

Construction and History of Brochel Castle

By Peter Macleod



About halfway along the eastern coast of the Isle of Raasay lies the ruin of Brochel Castle. It overlooks the southern end of Calum's Road, about 4km from what remains of the village of Arnish. The Isle of Raasay is between the Isle of Skye and the Scottish mainland at Applecross.

Visitors can view the Castle from the approach road but can also park nearby for a closer look. The ruin is fenced off and there are signs saying that entry is prohibited because of the building's ruinous and dangerous state.

Early Days Like many of the old Hebridean Castles, Brochel's origins are lost in time. Local legends point to the MacSweens as first building a fortification on the site. This is quite possible as they had a hand in the construction of many of the castles in the Hebrides. Before the coming of the MacLeods the Isle of Raasay had a reputation as a base for pirates and outlaws. Times changed and the MacLeods acquired the Isles of Raasay and Rona.



In its more recent form, Brochel Castle would have been built in the early 1500s by the first MacLeod Chief of Raasay, Malcolm Garbh (c. 1503-1560) who was given the Isles of Raasay and Rona by his father Malcolm, IX Chief of the MacLeods of Lewis (c. 1452-1528). In these times ownership of Raasay was still disputed and it was said that the island belonged to the Bishop of the Isles by Heritage but held by MacLeod of Raasay by the sword. In time the sword prevailed and the MacLeods were granted a Charter for Raasay and Rona from the King of Scots. The MacLeod Genealogies say that John Garbh MacLeod (c. 1625-1671), VII of Raasay was probably the last to live at Brochel Castle. It is believed that after his death the family moved to a residence on or near the present site of Raasay House. This is logical as by 1671 Clan warfare had virtually ended and Clan Chiefs could afford to opt for a comfortable home rather than a

defensive fort.

The Site Positioned on a 15m high rock which sits on a level area above a small bay and beach, Brochel Castle commands an extensive view over the Inner Sound. Any approaching raiding vessel would be readily spotted and appropriate preparations made. The Castle itself was eminently defensible. Also it is in a position from where birlinns or galleys could be quickly despatched on whatever mission MacLeod of Raasay wished to embark.



Earliest Known Reference Donald Monro/Munro, also known as Dean Munro became vicar of Snizort and Raasay in 1526. He wrote a description of the Hebrides accepted as dating from 1549. In it he referred to Brochel as one of 'twa castellis' on Raasay, the other being what would eventually become Raasay House. He mentioned Brochel had a 'fair orchard' indicating it was being used as a residence.

Travellers' Descriptions James Boswell, who with Samuel Johnson, toured the Hebrides in 1773, left a description of Brochel Castle, he said:

'The old castle is situated upon a rock very near the sea. The rock is not only one mass of stone, but a concretion of pebbles and earth; but so firm that it does not appear to have mouldered. I perceived no pieces of it fallen off. The entry was by steep stair from the quarter next to the sea, of which stair only three or four steps are remaining, all at the top of it. Above them the castle projects, and there is an opening in the wall from which hot water or stones could be thrown upon an invader. Upon entering the gate or door, there was what I never saw before: a sentry box or alcove in the wall on your right hand. The man placed there could only watch in case of noise. He could see nothing. The next advance was to a court or close as it was called, in the centre of four towers, and open above just like any other court of an old castle in the square form. Only that this seemed extraordinary, as you came to it after ascending a stair and entering a gate; but as Mr Johnson observed, it was just an ordinary court, with the difference that the rock here was as the ground in others. The court here was very small. There was a fine well just a spring in the rock but it was now filled up with rubbish. One could distinguish tolerably that there has been four towers, but time and storms had left little but ruinous fragments: pieces of wall, pieces of stairs, a part of the battlement in the sea.'

William Daniell (1769–1837) was an English landscape and marine painter, and printmaker. He toured around the British coast from 1813 to 1822 painting scenes for his book *A Voyage Round Great Britain* which was published in 1825. Daniell visited the Isle of Raasay and painted Brochel Castle (*right*) in 1819.



Abbreviated from a Report of a Field Visit in 1921 *By The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions of Scotland.* Brochel Castle occupies the summit of an isolated mass of agglomerate (Torridon grit and sandstone), in a small bay that breaks the line of precipitous cliffs forming the northern part of the east coast of the Isle of Raasay. To the north the view is closed by the rising ground, but there is a clear outlook to the Ross-shire coast in front and down the Inner Sound.

Rising from a slight slope the pinnacle of rock all round stands about 15m above the terrain, though the summit is in two levels, that on the east side being 6m above the other. On both levels there are buildings.

The entrance is on the east face and up a steep, narrow ridge. On the right the bare rock rises to the higher level; on the left the lower level carries the corner of the building on this side. The approach is thus narrowed, and there is evidence that originally there was some sort of overbuilding outside the present doorway - the walling on both sides was apparently continued outwards with a chamber above, providing a passage roofed with slabs, of which only the inner end now exists. Another chamber would seem to have been contrived over this surviving portion of the passage, and beyond this a narrow open way continues between the rocky sides, which have been faced with stone, for 3.3m or so. In this alley are several recesses, large and small.

The entrance is in a tumble-down condition; much of the building, having been but a skin on the rock face on either side, has disappeared. The entrance corridor opens upon the middle of three apartments, which occupy the lower level and are angled to follow the ground. The walls of this middle apartment have almost wholly disappeared. On the short north-eastern face the wall is again but a facing on the rock, and then only as high as where the rock overhangs. At the north corner are recesses. The apartment to the east has been about 5.2 by 3.5m, but only one wall and portions of other two are left. Of the western apartment more

remains, and, as laid out, this forms almost a square of 3.3m, but at the north corner what has been the stair projects inwards, while the greater part of the rest of the north-east face is occupied by a 1.5m recess with a slab lintel, the back of which is bare rock. In the north-western wall, on the upper floor, is a narrow window opening or slit splayed inwards, one jamb of which is a single stone, while the other is built up of small stones. Another similar slit in the south-west corner completes the meagre lighting of this apartment, which, like the others, must have had a room over.

The higher level can now be reached only by scrambling up, and of the battlemented tower of two stories which, according to Daniell's view of 1819, occupied most of it, only parts of the foundations remain. But on the spur of rock projecting to the north-west still stands the small triangular building which adjoined the tower, and which on the lower floor contains a couple of narrow through apartments, while the upper floor is a single chamber. In the inner of the lower rooms on the western wall is a garderobe with an external chute. The northern end of the wall of this structure butted against the tower wall. This wing had an upper floor lit by three slits, while the lower floor has just a single slit in the north-east wall. At the apex of the triangle the upper part of the corner is built out on corbels to overhang the tower. About 3.7m high of building remains, with, on one face, some indication of the parapet in slight projection on a continuous corbel course. On the south-western face of the lower building are six of the quarter-round corbels supporting the parapet, part of the lower courses of which is in position near the corner. These are of very small stones, and there is no sign of an embrasure, but according to the 1819 view, the embrasures on the tower, and so no doubt here also, were few - two on a face - and at a higher level than the fragment remaining.



Image by Allan Mclver

The building is in roughly coursed blocks of sandstone and basalt of all shapes and sizes, embedded in plentiful mortar of shell lime and gravel, and is in a very bad state. The walls are nowhere more than 1.2m thick. It may be noted that, in the Daniell picture, what looks like an approach and entrance to the right on the lower level cannot have been intended to suggest such, as there is no indication of anything of the kind, and, where a door might be expected to exist, there is really just a small chute from the interior.

A Modern Interpretation David L. Roberts (1934-1997) was an artist who lived on the Isle of Skye for the last 20 years of his life and painted many local scenes. His painting of Brochel Castle, drawing on the archaeological information available, gives an excellent impression of how the Castle would have looked in its heyday.

Castle Design Artist David L. Roberts noted that: *'Few buildings in Scotland or the British Isles show such a level of ingenuity or design that Brochel clearly displays, even in its current state of disrepair. The castle is an ingenious fusion of natural rock and masonry, intricate brickwork and lime mortar, rising sheer out of a stack-like volcanic plug some 15 metres high and commanding a position over the coastline. Brochel Castle would have been an intimidating sight to anyone passing or approaching the castle from either land or sea, a near impervious fortification with many defensive advantages. The fact that such a place could be built as to integrate every irregularity in the rock and draw upon the stepped plateau it sits on to form this formidable complex is a triumph of design, construction, and execution.'*

Present and Future Brochel Castle is in a precarious and dangerous state of dereliction. If you manage to visit, it is important for your own safety and to limit further deterioration that you do not attempt to enter or approach the structure.

It is now over 350 years since the MacLeods of Raasay moved out of Brochel Castle and the



'old lady' is showing her age and neglect. The Highland Council are the current owners and to anyone not possessing the good fortune of having MacLeod or Raasay connections, Brochel Castle must appear to be an obscure monument on an island backwater. So it is unlikely that funds for preservation will be allocated.

A Raasay Legend - where did the money come from Norma MacLeod's book *'Raasay - The Island and its People'* has an interesting tale about how the MacLeods financed the improvements to Brochel Castle soon after they acquired the Isle of Raasay. The tale is abbreviated below.

'The MacLeods were hunting on Glamaig, Skye, and a favourite dog was lost. The next day the Laird and his Gille Mor (right hand man) found the dog aboard a birlinn at anchor in Loch Sligachan. The Gille Mor tried to retrieve the dog and was seized by the crew, he was a strong man and soon flung the crew overboard. A youth appeared and grabbed the dog but he too was flung aside. Later it was learned that the birlinn belonged to the Campbell Laird of Craignish and the youth was his son who died as a result of his injuries.

Some time after, at a gathering at Dunvegan, the Laird of Craignish promised a purse of gold to anyone who could tell him who killed his son. The Gille Mor admitted he had done it but explained it was all a dreadful accident, he was given the gold and, with the Laird of Raasay, left soon after. Gille Mor's conscience would not let him keep the gold so he gave it to his Chief, the Laird of Raasay who used it to build Brochel.'

Norma points out that this sounds implausible but there may be some truth to it as there is another link between the Campbells of Craignish and the MacLeods of Raasay. A history of the Campbells tells that Marion Campbell of Craignish married Gillicallum MacLeod of Raasay, second son of the MacLeod Laird of Raasay. The marriage probably took place sometime before 1510.



Reproduced from the Clan MacLeod Society of New South Wales newsletter March 2023 by kind permission of the author Peter Macleod