BALINTORE CASTLE

Many years ago ...... my mother’s mother came from a lovely estate in Angus, north of Dundee, called Kinnordy, to marry my London-based grandfather. She retained the use, and I think the ownership, of a remarkable castle on the estate, called Balintore, built on the most stunning site. Designed as a grandiose sporting lodge in 1860, complete with spires and turrets it stands on the sunny southern edge of a heather clad grouse moor, looking south over rolling farmland to the distant Sidlaw Hills.

It was to this castle that we would annually trek as a family to spend two weeks of the summer holiday, a journey that itself took two weary-some days.

My grandmother died in 1963, when I was six, so my memories of time spent there are vivid yet indistinct. In particular I was terrified of the one-eyed gardeners wicked billy goat that would lure the incautious into the range of its tether chain, but I loved my grandmothers large set of realistic Victorian stuffed toy animals and picking the wild raspberries along the drive. There is a clear picture in my mind of dark, candle-lit suppers while some poor family member was volunteered to brave the lashing rain to climb the hill behind the castle and clout the water-driven hydro-electricity turbine, so to free the eel or bit of stick that had extinguished the flickering electric. A peregrine falcon nested each year in one of the damaged turrets, and moss grew liberally on the wallpaper. Of course the grown-ups enjoyed themselves daily with shooting and fishing, but of that I have no recollection, nor of the snooker table.

At "Big Granny’s" death the castle returned to the custodianship of the cousins running the rest of the estate and the rear-guard action against dry rot and roof decay was well and truly lost. Furniture was distributed around the family, the floorboards were looted, and we never holidayed there again. The Coup de Gras was the huge oriel window on the second floor hurling itself out onto the lawn, thus leaving a mortal wound in the side of the building, and vast granite blocks like icebergs strewn over the old tennis court. In an ever-worsening spiral of disrepair this Grade A listed monument changed hands, as a ruin, between a succession of romantic dreamers before it ended, on the Compulsory Purchase payment of £1, in the hands of the less glamorous Angus Council.

It was thus at this point of Balintore's nadir that the Somerset lunchtime conversation turned to the snooker table. My mother had heard tell that though the castle was being badly vandalised, the table, centrepiece of the Great Hall, still rested solely on the exposed floor joists, the floorboards having long gone. Local keepers and shepherds still enjoyed the use of its ripped baize by candle light, with a bottle or two of whisky, as the castle collapsed around them. It was resolved immediately to save this last heirloom, which had remained un-pilfered only because of its inconvenient weight. A plan was hatched and my intrepid mother and her brother left for Scotland with the Land-Rover and horse trailer (containing a bull sent for the farm there), some spanners, my brother, a cousin and a great deal of determination.

It turns out that modern tables have eight legs and four slabs of slate, the vast flat stones that lie under the baize. This one, though full size, had six legs and only three slates, each of which weighed about a third of a ton. Therefore dismantling and removing the components without floorboards and stairs needed more time and ingenuity than normal, but nevertheless, triumphantly, it returned back to North Cadbury Court where attention was lavished upon it by workmen from Thurston (London) who had constructed it 150 year before. Their records, for some reason in the Victoria and Albert Museum, showed it to be in fact a billiard table, made of the highest quality. It is now enjoyed regularly by guests at the Court.

In the year 2007 Balintore Castle had the great good fortune to be purchased by Dr David Johnston. This dogged individual is the first owner for nearly thirty-five years to afford the building any compassion, or investment, at all. Slate by slate and stone by stone single-handedly he is overseeing a small team as they patch up some of the more serious wounds on the building and already one of the towers has been renovated to provide a most unusual B&B. His ambition is to gradually restore some of the former glory and allow the building to be let out as a venue for guests, or some such return.

When my mother died in 2010 I had a vision to keep alive the Scottish connection, particularly with Balintore which had supplied her with so many happy memories. After ten years and several false starts a cameraman, Andrew Holt, was discovered last year, 2020, with enough enthusiasm and ability to see through the task of capturing the essence of Balintore Castle, the home of the snooker table, onto this magnificent panorama.

Archie Montgomery, March 2021