
Bitesize History -People

The McDowall's of Castle Semple

Just as the Semples had acquired their lands through royal patronage, the McDowalls had similarly been granted lands in the south-west of Scotland. They were made Lords of Galloway with estates around Garthland Tower near Stranraer. Three generations of McDowalls dominated eighteenth century Glasgow and the west of Scotland as merchants, estate owners and through that were patrons of parishes, MPs, Lord Lieutenant of Renfrewshire, Provost of Glasgow and Rector of Glasgow University.

The first McDowall of Castle Semple was William the fifth son of William McDowall, 17th of Garthland in Galloway. Being a fifth son meant restricted prospects so had to seek fame and fortune elsewhere. His first job was as a slave overseer responsible for "getting the work done" and "keeping the slaves in line". After 10 years in the job he secured his own plantation and never looked back. He gained an air of respectability acquiring the title Colonel from the local militia. He returned to Scotland a rich man and in 1727 purchased Shawfield mansion and the Castle Semple estate. As principal land owner, William McDowall was responsible for the Kirk and parishioners of the extensive Parish of Lochwinnoch. The old church building



at the foot of Johnshill had been neglected and, under McDowall's stewardship, was partly rebuilt in 1729. This included the construction of a new gable on the south-west face which remains standing today (Auld Simon). He found the contrast between having the power of life and death over his sugar plantation slaves versus having a responsibility to provide for his

tenants in Scotland a challenge.

His son William inherited the estate in 1748 and around 1770 built the small tower on Kenmuir Hill as a vantage point. He drained the Barr Loch and reduced Castle Semple Loch to about fifth of its size.

William III inherited the estate in 1776. He was a non-practising

advocate and served as Rector of Glasgow University from 1795 till 1797. He was a Member of Parliament from 1783 until his death in 1810 and acted as Lord Lieutenant of Renfrewshire from 1794, again until his death. He witnessed



the transformation of Lochwinnoch from a largely agricultural/cottage industry village economy to one with a greater industrial base and was prominent in the management of this change.

His business interests collapsed in 1795 bringing a significant reduction in his wealth. On his death in 1810 the estate passed to a nephew (another William !) who had to sell it in 1814. He retained Garple House and the lands of Barr and renamed it Garthland House which remained in the family till 1935. At which point it was sold to the Mill Hill Foreign Missionary Society, latterly becoming St Joseph's nursing home.

It is somewhat ironic that the McDowall's home became a training centre for missionaries, latterly a nursing home and were responsible for the building of the Parish church given their wealth and stature in the community derived from the suffering and inhumane treatment of thousands of slaves on their plantations. And, as if to add insult to injury, when slavery was abolished they were given compensation by the Government for the loss of free labour. A debt to the Rothchilds the Government, and we as taxpayers, has only just paid off.

