

The Landmark Trust

FAIRBURN TOWER, NEAR INVERNESS

Fairburn Tower was probably built around 1545 by Murdoch Mackenzie, former Groom to the Bedchamber of King James V of Scotland. Murdoch was the natural son of Rory Mor, himself third son of Kenneth Mackenzie of Kintail, and was sent to Court with his brothers in the mid-1530s. 'From his Strong and Robust temper of Body [Murdoch was] one of the Strongest Men of his Age' and he was singled out for direct royal service by the king, 'being the most gracefull Youth' of the brothers. James V's court was a sophisticated one, benefitting from all the latest Renaissance trends from France and Italy. James married two glamorous French princesses in quick succession, Madeleine of Valois (who died very soon after her arrival in Scotland) and Mary of Guise. Both brought large dowries and the Scottish royal palaces that would have been known to Murdoch were richly decorated and comfortable. As a Groom to the Bedchamber, he attended to James V's personal needs, a favoured member of the royal household.

Murdoch became a royal tenant of lands at Mydfairbrune' and 'Kirkfairbrune' in 1539. In April 1542, the king gave the lands to Murdoch with a standard condition to build a dwelling and create cultivated land around. The Stewart kings used such land grants to loyal retainers as a means of ensuring loyalty from the notoriously quarrelsome clans; Clan Mackenzie were given increasing sway over Ross-shire and the fertile Black Isle in these decades. Murdoch's grant of Fairburn between the rivers Conon and Orrin provided a forward lookout post in a chain of other Mackenzie castles and tower houses across the neck of the Black Isle, under Mackenzie of Seaforth as clan leader. With the mountains at its back, Fairburn Tower offers panoramic views across the mouth of the Great Glen, making its position ideal for a lookout. The grant also prompted enduring loyalty from the Mackenzies of Fairburn to the Stewart dynasty.

As first built, Fairburn was a typical four-storey Scottish tower house, built primarily for defence while also aspiring to some comfort. It is unusual today in having been very little altered since (most were significantly extended and adapted in the 18th century). Its cellar especially is exceptional in retaining its gunports and even a swivel mount for a gun pintle – these were lawless times in the Highlands. Windows throughout were small. The main entrance was to the first floor (today's kitchen) via an external stair, probably made of timber. The two upper floors (a hall and the laird's private chamber) were reached by narrow intramural stairs. The walls of the rooms were peppered with alcoves and closets, all evidence of sophisticated construction.

James V died in 1542 (to be succeeded by his baby daughter, Mary Queen of Scots) and it seems Murdoch then left court to take up residence at Fairburn. We found a cobbled surface surrounding the tower during our restoration, the footings for the cluster of outbuildings, stables and crofts that would have surrounded it. Murdoch died in 1590 and was succeeded by his son Alexander; it is unclear which of them improved the tower, but within about fifty years of its creation, a well-built stair turret was added.

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At the same time, the garret in the roof space was formalised into an extra storey of living space. We have imagined, and recreated, a painted ceiling as if commissioned as part of the same phase of works. Probably at a later date, and adapting an earlier structure, a single storey dining hall was added immediately adjacent to the tower.

The Mackenzies of Fairburn prospered through the 17th century, despite apparently remaining in Ross-shire when James I (of England & Wales) & VI (of Scotland) inherited the throne of Three Kingdoms in 1603 and despite Hector, 4th laird, becoming an 'Engager' for Charles I in 1646. Generations followed on, until the Jacobite uprising in 1715 to promote the claim of James Stewart, (the 'Old Pretender'), to the British throne in preference to George of Hanover. Roderick 7th laird of Fairburn fought with the Jacobites against the Crown, and his estates were therefore forfeited to the victorious regime after the Jacobites' defeat. Fairburn Tower was garrisoned by 30 Swiss mercenaries, and repaired in the early 1720s.

In 1731, after a general pardon and clever manoeuvring by the wider Mackenzie clan, Roderick regained title to the Fairburn estates. However, the family fortune never fully recovered again. When the Young Pretender, 'Bonnie Prince Charlie', rose again in 1745, Alexander, 9th laird quietly declined to rise for either side, claiming that 'a famer or grasier is all I pretend to' (his wife Barbara Gordon, however, is said to have sold her diamonds for the Jacobite cause). Alexander may have died in a duel in 1760; he left a son who was still a minor and grew up to be a spendthrift.

By 1759 Fairburn Tower was left uninhabited. The 10th and last laird became a renowned career soldier, General Sir Alexander Mackenzie. He gradually sold off all the family lands. Fairburn Tower was bought in 1802 by the executors of James Macpherson, populariser of Ossian, the mythic Gaelic bard. There were further attempts to sell it, until it was bought in 1876 by John Stirling, a wealthy ironmaster, who built a fine new residence nearby, Fairburn House (today a nursing home). Stirling's descendants still own the estate today.

Fairburn Tower, meanwhile, had fallen into ruination and stood as a roofless, gutted shaft with jagged cracks running down its masonry. In the mid-17th century it had been the subject of several dark prophecies by the Brahan Seer (a shadowy prophesier of the Black Isle). One, concerning a cow giving birth on the top floor of the tower (unthinkable at the time) came largely true as the tower became used a byre. The dining hall next door became two estate cottages before they too fell into roofless decay.

Landmark was first approached to take on the tower in the 1990s. It was only in 2013 with a renewed approach from the Stirlings of Fairburn that we were finally able to step in and take it on as a restoration project. Fortunately the actual shafts of both the original tower and the later stair turret proved basically sound. Archaeology and building analysis added greatly to our understanding of the building, much of it done initially by drone. After extensive masonry repairs the restoration was, of necessity, comprehensive, renewing floors, bartizans, roofs, shutter-boarded windows and doors. Services were brought in (the electrical supply partly by way of a discreet array of photovoltaic panels) and drainage issues addressed with a 'rain garden' or soakaway.

A masterful new concrete stair was inserted into the stair tower to replace the vanished original, once again helping provide additional stability to the main tower. The kitchen was designed and made by Landmark's workshop in Honeybourne. On the second floor,

Murdoch's original 'hall' or living room, artist Paul Mowbray has created a painted ceiling using a ceiling dated 1592 at Delgatie Castle in Aberdeenshire as his reference but personalised to our project by adapting 16th-century motifs. After contending with the Covid -19 pandemic, marauding jackdaws and persistent owls, Fairburn Tower now resurrects the thrilling time of the Scottish Renaissance for all who stay there.

Fairburn Tower sleeps 4 people and is available for self-catering holidays year round.

To book, please visit www.landmarktrust.org.uk