

'Courtship' sealed by Freedom



The band of the Royal Marines led the parade around the centre of Dornoch after the ceremony. As newly created Freemen of Sutherland, the ship's company were allowed to march "with swords drawn, bayonets fixed, drums beating, bands playing and colours flying".



In safe hands ... Chief Petty Officer Richard Gregory takes careful charge of the Freedom scroll for HMS Sutherland.

The growing bonds of friendship between Royal Navy frigate HMS Sutherland and the county whose name she bears were sealed in Dornoch on Saturday when the captain and crew accepted the Freedom of Sutherland.

"I see the ship's previous visits to Sutherland as the courtship," Commander Phil Haslam told the crowds who turned out in bright September sunshine to see the impressive ceremony in the town's Cathedral Square. "Today I see the marriage, a lasting commitment made for mutual benefit which will grow stronger and run deeper as the years go on."

Cdr Haslam said the ceremony was the culmination of a lot of hard work and determination, not just to bring the event to its conclusion "but to foster what I think is one of the strongest affiliations in the Royal Navy — if not the strongest."

He continued: "This ship and the Sutherland district have a bond that runs very deep. *Sutherland* is very much your ship. It gives me immense pleasure, and it's a great privilege both personally and professionally, to accept the Freedom."

The Freedom scroll was officially presented to him by Councillor Francis Keith, chairman of the Highland Council's Sutherland County Committee, who paid tribute to those who serve in the armed forces.

"The world has become a very dangerous place," he told the officers and ratings on parade. "Now, you don't know where your enemies are. I really feel for the young men and woman who volunteer to join our armed forces. I think they deserve our greatest debt of gratitude. But there's a particular place in our hearts for the people of HMS Sutherland. We follow your progress throughout the world with great diligence, through the Northern

Times and your e-mails to schools and councillors. I wish each and every one of you a happy and successful career in the Royal Navy."

Highland Council convener Alison Magee, Laig, had a revelation about the ship. Before it was even completed, in 1995, the Admiralty had offered its affiliation to the city of Aberdeen because of its maritime connections. But the then left-wing Aberdeen council rejected the offer, and it was rumoured that Cardiff was about to accept the ship as the city's own when Sutherland District Council intervened. "And I am absolutely delighted to say that we were successful in getting one of the Navy's foremost warships affiliated to one of the most remote and least populated parts of the country," she said.

Councillor Magee paid tribute to the succession of captains who had arranged visits to the county by work parties of the crew, to carry out amenity projects, notably in the early days the reconstruction of the walled garden at for elderly patients at Migdale Hospital, Bonar Bridge. Since then the kinship between ship and county of the same name had flourished.

The ship's guard, with bayonets fixed and colours flying and led by the band of the Royal Marines, then headed a parade of the 170 sailors through the main streets of Dornoch, watched by many residents and holidaymakers. Later captain, crew and guests were entertained to a reception and lunch in Dunrobin Castle.

It is only the third time the Freedom of Sutherland has been bestowed. The honour has previously gone to the Queen's Own Highlanders and to the late J O F Mackay for his services to local government.

More pictures on Page 6.