

# Stornoway Castle – Seat of the MacLeods of Lewis

by Peter Macleod

Very little was known about Stornoway Castle and most of us thought no images of it existed until a chance discovery on the Uig (Lewis) Historical Society website. Here was a letter, dated 24th February 1960, from Dr Donald Macdonald of Gisla and Stornoway (known as Dolly Doctor, Dolly being a diminutive of Donald) to another great Uig historian, Murdo Macleod of Crowlista and Glasgow.

Dolly Doctor had found a negative of a picture of Stornoway Castle and enclosed a print of it to his great friend Murdo, who was at that time in Glasgow. The letter referred to the Castle, the weather (snow and ice), and their health. Dolly Doctor was born in 1891 and was 68 when he wrote the letter. At the time he was suffering from osteoarthritis and could walk only with the aid of two sticks. He died in September 1961.

Another subject mentioned was fund raising for a folk museum. Efforts had stalled but Dolly Doctor had collected £1,543, and accumulated a great number of potential exhibits. He passed away before his dreams materialised but both funds and exhibits went to Museum nan Eilean in Stornoway.

The photo seems to be of a drawing or painting of the Castle which, I believe, depicts it during, or prior to 1654. In that year it was blown up by Colonel Cobbett's Regiment of Foot, part of Cromwell's army.

The MacLeods were dispossessed of Lewis in 1610 by MacKenzie of Kintail. Kintail died in 1611 and was succeeded by his eldest son, Colin MacKenzie who, in 1623, became the 1st Earl of Seaforth. In 1633 the 2nd Earl succeeded and in 1651, Kenneth MacKenzie, 3rd Earl of Seaforth became the owner of the Isle of Lewis and Stornoway Castle.



Stornoway Harbour by William Daniell in 1815. The Castle is a small detail in the centre.

The 3rd Earl was a supporter of King Charles II and in 1652 fortified Stornoway Castle in defiance of Cromwell. The Earl used it as a base to resist Cromwell's troops. Cromwell sent a company of soldiers from Inverness. They occupied Stornoway and built a garrison fort where today stands the old Customs House, also called Amity House, the Stornoway Pier and Harbour Commission's HQ. The troops were withdrawn in 1654 but before departing they blew up the Castle in retribution.

Dolly Doctor's letter tells us 'they blew up the castle leaving only a part of the walls and the tower. This was its condition up till 1882 when the stones of the tower and old castle were built into the foundations of No. 1 Pier.'

Strictly speaking this was probably not quite correct. There was nearly 230 years of Hebridean weather wearing away at the ruins. Also, as is commonplace when a building falls into ruin, some stones would have been robbed for building materials and maybe more for ship's ballast. But, essentially, Dolly Doctor is telling us the Castle was unchanged. So the 1882 (or prior) picture would reasonably depict the Castle after Cobbett's 1654 fireworks.

Some confirmation comes from 1815 when English painter and printmaker, William Daniell (1769 - 1837) toured the Western Isles producing images for his book 'A Voyage Round Great Britain'. One image was of the town of Stornoway and in it can be seen the remains of Stornoway Castle looking very much the same as in the 1882 picture.

The pre-1654 picture has been Photo-shopped and coloured for clarity but the Castle shape and dimensions are unchanged. The source of the painting or drawing, or when it was photographed is unknown. The original may have even been made many years after 1654 from descriptions passed down. But, Dolly Doctor, who was a highly respected historian seems to have accepted it as genuine.

The builders and early owners of Stornoway Castle are lost in a confusion of history. There are stories that the MacLeods acquired the Castle from the MacNicol or Nicholson; which would have been in the 14th Century. Other indications suggest that it was built in the 10th Century.

Because it may have been built around the same time as Kisimul Castle of the MacNeills of Barra, and on a similar small rocky island, there has been speculation the two may be similar in size.



The ruin of Stornoway Castle in 1882.

For interest, Kisimul Castle is roughly hexagonal in shape, about 35 by 25 metres.

Normally Stornoway Castle was completely surrounded by water. Scaling from old maps indicates it was approximately 60 metres offshore. This distance is impossible to calculate accurately as not only have some rocks been pilfered and the island size reduced but some of the mainland shoreline has been reclaimed. With very low spring tides it was possible to access the Castle via 'clachan sinnteg', a causeway of stepping stones, these remained until the 1880s.

The earliest reliably known MacLeod connection seems to be through Torcall, born c1320 and on record c1343. He was Chief of the MacLeods of Lewis and progenitor of Siol Torquil.

Sovereignty of the Western Isles rested with the Kingdom of Norway until 1266. Old King Haakon of Norway visited Stornoway in 1263 en route to his defeat at the Battle of Largs. He died in Orkney on his return voyage after his defeat. His son, Magnus IV, now King of Norway, had no interest in regaining Norway's Scottish possessions. He ceded the Western Isles and Norway's mainland Scottish possessions, to Alexander III, King of Scots, at the Treaty of Perth in 1266. The Western Isles were therefore part of his Kingdom, but Alexander did not have the military power to enforce his authority.

The 'de facto' rulers of the Western Isles were the 'Lords of the Isles'. The Lord, who headed the powerful MacDonald clans, gained the allegiance of all the major Western Isle Chiefs including the MacLeods of Harris and Dunvegan and the MacLeods of Lewis. Successive Lords of the Isles were overlords until 1493 when James IV, King of Scots asserted his authority by ending the Lordship through forfeiture.

The next 120 years were tumultuous. The MacLeods of Lewis backed those who tried to restore the Lordship of the Isles and as a result Stornoway Castle was besieged by the Earl of Huntly in 1506.

Old Ruari, born circa 1500, is generally recognised as the last of the old Chiefs of the MacLeods of Lewis. Old Ruari became Chief around 1537 and continued his family's disastrous support

of the attempts to restore the Lordship of the Isles. Ruari's seat was Stornoway Castle. In 1545 the Lordship restoration efforts collapsed.

But, the MacLeods of Lewis continued to cause problems for the Crown. So, under instructions of the Earl of Arran, Regent of Scotland, in 1554 the 4th Earl of Argyll laid siege to Stornoway Castle, the artillery bombardment was unsuccessful and the MacLeods retained the Castle.

Before Old Ruari died in 1595 there was much quarrelling and bloodshed over his succession. His numerous legitimate and illegitimate sons divided into two factions and fought to their mutual destruction. King James VI tried to give the lands to a group of Lowland Gentlemen (the Fife Adventurers) who were harassed by the MacLeods and forced out. In 1610 the Gentlemen sold their interest to MacKenzie of Kintail who was a much tougher enemy. He invaded and took possession.

Throughout these fifteen turbulent years Stornoway Castle was occupied, besieged, attacked and captured. Substantial damage



Impression of Stornoway Castle at the height of its power by Peter Macleod.

must have been done and few repairs made but the Castle had survived.

Stornoway Castle's final ruination came about in 1654 while in possession of the MacKenzies and at the hand of Cromwell's roundheads. As of 2006 there was a plaque on Stornoway's Pier No. 1 acknowledging Stornoway Castle's remains were buried underneath. The plaque was no longer there in 2014 having been removed when the building it was on was demolished. In 2018 the plaque was in the possession of the Stornoway Port Authority.

During the Lewis and Harris Pre-parliament Tour in July 2018 clansfolk visited the site and officials from the Port Authority met us there with the plaque. We heard about the history of the Castle and had our picture taken with the plaque.

Plans are being made to erect a new building on the site to commemorate the 'lolaire' sinking of 1919. When that building is completed it is intended to install the plaque on it.



Artist's impression of lolaire Centre.