

EVANTON ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

BALCONIE (Inchcoulter)

Two different pronunciations are heard for Balconie. The emphasis on the second syllable derives from the traditional interpretation as Baile Comhnuidh, the Residence - supposedly erected by the 1st **Earl of Ross**. The early Gaelic form, however, is *Bailcnidh*, which Professor Watson interpreted as being decisive against *baile*, a town or stead. He derived it instead from *bailc*, strong; thus Balconie = 'the strong place'.

Two chapels are mentioned as having been on the estate, St. Monan and St. Ninian's (See 'Church Notes'). Reverend Archibald Campbell used to say that Balconie derived from 'the bay of St. Ninian' and would also point out various oratories where hermits once stayed.

In 1297 the Castle was held for the Patriotic Scots. Earl Hugh Ross, on the 14th June 1333, a few weeks before his death at the Battle of Halidon Hill, discharged at Balconie/Balkenny an annuity payable to Sir William Rose of Kilravock. In 1337 the Earl of Ross granted land at Balconie to Hugh Ross of Balnagowan.

In 1445 James II granted the Barony of Balconie to Beatrice, Countess of Ross.

The Earldom of Ross, which for 200 years had been the most powerful house in Scotland, ceased to exist in 1476. It came into the hands of some MacDonalDs and came to be referred to as Baile Comhnuidh Mhic Dhonuill, MacDonald's habitation. Balconie became **Munro** property by end of that century.

"Mr John Munro of Balcony" is the first so designated. He was the first son by the first marriage of Hugh Munro, a son of George Munro X of Fowlis. John studied for the church and took his MA at Aberdeen. In 1498 he was presented to the vicarage of Logie Urquhart. In 1546 he let the Church lands of Fowlis, with the brew-house and croft for 5 marks 2 shillings 8d, a dozen capons and 4 shillings increased rental.

In 1551 Queen Mary presented William Munro, second son of Sir William Munro, 12th baron of Fowlis, to the Chaplaincy of Balconie, "vacated by the decease of Master John Munro." His eldest son **John Mor Munro** followed, as third of Coul, second of Balconie, who married a grand-daughter of Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromarty (life model of whom is in Cromarty Court House). His third son Robert became minister of Kiltarn.

John Munro, third of Balconie, was followed by his son **Hugh**, 3 of whose sons went to the German wars along with their chief Robert Munro XVIII of Fowlis. John was succeeded at his death about 1640 by his son **Robert**, fifth of Balconie. His only surviving son **Donald Munro** continued the line which was ended when his son **John Munro** seventh of Balconie, alienated or sold the lands. (A. Mackenzie)

Balkeny was one of the five farms of Dingwall Castle, of which several Munros were at times governor.

DC Murray writes that "the estate of Balconie was known as Inchcoulter (Munro Writs 1586) and covered lands between the rivers Sgiach and Allt

Grad. In Bishop Forbes' time it had both sides of the latter for some way up. WJ Watson calls Balconie 'Innis a Cheltair', deriving it from culter, being pointed in shape." (OS Notes)

Hugh Miller dated the story of the **Lady of Balconie** from early 17th century. Frank MacLennan relates that she appears to have been a daughter of a Lord of Balconie. "Her nurse was a witch and secretly trained the girl in the black art." Visitors to the castle, expressing their scepticism at witchcraft, were startled when the young lady magically levitated the castle several feet into the air and after some moments, deposited it safely on its base. Eventually she was taken by the Devil himself at the Blackrock Gorge, where she remains chained in a cave and surrounded by fierce hounds to this day. (See also Hugh Miller 'Scenes and Legends')

In 1722 William Robertson, Chapman (trader) in Balcony, craved admittance to the Burgesses and Guild Brethren of Dingwall Borough on payment of £3 Scots as 'scot and lot' for trading.

Rev. Harry Robertson of Kiltarn wrote in the 1790s that "Balconie is a beautiful seat, situated on the banks of the River Skiack, on a fine eminence, which slopes gradually towards the sea. This was formerly one of the seats of the ancient Earls of Ross. "

In April 1731 Inchcoulter sent a letter of apology to the Dingwall Town Council concerning feu duties at the Bog and Kiln of Dingwall, being £9 6s8d Scots.

George Mackenzie, Inchcoulter, was in place in 1775.

Sir George Steuart Mackenzie, Bart. wrote in 1810: "This house, with the estate of Inchcoulter, has been lately purchased by **Mr. Fraser**, who has made additions to the old building. The situation of the house is good and commands a most beautiful view of the surrounding country."

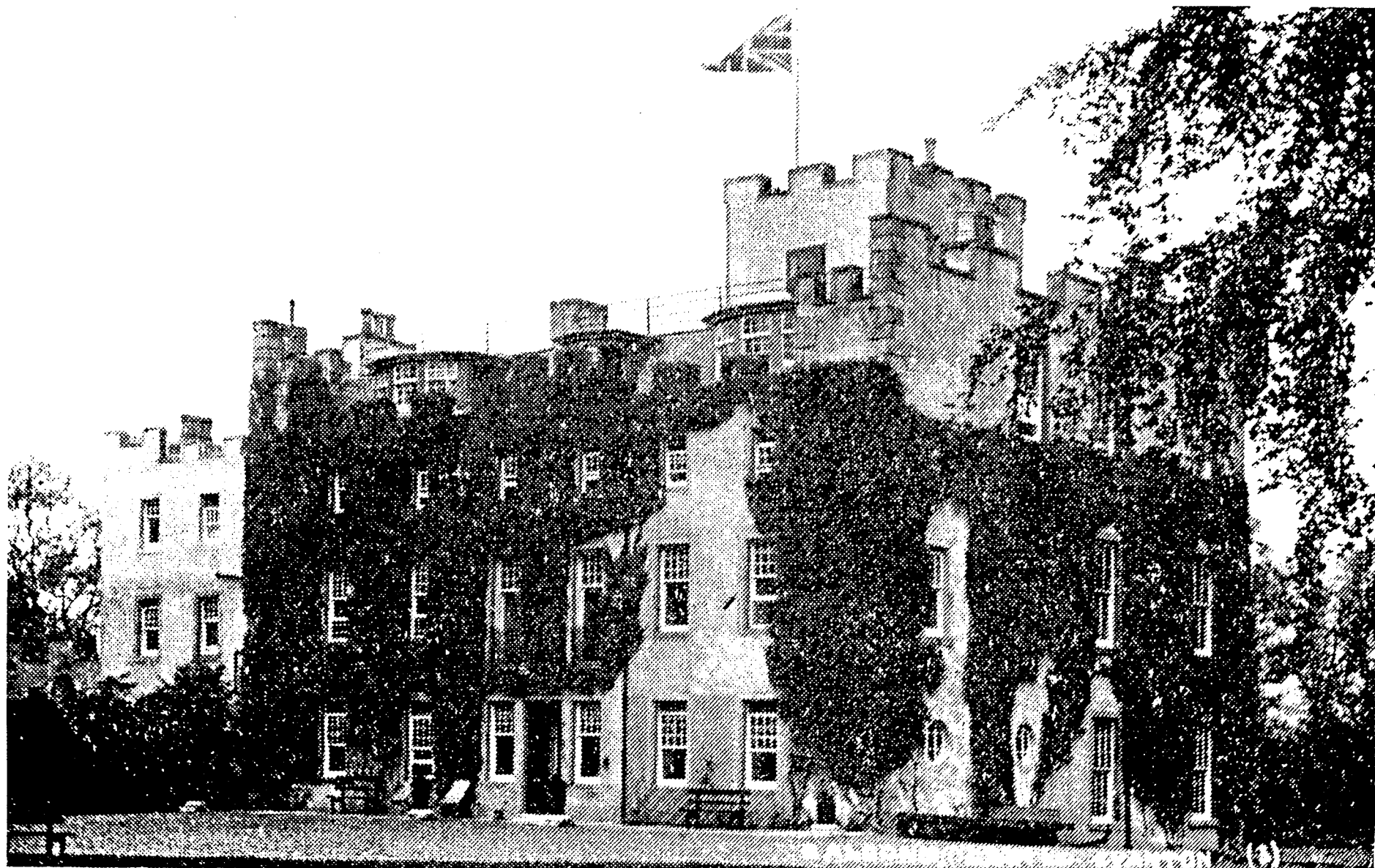
The same Alexander Fraser (1759 - c1838) was responsible for laying out the village of **Evanton** which he named after his only son Evan Bailie. (NB It is common for the names Evan and Bailie to be combined). Alexander Fraser had reportedly made a fortune through his interests in the West Indies and three streets in Evanton (Camden, Livera and Hermitage) are named after West Indian Plantations.

In 1816 Alexander Fraser Esq. of Inchcoulter paid £3 13s 6d for a general Game Licence (*Inverness Journal*). He was Provost of Dingwall in 1827.

There was a sizeable staff at Inchcoulter as is evidenced by the Old Parish Record. In 1790 a child was born to George Munro, servant; in 1797 to Donald McGillivray, servant to Mr Barclay; in 1799 to Alex Bain, gardener; in 1824 to Alexander Macleod, coachman; in 1825 to Andrew Elder, grieve and to John Munro, gardener. George Smith, a coachman at Balcony, married in 1819. In 1823 the butler John Taint/Tant and his wife Henrietta named their son Evan Bailie Fraser, after the heir to the estate. (They became keepers of the Balconie Inn and "probably died around 1835-7 when apparently there were epidemics of some sort in Evanton. Three of their children appear in the 1841 census, living with John Tant and Hannah Aldred in Edinburgh. The fourth child, Evan Baillie Fraser Tant, was in the employ of the Sinclair family elsewhere in Edinburgh... There was still recently an Evan Baillie Fraser Tant living in Edinburgh" (Alex Dow, personal communication 2007)

Captain Evan Fraser, Inchcoulter, in turn, became proprietor,

marrying Jane Christine Nicol in 1838, who in 1839, 1842 and 1843 bore him children named Alexander Thomas, John James and Elma. He became a 'Collector of Stamps with the Excise Service.



In March 1835 fifteen Acres of Excellent Turnips were advertised for sale at Balcony.

In February 1836 the Farm of 'Assint' was advertised for let by the Estate of Inchcoulter, The tenant of Assynt, Hugh Munro, had had to return to Berbice (West Indies) "so materially injured by the ruinous measures of an unfeeling government." It comprised 180 Imperial acres of arable land (particularly well suited for turnip husbandry) plus hill pasture and plantation. There was a "powerful threshing mill propelled by water," "The dwelling house is sufficient for the overseer or tenant. It is stone, lime and slated." Suitable farm servant houses. "The principal manse is rather a handsome structure. A public road is kept in repair by the District."

The limit of Balconie ground was Bog Tuach, where there were three tenants in 1819 (FP)

Rev. Thomas Munro of Kiltearn, describing **improvements** in the late 1830s, wrote:" Draining and inclosing have been carried on very extensively, and in some cases very judiciously. Large embankments were made, some years ago, at **Newton** and at **Balconie**, and a considerable tract of land, formerly Quite unprofitable, was thus redeemed from the sea and rendered fit for the purposes of agriculture. The principal improvements which have been made were usually at the expense of the tenants, without the prospect of any remuneration from the proprietors..... The late Mr Fraser of Inchcoulter, a gentleman of great taste, expended large sums in the improvement of his property. He divided it into moderately sized farms, well fenced and enclosed. On all these farms he erected steadings which are highly ornamental to the country, and very convenient for the tenantry."

Blind **Captain Hugh Munro** of Teaninich bought Balconie for one of his natural daughters, **Catherine**, in 1838 - 9. She ran the Chapel School, which was known as 'Miss Munro's'. As late as 1869 she had a lock installed and a window pane replaced in the school house.

The **Inverness and Ross-shire Railway** wished to build their station at Evanton itself but Catherine would not permit use of her property. "Culling her motto from Horace," Odi profanum vulgus, et arceo" ("I hate the uninitiated crowd, and keep them at a distance", she refused to sell any ground, feeling that the property was desecrated enough by the railway crossing it. The laird of Novar was of a different mind," <FP)

In May 1851 there a **Sale** of Household Furniture included: Chairs, sofas, couches, carpets, four-poster beds, mahogany book-case and writing-table, books (Encyclopedia Britannica, Cook's Voyages, Shakespeare, Blackstone, Gibbon etc), crystal, portable shower bath. Foulis was the agent,.

In January 1851 a Contractor was required to repair masonry on the breached embankment of Balcony beach. (Apply: John Munro, Fowlis).

Tobar na Slabhraidh = Well of the Chain.

Frank MacIennan recounts how in the 1860s a wise woman, the *Mhaighdeann Bhan* (White maiden) cured a boy suffering from a rash using water from the Balconie well and assorted coins and other objects. (FP)

Catherine Munro frequently called on the services of cartwright John Munro of 11 Balconie Street for activities ranging from work at the saw-mill, boiler and mill, building the laundry, making barrow wheels, sheep, cattle and pig troughs, repairing the Fisher's house by the shore and mending turnip cutters. In 1875 part payment was in blown down wood from the estate, including oak, elm, larch, beech and ash.

In 1877 Catherine advertised the "desirable residential estate" for sale by roup in Edinburgh in 'The Times':

"279 Imperial Acres or thereby of rich arable land, with the salmon and other fishings thereto belonging. The lands have for many years been in the possession of the proprietrix and are of excellent quality and produce every variety of crop. Salmon fishings are presently let on a lease which expires in 1878. The Mansion House, which is situated in a fine park is approached by an avenue of about a mile in length. It is a handsome building containing 4 public rooms and ample bed-room accommodation. There is an excellent garden and the Estate abounds in fine old timber, There are coach-houses, stables and other offices at a convenient distance from the Mansion House. This is beautifully situated on the shores of the Cromarty Firth about 8 (!) miles from Inverness, 6 miles from Dingwall and Invergordon and one mile from the Novar Station of the Highland Railway. The Estate abounds in every description of low country game. In the immediate neighbourhood is deer and grouse shootings. Beside the salmon fishing, in the Cromarty Firth there is excellent trout-fishing in 2 streams by which the property is bounded."

Mary Reid, widow of Major-General Francis Archibald Reid owned the estate from 1878 until 1889/90. It is said that she was Catherine's sister, We know from the ledger book of cartwright John Munro and his grandson John Maclellan of 11 Balconie Street that she settled her account in July 1889, having spent nearly £25 over the previous two years, Works undertaken included repairs to Fisher's House, mending stalls in the stable, repairing tower, repairing the roof along with the smith, and earlier making kilns and putting up a flagstaff.

The well in Evanton Woods, from which water was piped to Balconie House and Farm, was repaired and the pipes re-laid by Mr Reid in 1879. The plaque still stands in the wee 'witch's house', as the children used to call it.

The estate was bought by 'Squire' **Bankes of Winstanley** Hall, Lancashire. The house was now known as Balconie Castle. He also had Deanich Lodge, at the end of Glen Mor in the Sutherland interior, where he hunted deer.

In 1894 Balconie Grass Parks were sold. In 1897 the Wyvis Glass Ball was held at Balconie.

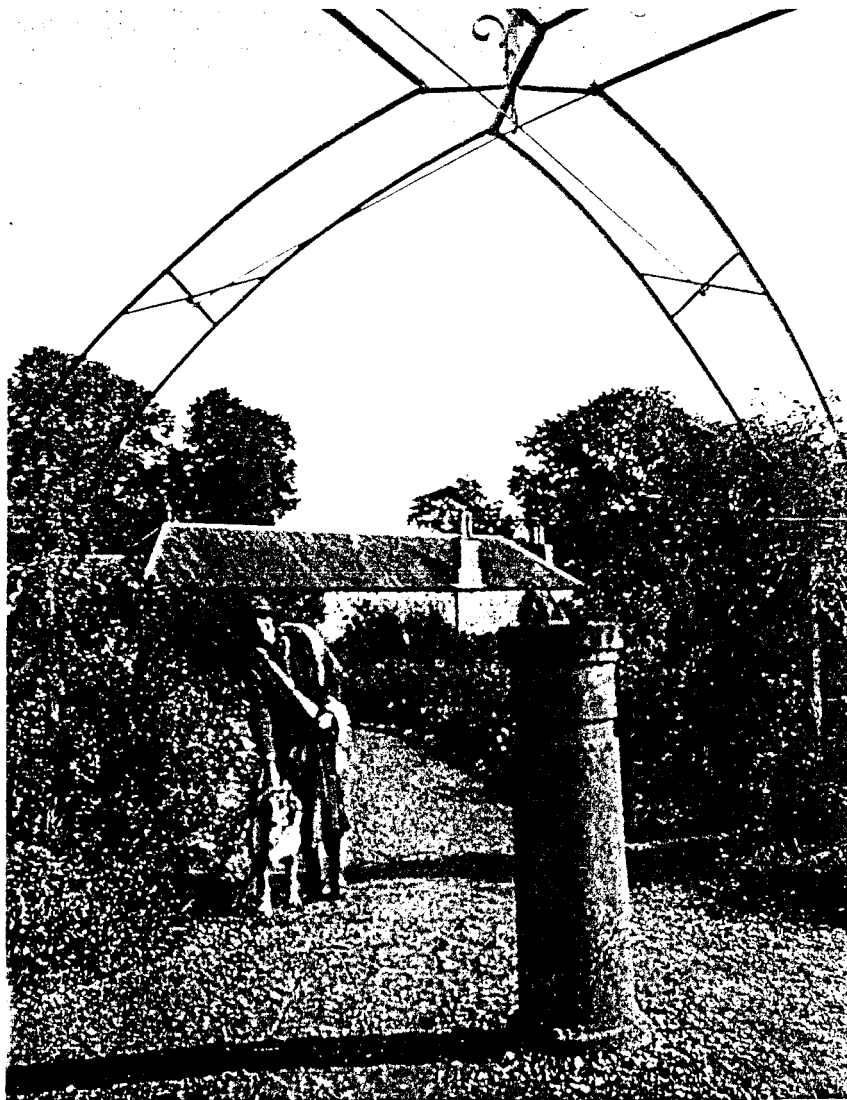
On 24th February 1899 the Ross-shire Journal reported the death of Meyrick **Bankes, Balconie**, 32, eldest son of the late Squire Bankes, Winstanley Hall, Lancashire, "There was a short and impressive funeral service at Kiltearn, then the coffin was conveyed to Winstanley Hall." It is said that he was an excessive drinker,

George S Bankes followed his brother as proprietor. He became a member of the Parish Council, and a member for Mid Ross in 1901, despite the fact that he was not normally resident in the area.

In 1910 there was litigation between the Church of Scotland and Balconie concerning use of part of the Glebe.

Plans of part of the building in 1912 show: A Library, Servants' Hall, Kitchen (24 feet by 17 feet), Butler's Pantry, Butler's Bedroom, a Pantry, Larder, Scullery and back hall on the Ground Floor; Housekeeper's room, Gun Room, Bath Room, Dining Room, Night Nursery, Serving Pantry and bedrooms on the First Floor. It took a man two days to clean the windows.

In 1929 the Daily Record and Mail reported the marriage of Miss Joyce Bankes, only child and heiress of Mr Murray Bankes of Balconie Castle and Winstanley Hall to Lieutenant Bankes, Royal Navy. "The bride's grandmother was the daughter of the famous millionaire Meyrick Bankes of Letterewe...and she married Mr William John Murray of the Geanies family...On succeeding to the property they assumed the name Murray-Bankes and some years later the bride's father bought Balconie Castle."



Joyce Bankes in the Walled Garden

Mr. Ross, father of **Jessie MacDonald** (born 1900) worked on the Estate and she herself worked in the castle for 6 weeks. She recollects:

"One of the English maids, her mother died and of course she went home and it was just 6 weeks till they would go back to Wigan - that was their big place - so they asked if I could come down for 6 weeks. Well I didn't know anything about a castle and how it worked - so many servants, so many girls, a butler, 2 footman, house-keeper, valet, cook, kitchen-maid, under-maid, scullery-maid and then there were 5 or 6 house-maids - I would be the wee one."

Do you remember how much you got paid?

"Ha! if I got paid at all I never saw it. They would have put it in with my father's cheque or whatever he was getting. Ah it was strange to work in there and everything had to be done early, before any of the gentry appeared. You couldn't meet any of them, I don't know why. The Bankes weren't titled people but the Munros of Foulis, it was Lady Munro, were different people altogether. Och it gave me experience, it gave me 6 weeks of living a different life and how other people lived in a big castle."

How was the castle?

"It was lovely in a way but it give me a disappointment. It was bare. You look at the houses today so beautiful, the castle was nothing - bare."

How often did they come to the castle?

"It was once a year. They came just for the fishing and the shooting, - August. And then they took up all their crowd of servants - every one came up with them and every one went back with them, What a stir there was down there."

Then there was a coachman, a chauffeur, a head gardener and many gardeners - a crowd of boys. What money was put out. They must have been wealthy. She would stamp on the servants, she would."

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Marianne Chamier (née Gascoigne) visited the castle frequently. " It was a beautiful old house, much like Teaninich with many legends attached to it, The Lady of Balconie was said to have sold her soul to the devil and disappeared into the water of the Blackrock. The Bankes' only daughter, Joyce, who was a great friend of mine, and I used to spend much time down there searching for the rock onto which she was said to have thrown her keys before stepping into the water - they were supposed to have sunk into the rock leaving their imprint! There was also said to be a tunnel between Balconie Castle and Castle Craig and we used to spend hours looking for that in the basement."

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Lily Ross, an aunt of Lela Fraser, worked with the Bankes at Winstanley Hall, Balconie and Deanich, where she was sometimes alone with Maggie, the cook. Edward Duncan was a footman. A Miss Kree (?) was one caretaker at the castle. A keeper was Mr Johnson, who with his wife, ran a dance band. Their son, Morton, was the local news reporter. Isabella Maclean, was the gatekeeper for some years and stayed in the lodge at the top of the driveway. Donald Gallie recollects that her job was to open the gates - "they would beep the horn. "

Janette MacLennan recollects Balconie in the 1st World War:

"What I remember most about the war (WWI) was all the cars and lorries and vans and things that came from the East coast and went down the Balconie Drive. We wondered what they were for but no-one must tell you. My mother said they just came there for safety and a lot of them had their names on - Elgin and Aberdeen - so when night came a bright moon as big as you could get shining down on all those things - the trees weren't there - you could count the machines. They were there for just 2 or three days."

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Iain MacDonald recollects: "That drive-way when I was a boy was swept twice a day by the men. It was beautiful - there wouldn't be a straw out of place, everything was so clean, so well-maintained".

"The main street, Balconie Street, had large beech and oak trees right along there, then there was a drive-way going for a mile to Balconie Castle. Then there were further beech trees going right along to Kenneth Mackenzie's garage. After the war that was all cut down - a shame - irreplaceable."

"The Bankes came along for the stag-shooting and all the rest of it; they mainly stayed in the North of England but they came here from time to time with their whole entourage; some of their servants would precede them, maybe a week beforehand to get the place ready. The daughter Miss Joyce Bankes had a riding horse and my grandfather was making sure this horse was ready for her when she would come. Now the horse had been inside all winter and was coming out for the first time and was a bit frisky so my grandfather had to go in to take it out, It kicked out and broke his ribs and the ribs pierced the lung and my grandfather died as a result."

"I remember saying to my grandmother many years afterwards "Did you ever think that you should have claimed compensation?", "Oh I No" - they would never have dreamt that anything was the fault, or could be laid at the feet of the employer - they felt the employer was everything, they were privileged to work for them. As soon as my grandfather was no longer fit, he had to vacate, and he was lucky enough to get a house in the village which he rented. That was the sort of treatment they got in those days."

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Marianne Chamier recollects: "The Bankes family left there at the beginning of the last war and went to their estate near Wigan and never came back, He left all his fishing rods with the Torren. The Sports Shop owner, 'The Torren', was a great sportsman and character was great friends with George Bankes of Balconie, another tremendous sportsman, who shot and fished all over Europe and Iceland."

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Moodie, from Kilcoy, farmed Balconie in the 30s and 40s, Donald Gallie recollects that he was a "nice bloke to work for."

Alistair Munro, Balconie House, recollects that his father, a timber merchant, bought Balconie Estate in 1947 from George Bankes.

"Major and Mrs Bankes were very fond of Balconie. Mrs Bankes was a very keen, very good gardener.

A number of gardeners worked on the estate. One young lad from the village, Alex Munro, served his apprenticeship here and in 1920 migrated to Canada. He became Superintendent of Calgary's Park Dept. and was responsible for the lay-out of many artistic gardens and picturesque parks there. He was known as "Mr Gardener" to countless Calgarians.

The castle was demolished in 1965 because it was in such a dangerous state. When it came into our ownership it was very badly affected with dry rot. my father tried to repair it. Being a timber merchant he had his own carpenter so they set to, to strip out the drawing-room. They found that the beams were absolutely sodden. Next they tackled the ding-room. It had gone as well. The whole building was badly affected, my father, therefore, abandoned the project.

He tried to sell it - various people came and inspected it, didn't think much of the proposition, so he gave up any idea of restoring it. The castle had a flat roof and small tower - from there you had a panoramic view of the Black Isle, the Sutors and up towards Dingwall.

The roof was of lead, a lot of lead. We decided to remove the lead as it was being removed for us. Once this was down the building became a danger and it was taken down, the stones being used to bottom the Aluminium Smelter at Invergordon.

The War Years

The army occupied the castle during the war years and the soldiers were billeted in the castle itself. There were Norwegians, Poles and our own Gordon Highlanders.

On the lawns around the castle the army had their cook-houses, offices and other such things. Also in field the running alongside the River Skiach I could see the gun emplacements that they had for practising their manoeuvres. On the side of the farm by the Allt Graad river there is a field which we call the Hangar Field. Across the river on the Novar side there was an RAF station, No. 8 Wireless and Air Gunnery School. They parked some of their aircraft in this field. We had to remove the foundations of these buster hangers later.

Some of the trees on the estate were very old?

Clearly Balconie was a very old site with many beautiful, mature trees opposite the castle. One of them was adjudged to be over 300 years old.

Any interesting archaeological finds?

None that I know of. Although whilst ploughing a field called Braeface Field, which would be about 30 to 40 feet above sea-level now, we turned up sea shells. That field would be almost on the same level as the castle.

The keeper's cottage is still there?

Yes. There are two cottages at the bottom of the farm, below the castle - service cottages. One was the keeper's cottage, which backs onto the castle walled garden. The other, now renovated, is a much older one still. It had indications of having had a thatched roof. I think it predates the castle.

The garden looks well in the photo (Joyce Bankes)

This photo was taken pre-war. We never actually saw it like this. It was a beautiful, peaceful garden, lovingly looked after. Even now it has an atmosphere of peace and beauty. There were 4 gates, one at each corner with 4 paths leading into the middle, where a huge wrought iron pergola stood, draped in an ornamental vine, absolutely stunning in its brilliant red autumn colouring. There were fruit trees trained against the wall - apples, plums, pears, damsons.

What about the green-houses?

The greenhouse was an elegant, long, substantial structure - it had gone when I came here. They used to grow peaches and all sorts of exotic fruits apparently.

When was your house built?

In 1956, there being no farmhouse on the farm. Hitherto the previous tenants of Major Bankes occupied one or other of the estate houses. The steading itself was enlarged quite considerably when we came in. We built a new dairy and byre. We also installed a grain-drying unit later and built a huge shed to house tractors, implements and potatoes. A house for the cattlemen was also built.

At the lower end of the farm, when we came in '49, the sea water washed in and out at will. So a new sluice had to be built. We dug out a big canal from the sluice towards the sea and back up from the sea-wall through the lower fields and drained the fields into the canal."

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The **Balconie Stables** and walled garden were bought by Ian Clark (ex drummer with Uriah Heep, and founder manager of the Fyrish Trust) in the late 1980s.

On the shore between the Allt Skiach and Balconie Point is a ruin of a sturdy stone building with arched windows. It is sometimes taken for a chapel but is identified on the old OS Map as a **fishing station**. The dividing wall would have ruled out its use as a chapel.

The stones of Balconie House were removed to create the foundation of the short-lived **Aluminium Smelter** in Invergordon. One pot-line, which was prone to freezing, was reputedly bewitched by the Lady of Balconie!

Adrian Clark Feb 1992 Revised Jan 1994 and Jan 2010