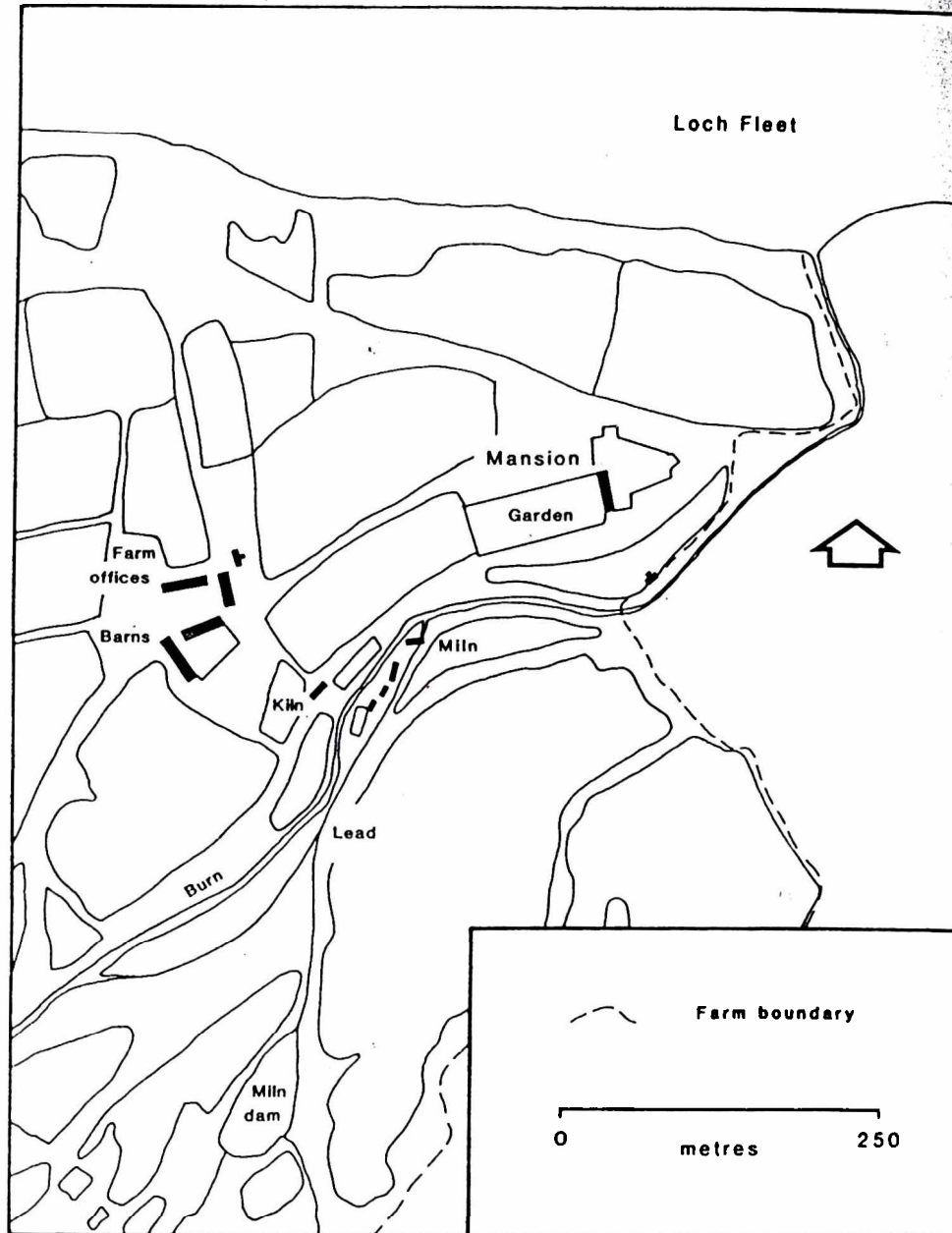


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ACCOUNTS OF BUILDING WORK AT SKELBO 1723-1787



The "mansion" house of Skelbo in south-east Sutherland is a building of great architectural significance in the Northern Highlands. The records which are presented here relate to building work carried out to the house, farm buildings and giral of Skelbo during the period that the Skelbo estate was under sequestration and will, it is hoped, contribute to the history of this site¹. As Geoffrey Stell has written², building accounts for this period in the Highlands are few and far between and the records of Skelbo are thus of great interest for the information they contain on building costs, the sources for materials, constructional techniques and the availability of skilled craftsmen. The records also throw light on the administration of a sequestrated estate for although bankrupt estates were relatively common, little has been published on their management. The seemingly simple process of ranking creditors and bringing an estate to a judicial sale could, in some instances, take a considerable number of years. Although there were regulations surrounding the administration of sequestrated estates - expenditure on reparations, for instance, had to be sanctioned by the Court of Session - this does not mean that positive management was impossible. After all, if a fair price was to be obtained for a property, then the land had to be kept tenanted and the buildings in good repair.

In the medieval period the lands of Skelbo belonged to the De Moravia family, who became the Morays of Culbin. Skelbo later passed by marriage to the Kinnairds and then in 1529 William Sutherland of Duffus bought Skelbo from John Kinnaird of that ilk. The Sutherlands of Duffus were descended from Nicholas Sutherland, the second son of Kenneth, fourth Earl of Sutherland. Nicholas Sutherland had been granted the lands of Torboll in Sutherland in 1360 and acquired part of Duffus in Moray by marriage. Alexander Sutherland was created Lord Duffus by Charles II in 1650 or 1651. However, James, who succeeded as the second Lord Duffus in 1674, ran into financial difficulties which were only made worse when he murdered one of his creditors in 1688. A considerable proportion of the estate in Sutherland was wadsetted

out and eventually the outlying lands of the estate in upper Strathnaver were sold in 1700. There does not, however, appear to be any evidence to support the assertion that Lord Duffus was forced to sell the estate to his second son James, an advocate.

Efforts were made to save the estate. Kenneth, who succeeded as Lord Duffus in 1705, became a naval captain and a scheme, involving Kenneth's younger brother, William Sutherland of Roscommon, was put into operation to buy up the debts affecting the estate. These measures were insufficient and the creditors began to take steps to seize the estate. It was this, perhaps, which prompted Kenneth to take part in the Jacobite Rebellion, in 1715. The estate was forfeited and placed in the hands of the Commissioners responsible for disposing of the forfeited estates in Scotland. Skelbo, however, was claimed by John, Earl of Sutherland on the basis of the Act for encouraging loyal superiors of 1715, usually known as the Clan Act. The Earl entered into possession of Skelbo in 1716 and in 1719 was awarded the estate by the Court of Session, under burden of a proportion of the debts. These were considerable and the creditors were able to have the estate sequestrated in 1723. In the meantime, the lands of Duffus had been obtained by Archibald Dunbar of Thunderton.

Although some legal progress was achieved, proceedings were allowed to lapse and it was not until the late 1730's that another attempt was made to bring the estate to a sale. This time the main mover was the Earl of Sutherland who in 1738 had acquired right to some of the principal debts affecting the estate. Unfortunately the earldom itself was heavily encumbered by debt and there was little to spare for fighting lawsuits. Consequently there was no procedure from 1754 to 1765. In 1768 the Court of Session decreed that the Countess of Sutherland must either pay all of the debts affecting the estate or bring the estate to a judicial sale. The Countess and her tutors chose the latter course but experienced considerable difficulties in redeeming the various wadsets on the estate, a task only completed in 1775, and it was not until 1787 that the estate was finally sold.

It is not surprising that during the 64 years of the sequestration the administration of the estate passed through the hands of a number of judicial factors appointed by the Court of Session. The first factor was Sir James Calder of Muirton, a Morayshire merchant and suspected Jacobite who had been greatly involved in the

Sutherland salmon fishings. A sub-factor, William Sutherland of Thomskill, carried out much of the day-to-day administration. Calder was apparently succeeded in 1735 by Eric Sutherland, eldest son of the attainted Lord Duffus and, after his father's death in c.1734, generally known by the courtesy title of Lord Duffus. His factorship was terminated by the appointment of Robert MacAllester in 1738. MacAllester had been a factor for the Earl of Sutherland since 1729 and his appointment thus marks the beginning of the Sutherland family's dominant influence in the sequestration. In 1739 MacAllester appointed Kenneth Sutherland of Meikle Torboll, a wadsetter on the estate and who had taken over as factor the east coast parishes on the Sutherland estate, as his sub-factor. MacAllester was replaced by James MacLean of Capernoch, a local merchant and tacksman farmer, whose factorship lasted from 1743 to 1756. From 1756 to 1787 the judicial factor for Skelbo was Dugald Gilchrist, a former "servant" to the Earl and a factor on the Sutherland estate from 1741 to 1770³.

Prior to the Rebellion the house of Skelbo was occupied by William Sutherland of Roscommon, who been given a general factory in 1709. Once the Earl of Sutherland had obtained possession of the estate he gave a lease of the Mains to Captain David Ross of Little Daan near Edderton who had served in Lord Strathnaver's Regiment and acted as the Earl's factor between 1720 and 1724. Ross did not live at Skelbo but "maintained 4 men in the house for its defence"⁴. After the estate had been sequestrated the Mains was tenanted firstly by Sir John Gordon of Embo and then by the sub-factor, William Sutherland of Thomskill who lived in the house. There were various pendicles in the Mains, including "The officers possession" for the ground officer or officer for the barony and the "Miln and Croft". Eric Sutherland, Lord Duffus, took over the Mains and house in 1738 and despite accumulating considerable rent arrears was allowed to retain possession until 1760 when William Sutherland of Sciberscross became tacksman⁵.

An idea of the layout of the buildings at Skelbo in the late eighteenth century may be obtained from Fig. 1 which is based on an estate survey made by David Aitken in 1788. The house, which dates from the early seventeenth century, is set within the confines of a late medieval castle comprising hall-tower and curtain-wall, a structure which probably replaced an even earlier timber keep or tower on an earthen mound or motte. The ground floor of the house contained two vaulted cellars which were probably used for

housing stock and storage. The living quarters were situated on the first floor, to which access was gained by an external stair, and attic. Both first floor and attic were apparently divided into three apartments. The house at Skelbo may be considered to be a northern example of the fortified farmhouses known as bastles which were common in the Borders and which are now being discovered elsewhere in Scotland⁶. It is probable that there were similar houses elsewhere in the Highlands.

The accounts are given in detail; firstly, to assist in the interpretation of this important building and, secondly, to contribute to the identification of builders and their works in the Northern Highlands. Original spellings have been retained but certain contractions have been spelt out in full. Explanations have been placed within square brackets. Some of the accounts are reckoned in £ Scots: during this period the Scottish £ was worth one-twelfth of the £ Sterling. In Sutherland the change-over to Sterling took place between 1730 and 1760.

THE BUILDING ACCOUNTS

Between 1727 and 1728 various repairs were made to the mansion on the orders of Sutherland of Thomskill. On 17 February 1727 Alexander Watson, mason, was paid £3 12 0 (Scots) for "repaireing and helping the Stare which was like to fall and bigging backs for four chimney and helping an window being five days work". The same day an account was settled with Benjamin Bethune, glazier in Dornoch⁸:

To sixteen Losons [lozenges] put to the windows in the wester room with new lead and latshadgs at 2s 6d each loson	2 0 0
To two losons in the other window ther	0 4 0
To 2 new windows Made for the low Casements in the said Room both Consisting of eight foot 6s each foot	2 8 0
To two more made for the Casments in the said Room 4 foot each	2 8 0
To ane new window made for the Closet of five foot	1 10 0
To 10 losons put in one of the large windows in the Dineing-room with new lead & lachets	1 5 0

To two losons put in the other window there	0 5 0
To Sevin losons put in one of the Casments of the Dineing room	0 14 0
To two Casments Made up for the other window there with sixteen losons and new lachets	1 12 0
To the back window in the Dineing room repaired with 18 losins new lead and lachets	1 16 0
To a Casment window repaired in my Lords room with 6 losons and new latched	0 12 0
To four losons put in the other window ther	0 10 0
To another Loson put in that room	0 2 0
To a new window made up for the East room of 7 foot	2 5 0
To a loson put in the other window in that room	0 2 0
To a new window put in your Kitchin of 13 foots	3 18 0
To ane weir tirlies [trellis] to the forsaid of 18 foots	4 10 0
To a large shass [sash] loson with new lead put in your Closet	0 6 0
Summa (Scots)	26 7 0

In the summer of that year two slaters, John Ross and James Duncan, were employed to point the house. Their account comprised⁹:

11 roods @ £3 Scot	33 0 0
their Maintenance for 3 Wiekis att 6 Shil: Ster per wiek	10 16 0
To a Borow man for their above 3 wiekes att 6 shil Scots per diem	6 0 0

In the meantime James Mackenzie, smith in Dornoch, had been attending to the door-locks and window catches in the house¹⁰:

	£	s	d
To making six stock looks at one half crown each is	9	0	0
To four Chack looks [check-locks] & five sneks for doors is	8	14	0
To two pair bands for doors	1	16	0
To ane look and ane pair of bands for a press	0	12	0
To ane kie for a press & ane hand & lifter for			