

BIGHOUSE AND STRATH HALLADALE, SUTHERLAND

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INTRODUCTION

Bighouse (NH 891648) [Fig. 7.1] is a group of 18th- and 19th-century buildings sited on the east bank of the Halladale River close to its confluence with the sea: within the group Bighouse Lodge is paramount. The estuarine site has not always been called Bighouse, though this anglicised title is well-suited to the location dominated by a mansion-house.

From the 16th century until sold in 1830 to the Marquis of Stafford and his wife, the Countess of Sutherland, Strath Halladale belonged to the Mackays of Bighouse, originally domiciled further up the strath. North-west Sutherland was dominated by various branches of the Mackay family, headed by the Lords of Reay at Tongue, of which the Bighouse branch was a principal cadet line (see Bangor-Jones, this volume).

This paper seeks to set the buildings at Bighouse in their architectural and historical context, the background material drawn from a variety of sources.

PLACE-NAMES

The anglicised name Bighouse immediately conjures up a mansion or substantial dwelling, Bighouse Lodge fitting neatly into this classification. Confusingly *Bighouse* or *Beghous* is derived from *bygdh-hús*, a settlement name of Norse origin meaning ‘village house’, combining the ON element -*byr*, farm, with *hus*, house (Omand 1982. 282). Timothy Pont (1560 – ca 1625/30), cartographer and Minister of Dunnet, Caithness (1601-14) spells the name *Begos* (Blaeu 113. 1654) [Fig. 7.2], while *Beghous* and *Bighous* also make their appearance. Locally the pronunciation ‘Begus’ prevails.¹

However, Pont’s *Begos* is not sited at Bighouse! *Begos* was further upstream, at or near Upper Bighouse (NC 887573), between six and seven miles up the Halladale River from the mansion-house. The present Bighouse was originally Tor, castle (Owen nd.). It appears as *The Tor* in a farm rental of 1819 (Mackay 1906. 480; Bardgett 1990. 18), *Tor* in 1823 (Thompson. 1823) and optional as *Torr* or *Bighouse* in 1885 (OGS vi. 420). The name survives in *Rubha an-Tuir*, headland of the castle, to the north-east of Bighouse.

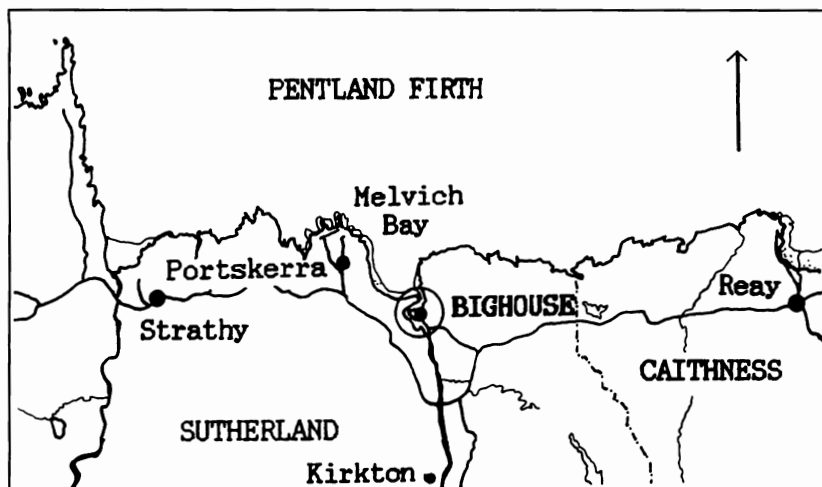


Fig. 7.1 Pentland Firth and Bighouse. 1994.

STRATH HALLADALE

Strath Halladale runs north/south from Melvich Bay (formerly Bighouse Bay) to Forsinard, sheltered east and west by low but often rugged hills. It is settled with scattered farms principally devoted to sheep and cattle, with pasture land flanking the winding river. Historically, the salmon fishings of the Halladale River were an important source of wealth. In 1726, the river 'runs North towards the sea where it has salmond fishing with nets and cruives'² (MacFarlane 1906. i. 186); there is still some commercial salmon fishing at Bighouse.

Though always in Sutherland, Strath Halladale formed part of Reay Parish, Caithness, from the 13th century until 1892 (*OPS* 1885. 742; Smith 1988. 148), but was *erected* as a *Quoad Sacra* parish with Strathy in 1846 (*FES* 1928. vii. 109). The Mackay Lords of Reay took their name from Reay parish, where the shell of their 16th-century castle still stands within, and has given its name to, the Dounreay Nuclear Power Development Establishment.

It is recorded that 'In 1274 and 1275 ... the church at "Halludal" or "Helwedale" contributed around 9sh.4d. towards the expenses of the Crusades' (Bardgett 1990. 8). This was probably the predecessor of the chapel at Balnaheglis (various spellings, all meaning 'place of the chapel'), otherwise Kirkton, mentioned in 1574 and 1576 and existing in 1726 when the Minister of Reay 'was bound to preach in it eight times a year' (*OPS* 1855. 743). Six 18th-century tombstones from Kirkton are in the Strathnaver Museum, Bettyhill. None record principal members of the Mackay of Bighouse family, some of whom are commemorated in the Bighouse aisle at old Reay burial ground.

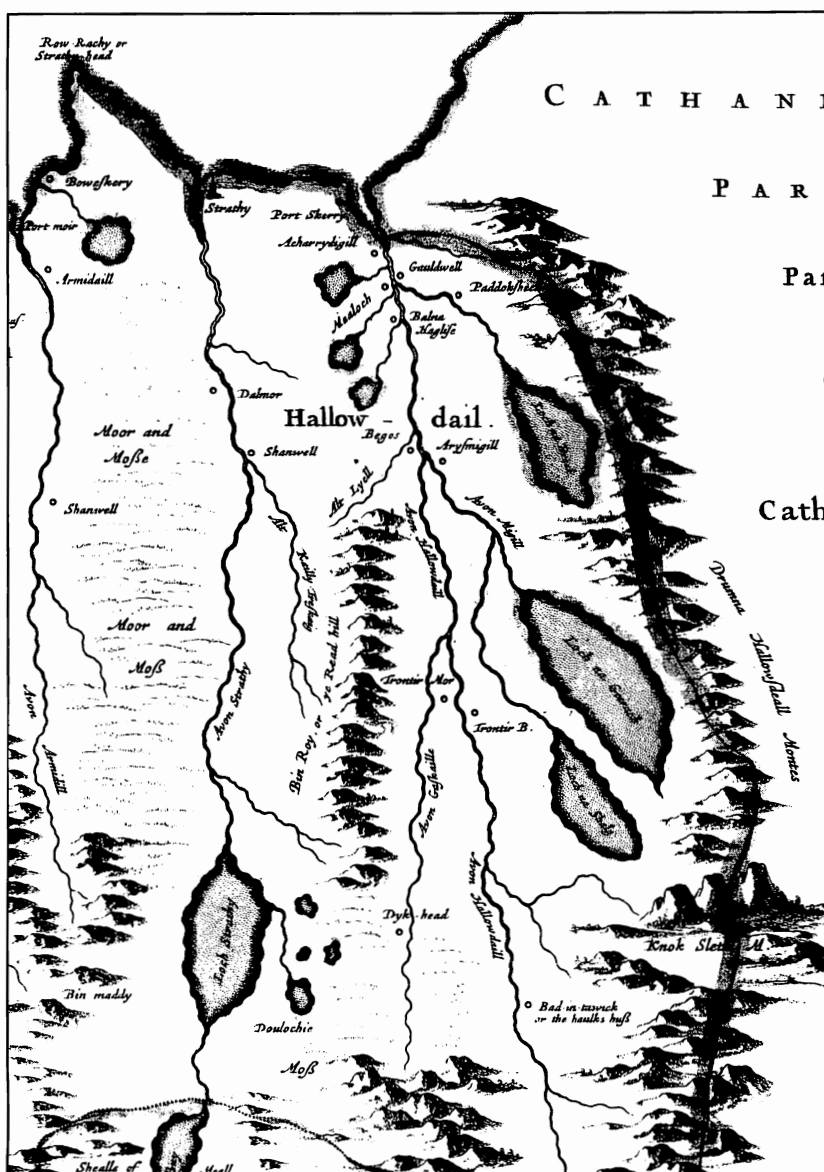
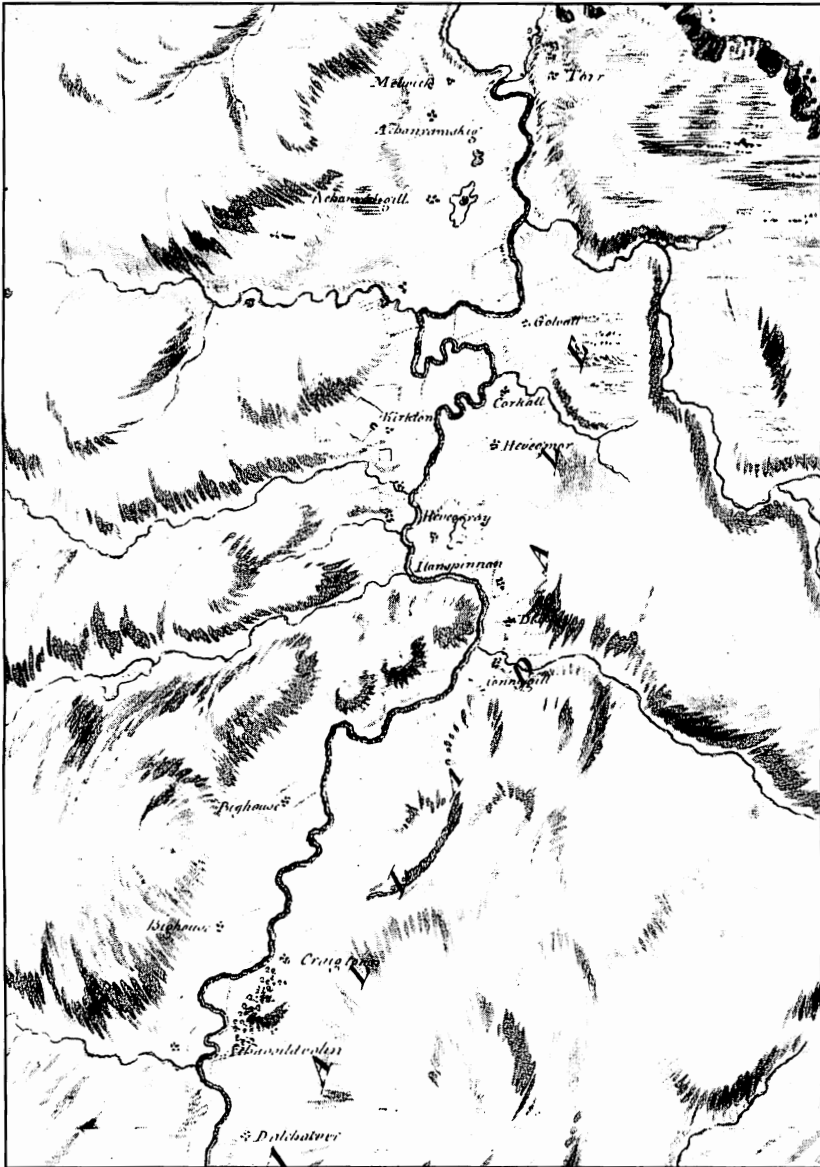


Fig. 7.2 Timothy Pont's map of Strath Halladale, in Blaeu's *Atlas Novus*, 1654. Note 'Balna Haglise' (Kirkton) and 'Begos', the latter sited at the present Upper Bighouse.



Figs. 7.3; 7.3A Roy's *Military Survey of Scotland*, 1747-55. Note hatching of run-rig cultivation. The square enclosure at Kirkton is the former 'dwelling house of the laird of Bighouse' (revealed as U-plan, when enlarged as Fig. 7.3A). The smaller square is the burial ground. Note two settlements named Bighouse, the spelling anglicised, presumably by English-speaking military surveyors: also Torr at the river-mouth.

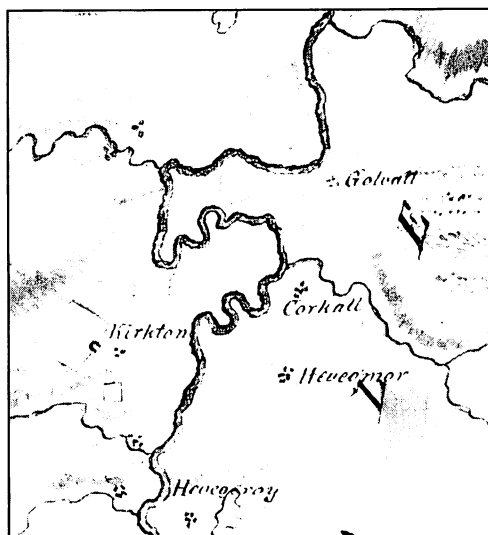


Fig. 7.3A

Though Kirkton seems to have been the principal ecclesiastical site in the strath, there were others. At Craigtown, the present church of 1910 is a successor to 'the meeting house where', also in 1726 'the people convene, when the minr [*sic*] comes to preach to them which is every Lords day' (MacFarlane 1906. i. 186). Recent excavations revealed a T-plan church of ca 1800 at Deasphollag ('Dispolly' in Bardgett 1993. 10-11). Here, in 1840 'a missionary preaches every third Sabbath', the church 'supported partly by the Royal Bounty and partly by the people' (NSA 1840. xv. 20).

The mansion of Bighouse Lodge, together with ancillary buildings and garden, occupies low-lying land on the east bank of the river, close to where it joins the sea in Melvich Bay. Here, the fast-flowing river forms a pronounced 'S' bend, encompassing within its sinuous curves both the mansion site and the higher sand dune mound opposite on the seaward side – both sites obviously naturally defensive. Eastwards, the land rises gently to 314 ft (100 m), culminating in the headland of Rubha an-Tuir. The former presence of a stronghold is re-enforced by place-name evidence quoted above. Whether this stronghold was a fort, broch or tower-house must remain conjectural. Timothy Pont indicated no building nor settlement here on either of his maps of the area, surveyed between 1584-1596 (Blau 1654): nor, more pertinent to this paper, do any buildings appear on Roy's *Military Survey of Scotland*, executed between 1747-55, except for three small settlements on the headland slopes to the east [Fig. 7.3]. It is worth noting that there are two places named The Borg (which could be construed as fortified or enclosed) at the upper and lower limit of inhabited Strath Halladale (NC 890635; NC 899509), and four ruinous brochs. The brochs, at least, indicate settlement from around the beginning of the Christian era, and

subsequent townships and farms are associated continuously with local names such as Trantlemore and Golval.

Strath Halladale has a varied history of ownership. At least by the 16th century, *Bighouse* was implied as neighbouring Trantlemore and Trantlebeg when, in 1527, King James V 'granted anew' these lands to Gavin Murray, son of Roderic Murray of Spinningdale. The strath, or portions of it, was owned or argued over by the Sutherlands of Duffus and the Mackays, besides branches of other northern landowners (*OPS* 1855. 744).

KIRKTON

Though the principal A 897 road northwards through Strath Halladale is on the east bank of the Halladale River from just north of Forsinard, there is a parallel track or secondary road on the west bank commencing south of Trantlemore. This road passes north through Kirkton, reflecting the importance of that site and communication between townships on the west bank. That Kirkton was a settlement in its own right, is clearly stated in 1726 in a description of the strath in which 'the places inhabited are ... Bighouse, Kirkton, Golwake, Melvik ...' (MacFarlane 1906. i. 186).

Other than an empty cottage, there are now no buildings near the Kirkton burial ground [Figs. 7.3A; 7.4]. Kirkton farm, with modern bungalow and outbuildings of 19th- and 20th-century date, is half a mile north. Yet in 1726:

Fig. 7.4 Burial ground, Kirkton, looking north up strath. This was Balnahaglis (also Balna Haglise), place of the chapel. Pediment dated 1630 mounted immediately left of gateway in foreground. 1994.





Fig. 7.5 Dormer window pediment dated 1630 mounted on Kirkton burial ground wall. 1994.

Four miles west of the church of Rae [*sic*] is the house of Kirkton standing clos on the west side of the river Halladale (upon which is Strath-Halladale) which is the dwelling house of the laird of Bighouse proprietor of the said Strath' (MacFarlane 1906. i. 182).

– indicating that the 'laird of Bighouse' was domiciled at Kirkton at least by 1726. The existence of a house of standing is confirmed both by Roy in the mid 18th century and in *The Ancient Parochial Map* (OPS 1855).

Mounted on the burial ground wall, close to the lower, south-west entrance, is a dormer window pediment dated 1630 with Mackay armorial and monogram AMK for Angus Mackay, almost certainly Angus 1st of Bighouse, who died in 1634. The pediment is a typical early 17th-century upper storey window gablet, triangular in shape, the outer edges decorated with cable moulding and naive scrolls [Figs. 7.5; 7.6]. It is supported by a stone block bearing the following worn inscription:

Found on church site by D. Macaskill Kirkton 1894.
Erected by [?R?S] Macdonald M[?D], Dunedin NZ 1895

This pediment of 1630 is the earliest fragment of the 'dwelling house of the laird' at Kirkton. Another datestone of 1738, now at Bighouse, is discussed below. It is of interest to note that Kirkton formed part of the Bighouse estate until the early 1980s.³



Fig. 7.6 Pediment with AMK (Angus Mackay) above Mackay armorial; dated 16 (left) and 30 (right) at base. 1994.

At Kirkton, Roy's *Military Survey of Scotland*, surveyed between 1747-55, clearly reveals a U-plan house flanked either side by the walls of an enclosed yard or garden extending to the rear. The site is approximately that of the ruined cottage slightly to the north-west of the burial ground, standing on a terrace (?man-made) overlooking the valley. The same map names Bighouse as being two settlements near the present Upper Bighouse, further up-stream. Presumably the surveyors were English, for the anglicised spelling Bighouse is used.

THE MACKAYS OF BIGHOUSE

The genealogy of the Mackay family of Bighouse has been adequately covered elsewhere (Bangor-Jones, this volume; Mackay 1906. 303). Sufficient for this paper that '[Rory] Murray [of Bighouse] alienated these lands to William Mackay for 1000 merks on 15 July, 1597', the deal finalised 'by charter of confirmation under Great Seal 18 December, 1598' (Mackay 1906. 304). William Mackay, second son of 'IYe Du xii' of Strathnaver, was thereafter 'of Bighouse'. These formalities may have confirmed the *status quo* established some years earlier when:

on 20 September 1587 William Mackay with certain brokin heiland men ... came to the lands of Bighouse or Strath Halladale (Mackay 1906. 334).

William probably lived near what is now Upper Bighouse: he died in 1612 and was succeeded by his son Angus, whose first wife, Jane Elphinston, died in 1630 and was buried at Kirkton. In 1631, Angus extended his holdings by purchasing from the 1st Lord Reay 'the church lands of Belnaheglis and Goval with the salmon fishings of Halladale' (Mackay 1906. 304). This early 17th-century acquisition suggests that Angus was responsible for building the family house at Belnaheglis (Kirkton), of which the 1630 armorial is a surviving fragment. Though this armorial is dated a year earlier than the formalities of purchase, these may have regularised a previous *status quo*. Angus died in 1634, his death 'was much lamented, being a very active and able Gentleman' (Mackay 1829. 273).

By 1681, the estate had passed to Angus' great-nephew, also Angus, who with his wife Jane Sinclair is buried in the Mackay aisle in the old burial ground at Reay.

In 1722, Angus' grand-daughter Elizabeth succeeded to the estate. Six years later, in 1728, she married Hon. Hugh Mackay, brother of the 4th Lord of Reay, a prosperous factor and cattle trader. They acquired Kirkton in 1737, probably building the U-plan house (now The Barracks, Bighouse?) at Kirkton, even though they did not settle there permanently until the winter of 1758/59. They subsequently moved to Tor, where they built the mansion-house, both dying in 1770. The property passed to their daughter, Janet, who had married Colin Campbell of Glenure, Argyll, in May 1749, and in turn to

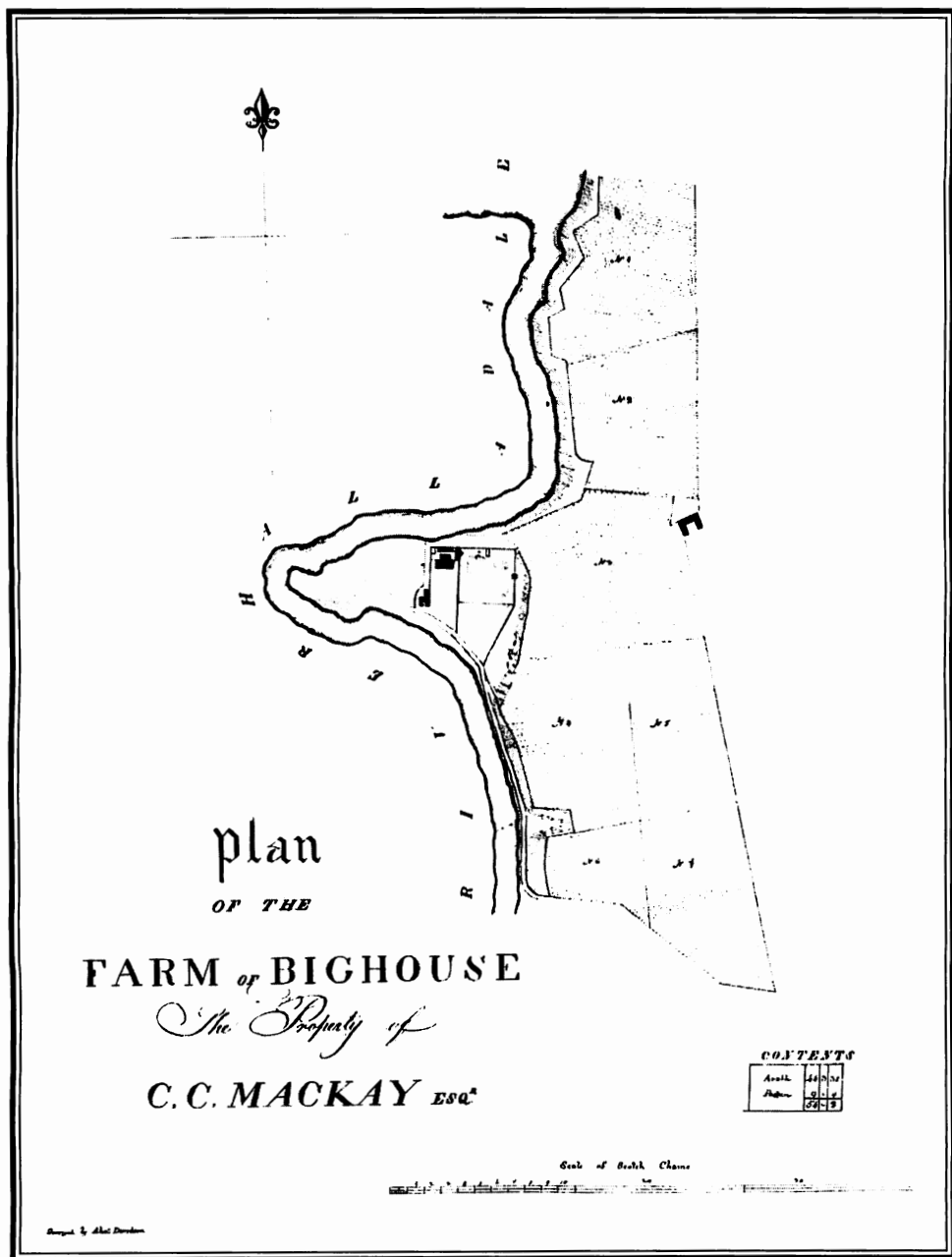


Fig. 7.7 Plan of the Farm of Bighouse, undated but drawn between 1819-30 (NLS Dept. 313/3590/24).

her daughter Louisa Campbell, wife of George Mackay of Handa and Sandwood, by whom she had twenty-one children.

George was was a military man and 'a gentleman of great worth and probity' (Mackay 1829. 454). A portrait by Raeburn reveals Louisa as a matronly figure with strong features, wearing a turban decorated with a crescent brooch and a ruffle about her neck to relieve the darkness of her gown (Mackay 1906. 333). George died in 1798 and is commemorated in the Mackay aisle, old Reay burial ground. Their eldest son, Hugh, a merchant in Antigua died in 1818 and was succeeded by Louisa's third son, Colin Campbell Mackay, though it was not until 1829 that his mother (died 1834) finally settled the estate on him. It was he who commissioned three estate maps⁴ in the 1820s, selling the Bighouse estate to the Marquis of Stafford and his Countess of Sutherland in 1830. [Fig. 7.7]

THE BUILDINGS AT BIGHOUSE

The buildings at Bighouse are a remarkable group. As with three other important north-coast 'Lairds' houses' – namely Balnakeil, Tongue and Sandside – all are sited close to reasonably sheltered bays or sea lochs on the stormy but major sea route of the Pentland Firth, a reminder that this Sutherland/Caithness coastline was the hub of the northern Scottish mainland. All these properties were enlarged or rebuilt during the 18th century: Balnakeil in 1744, Tongue House apparently heightened in 1750, and Sandside House built in 1751.⁵

Bighouse Lodge appears to have joined this coastal group of mansions in the early 1760s, for the 'genteel dwelling house, adorned by a garden' was noted in 1767 by the naturalist James Robertson (see Bangor-Jones); while in 1774, the Rev Alexander Pope of Reay described it as a 'modern house' (Pennant 1774. 323). Alexander Broune 'made alterations' in 1763; whether these were connected with Bighouse Lodge or The Barracks (at Kirkton or Tor) is unclear (Gifford 1992. 106).

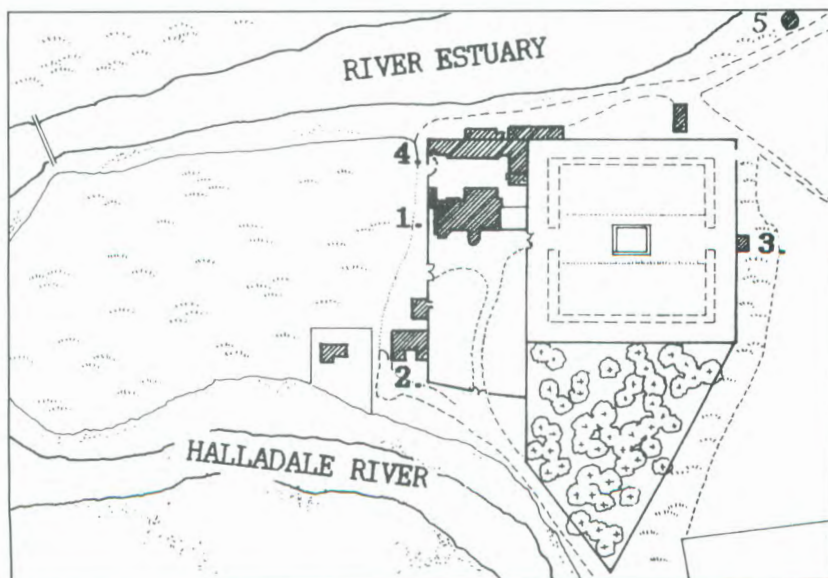
Bighouse is sited on a spit of level land projecting into the Halladale River by which it is enclosed on three sides [Figs. 7.8; 7.9]. Screened and protected from the open sea at the north by a high mounded dune, the general impression is that of an 18th-century complex, though subsequent alterations to Bighouse Lodge (the suffix Lodge was added in 1984) give it, at first glance, a 19th-century appearance.

The principal buildings are Bighouse Lodge, The Barracks, the walled garden with its garden pavilion and the icehouse. At the rear of Bighouse Lodge is a low irregular 2-storey, L-plan range of service buildings, which with The Barracks, are incorporated in the walls enclosing house and garden. The main house and The Barracks, facing south up the Halladale River, are sheltered at the east by rising ground and overlooked on the west by the township of Melvich strung out along the A 836 road.



Fig. 7.8 Bighouse Lodge (right) and The Barracks (left), fronted by the curve of the Halladale River. 1994.

Fig. 7.9 Site plan of Bighouse Lodge:
 1. Bighouse Lodge
 2. The Barracks
 3. Garden Pavilion
 4. Former farm buildings with kiln-barn
 5. Icehouse



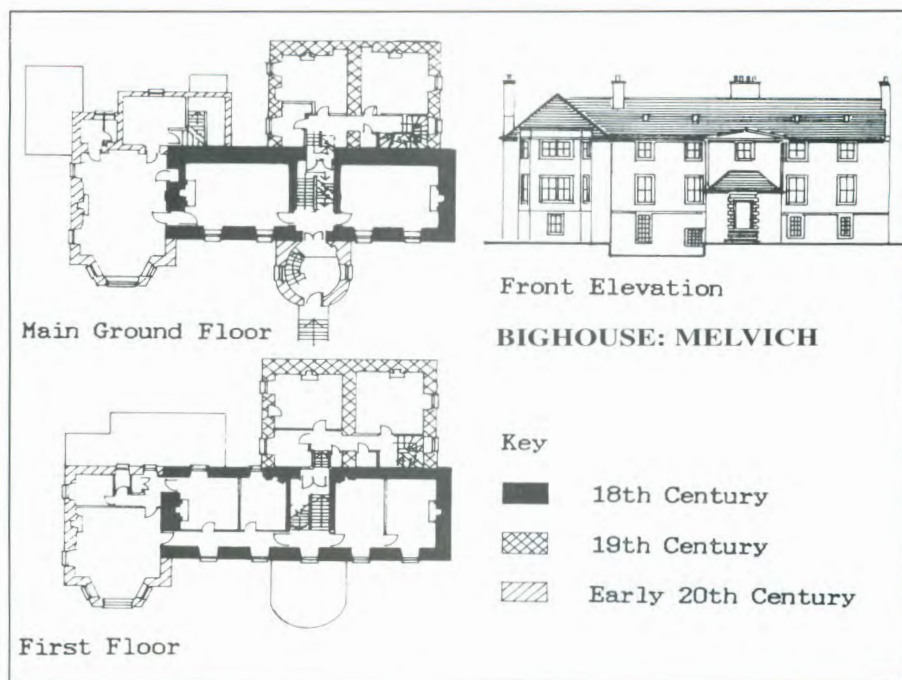


Fig. 7.10 Plan and elevation, Bighouse Lodge, ca 1980.

Fig. 7.11 Bighouse Lodge: Edwardian wing at left. Entry to walled garden just visible between trees at right. 1994.



Bighouse Lodge

Exterior

Bighouse Lodge, ca 1761-65, is an austere 3-storey house [Figs. 7.10; 7.11]. The centre bay is slightly advanced and rises above the wallhead as a shallow pediment, while the central doorway is masked by an Edwardian porch approached by steps. The projecting wide single-bay west wing, with canted windows rising full height, was also added in the early 20th century, but after the porch.⁶ At the rear, a massive double-gabled 3-storey and attic wing projects to form a T-plan. A rear wing appears on a plan of Bighouse drawn before 1830: this may be incorporated in, or have been replaced by the present very large rear extension – which seems of two builds, divided longitudinally down the centre by a thick (?former outside) wall.

The house is of harled rubble, the window margins of sandstone ashlar and chamfered.⁷ This chamfering is repeated on the window margins of the Edwardian west addition, but not on the tooled margins of the rear wing. The



Fig. 7.12 Bighouse Lodge: narrow raised basement window with scarcement (ledge) and wider window above, 1994.



Fig. 7.13 Bighouse Lodge: stone scale and platt staircase. Note centre spine wall rounded at landing face, with square base and capital. Also moulded risers to stone stairs. 1982.



Fig. 7.14 Bighouse Lodge: first floor landing and staircase spine wall. 1982.

substantial panelled chimney stacks all have flaired copes, stylistically dating from the early 20th-century alterations.

The projecting porch, ca 1900, has a bowed front, the rusticated and corniced doorpiece surmounted by a cornice enriched by a pulvinated (convex) frieze. Within the porch, the stone staircase rising to the raised ground-floor entrance is constructed of re-used stone treads, apparently the former outside stairs that originally oversailed the basement well to the main door. The bottom tread of the stairs has a scroll terminal where the final handrail baluster is mounted, a characteristic of 18th- and early 19th-century splayed outside stairs. Over the main inner doorway (original main door) is an 18th-century semicircular fanlight with intersecting astragals.

The lower ground floor, in effect a raised basement lit by the well (which only survives left of the front entrance), has very narrow windows in the south elevation. Three remain: one lighting the present family kitchen left of the entrance porch [Fig. 7.12] and two to the east (right). Furthermore, a narrow scarcement (ledge) runs horizontally across the frontage above these windows, indicating slightly thicker lower external walls. The narrowness of the windows suggests an earlier build and that there was some change of fenestration breadth by the time the main part of the house was constructed.



Fig. 7.15 Bighouse Lodge with The Barracks (left). Note contemporary store immediately to rear of The Barracks, with modern glazed bay window. 1992.

Fig. 7.16 The Barracks. The inserted window dated 1738 just visible set back at centre first floor. 1994.



Interior

Internally, the only original feature to survive the Edwardian alterations is the central scale-and-platt staircase⁸ [Figs. 7.13; 7.14]. This substantial stone staircase fills the centre of the house, the stone treads with moulded risers bedded in the central masonry spine wall which is rounded at each landing

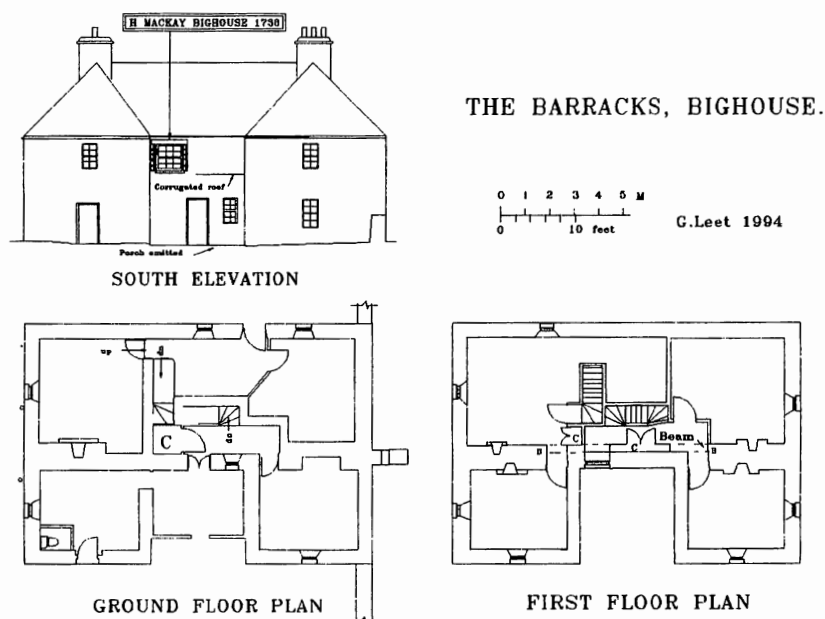
face. The type is consistent with a mid 18th-century date for Bighouse Lodge, found elsewhere in Scotland and particularly appropriate in treeless northern Sutherland and Caithness, where timber for staircases with decorative turned balusters was at a premium. The staircase, a massive integral part of the house, is an important piece in the architectural jig-saw of Bighouse Lodge, a vital clue in the dating of the building to the 18th century.

Otherwise, the internal features of the house, the chimney-pieces and carpentry such as window shutters and doors, are of early 20th-century style.

Building Date

The architectural evidence suggests that the lower ground floor of Bighouse Lodge may have been commenced a little before 1760. If so, either the foundations were of no importance to Roy's military surveyors at work in the area ca 1750, since they are not entered on the finished map, or there was nothing there for them to note. Elizabeth Mackay of Bighouse and Hugh Mackay of Reay, a dominant Mackay of his generation, were married in 1728 but apparently did not settle at Kirkton until 1758/59. Perhaps they planned to build at Tor rather earlier, but either Hugh's health, business affairs, or the 1745 up-rising delayed the project. Bishop Pococke travelled from Tongue to Sandside in June, 1760. It is not clear whether he passed near Tor or Kirkton, but he makes no mention of a new mansion, only that:

Fig. 7.17 Plan and elevation, The Barracks. Courtesy of G. Leet, 1994.



[we] crossed upon Avon Hallowdale ... and passed by Bighouse, another apenage of the house of Reay that disceded [*sic*] to the present Lord's brother by his marriage of the sole heiress. This is a beautiful vale of considerable extent (Pococke 1887.132).

Had there been a new mansion, surely Pococke would have noted it? A building date of 1761-65 seems a reasonable assumption.

The Barracks

The name of this small U-plan dwellinghouse, sited in front of and slightly to the west of the main house [Fig. 7.15], is enigmatic. Local tradition has it that, during the 1745 rebellion, troops were quartered there and arms kept in the contemporary square store to the rear. The complete absence of any building on Roy's map, however, suggests this is legend rather than fact. The name could have come about if the house was relegated to servants: in north-east Scotland servants' quarters were termed 'barracks', and no doubt there was a need for considerable domestic and outdoor staff during the tenure of Louisa and George Mackay with their large family of twenty-one children.

The Barracks [Figs. 7.16; 7.17] is a modest neat U-plan, 2-storey rubble structure, with small regularly-disposed windows, those in the first floor tucked closed under the eaves. Two advanced wings, each with 2-bay long elevations facing east and west, are linked by a narrow recessed bay with centre entrance (now masked by a corrugated iron lean-to). A further entrance was slapped in the front gable of the west wing when the house was divided into two dwellings. Each wing has a piended (hipped) slated roof with a central ridge chimney, the stacks with simple cornice and high cope chamfered along the upper edge in early 18th-century style.⁹ Nothing of interest survives internally except a massive timber ridge beam.¹⁰

In the first floor of the narrow centre bay of The Barracks, there is an awkwardly-placed window, larger and squarer than the other symmetrically-arranged fenestration. This window is obviously a later intrusion, the jambs moulded in 17th-century manner (re-used from the 17th-century dwelling?), but the lintel inscribed 'H Mackay Bighouse 1738'.

To the rear of this interesting little house is a contemporary, free-standing store with similar gable end chimney stack to those on the The Barracks.

Stylistically, The Barracks dates from the first half of the 18th century, probably 1738: assuming the correctness of Roy's map, it could not have been on this site before 1755. Yet that same map reveals a small U-plan dwelling at Kirkton. Was The Barracks moved *in toto* to the present site? It has already been suggested that Hugh Mackay built this house at Kirkton after he and Elizabeth acquired possession in 1737, and that Louisa and George may have moved the building after they took over in 1770? As it stands now, slightly to the west of Bighouse Lodge and outside the walled perimeter of mansion and gardens, The Barracks lacks a premier or even

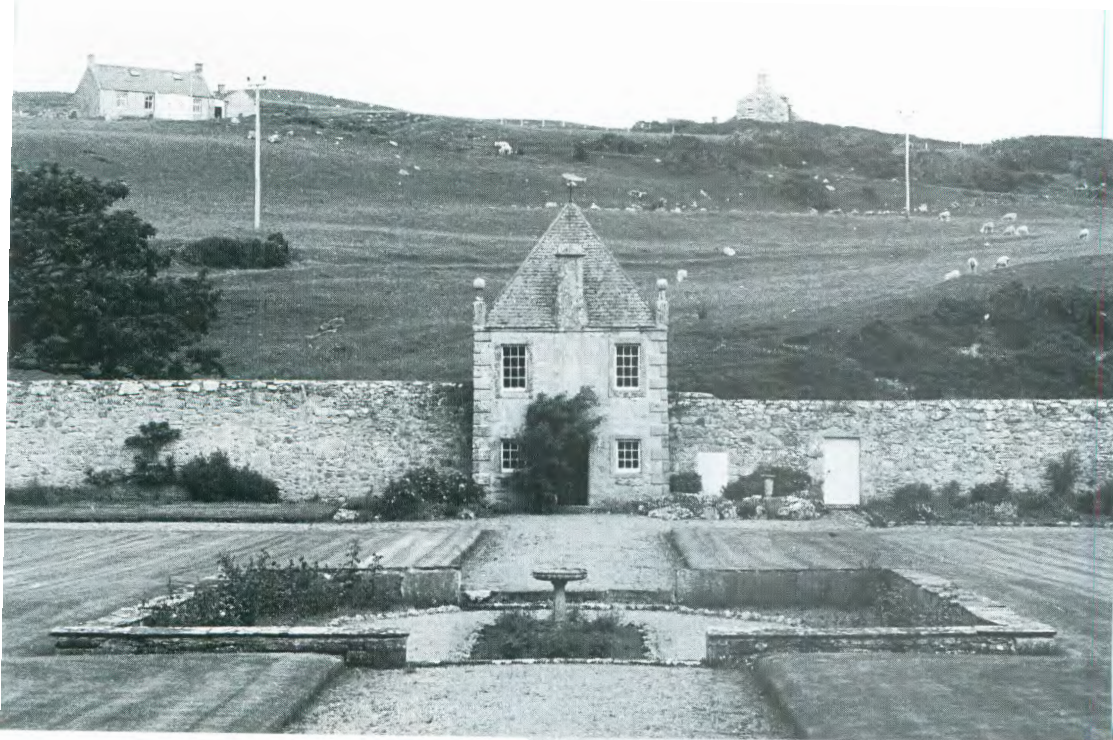


Fig. 7.18 Garden pavilion. 1994.



Fig. 7.19 Garden pavilion. 1994.

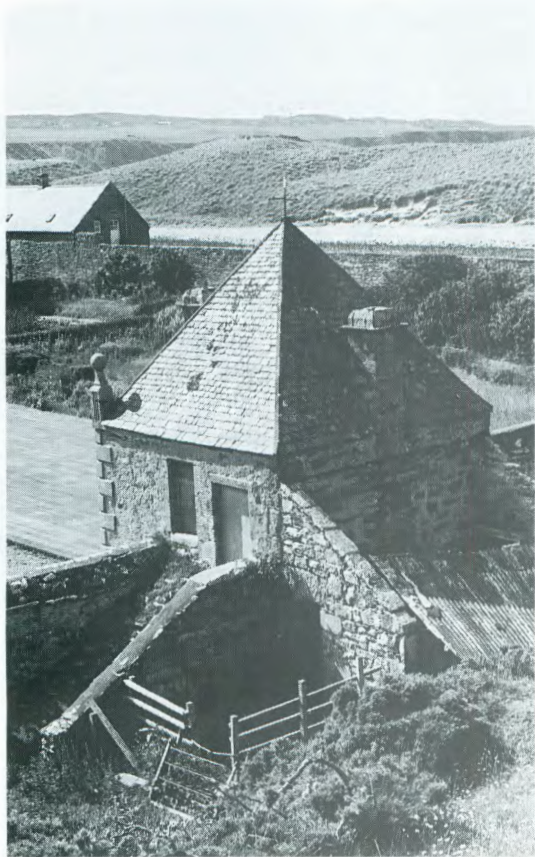


Fig. 7.20 Garden pavilion from rear with forestairs leading to first floor room. 1994.



Fig. 7.21 Garden pavilion roof with chimney-head and salmon silhouette windvane. 1994.

logical position in the complex. The re-used lintel, dated 1738 and bearing Hugh Mackay's name, must also have come from Kirkton, perhaps rescued and installed after the house was re-built at Tor.

Walled Garden and Garden Pavilion

The high walled garden, immediately east of the Lodge, measures approximately 263 ft x 263 ft (80 m x 80 m). In the centre of the east wall, aligned with the entrance at the west, is a small two-storey garden pavilion [Figs. 7.18; 7.19]. By 1767, this was the centre-piece of the 'garden, which, for it's size, is the best and most elegant ... in the North' (Henderson & Dickson 1994, 50). The only other garden pavilion of this type in northern Scotland is at Dunrobin Castle, Golspie, the seat of the Earls of Sutherland, constructed by Lord William Strathnaver (heir to the 17th Earl) in 1732. At Bighouse in 1780:

The appearance of the gardens was unexpectedly pleasing. In a spot enclosed by such barren ridges of rocky hills, one does not look for such a display of luxuriance; the borders decked with variety of the richest flowers, plenty of wall-fruits; apples, pears, plums, cherries, which are often as early ripe as at Edinburgh; beds of melons and cucumbers; and whatever can give variety, or grace the entertainments of the table. (Cordiner 1780, 93)

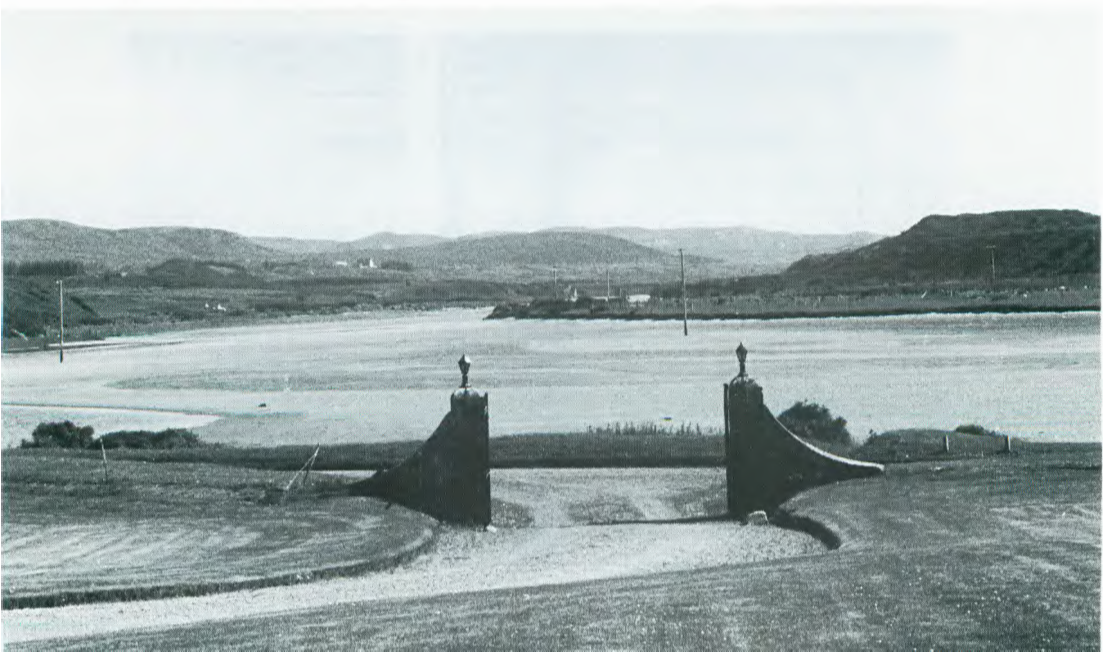
Fig. 7.22 Garden pavilion: blocked hearth in ground floor with bolection moulded surround. 1994.





Fig. 7.23 West entrance, Bighouse Lodge. The flanking walls have been raised. 1994.

Fig. 7.24 Looking up Halladale River from Bighouse Lodge; later gatepiers, possibly replacing those now flanking west entrance. 1994.



The pavilion is of harled rubble with ashlar dressings and quoins, the front wallhead angles each crowned with a ball finial supported by a stout, attenuated stalk rising from a fluted rectangular base. The centre front wallhead chimney, with a cope similar to those on The Barracks, is matched at the rear. The garden walls abut the pavilion in the centre of the north and south gables: against the latter is a forestair serving the first floor, reached via a doorway in the garden wall [Fig. 7.20]. The slated pyramidal roof is crowned by a weathervane with a salmon silhouette, a usual feature on buildings associated with the salmon industry – from which Bighouse traditionally gained wealth [Fig. 7.21]. Internally there is now no ceiling; the floor is paved with stone slabs, and the chimney-piece in the rear wall is of early 18th-century type with bolection moulded frame [Fig. 7.22]. That serving the first floor is later, of plain tooled ashlar and possibly a replacement. The longer windows in the first floor suggest that this was the more important of the two rooms and worthy of an elegant chimney-piece.

The west side of the walled garden flanks both the court at the rear of Bighouse Lodge and the lawn in front. A further wall encloses the west side of the front lawn, the entrance aligned to the present footbridge and perhaps previous ferry crossing of the Halladale River. The gate-piers are very similar to those of the walled garden [Fig. 7.23]. That these piers are not in their original position is suggested by the heightening of the masonry west wall each side of the gateway. No entrance is shown here on Surveyor Alex. Davidson's *Plan of the Farm of Bighouse* – but neither does he indicate any entrance, anywhere, to the walled garden on this plan! However, on the evidence of the west wall being altered to accommodate the piers, and as the entry centred on the front of the house lacks emphasis, it is suggested that these west entrance piers may once have flanked the short south drive between the shore and the house, leading directly to the front door [Fig. 7.24].

Former Farm Buildings

The *Plan of the Farm of Bighouse, The Property of C C Mackay Esq.* was prepared by surveyor Alex. Davidson during the period of joint ownership of Bighouse by Colin Campbell Mackay, 1818-30, with his mother [Fig. 7.7]. It is mainly devoted to the field layout of Bighouse – large fields superseding the run-rig of the three former settlements on the slopes of Rubha an-Tuir indicated in the mid-18th century by Roy. The plan reveals a U-plan standing to the east, but no farmhouse. From this it appears that whoever farmed the property lived in the main house, with the rear detached L-plan range as farm and service buildings [Fig. 7.25]. The mid 18th-century kiln-barn and barn at Sandside are so disposed, and a similar layout is shown on Wm. Aberdeen's plan of Castlehill, Castletown, Caithness, prepared in 1772.

At Bighouse, the two rectangular buildings shown on the plan at right angles to one another are still there, though altered. Sufficient evidence



Fig. 7.25 Bighouse: ?former kiln-barn; note vent immediately below eaves and another in gable end. 1994.

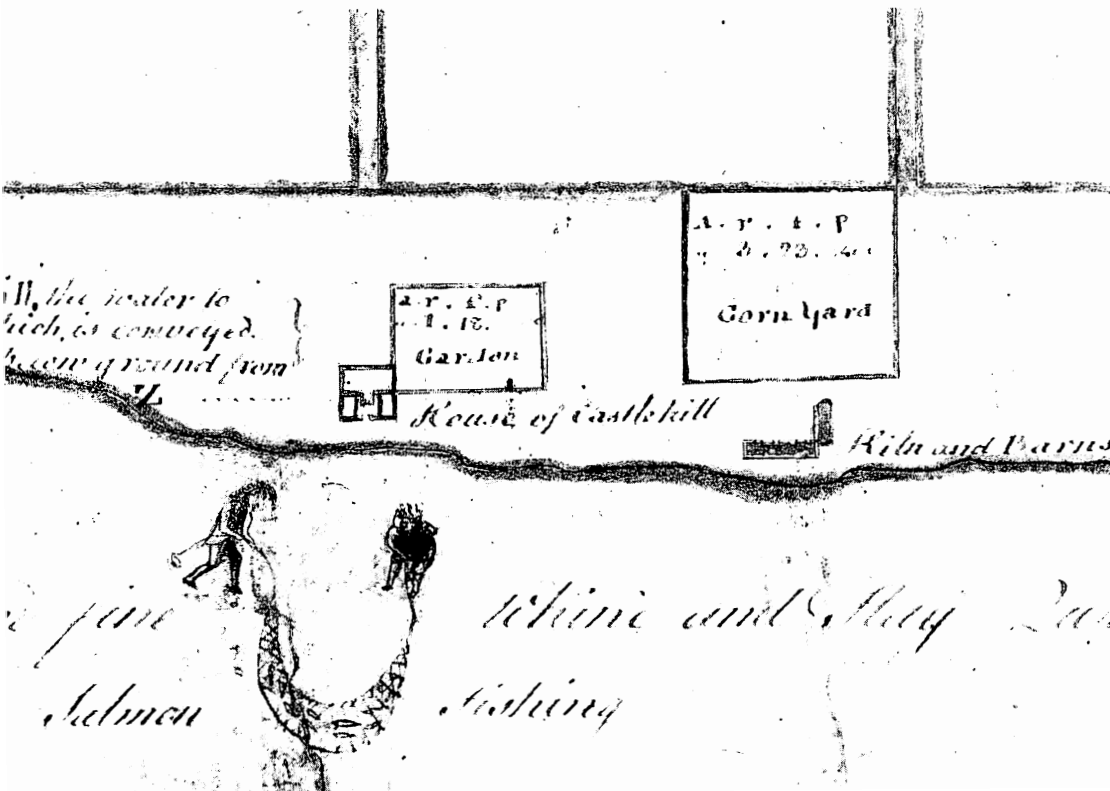
Fig. 7.26 Sandside, kiln-barn: the kiln occupied the left hand section, the upper floor reached by staircase in canted stairwell fronting gable end. 1992.



survives to suggest that they were in fact, kiln-barn and barn similar to those at Sandside and Castletown, probably of late 18th-century date. The ridge stack, small circular vents below the eaves and 18th-century chamfers to a very small window in the west gable, all suggest that the west end of the block running parallel to the river was the original kiln of the kiln barn. This was later gutted and altered to accommodate gig-house and saddle room, the latter heated by a hearth utilising the former kiln flue, with chimney stack rebuilt and capped with a 19th-century cope.

Farm kilns were usual in the north, to dry the grain before grinding: they took various forms, sometimes quite small, but substantial on the larger properties. They required mural ventilation to the upper floor where the grain was spread to dry, and a flue to carry warmth upwards and to draw off smoke. While most Caithness farm kilns are bow-end, that at neighbouring Sandside, like Bighouse, is also square (Beaton 1988), the kiln-barn and barn laid out at right angles to each other with barely passage room between [Fig. 7.26]. In 1772, there was the same arrangement at Castlehill, Castletown, east of Thurso [Fig. 7.27]. Based on similar buildings of this type sited on the

Fig. 7.27 Kiln-barn, Castlehill, Caithness, by Wm. Aberdeen, ca 1772. Note L-plan layout of paired buildings, similar to those at Sandside and Bighouse (SRO RHP 1221).



more substantial farms of the Pentland Firth coast, and the requirements of 18th- and early 19th-century farming, one can be confident of the origin of this building.

These improved farm offices would have contributed to the rental paid for the farm. In 1819, the annual rental paid by Gabriel Reid (Louisa's son-in-law) for the farms at 'North Golval and Tor' (Bighouse) was £160. The only higher rental of that year was for Forsinain, possibly used also as a sporting estate, where 'Mr. Robson' paid £550 pa (Mackay 1906. 480).¹¹ The rents at Bighouse (presumably Upper Bighouse) varied between £1.11s.6d to £10.10s.0d pa (Mackay 1906. 480).

Fig. 7.28 Icehouse. Bowed ante-chamber fronts lower portion: chute to rear of turf conical roof. 1992.



Icehouse

As elsewhere in Scotland, commercial salmon fishing was a source of wealth, peaking during the early 19th century when the growth of urban centres provided ready markets for the fish. The importance of the salmon fishings was always emphasised throughout the history of Strath Halladale. This perishable commodity was transported by sea, at first salted and in barrels. From ca 1800, in order that the fish remained (reasonably) fresh, they were par-boiled in brine and packed in ice collected during the winter and retained in semi-subterranean stores called icehouses.

Commercial icehouses were masonry vaults with rear chutes down which the ice was thrown, and a doorway at the front – sometimes preceded by an ante-chamber, or dead-room, leading into the ice store. The icehouse at Bighouse is of a less usual cylindrical form with conical roof, the rear chute approached by a track, and the entrance fronted by a semi-circular ante-chamber [Fig. 7.28]. It was used until the early 1980s, when the ice, instead of being collected from river or pond and transported thither by cart, was delivered from the ice factory by lorry (pers. comm. ca 1983).

This icehouse is not revealed on the undated *Plan of the Farm of Bighouse*. Given that the plan probably dates from the mid 1820s, the icehouse and neighbouring salmon fishers' bothy must have been built after the survey, perhaps before Bighouse was sold to the Marquis of Stafford in 1830. It is less likely to have been built by the Sutherland estates, whose icehouses followed an estate pattern, vaulted with curved, gabled front – as at Bettyhill, Brora, Helmsdale (Bridge) and Littleferry.

It is interesting that the rent paid for the commercial salmon fishings at Bighouse in 1819 was £150 pa, the third highest rental on the estate. The gross rental for that year was £1,566.18s.8d.

The 18th/early 19th-Century Bighouse Buildings: A Summary

Much of Bighouse remains an enigma and will continue so until more detailed research is carried out in both Reay and Sutherland estate papers. Meantime, archival and published sources, maps and architectural evidence encourage assessment of this fascinating complex. Recapitulating all that has been outlined above, we know that the Mackays of Bighouse were established in Strath Halladale at the end of the 16th century. They may at first have been domiciled in the Upper Bighouse area, but certainly by 1630 had built their home, probably a small tower-house, at Kirkton, near the chapel and burial ground. A new house, revealed as U-plan on Roy's *Military Survey*, 1747-55, was built there ca 1738, probably what is now The Barracks, Bighouse. Elizabeth and Hugh Mackay relocated their principal residence to Tor in the early 1760s, from then called Bighouse. Perhaps they also re-built their former house at Kirkton as The Barracks or, more likely, left that task to their daughter Louisa and her husband George Mackay with their twenty-one children.

Alex. Davidson's *Plan of the Farm of Bighouse*, apparently dating from the 1820s, reveals the extent of the farm, the disappearance of the settlements at Tor, large enclosed fields and a U-plan steading some distance from the house – perhaps the first stage of removing farming activities from the mansion to the Mains farm (home farm). The L-plan layout of the rear offices at Bighouse, similar to others on 'Laird's' estates on the Pentland Firth coast, coupled with some building evidence, suggests that this range was originally the kiln-barn and barn.

The importance of the salmon fishings on the Halladale River, and the wealth they generated, was apparent throughout the Mackay tenure. Had the icehouse been built before Alex. Davidson surveyed the farm in the 1820s, it would certainly have been included on his plan. Maybe until the mid 1820s the fishings were centred further up-stream, or the fish caught were salted before export rather than packed in ice. Be that as it may, the icehouse does not appear and it is suggested it was built after survey but before Bighouse was sold to the Marquis of Stafford in 1830.

Fig. 7.29 Halladale River between Kirkton and Bighouse (in distance): note embankments flanking river and meadowland at left with grass cut for hay or silage. 1994.



BIGHOUSE AFTER 1830

Bighouse was run as a sheep farm after it was sold by Colin Campbell Mackay and his mother, Louisa, in 1830. The Marquis of Stafford (from 1833 the Duke of Sutherland), together with the 2nd Duke, made 'great improvement[s]' in Strath Halladale. By 1840:

a new chanel [*sic*], at a vast expense, has been dug for water and a high and strong embankment raised to confine the river from flooding and extensive meadow of very excellent pasture, thought to be worth upward of £200 per annum (NSA 1840. xv. 19) [Fig. 7.29].

These embankments were long anticipated, for in 1795 Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, that great agricultural 'improver', wrote:

On the estate of Bighouse there is a meadow of immense extent, the value of which would be greatly augmented by carrying the river Halladale in a straight line to the sea, and embanking it for greater security. This is an improvement which it is to be hoped, the present intelligent possessor of that property [Lieut. Col. Mackay], when peace is restored, will soon have it in his power to attend to and to execute. (Sinclair 1795. 153).

The banks built to contain floods are still clearly visible, and still help to 'confine the river'. A chain ferry over the Halladale River, similar to that at Loch Hope, was installed as part of the development of the road along the north coast, constructed by the Marquis in 1830, immediately after he had purchased the Bighouse and neighbouring Reay estates.

The Bighouse estate was sold by the 4th Duke of Sutherland in 1919, after when it served, under various owners, as a shooting lodge. That role has ceased, and it is now the home of a family with local connections.

Louisa and George Mackay's large family scattered in Scotland and overseas, some of them naming their new homes Bighouse. One member established a farm in Australia, also Bighouse. A descendant of this family, Louisa's great, great, great, grand-daughter, has returned to Sutherland from Australia, making her home at Strathy, not far from Bighouse.

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Notes

1. *Pers. Comm.* Mrs. Kathleen Wares. Miss Priscilla Richards, Louisa Mackay's great, great, great, grand-daughter, recalls her grandmother in Australia emphasising 'Bergus' as the correct pronunciation of the Sutherland family home.
2. Cruives were fish traps made of osiers and timber, staked in the river to catch salmon.
3. *Pers. comm.* Mrs. Wares.
4. National Library of Scotland: Dept.313/3590/24, 27, 28.
5. Neighbouring Sandside House, Reay, Caithness, appears on Roy's *Military Survey of Scotland*. This seems to be the house dated 1751, suggesting an approximate date of the Roy survey of the area to 1751-5.
6. A picture postcard of Bighouse (posted 1908) reveals porch but no west wing: Richards, C. (ed) *Postcards from Caithness*. 1992. 136.
7. *Ashlar*, finely tooled and squared facing stone. *Chamfer*, an arris or angle splay.
8. *Scale and platt stair*, a staircase with landings and straight flights of stone stairs, bedded into a central masonry spine wall.
9. The Barracks resembles Ardmaddy Castle, Argyll, as re-built in 1737 by Colin Campbell of Carwhin, Chamberlain of the Breadalbane Estate. Colin Campbell of Glenure, who married Janet Mackay of Bighouse in 1749, held land in feu from this estate. The likeness between contemporary Ardmaddy and The Barracks suggests that the Campbells, both of Glenure and Ardmaddy, and the Mackays of Bighouse, were acquaintances some years before formal links were established by marriage, perhaps through cattle-dealing as suggested by Bangor-Jones (this volume). I am grateful to Ian Fisher, Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, for drawing my attention to Ardmaddy. (See RCAHMS Argyll 1975. ii. 248-52.)
10. *Pers. comm.* Geoff & Lyndall Leet, Thurso.
11. This tenant is the only one entitled 'Mr.' in the rent roll.

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