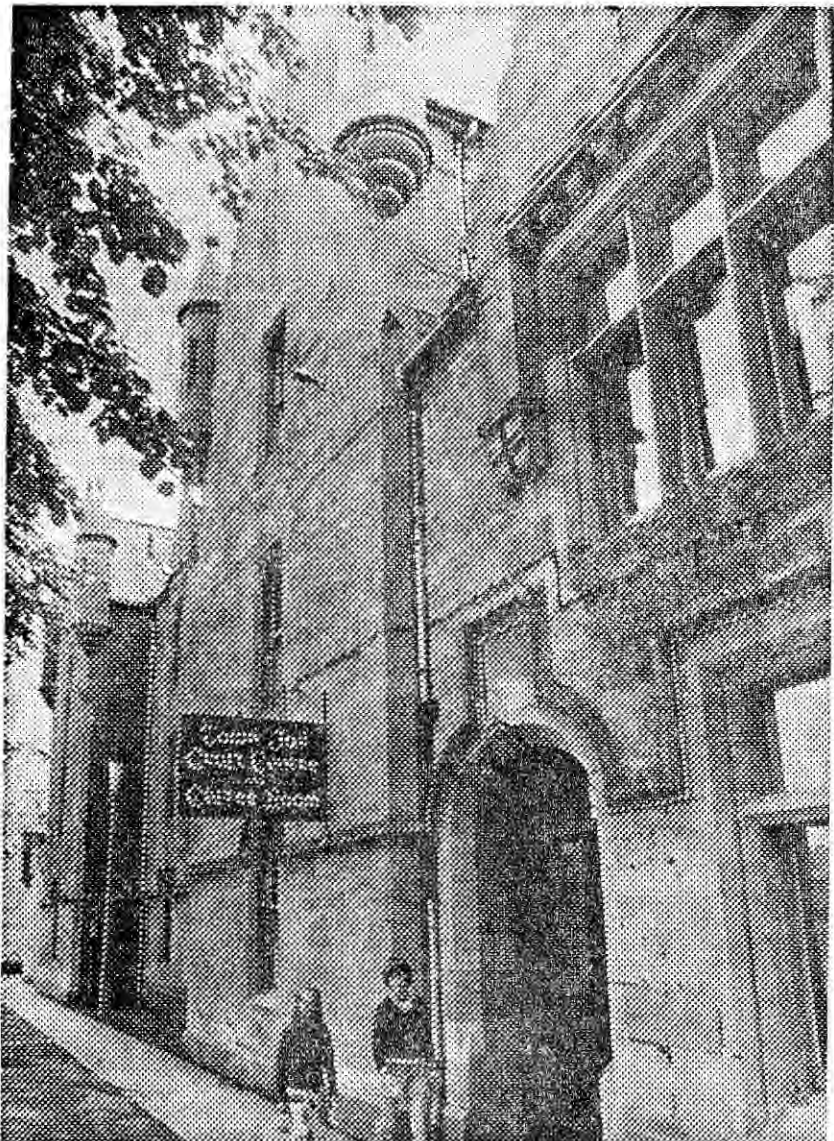
Dornoch is truly fortunate to be still represented by her much loved Freeman, Henry Clunie on the Sutherland District Council. This has no doubt done much to ease the transition from "self-determination" under the old Town Council to the new local government regime. Mr Clunie, who served for 10 years as Provost, was given the Freedom of Dornoch on July 9, 1973.

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DORNOCH'S elder statesman, Henry Clunie, last Provost and last Freeman of the Royal Burgh on right, with the new minister of Dornoch Cathedral, the Rev. James Simpson. Mr Simpson is an expert on church doctrine and attitudes to marriage guidance and family problems. He is the author of two books, "There is a Time To . . ." (James Clarke & Sons) and "Marriage Questions Today" (The Saint Andrew Press). Behind is the splendid outline of Dornoch Cathedral, an example of an ancient foundation that has been continuously adapted to the needs of modern religious life.



The ancient royal burgh of Dornoch as seen from the tower of the Burghfield Hotel. The town is built on a series of raised beaches, the oldest part, including the Cathedral and Castle, seen on extreme right, on the 25ft. and 50ft. beaches and the newer part with its modern housing scheme on the 100ft. raised beach behind that. On the horizon behind this picture stretch the famous Dornoch Links, including the Old Course, the second oldest golf course in the world.



The Old Jail of Dornoch, built by the County Board of Sutherland and adjoining the Sheriff Courthouse and the Old Castle, was opened in 1850. Today it is the home of a fascinating Landmark-type visitor centre run by the new owners, Lochcarron Weavers.

How Dornoch faces the new age

WHILE Dornoch is very happily placed in many respects, with a booming holiday trade, golfing renown as never before and all its old inherited charms, it has one great grief — the downgrading of the Dornoch Academy to a two-year secondary school and the under-use of a superb modern building.

This patent injustice is due to the comprehensivisation of education and the idea that "big schools are best", along with the notion that with its restricted population and rating support the District of Sutherland, as it now is, cannot afford more than one full secondary school.

All these arguments are questionable. But insult is added to injury by the fact that Dornoch has a hostel in use for pupils from the far west of the county and these pupils, while living in the town, are sent to Golspie to have their entire secondary education there.

These arrangements make it difficult to recruit teachers for the unfairly truncated academy. It has only three permanent teachers. All the rest of the work is done by visiting teachers.

The modern academy, opened by HM The Queen Mother in September 1973 has a splendid hall (seating 400) with a fine modern stage, science labs. for chemistry, physics and biology, a homecraft suite with small flat in addition to the needlework and cookery rooms, technical rooms and gym., music and art rooms and library with provision for 3000 volumes. There are of course hostels (two) for the remote-home pupils actually attending the first and second year classes at Dornoch.

The roll today stands at 115 secondary and 200 primary pupils, the primary pupils, except for the Primary 7 class, being accommodated in the Old School. The big hall with its raked floor and superb stage is a boon to Dornoch for drama productions and other adult events, and the building is also used for night classes, but one cannot help a feeling of sadness that a full secondary school no longer exists here.

Meanwhile efforts to reverse the downgrading policy have failed and the present economic recession makes it difficult to renew them at the moment, but a time will surely come when they will be renewed, and by then perhaps, the practicality of small rather than large centralised secondary academies will have been sufficiently demonstrated by experience elsewhere in Scotland.

One reason why the loss of a full secondary school here is so acutely felt is the venerable tradition accruing from this could be a great asset. The names of Dornoch headmasters from 1585 to the present day are known and recorded.

1000 years of Schools

A fascinating history of Dornoch schooling was compiled by Provost Clunie. He told how the monks of the Celtic Church were the first teachers. The earliest recorded ecclesiastical foundation was that of St Finbarr on Schoolhill, about 564 AD.

In 1567 Dornoch and its Cathedral were put to the flames by wild Mackays of Strathnaver. From their ruins the school appears to have been moved to the Town House at the Mercat Cross in High Street, where it remained until about 1589 when it found temporary quarters in the castle. William Pain, the dominie of the day was accounted by Sir Robert Gordon (who had been taught by him) as "a reasonable good scholar, and of a quick and reddie wit."

Sir Robert, in his role as the Tutor of Sutherland, advised his charge, the young 14th Earl (who had been educated at Dornoch school between 1616 and 1642: "Let your chief schools for learning be at Dornoch... Be careful to enlarge and mantayne the liberties of the toune of Dornoch... Erect schooles there which may be a seminarie of vertue to instruct the children and youths of your countrey in learning... Cause erect a bibliothek in Dornoch, and fill it with sufficient store of books, both for your credit and the weill of the country, to amend their ignorance which increases through laik of books."

The Dornoch of today thinks this was good advice! But schooling had its ups and downs and there were desperate periods like the dawn of the nineteenth century when "the Cathedral was crumbling, the Castle uninhabitable and the Town House a ruin."

But education was by no means neglected. Donald Sage was a schoolboy in Dornoch between 1801 and 1803 and reports that the school was a single room laid out in its whole length with wide pews, while the "most dangerous game of shinty" was played on the Links by old and young alike.

Vast improvements took place in the town between 1810 and 1815. The "old school" of the present Dornoch Academy was opened on its present site in 1913.

I told the story of Dornoch Cathedral and Castle in "This is My Country" in September, 1964, so will not repeat it here. But the saga of the Town Jail demands a mention in view of present developments.

It forms the end flank of the remarkable facade in Castle Street formed by the Castle

By Cuthbert Graham

(now a hotel) Sheriff Courthouse and the prison. It was built between 1844 and 1850 by the County Board of Sutherland and in recent years has served as a craft centre. Under the new ownership of the firm of Lochcarron Weavers the ground floor with its cells is being converted into a vivid exhibition suite, a sort of Dornoch "Landmark" which will tell a great deal of history in a vivid and intriguing manner.

Upstairs there will continue to be a lively crafts centre and coffee bar providing a delightful rendezvous for visitors, while the drill hall at the back will be utilised as a manufactory for tartan fabric by the weavers. I saw dummy figures of "prisoners" and uniformed "warders" arriving and being installed in the cells which will also display scenes from jail life of early last century.

It is both original and entertaining to be shown a famous County Jail of the 1850s.

Treasures in the Rocks

Another unusual Dornoch institution is the Sutherland Rockhounds Club which exists for the exploration of the fascinating geology of the county. Sutherland is a happy hunting ground for the many folk who now have rock hunting as a hobby.

The expeditions organised for members are carried out with full collaboration with the land-owners concerned. The tools of the trade are simple — a crack hammer and a geologist's chisel. The club was formed in 1962 and has around 40 members, some of them corresponding members from England and overseas — including Texas, France and Italy.

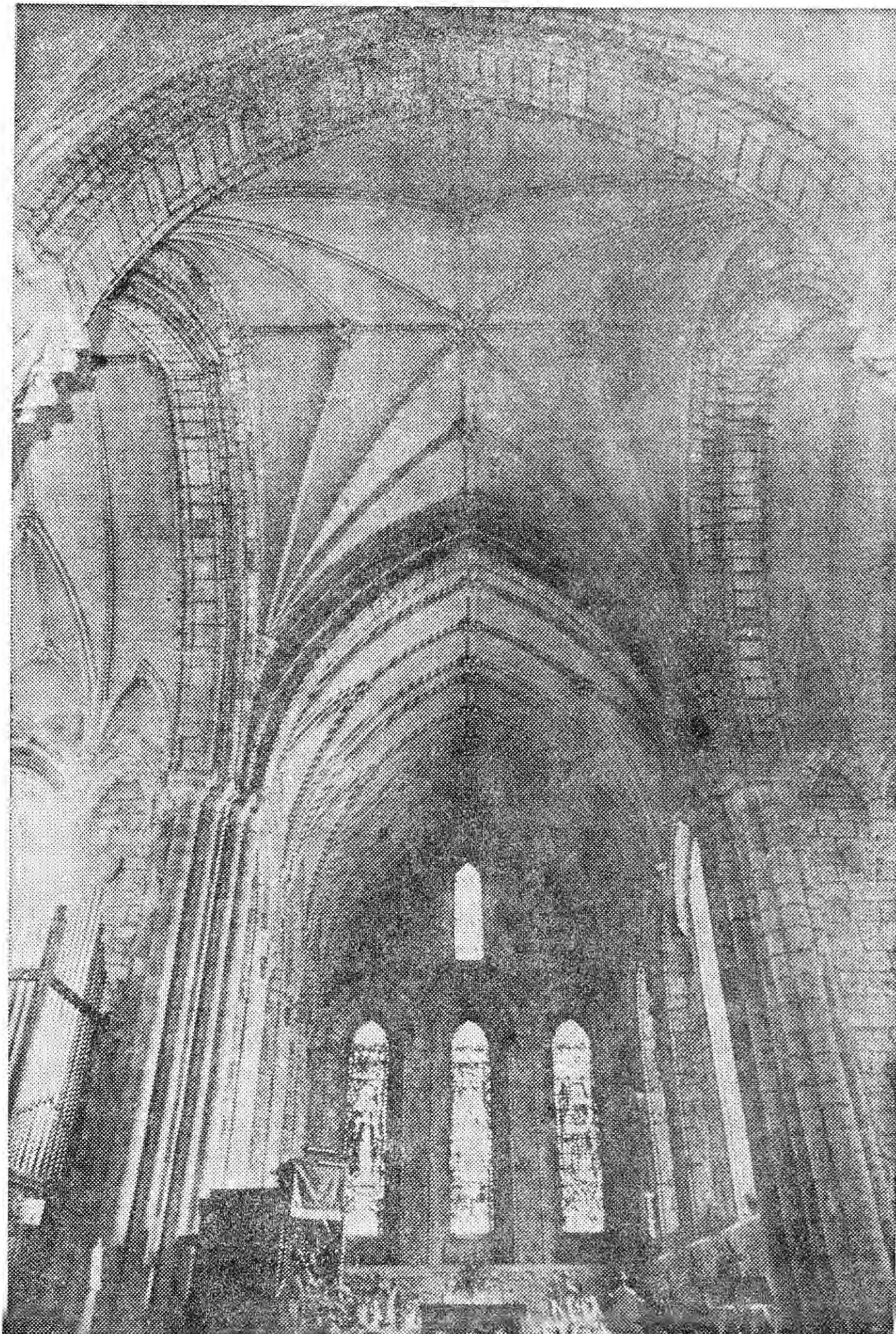
Small rock specimens are brought back from outings and have included six-sided crystals of aquamarine from Ben Loyal and Ben Hope, serpentine from Scourie, jade from Assynt, amethyst from the Glen of Golspie, topaz from Ben Hope, copper pyrites, zircon, Cairngorms and many other precious minerals.

The Rockhounds, whose president is Mr Peter Anderson, and whose secretary is Mr D. S. Frier, have their own workshops equipped with cutting machines which enable them to polish the stones and create attractive jewellery.

Meanwhile in its last months of existence the old Dornoch Town Council made arrangements to make available to the Golf Club on a 99-year lease the part of the Links needed for the extension of the Ladies' Course always provided that a site would be set aside for the annual Sutherland Agricultural Show — or its successors.

This famous show takes place this year on Saturday, July 24, and will incorporate the Sutherland Trades Fair, as floral art exhibition and flower show, livestock, horse and pony events, a children's pet parade and sports, sheep dog handling, a homecraft section, aeroplane flights and an RAF helicopter display, a police dog demonstration, the Black Knights eight-man free fall parachute display and performances by the Deeside Ladies' Pipe Band.

The show will be preceded by various warming up events, among them a car rally treasure hunt on the evening of Tuesday, July 20, professional TV wrestling in the marquee on the following evening and a grand ceilidh in the marquee with dance to follow on Thursday, July 22, while the Show Queen finals will be staged in the marquee on Friday evening (July 23).



The interior of Dornoch Cathedral showing the pillars and vault of the Crossing, the oldest part of the building, and the chancel and sanctuary with its magnificent triple-lighted window.



Skibo Castle, home of Mrs Carnegie-Millar, daughter of Andrew Carnegie, the Scots-American millionaire and benefactor. It is partly old (with a section dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and partly a Victorian neo-baronial pile.



Players practise putting on the Dornoch Old Course with the recently extended club house behind. Golf has been played here since the sixteenth century.



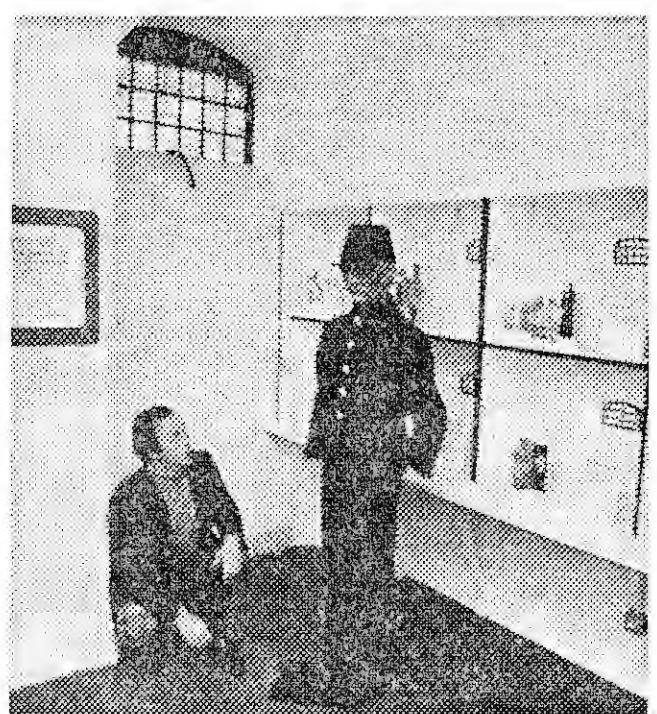
Primary I and II pupils of Dornoch Academy line up in front of the Old School with the new Academy building on left. The majority of the Primary School classes are held in the Old School. The new Academy was opened by the Queen Mother in September, 1963.



The inside of the Old Jail of Dornoch, now a visitor centre and exhibition suite, viewed through the massive iron yett.



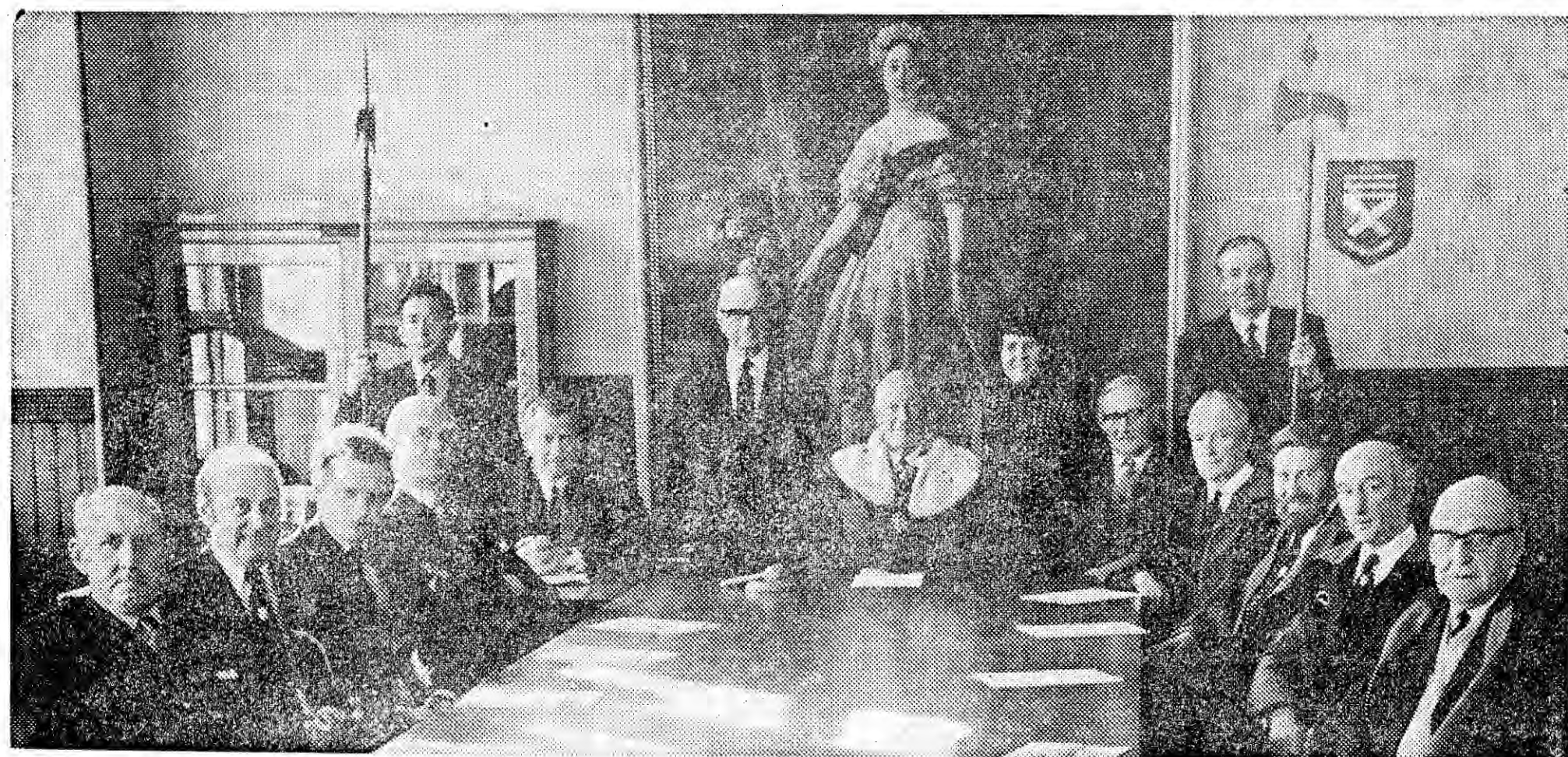
Mr D. S. Frier, secretary of the Sutherland Rockhounds, with an array of local rock crystal, serpentine, copper pyrites, cairngorm, amethyst, jade and agate on the Plaiden Ell of Dornoch.



Manager Mr A. Buchan with one of the model jailers in an exhibition cell of the Dornoch Old Jail.



Dornoch Academy musicians: left to right, standing — Alison MacLeod, Carol Ferguson, Isobel McNeil, Shirley Burnett and Sara Bailey. Seated: Morag Mackie, Iona Patterson and Gladys Grant.



Historic picture of the last meeting of Dornoch Town Council. Back row, standing: G. Manson (Caravan Site superintendent), M. S. Baxendale (cashier), Miss C. J. Mackay (secretary), H. M. Morrison (Burgh Officer). Back row, seated: G. F. Trowbridge (Town Clerk and Chamberlain), Henry Clunie (last Provost and last Freeman), H. Steele (Burgh Surveyor). Left side, front to back: the late Councillor G. A. Mackenzie, Councillors D. Macpherson, W. M. Wickham, Capt. W. W. Stewart-Fitzroy. Right side, front to back: Hon. Treasurer E. K. Cartwright, Dean of Guild W. J. A. Davidson, Junior Bailie E. K. C. Currie and Senior Bailie J. A. T. Seatter.