

Early Mowats History

It was not until the early part of the fourteenth century that Lambaborg came to life again, but under its new name of Bucholie. We have no definite date as to when the Mowats came to Freswick bringing the name Bucholie with them from their estate of the same name in Aberdeenshire, although we do know that in the reign of King Robert the Bruce, that monarch granted them a charter of the lands of Freswick. However such charters were sometimes merely confirmatory, stamping the royal seal on possessions of a particular family who might have already inherited them through intermarriage with a Norse family whose previous legal titles were held from the Norwegian crown.

Norman Descent

The Mowat family derive their name from Mont Hault (meaning High Mount) in Normandy, but later latinised to de Monte Alto. Like many other noble families who followed the conqueror they settled in England and were given the task of keeping the Welsh marches. Their first castle, built by Robert de Monte Alte was Moldo or Molde from their own surname. The modern town of Mold in Flintshire grew up around the site of this castle.

By 1260 their seat was Howardon castle on the Chesire side of the border, but in 1329 the 1st baron of the line died without a male heir and the title became extinct. Branches of the family had spread in England and are now known by the surname of Maude.

Arrival in Scotland

The first of the name to settle in Scotland was another of Robert de Monte Alto who was invited to do so by King David 1. He was a younger son of one of the barons of Mold, Flintshire. King William the Lion granted Sir William de Monte Alto the lordship of Fern in Angus and his descendants for the next two centuries were prominent landowners and justiciaries in that county, holding many appointments and offices under the crown. Another Sir William de Momte Alto fought with Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn, was a member of the Scottish Parliament and was one of the signatories of the famous Declaration of Arbroath in 1320.

By the thirteenth century some members of the family were spelling their surname as De Mohaut, evolving towards the present spelling. After 1140 there is no further mention of the De Monte Altos of Fern, and the representation of the family devolved on the Mowats of Bucholie, Aberdeenshire, who had sprung from the Fern family. This was a branch, who by means unknown, acquired the landed estates of Freswick and Harpsdale in Caithness. They restored and reconstructed the old castle of Lambaborg and changed its name to Bucholie, but the change of name affected the castle only and not the lands which continued to be known as Freswick.

Mowat Branches in Caithness

There were many offshoots of the Mowats of Freswick. One important branch was the Mowats of Brabstermire and Slickly who in turn had a branch in possession of Swinzie (now Lochend). Members of the Mowat family migrated both from Aberdeenshire and Caithness into Orkney and Shetland where several Mowat families appear as landholders; others as merchants and traders.

In Shetland the name is often spelt Mouat. The name also appears at an early date in Norway - son of Andrew Mowat of Gugoland, Shetland, became a distinguished Admiral in the Norwegian Navy with large estates in that country.

In 1661 Magnus Mowat of Bucholie sold the family estates in Caithness and sixty-six years later the then third laird John Mowat disposed of the Aberdeenshire Bucholie Castle, later largely rebuilt by the Duff family, and renamed Hatton.

Landless and Chiefless

The Mowats are unhappily both landless and chiefless. Sir Thomas Innes of Learney, the late Lord Lyon King of Arms has said that "a chiefless clan, like an orphan family is an imperfect group." That the Mowats of Bucholie were Chiefs of thier name is signified in their coat of arms with their "supporters"- a distinction only given in Scotland to Chiefs of their name and peers of the realm. The Mowats do not have a clan association - nowadays a first requirement in the tracing of a Chief.

That there is someone walking the earth today who unknown to himself and his clansmen is entitled to the 'undifferenced' arms of Bucholie, there cannot be the slightest doubt.

The Castle Today

Looking at the castle today it would appear that there is little left of Sweyn's original structure. The earliest Norse strongholds were square box-like buildings three or four storeys in height. With extremely thick walls of about 8 feet with the doorway on the first floor level facing the sea.

The site is almost an island stuck onto the mainland by a very narrow strip of land cut through at the neck by a dry ditch. The old Norse keeps rose straight up from the far side of the ditch but slightly offset from the line of the drawbridge to allow access past the building to the rear. Today's ruins have an entrance facing where the drawbridge stood and a vaulted passage leads through the keep to the courtyard beyond.

It may well be that Lambaborg's extremely thick walls were unnecseary for its defence owing to the natural impregnability of the site, as in a similar position at Castle Gunn in Clyth of about the same date, the walls were only three feet thick.

An unusual feature of the ruins is that the ground and second floors were vaulted while the intermediate first floor was of wood. At the second storey level facing the landward side there are the corbelled remains of a projecting turret. The narrow courtyard behind the castle has the remains of outbuildings on either side of it. There are no signs of how the castle was supplied with water.

It is clear that the present buildings for the most part date from the Mowat occupation, the main keep being fifteenth century architecture, closely resembling Girnigoe which is known to date from somewhere between 1475 and 1494.