

New controversy over Skelbo Castle

THE ANCIENT Skelbo Castle on the shores of Loch Fleet is at the centre of another controversy.

Historic Scotland carried out emergency work to stabilise the crumbling structure earlier this year at a cost to the taxpayer of more than £64,000.

Now, the Labour peer Lord Moonie has criticised the agency, claiming not enough effort had been made to trace the castle's owner and exact payment from him.

But in another twist it has emerged that the Russian businessman understood to have owned the castle died in September last year, leaving no will.

by Caroline McMorran

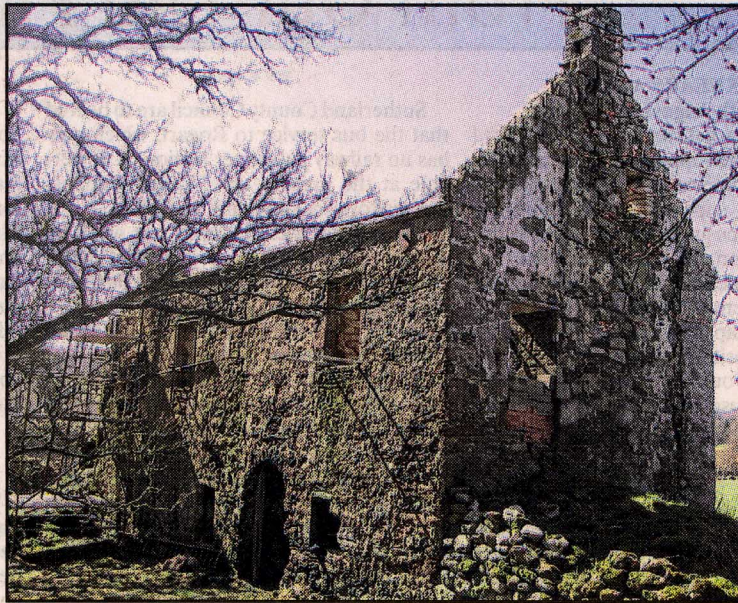
And now Lord Moonie himself has attracted criticism from history buffs who are standing up for Historic Scotland, saying it had a duty to carry out the preservation work.

It's yet another convoluted chapter in the long and eventful history of ruined Skelbo Castle, which dates back to early Norman times.

The structure and its surrounds were bought by Moscow businessman Mikhail de Buar for £75,000 in 1996 from adventure writer and Colditz survivor Michael Alexander.

Art collector Mr de Buar visited his acquisition only once, in 2000, and allowed it to fall into disrepair. It is thought he bought the castle and its surrounds in order to acquire the title of "baron".

Mr De Buar died intestate in September last year and a Moscow court is trying to sort out his compli-



Skelbo Castle – it has emerged that the Russian businessman understood to have owned the historic structure died last September and left no will.

cated financial dealings. Unaware of his death, Historic Scotland commissioned specialist contractors in March this year to stabilise the castle.

A spokesman said: "Historic Scotland was sad to hear that the owner had passed away and that his estate is now subject to the Russian court.

"We are unable to apply for costs against the estate for the stabilisation work we carried out at the castle.

"However, we would very much like to work with the new owner in order to preserve this 14th-century castle."

But Lord Moonie, Labour's tourism and heritage spokesman in the Lords, told a Sunday newspaper: "I'm surprised that money was spent from the public purse without first checking whether it could be recovered.

"Surely there should have been efforts to see if the owner was in a position to pay for the work.

"I don't understand why efforts aren't being made to recover the money from the owner's estate, even though no will was made.

"There should still be a claim made on the estate for in excess of £60,000 of

taxpayers' money." But Lord Moonie has himself attracted criticism for his comments.

In a letter to *The Northern Times*, Ronny Rehse of Aberdeenshire, who describes himself as a "castle enthusiast", says the work was long overdue. He says: "I'm adamant the use of public money to consolidate the decaying structure was entirely justified."

Mr Rehse points out that the work created employment for local craftsmen.

He says historic structures such as Skelbo have a long-term value to the taxpayer as visitor attractions.

And another Aberdeenshire resident, who did not want to be named, commented: "Historic Scotland should be congratulated for doing such a sterling job in preserving this fascinating and historically important castle. Short-sighted vision in the past has already translated into the decay of too many historically important structures here in Scotland.

"Lewis Moonie would be wise in supporting Historic Scotland and learning the facts of what was actually done to track the owner down. I don't believe Historic Scotland does spend money on a whim!"

Dornoch Heritage Society has been campaigning for the castle to be restored for years.

Secretary Robin Ashby said the society had been trying without success to contact Mr de Buar through his German lawyers for many years. He said: "We're delighted that Historic Scotland have stepped in and I don't think any of us expected them to get the money back."