

THE CULBIN SANDS — A MYSTERY UNRAVELLED

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The Culbin Sands

Along the southern shores of the Moray Firth some 50 km of the coastline are formed from unconsolidated sands and shingle of fluvio-glacial origin. The Culbin Sands lie on this coast between the river Findhorn and the river Nairn (Fig.10.1).

The whole of this stretch is covered by blown sand, with spectacular dunes reaching up to 30 m in height. Old photographs show it to have been a desert-like wilderness at the beginning of this century. Over the past 100 years, however, the sands have gradually been stabilised by afforestation and today the 28 square kms of the Culbin Sands are covered by a thriving forest.

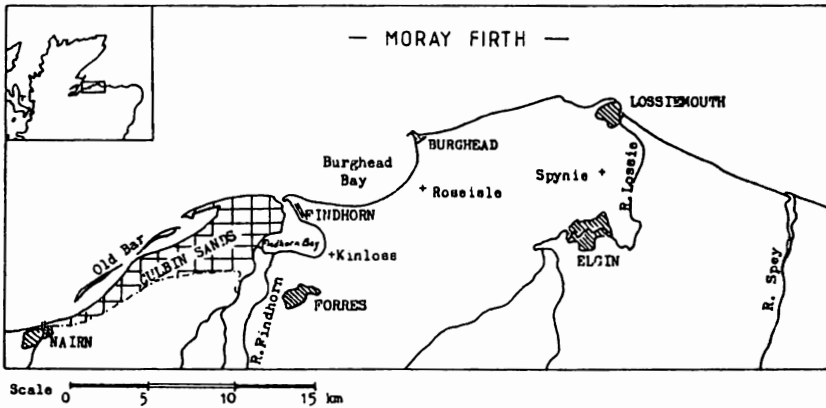


Fig.10.1 Part of the Moray Coast showing location of the Culbin Sands.

There are historical records of severe sand-blowing which buried stretches of farmland in Lower Moray around the close of the 17th century, but no tales so harrowing as the destruction of the Culbin Estate in 1694. This had been dramatically described by Martin and later by Bain, and, backed up by the desert scenery of Culbin, these accounts fired the imagination of all their readers.¹ From their descriptions the following synopsis of events has been compiled.

The Barony of Culbin (popular version)

With a history going back to the beginning of the 13th century, the estate of Culbin was the finest and the most fertile in Moray. In the centre of it stood the mansion house of the Kinnairds — a large square building of dressed stones, embowered with a beautiful garden, a fruitful orchard, and

a spacious lawn. It was, given the social position of the Baron, and the wealth the family possessed, a centre of the culture and refinement of the time.

The estate itself was called the garden and granary of Moray. 'Stretching away in the distance in every direction were to be seen the highly cultivated fields with heavy corn; the rich meadows, dotted here and there with thriving herds; and the extensive pastures with numerous flocks'.² There were in all 3600 acres. To the east and west were sixteen fair sized farms and farm houses, each tenant paying on average £200 Scots in money rent, as well as forty bolls each of wheat, bere, oats and oatmeal in kind. There were numerous small crofts and huts all over the estate. The rent roll still exists.

The river Findhorn flowed past the north side of the lands in a slow, broad stream. Along its banks were rows of fishermen's huts, with their boats and fishing gear in front — all of these dwellings teeming with life and activity. The salmon fishing was particularly valuable, and the little community appears to have enjoyed a large measure of prosperity. The late frost or protracted drought might destroy the crops in other parts of the district, but so rich and deep was the alluvial soil of Culbin that the crops there never failed. One year a heavy crop of barley was reaped, though no rain had fallen since it was sown.

The great sand drift came from the west in the autumn of 1694: it came suddenly and with short warning. A man ploughing had to desert his plough in the middle of a furrow. The reapers in a field of late barley had to leave without finishing their work. In a few hours plough and barley were buried beneath the sand. The drift, like a mighty river, came on steadily and ruthlessly, grasping field after field, and enshrouding every object in a mantle of sand. In terrible gusts the wind carried the sand amongst the dwelling houses of the people, sparing neither the hut of the cottar nor the mansion of the laird. The splendid orchard, the beautiful lawn, all shared the same fate.

In the morning after the first night of drift, the people had to break through the back of their houses to get out. They relieved the cattle and drove them to a place of safety. After a lull, the storm began again with renewed violence, and they had to flee for their lives, taking with them only such things as they could carry. To add to the horrors of the scene, the sand choked the mouth of the river Findhorn, which now poured its flooded waters amongst the fields and homesteads, accumulating in lakes and pools till it rose to a height at which it was able to burst the barrier to the north, and find a new outlet to the sea, in its course sweeping to destruction the old village of Findhorn.

On returning, the people of Culbin were spellbound. Not a vestige, not a trace of their houses was to be seen. Everything had disappeared beneath the sand. From that time to this, the estate of Culbin has been completely

buried by the sand. A portion of the old mansion house appeared about a hundred years later, like a ghostly spectre amidst the sand, and became an object of superstitious interest to the people of the neighbourhood, especially as one man who had bawled down the chimney, heard a voice distinctly respond to his cry. It eventually disappeared as suddenly as it came on the scene. Fruit trees have actually come out and blossomed and borne fruit in this sandy desert, only to be swallowed up again. The dovecote and chapel also reappeared, and their ruins supplied stones for neighbouring farm buildings.

As for the laird and his family, the sequel is more pathetic. Kinnaird escaped the night of the catastrophe with his wife and child, attended by a nurse. Their boy was but a few months old. Kinnaird petitioned Parliament to be exempt from the payment of land tax, on account of the greater part of his land being overrun by the sand and the remainder threatened. Shortly afterwards he was forced to sell out and applied for personal protection against his creditors. The estate was sold in 1698 and both the laird and his wife died a few years later. The faithful nurse took the child to Edinburgh and supported him and herself by needlework. When the orphaned child grew up, he enlisted in the army where he was recognised by an uncle of his who procured for him a commission. He later became Captain of a Troop of Horse but died without issue about 1743 bringing the Kinnaird line to a close.

The Extent of the Barony of Culbin

Investigation by the writer into the coastal processes which formed the Culbin foreland³ showed that the river Findhorn had at one time flowed into a wide estuary, flanked on its northern side by a westward-growing shingle bar which diverted the course of the river to the southwest. This was at the time of the Post-Glacial High Sea Level, when, 6500 years ago, the sea stood 5.5 m higher than today.

As the sea level fell back, the shingle bar was left high and dry as a fossil beach, the estuary dried out with vegetation and soil developing, and the old river channel became a peat-filled hollow. The estuarine soils were to become the farm lands of the Barony of Culbin. Today the outlines of the shingle ridges can be traced in the forest, and by digging down through the sand in hollows between the dunes, the extent of the soil and peat horizons can also be gauged (Fig.10.2). When mapped to scale it became obvious that a considerable discrepancy existed between the accepted extent of the old estate and the most generous estimate that could be made on the ground of the area of potentially arable land — the stretches of estuarine soils between the shingle ridges and the river. Details of carse lands flanking the river were obtained from a map of 1758⁴ and an estimate of the area of soil available came to 548 ha. (1354 acres). This had to be

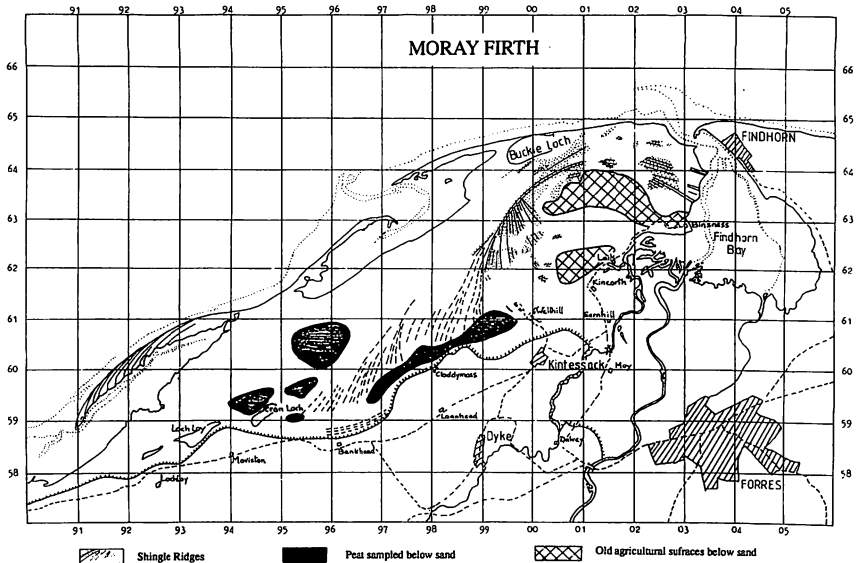


Fig.10.2 Areas in Culbin Forest where peat and soils have been sampled below sand.

shared between several farms, some of which were not part of the Barony of Culbin.

Much of the original information about the estate was contained in an article written in 1865 by C Fraser Mackintosh,⁵ who had access to old estate papers. These were described in 1884 as totalling 68 documents,⁶ but today only a few survive.⁷ On researching what had been written on the Culbin Sands, some 200 papers, articles and books have been traced. These are of varying length and weight, with roughly half covering aspects of the history of the estate. The ‘facts’ in these accounts have often been taken verbatim from the well known lectures by Martin and descriptions by Bain, and then not uncommonly enhanced in the telling.

Only one author urged caution in the acceptance of the popular version. In 1938, the Rev. J G Murray wrote, ‘It might have been expected, however, that newspaper and magazine editors would exercise a measure of discretion before publishing in their columns fantastic legends which have been repeated ad nauseam during the last quarter century. Or do they imagine that their readers will swallow “cauld Kale het again” if only it is served by a different writer each time’.⁸ Fifty years later this is still fair comment, and the same old story is still being repeated.⁹

In an attempt to separate fact from fiction, it was considered that the first course of action should be to check what Fraser-Mackintosh had actually said against any historical documents relating to the estate which could still be traced. A surprising amount of information was gleaned

from available public records, the Register of Sasines being particularly useful. Details of property deals and family names and relationships were uncovered, filling many blanks in the history of the estate.

Quoting from an 'old deed', Fraser Mackintosh described the estate as, 'All and hail the lands of Culbin, comprehending therein the lands, mill, fishings and others underwritten, viz:- All and hail that part of the lands and barony of Culbin called the Mains of Culbin, with the manor place, houses, biggings, yards, orchards, tofts, crofts, and hail pertinents of the same; The Hill of Findhorn, with houses, biggings and pertinents, the ferme coble on the water of Findhorn, with liberties, commonities and privileges thereof, with the mussell scalp and salmon fishing and pertinents, as well in fresh as salt waters of Findhorn, commonly called the Stells of Culbin'¹⁰ In similar vein the other properties were described as 'the lands of Macrodder *alias* Mirrietown; the lands of Aikenhead, *alias* Ranchkers ... the lands of Binn, *alias* Middle Binn ... the lands of Laick and Sandifield, the lands of Delaith, *alias* Delpottie with the mill of Delpottie, multures, and sequells of the said lands and barony of Culbin ... the manse of the Chapel of St. Ninian ... the lands of Earnhill ... the lands of Easter Binn ... and the said salmon fishing on the water of Findhorn, called the common stell or the Sheriff Stell....'

Many writers have fallen into the trap of quoting directly from this, and including 'houses, biggings, yards, orchards, tofts, crofts, doves, dovecotes etc.' with each property as listed. This was merely the standard phraseology used in the conveyancing of the period by a 'writer' who might not have seen the property and had to cover all eventualities in his list of the estate's assets. The Mains, or home farm, was by tradition the best farm on an estate, usually close to the proprietor's residence. No mention is made in any of the charters or sasines as to the annual rent or size of the Mains of Culbin, and it is therefore suggested that the phrase the 'Mains with the manor place' was also part of the conveyancing jargon of the period, and that the laird must have stayed at the farmhouse of Binn, 'of old called Middlebin'. An obvious mistake is the statement that the total area of the estate amounted to 3600 acres (1457 ha). In a footnote, Fraser Mackintosh explained that about 1865 the area of the sands had been measured and found to extend to 3600 acres.¹¹ Thus this figure was the total area of the sands and not the extent of the Barony in 1694.

As other documents connected with the Kinnaird family were uncovered, it became apparent that there were differences between the various lists of the estate's holdings. These arose from various causes — the misinterpretation of old handwriting, faulty translation from Latin, the copying of a list of properties from an old document when in the meantime some lands had been sold, the assumption that a named property was a farm, when in fact it was carseland and so on. Exploration in this quarter

effectively reduced the productive part of the Culbin estate to Middle Binn, Laik and Sandifield, Delpottie with its mill, and Earnhill, plus the salmon fishings.

The most-quoted extract from Fraser Mackintosh's account is the rental for the year 1693,¹² which was supposed to show that the estate had sixteen farms producing a rent of £2720 Scots, plus 640 bolls of wheat, and similar amounts of bere, oats and oatmeal. A closer look at the rental shows that the list was not of sixteen farms but of sixteen tenants in six holdings, namely those listed in the previous paragraph. Of the three larger ones, Middle Binn supported five tenants, Delpottie and Laik four each, while Sandifield, Earnhill and Culbin Croft (presumed to be all that remained of Middle Binn after the sand blowing) had one tenant each. This raised the question of how much ground a single tenant worked in these days of traditional agricultural methods of the pre-improvement era.

Annual rents for Culbin Croft and Kintessack for the years 1733 and 1734 were quoted by Fraser Mackintosh for comparison with those of 1693.¹³ These are extremely detailed and show the acreage held by each tenant, together with the rents paid in grain, money and kind. The grain rents of the period were approximately 1.6 bolls per Scots acre.¹⁴ Figures for Kintessack showed each tenant had on average 4.4 acres. Using these figures, Earnhill covered 13.3 acres and Delpottie and Laik 19.4 acres each — a total of 52.1 acres. A plan of Moy estates dated 1776 shows the boundaries of Earnhill and Delpottie at that time enclosing 42 acres.¹⁵ Both sets of figures indicate that the holdings were small.

From a wadset held by William Duff in 1682,¹⁶ the Culbin estate included 'The 5 ploughs land of Binn, of old Middlebin', with a yearly rental of 90 bolls of bere — a very low figure for a 5-plough farm, and not much more than the combined holdings of Earnhill, Delpottie and Laik. (It should be borne in mind that farmers of the period had little or no knowledge of how to drain the land, and that what today appears to be soil suitable for arable farming might not have been workable in 1692.) This also suggests that there is need for the revision of the popular beliefs as to the size of the old Barony.

The other asset of the estate was the salmon fishings, and here the Kinnairds held the fishing rights along the left bank of the river from where it left Findhorn Bay to the sea — the Common Stell and the East and West Stells of Culbin (Fig.10.3). Various sasines in the period 1667-1677, when the Dawsons of Findhorn held a wadset on the Stells of Culbin, and the 1682 wadsets held by William Duff, show that the income from the salmon would produce a rent of some £750 Scots annually — a figure similar to the grain rents of the estates. A total annual income, depending on the price of salmon and grain at the time, could have been between £1300 and £1600 Scots.

The value of land in this period is commonly put at around twenty times

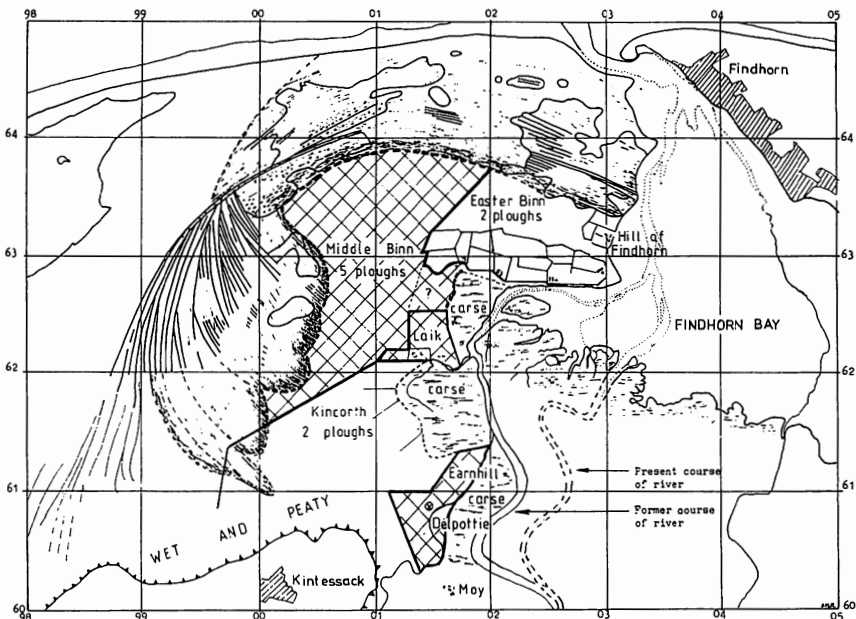


Fig.10.3 Middle Binn positioned to include maximum area of agricultural land.

the annual rent, with reduced values for deteriorating circumstances. The rental for 1733 quoted by Fraser Mackintosh calculates a '22-year purchase' of £10,872:15s:4d for Earnhill, Delpottie and Laik.¹⁷ This uses a price of bere of £5 Scots per boll. Had this been 5 merks per boll, the value would have fallen to £7810. In 1673 William Dunbar of Kintessack held a wadset on Earnhill and Delpottie with its mill, against 8500 merks (£5667 Scots), while in 1682 William Duff held the whole estate, including the fishings on a wadset of 25,000 merks (£16,667 Scots).¹⁸ In this latter case this is some ten to twelve times the annual rent. A twenty year purchase at the lower rent of £1300 per annum would put the value of the estate at £26,000. When the estate was finally sold in 1698 it fetched £20,259:10s:6d, a figure said to be some £6000 less than the sum due to William Duff and Sir James Abercrombie of Birkenbog, the only other preferential creditor.

The improvements in agricultural methods which were already under way in southern Scotland did not reach Moray until some 75 years after the destruction of the Culbin estate. This is of great importance when one considers that there had been a severe deterioration in climate throughout the 17th century, leading to several periods of famine.¹⁹ The century saw the total abandonment of many upland farms, the rise in Scottish mercenary armies and the plantation of Northern Ireland. During the

years 1691-1700 there were seven years with total crop failure and it has been suggested that up to 20% of the population of Scotland perished. This is the background against which we must weigh the 'highly cultivated fields with heavy corn; the rich meadows, dotted here and there with thriving herds and the extensive pastures with numerous flocks.'

The method of infield and outfield prevailed, with the agriculture being run on equal shares rather than for efficiency. Such subsistence farming, being aimed at providing a living for as many souls as possible on the land, was particularly vulnerable in a time of deteriorating climate. Taking into account the accepted crop-yields and rent structures throughout Scotland during this period, the 1693 rental looks ridiculously high if we are to agree that the Culbin estate was of a much smaller size than the popular accounts would have us believe. There then enters the possibility that the 'rental' was an attempt at some form of valuation, albeit incomplete.

The Boundaries of the Barony of Culbin

Middle Binn was listed as being five ploughs (265 ha) in extent in 1682 and Easter Binn appeared in a sasine of 1625 as being two ploughs (106 ha)²⁰. The adjoining property of Kincorth had a similar rating in the valued rent of the shire of Moray in 1667, and is also taken to have been about two ploughs in extent.

On the map of 1758²¹ the lands of Binsness (formerly Easter Binn) cover approximately 53 ha, or half the original size of the estate, and if an additional 'plough' is added to the north of the 1758 field systems we have a representation of the old Easter Binn, lying between the river and the shingle ridges (Fig.10.3). Adding information from the 1776 plan of Moy, the carse lands, Delpottie, Laik and Earnhill can then be positioned. A good approximation of the boundaries of Kincorth can then be inserted on the east and south sides, and then the two plough size of the holding brings the western boundary against the Culbin more or less on the present day boundary.

Laik can then be positioned from the 1758 map as a 11 ha block, leaving room for Sandifield between it and Easter Binn. Sandifield was always mentioned in conjunction with Laik, and had one tenant against Laik's four. It has therefore been allocated 3 ha. Assuming the 'Mains of Culbin' to have been a conveyancing term, as argued above, the remaining 207 ha of the arable land between these boundaries and the shingle ridges has been allocated to Middle Binn. The additional 58 ha required to make up five ploughs has to overlap into the rougher ground on the shingle ridges.

The completed map (Fig.10.4) is in agreement with what documentary evidence has survived and satisfies the evidence on the ground. It reduces the sixteen farms to five and the 3600 acres to 735 (1457 ha to 298), an area only some 10% of the present Culbin Forest.

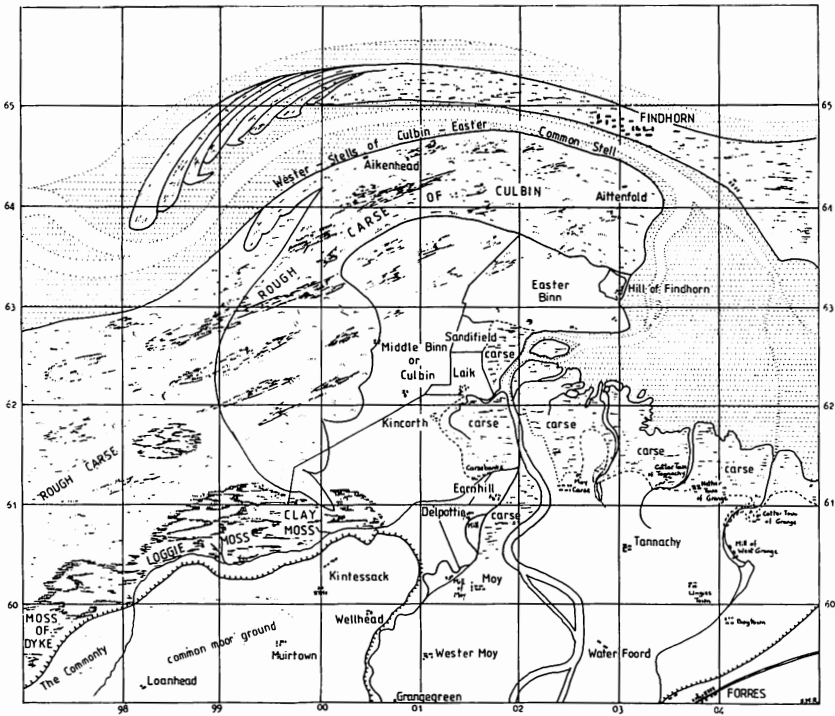


Fig.10.4 The Barony of Culbin and neighbouring estates in 1680.

Buildings and Sand-Blowing on the Culbin Estate

With no building stone available between the rivers Findhorn and Nairn, and no roads or wheels to help them, the tenants and cottars on the estate built their houses largely of turf. The renewal of roofs and walls took up a considerable amount of time each year and, in addition, the 'feal' dykes round the infields had also to be maintained. Traditionally the turf from the rough grazing or carse lands was used for this purpose, and in the case of the Culbin the turf capping the old dunes on the shingle ridges was stripped, and bent grass pulled for thatch. This exposed the sand below to the wind. Turf was also needed for mixing into the middens to make compost, and while old roofs and walls were dumped there, much more was dug up. The amount of turf used up by a ferme town for these purposes was surprisingly large, and in the case of the Culbin led to extensive sand-blowing. Descriptions by early travellers describe sandstorms in the area and Nairn Town Council periodically banned the digging of turf. In 1695 Alexander Kinnaird, the last laird of Culbin, appealed to Parliament for

a reduction in taxes as half of his estate had been overblown by sand. This led to an Act of Parliament being passed prohibiting the pulling of bent on coastal dunes.²²

There is no doubt that the destruction of the estate was greatly accelerated by the turf-stripping. However, modern theories of sand-blowing point to inundation being a gradual process rather than the dramatic burial of the popular tale. The turf houses crumbled away to dust, but the remains of some were seen during the 1800's. Legend had it that the 'Manor House' also appeared from under a large dune and that its stonework was 'quarried' by neighbouring farmers. There is no record of this as such, but about 1920 sandstone blocks bearing parts of the family coat of arms were found, and during the 1930's, a complete outline of foundation stones was exposed a short distance to the north west of Kincorth.²³ Unfortunately no measurements or distances were recorded and today we are still uncertain of the position and size of the building.

The Murrays of Culbin

The earliest possessors of the lands of Culbin on record are the family of Murray or De Moravia. In 1235 King Alexander II confirmed a grant of the lands of Skelbo in Sutherland to Richard de Moravia from his brother St Gilbert, bishop of Caithness.²⁴ Richard is the undoubted ancestor of the Murrays of Culbin. Lachlan Shaw considered him to be a descendant of Freskin de Moravia, and thus related to other families using this designation.²⁵ In this he has been generally followed, although D Murray Rose believed Richard to be a descendant of an earlier Richard de Moravia, supposedly a son of Angus, Earl or Mormaer of Moray, who rose against King David I in 1130.²⁶

Freskin de Moravia, himself almost certainly of Flemish origin, was settled at Duffus in the time of David I. His descendant Hugh Freskin aided David's grandson, King William, against Harald Madaddsson, Jarl of Orkney, and was rewarded with the forfeited lands of Sutherland. When the Caithness clans again rebelled and murdered their bishop, Hugh's son William helped put down the rebellion and was made the first earl of Sutherland.²⁷ The new bishop of Caithness was Gilbert de Moravia, formerly archdeacon of Moray. Hugh Freskin granted him the lands of Skelbo and, as noted above, he passed them on to his brother Richard.²⁸ From the days of Richard onwards, although only scattered pieces of information survive, the family of Murray of Culbin can be traced until the early 15th century when their heiress Egidia (otherwise Giles) married Thomas Kinnaird, son and heir of Alan Kinnaird of that ilk.²⁹

The Kinnairds of Culbin

The family of Kinnaird had a Flemish origin in a merchant, Radulphus de Kynnard, who received lands in Perthshire sometime prior to 1184. The

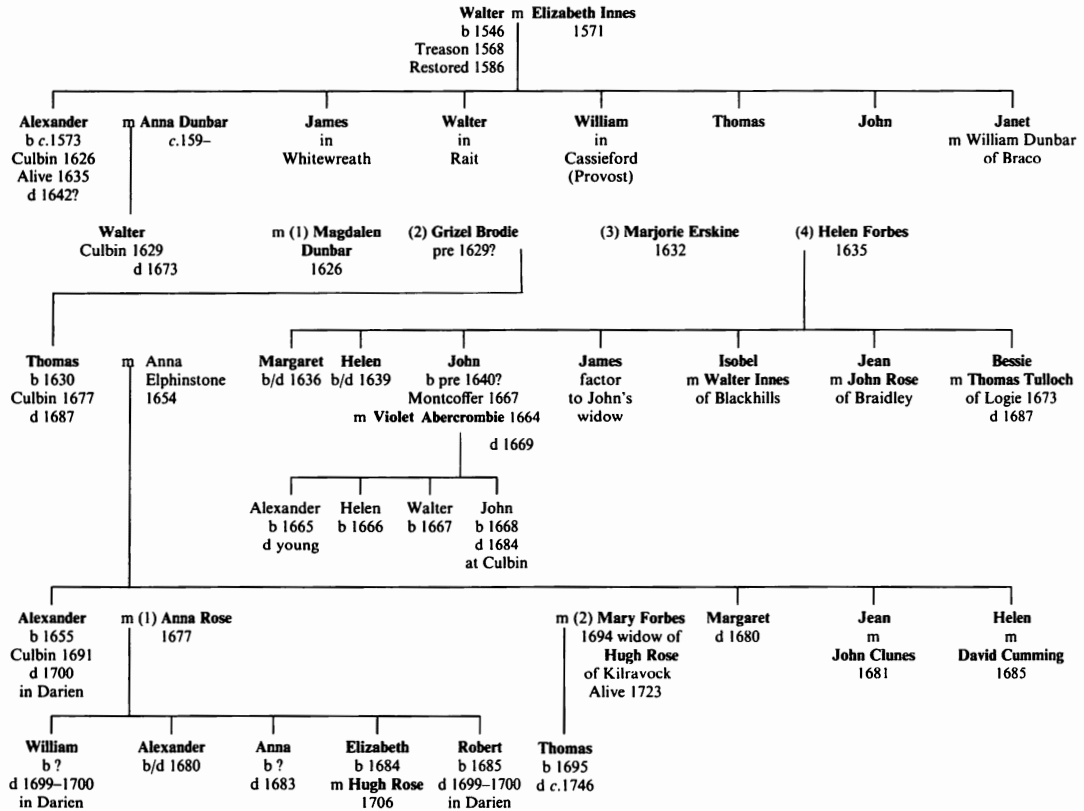


Fig.10.5 The Kinnairds of Culbin.



Fig.10.6 Gravestone preserved in Dyke Church.

family prospered and obtained other lands in the east and northeast coastal region of Scotland. When Sir Thomas Kinnaird married Egidia Murray, heiress of Culbin, their combined holdings of land were very extensive.

The early records of the burgh of Forres were destroyed, and while a few papers have survived from the first part of the 16th century, it is not until after 1575 that any information can be gleaned from that source. As a result the early history of the Kinnairds of Culbin is largely a table of the line of succession and a list of properties controlled. There is a marked increase in available information after 1575, and it then becomes possible to build up a more general picture of the Kinnairds as was done by Murray in his history of the family (see Fig.10.5).³⁰

The picture he paints is one of a land-owning family which prospered for a considerable time, acquiring property and fishing rights, and was in a position to loan money to neighbours. Circumstances then changed, and over the last twenty years or so of the life of the estate, debts suddenly increased until in the end the whole of the Barony was sold off. Murray

also recounts several family feuds and escapades, some outwith the law. The tale would probably fit many families of the period; all, that is, save the overwhelming of the estate by sand in 1694. Murray's account is straightforward, linking together small pieces of information and episodes in the history of the family from the sources available to him. However, additional information uncovered, mainly from the Register of Sasines, the Parish Register of Dyke and Moy and from the records of other families, shows parts of his version of the family tree to be flawed. There had also been several deals involving the estate, of which he was unaware, some of which indicate that financial problems may have started as early as 1660. Some of these additional findings are discussed below.

In the church of Dyke there is preserved a gravestone found in a heap of rubbish in the churchyard around 1823. The stone is in good condition and bears the names of Walter Kinnaird and Elizabeth Innes (Fig.10.6). Under the coats of arms of the two families is the date 1613. Walter Kinnaird had married Elizabeth Innes in 1571, and they had six sons and a daughter. Murray presumed that Elizabeth Innes had died in 1613,³¹ but the Register of Sasines showed she was still alive in 1629 but probably died before 1632.

In 1626 Alexander Kinnaird, Walter's eldest son, was served heir to his father, who must have been about eighty when he died. Murray states that Alexander died in 1630 and that his eldest son Walter married Grizel Brodie on 20th August 1629, having by her at least three sons and two daughters, and later marrying, as his second wife, Helen Forbes, widow of James Elphinstone of Barns, on 19th March 1644.

Pitfalls, however, await those who take for granted that the date of the charter of a son's succession to an estate was also the date of the death of his father, or that the date on which a wife was granted rents from the estate was the date of her marriage. At this range one can never be certain that every document has been uncovered. In a charter granted by Alexander Kinnaird in 1626 reference is made to a marriage contract between his son Walter and Magdalen Dunbar, daughter of Martin Dunbar of Grangehill.³² Murray makes no mention of this Magdalen in his history of the Dunbars.³³ Walter and his second wife Grizel Brodie got the tenancy of Culbin in 1629, while Walter's parents were still alive. Provision was made for the parents out of the estate for their lifetime, and for Elizabeth Innes, Walter's grandmother.³⁴ Grizel Brodie died before 1632, as in that year Marjorie Erskine was named in a sasine as 'future spouse' to Walter Kinnaird, and with permission of Walter's father, was given rents from the estate.³⁵ On 12th January 1635, Helen Forbes received sasine of the lands of Culbin with permission of Walter's father. She was referred to as '... nunc sponse honorabilis viri Walter Kinnaird de Cowbin'.³⁶ Whether Walter actually married Marjorie Erskine is not clear.

The Parish Register for Dyke and Moy reveals a daughter born to Helen

on 5th January of the following year who died when not quite three months old, and on 27th March 1639, another daughter, Helen, who died aged four months. In 1642 Walter Kinnaird received a charter of the estate of Culbin from King Charles I, and in 1644 Helen Forbes received sasine of her life-rent of part of the estate. This was a reaffirmation of the charter granted in 1635 when she married Walter, who after getting the 1642 charter (presumably on the death of his father), was now the feudal superior. 1644 was not, as Murray suggested, the date of their marriage. The chronological order of the births of Walter's family by his four wives, if four there were, is in doubt, but their names and histories can be traced. As can be seen from the accounts of this and other landed families, there seems to have been no difficulty for the lairds in getting new wives, but childbirth was more hazardous than the battlefield. What the prospects were for wives and infants in the squalor of the cottar houses, we can only guess.

One of the problems facing any landowner with a large family was the provision of lands for his sons and dowries for his daughters, particularly when finances were stretched. The original Kinnaird estate had been divided up in 1514, when the lands of Skelbo, Kinnaird and Naughton in Fife had gone to the eldest son, and Culbin alone had gone to the second son. In 1626 when Alexander Kinnaird had moved into Culbin, the family was still well off, with at least four of his five brothers being placed in farms of their own. When his son Walter had, in turn, to provide for his family of three sons and three daughters, money appears to have been much tighter. Whether this was due to the adverse effects of the deteriorating climate, we do not know. There are many records of his acquiring lands and fishings, and loaning money during the first 20 to 30 years of his tenure; but in 1660 he first sold off some land to set up his son John, then in 1667 we see for the first time, a laird of Culbin borrowing money using part of his estate as security. First the fishings were wadset, then some of the farms.

Walter Kinnaird died in 1673 and the estate lay in the hands of the crown because of non-payment of feu duties. His son Thomas could not gain possession until this was paid off. Thomas' brother, John of Montcoffer, had died in 1669 leaving a widow and three children. His lands were confirmed to Walter, the eldest son, with life-rent of the lands going to his widow. When his mother died in 1676, young Walter was only nine years old, and the estate was administered by his uncle James Kinnaird.

The boy's maternal grandfather, Sir Alexander Abercrombie of Birk-enbog, had originally owned the lands, and he and his brother John now arranged to sell the farms to John's son-in-law, in spite of the questionable legality of such a deed. The proceeds, 10,000 merks, were then paid to Thomas Kinnaird of Culbin as the children's nearest relative, and the

money was to be applied for their benefit. With this injection of capital there was a temporary improvement in Thomas' affairs. In 1677 his son married, he redeemed a wadset held on his fishings on the Findhorn, and he finally gained possession of his father's lands of Culbin after a delay of four years — presumably on the payment of the overdue taxes. He also paid certain moneys to his brother James as his share of the estate.

This period of opulence did not last long. There had been a shortage of peat for fuel for a long time in Lower Moray, and in 1680 Brodie tells of the Laird of Culbin stealing his peats.³⁷ From his diary it would appear that Brodie disapproved of the attitudes and behaviour of the Kinnairds — perhaps fueled by his support for the Covenanters, while the Kinnairds were staunchly Catholic. By 1682 the whole of the estate had been pledged, and no further loans could be raised. Murray states that Thomas Kinnaird died in 1691, but according to the Dyke Parish Register he died on 3rd July 1687, the 1691 date being when his son, Alexander inherited the estate. It is interesting here to note that when the estate was finally sold to cover the debts, young Walter, son of John of Montcoffer, was listed among the creditors who received nothing.

The Last Kinnairds of Culbin

Of the early accounts of the final saga of the Kinnairds of Culbin, only brief and scattered versions exist — some conflicting, most inaccurate and all incomplete. Later accounts are almost all repeats of Bain's 1911 version; sometimes quoted verbatim but often with additional embroidery.

By the time of Alexander Kinnaird, the last laird, William and Mary had come to the throne, and Catholics in Scotland had lost their positions of privilege. Alexander had been in trouble over his support for the Jacobite cause, and in 1689 had been listed among the 'rebels' associated with Viscount Dundee, which was possibly one reason for the delay in his getting control of his father's estate. When he eventually gained possession, the disastrous harvests and encroaching sands put an end to any vain hopes he might have entertained of paying off his creditors. His dramatic appeal to Parliament in 1695 blossomed into the legend of the 'Buried Barony', and fired the imagination of writers into keeping the tale alive. Had it not been for the saga of the sands he would have vanished without trace, like so many other landowners of the period, who had to sell off their lands to cover their debts in this time of recurring famine and hardship.

What we can glean of his background points to his having been an unruly character and a wastrel. He had married Anna Rose in 1677, and after her death he married Mary Forbes, widow of Hugh Rose, 14th Baron of Kilravock in 1694. Murray describes the first marriage as childless and the second as producing one son, Alexander.³⁸ Examination of the Dyke Parish Register, however, shows that the son of the second marriage was

christened Thomas. He was the 'orphan' who, according to the legends, was taken to Edinburgh by a faithful nurse. Murray rightly directs his readers to the history of the Roses of Kilravock in which it is stated that the laird of Culbin died in Darien and that Mary Forbes was still alive in 1715.³⁹ He also points out that her life-rent from her first husband's estate would have been more than sufficient to have kept the wolf from the door.

It is difficult to explain the failure of local authors to mention Alexander Kinnaird's family by his first wife, Anna Rose. In the Dyke Parish Register four children are recorded: Alexander, Anna, Elizabeth and Robert. At the place of the entry of Alexander's birth in the register, the page is damaged and discoloured. The almost illegible entry is non-standard, and was interpreted as also recording his death in infancy. Re-examination of the register offered the alternative suggestion that the entry was 'This child was born and baptised at Nairn'. In the family papers of the Roses of Kilravock, a William Kinnaird appears as witness to two deeds, being described in one dated 1696 as being son of 'Alexander Kynaird of Cowbin'.⁴⁰

Mary Forbes had been the second wife of Hugh Rose of Kilravock and bore him six sons. On Hugh's death, his son Hugh by his first marriage succeeded as 15th Baron of Kilravock. From a letter written by Mary Forbes to her stepson Hugh in 1723 we gather that in 1698 she had been staying in Edinburgh with her second husband and family, after the sale of the Culbin estate.⁴¹ She blamed her stepson for refusing to help them unless Alexander Kinnaird left her to fend for himself. She went on to say that as a result, Alexander and his sons (*in the plural*) had gone to Darien, while she returned north with her family of young Roses, presumably leaving young Thomas Kinnaird with relatives in Edinburgh. Prebble, in his account of the Darien Scheme mentions that the laird of Culbin and his son, Ensign William Kinnaird, died on the voyage, but unfortunately does not give the source of his information.⁴² The youngest son of Alexander's first marriage, Robert, is not mentioned here or in any other document, but he could also have gone to Darien, although he would have been only fourteen years of age.

When young Thomas Kinnaird enlisted in the army, the 'recognition' by a relative which led to his being commissioned was more than chance. That relative was his half-brother Alexander Rose, the oldest son of Mary Forbes by her first marriage. He had had a successful career in the army, reaching the rank of Lt. Col. in Lord Molesworth's Dragoons, and in 1742 Thomas was listed as being adjutant to that regiment. Lt. Col. Rose died in 1743, but only an approximate date can be given for Thomas' death — c 1746. There is no record of his ever having married, and with his death the line of the Kinnairds of Culbin came to an end.

Epilogue

While researching into his own connections with the Kinnairds of Culbin, John Kinnaird, then membership secretary of the Scottish Genealogical Society, noticed in one of that Society's publications the following inscription from Newtyle grave-yard, '1813 George Watson Esq., Bannatyne House w Jean Rose, sole heiress of ancient families of Moray and Kinnaird of Culbin'.⁴³ Elizabeth Kinnaird, the only daughter of the last laird, married a Hugh Rose in Nairn in 1706. Since her brothers apparently died without issue, only descendants of Elizabeth could claim this unique ancestry.

It is a fitting end to the tale that, in spite of the legends, neither the estate nor the family vanished without trace.

Acknowledgements

The account of the history of the Kinnairds of Culbin has been greatly improved by stimulating discussions with John Kinnaird. I also wish to thank Kris Sangster for providing the sketch in Fig.10.6.

Notes

1. J Martin 'The Buried Estate of Culbin' *Elgin Courant* 1860; 'The Sandhills of Culbin' *Forres Gazette* 1867; 'The Sands of Culbin' *Elgin Courant* 1875.
2. G Bain, *The Culbin Sands* (Nairn, 1922)
3. S M Ross 'Notes on the Development of the Culbin Foreland' *Bulletin of the Moray Field Club* (1974) 2.
4. P May, *A Survey of the River Findhorn* (1758) (Elgin Museum.)
5. C Fraser Mackintosh 'The Lost House of Culbin' in *Antiquarian Notes* (Inverness 1865); 2nd ed. (Inverness 1913) 331-42.
6. J Pirie 'The Sandhills of Culbin' in *Journal of the Excursions of the Elgin and Morayshire Lit. and Sc. Association* (Elgin 1884).
7. Seafeld Papers (Scottish Record Office [SRO] GD/245/95).
8. J G Murray, *The Kinnairds of Culbin* (Inverness 1938).
9. Eg. M Harding 'A Time of Smothering Sands' *The Northern Scot*, Xmas 1986; and D P Willis, *Sand and Silence* (Univ. of Aberdeen 1986).
10. Fraser Mackintosh, *Antiquarian Notes* 333.
11. *Ibid.*, 336n.
12. *Ibid.*, 336-7.
13. *Ibid.*, 337-8.
14. As calculated from the more detailed Kintessack rental of 6 March 1734 (SRO GD 248/80/6/5.)
15. *Plan of the Lands of Moy, 1776* (anon.), (Moray District Record Office, DGS/P1).
16. *General Register of Sasines [GRS]* (Morayshire) 29/3 pp.116, 127 (1682).
17. Fraser Mackintosh, *Antiquarian Notes* 338-9.
18. *GRS* (Morayshire) 29/3 pp.116, 127 (1682).
19. H H Lamb, *Climate, History and the Modern World* (London 1982).
20. *GRS* (Moray) 28/3 p.18 (1629).

21. Above, n.4.
22. The Soil Preservation Act, 1695 (*Acts.Parl.Scot.* ix, 452, c.54).
23. M Anderson 'The Culbin Sands' *Forres Gazette* 1938.
24. *Registrum Episcopatus Moraviensis* [*Moray Reg.*] (Bannatyne Club 1837), Appendix to preface, no.IV; see further preface p.xxxiii, note o.
25. Lachlan Shaw *History of the Province of Moray* 2nd ed. (Edinburgh 1827) 99.
26. D M Rose 'The Morays of Culbin, Kinnairds and Roses' *Nairnshire Telegraph*, 25 Jan 1925. [Roses's arguments do not convince. They are founded on a transumpt dated 1 Oct 1476 'of Ane Confirmatioun made be King David of Ane Charter concerning the said lands (Naughton) disponet be My Lord Murray to Richard of Murray his son, which wantis the date'. From this Rose suggests that Angus, Mormaer of Moray, must have been lord of Newton or Naughton in Fife and must have had a son Richard to whom he disponded these lands. There are several arguments against this scenario, not least that there is no independent evidence for the existence of this supposed earlier Richard; and also the fact that the Naughton interest later possessed by the family of Culbin (half the barony) appears to have been inherited through the marriage of the historical 13th century Richard de Moravia with Marjorie de Lascelles, heiress of the family of Lascelles which had previously possessed it - see G W S Barrow *Anglo-Norman Era in Scottish History* (Oxford 1980) 182 (ed.)]
27. For Freskin and his descendants see *inter alia* *Moray Reg.* intro. and J Gray, *Sutherland and Caithness in Saga-Time* (Edinburgh 1922).
28. Above note 24, and *Moray Reg.* Appendix to preface., nos.I-III.
29. J G Murray, *Kinnairds*. Despite the researchs of D Murray Rose and others, the history of the Murrays of Culbin in the generation or so before the heiress Egidia is not clear.
30. J G Murray, *The Kinnairds of Culbin* (Inverness 1938).
31. *Ibid.*, 15.
32. Seafield Papers (SRO GD 245/95).
33. J G Murray, 'The Dunbars of Grangehill' *Forres Gazette*, 1938.
34. *GRS* (Moray) 28/3 p.223 (1629).
35. *GRS* (Moray) 28/3 p.337 (1632).
36. *GRS* (Moray) 28/4 p.596 (1635).
37. A Brodie, *The Diary of Alexander Brodie of Brodie* (Aberdeen 1863).
38. Murray, *Kinnairds* 35.
39. H Rose, *The Family of Kilravock 1290-1847* (Edinburgh 1858).
40. Rose Family Papers (SRO GD 125 Box 19).
41. Rose Family Papers (SRO GD 125/31; 125/14/3).
42. J Prebble, *The Darien Disaster* (Edinburgh 1968).
43. Newtyle, grave 106.

A full account of the development and history of the Culbin Sands by Sinclair Ross is now available: *The Culbin Sands — Fact and Fiction* (Centre for Scottish Studies, University of Aberdeen).