

The History of Balnakeil House

It is believed that building of the original Balnakeil House was begun around 1642 and it was then rebuilt c. 1744 and extended a few times in the 1800's, but there is no known authoritative work documenting this.

Balnakeil House was built by the Mackay chiefs as a family mansion on the site of an earlier building which had at one time been the summer palace of the medieval Bishops of Caithness. There is little by way of contemporary documentation on the building itself but plenty of stories about the place and its inhabitants. The first occupant of the rebuilt mansion, Donald, son of the third Lord Reay was, according to poet Rob Donn, "the apex of society and entertainment, of the men of poetry and of music". In 1740, the minister in the nearby manse, the Rev Murdo Macdonald, wrote in his diary that he couldn't concentrate on composing his Sunday sermons for all the merrymaking going on at the house on Saturday evenings!

From the early 1800s Balnakeil was occupied by the sheep farm tenant, beginning with John Dunlop. The last occupants were the previous farm manager and his family, the Andersons. Balnakeil House has lain empty since 1992.

Melness-based author Mary Beith has written: "By the end of the seventeenth century, the Reay Forest, including Glen Golly, had been subject to Sutherland's [sic] earliest and least publicised clearance when a chief of Mackay moved the people to Eddrachillis in the west to make way for what may well have been, ironically, both the Highland's first purpose-planned sporting estate and one of the last resorts of a truly indigenous luxury lifestyle.

"At Balnakeil House in Durness, John, Lord of Mackay, held sway over what the historian Edward Cowan has called "an almost aggressively traditional household". When the then Lord Lovat visited John Mackay in 1669 there was hawking, hunting, sea fishing, archery, wrestling, feasting, music and dancing. Among other household retainers, Mackay had a piper, a harpist and an amadan (Gaelic: fool or jester). When he left, Lovat was showered with gifts a sheltie, guns, longbows, an antique sword, a pair of deerhounds, a silk plaid and a doublet and trows."

In his book "The world of Rob Donn" (Edinburgh, 1979, although a new edition has now been issued) Ian Grimble wrote: "Second in magnificence to the seat of the chief at Tongue stood his mansion in the far west. This ancient manor farm had been inhabited by the second Lord Reay while Tongue House was being rebuilt, and it was used besides as a hunting lodge for expeditions to the Reay Forest, as a granary the chief's western estates, and as the residence of his heir. Like Tongue House it remains exactly as Rob Donn saw it, though it has also lost all its eighteenth century furnishings." According to Dr Grimble, Balnakeil was built by the second Lord Reay who was educated in Denmark while his father was fighting with his clan regiment in the Thirty Years' War, "and it may not be fanciful to see in its architecture the influence of the Danish manor-farm".

Another story related by Ian Grimble tells how the wife of a Mackay chief, a Sutherland by birth, helped save Kenneth Sutherland, an army deserter who had fled to Durness during or shortly after the 1745 rebellion. A detachment of troops caught up with him at Balnakeil. "Whether by accident or design, Kenneth Sutherland did not choose one of the doors leading to the ground-floor premises when he bolted through the garden and across the court. He chose the entrance which took him to these narrow stairs. At the head of them can still be seen the little closet beside the panelled reception room into which Lady Reay pushed her clansman in his extremity. She then welcomed his pursuers as they tumbled up the stairs, ushering them into the great room beyond Kenneth's hiding place. She ordered drink for them; she summoned the women who were working about the premises and improvised a dance."

"There was a lady beside the threshold / Standing there, alert, formidable. / I don't know the pass / He went out by, on my life / But between the woman's legs, / Without bonnet or weapons, / Very near the fissure where he was born, / There he made his escape." The double entendre got lost in the translation, apparently.

"Lady Reay's resourcefulness in smuggling the deserter to safety down that narrow staircase beneath a woman's skirts was not the only theme she provided for Rob Donn," Dr Grimble commented.

Balnakeil House was listed in 1971 by Historic Scotland as a category "A" building, which makes it of national importance, placing it in the top seven-and-a-half per cent of listed buildings. The description reads: "1744. Two storey and attic, symmetrical U-plan house; four centre bays, projecting outer wings with 3-bay inner faces to small paved court; two first floor and small attic windows only in south facing outer gabled wings. All harled, with polished ashlar margins and dressings." The interior is a mixture of original features and nineteenth century alterations and decoration (wood panelling etc.). The walled garden is dated 1863.

Works on the House started in late 2009, following lengthy discussions with Historic Scotland, and the house has now been sympathetically refurbished to form a comfortable large house.