

THE VANISHING LAIRD

LORD PITSLIGO



By JAMES and LIZ TAYLOR

This book is dedicated to
Alison Forbes,
Druminnor Castle,
who took a keen interest
in Lord Pitsligo,
his castle and his grave
at Roshearty Cemetery

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the help received from the late Bob Wilson and Bill Taylor of Rosehearty. Also Strichen Librarian the late Bob Banded.

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Mr George Chalmers, Castle Farm, Rosehearty, for his patience whilst we surveyed and filmed the Castle throughout the years.

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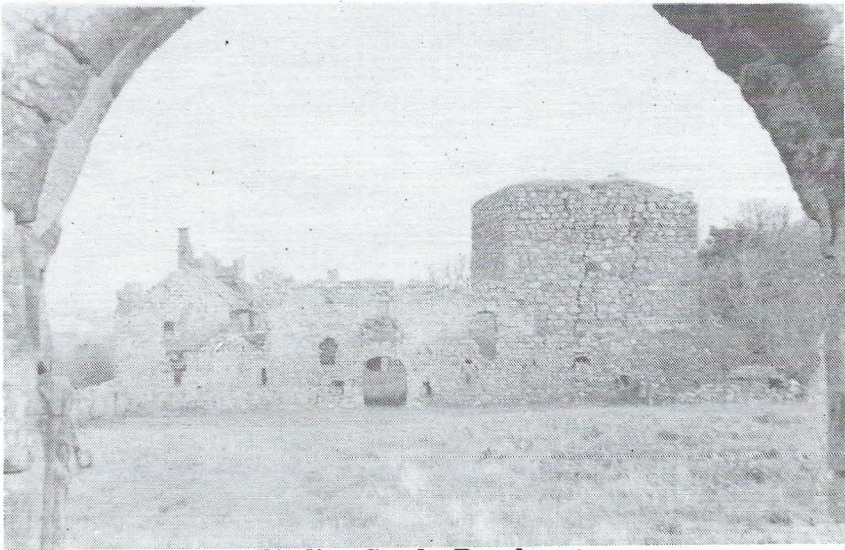
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LORD FORBES OF PITSLIGO THE LEGEND LIVES ON

THE other day I wandered up the hill out of Rosehearty towards the ancient stronghold of the Forbes's of Pitsligo. It is a handsome ruin, still acclaimed by experts as one of the best in Aberdeenshire. Before the '45 it was a place of great splendour and housed for centuries one of Scotland's ancient and most noble families, but after Culloden it was forfeited along with the estate by the crown and later sold. Soon after its new Hanovarian owner, Garden of Troup, took off the roof and left it to the harsh North-east elements. One thing the Hanovarians never learned was that instead of breaking the legend, that very day it gathered momentum and this magnificent home of the last Laird became enshrined in his name.

Pitsligo Castle stood neglected for centuries as does other Jacobite Castles in the area and had it not been for the generosity of Dr Malcolm Forbes and his family who have secured this fine castle for posterity, the fate of Pitsligo Castle would have been doubtful.

Thanks to the Forbes family in America the legend lives on and this splendid monument conserved for the nation. It serves to remind us of one of Scotland's most colourful and romantic figures, Alexander, Lord Forbes of Pitsligo.



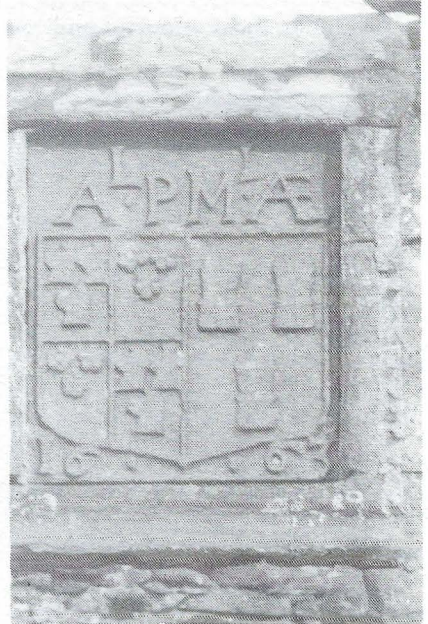
Pitsligo Castle, Rosehearty



Inner Courtyard, Pitsligo Castle, Rosehearty



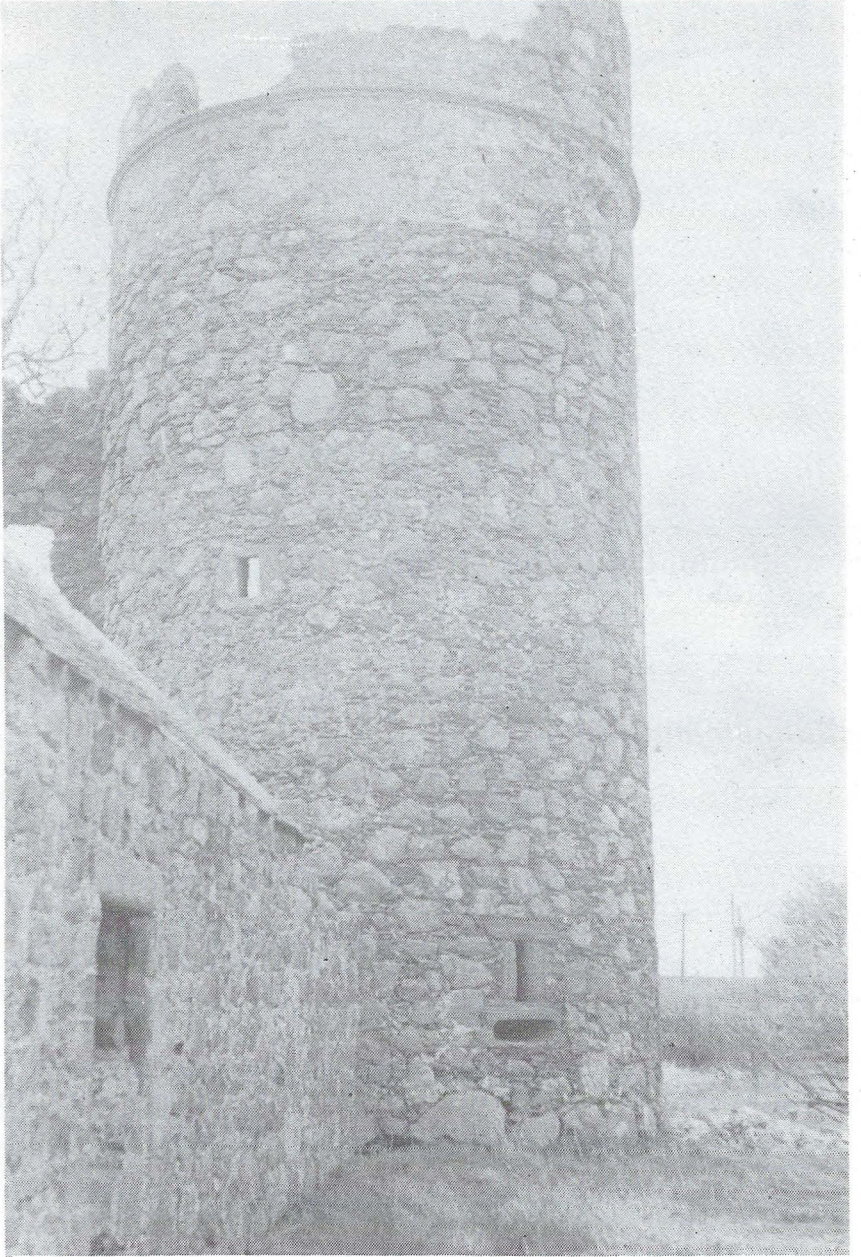
The Family's pledge to the Jacobite Cause can be seen in this plaque.



Forbes of Pitsligo Coat of Arms



Entrance to the old Keep, earliest part of the Castle



The Round Tower



Gun loop for cannon with opening above for musket fire



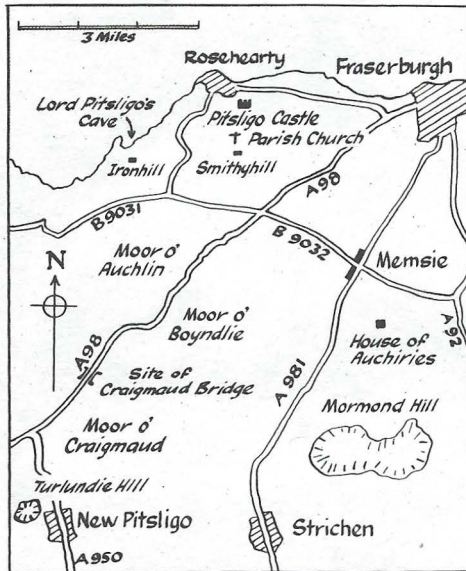
**Gateway from inner courtyard looking out towards
nine-maidens well.**



Front entrance to Pitsligo Castle

The life of this Laird was so remarkable that stories about him still abound in the area.

He was born on May 22, 1678 into a staunch Jacobite family. At the age of twelve his father died and he became the twelfth Laird but soon he was sent to France to further his education. There he became interested in mysticism and was influenced greatly by Francois Fenelon, the Archbishop Duke of Cambrai whose philosophy Sir Walter Scott called a species of "transcendental devotion" better known in this age as meditation. The young Laird mingled freely with prominent members of King Louis' court, but when he returned to Scotland in 1700 he never forgot the lesson of his mystic teachers, the art of being humble. This man who treated courtiers and commoners equally as his friends became known as plain Pitsligo – this is the name of his castle and estate.



Map showing the area where Lord Pitsligo hid after the '45

On his return to the castle in Aberdeenshire he founded a mystical school within Roseheartly and invited Dr George Garden to become an instructor. Numerous leading dignitaries of the period, including the Chevalier Ramsay – the man who recognised Freemasonry in 1737 – studied here until its closure in 1710 by pressure of the church.

A deeply religious man, whose thought being strengthened by staunch mystical beliefs, Pitsligo was greatly loved, admired and respected. He was profoundly concerned with the problems that beset his fellow men and placed the interests of his countrymen before himself.

This real concern led him to become involved in both Jacobite

rebellions – an involvement that proved disastrous.

The Jacobite cause enjoyed much support in the North-east and when the old pretender landed on December the 25th at Peterhead (20 miles from Rosehearty) there was no safer place in Scotland for him to set foot on his native soil.

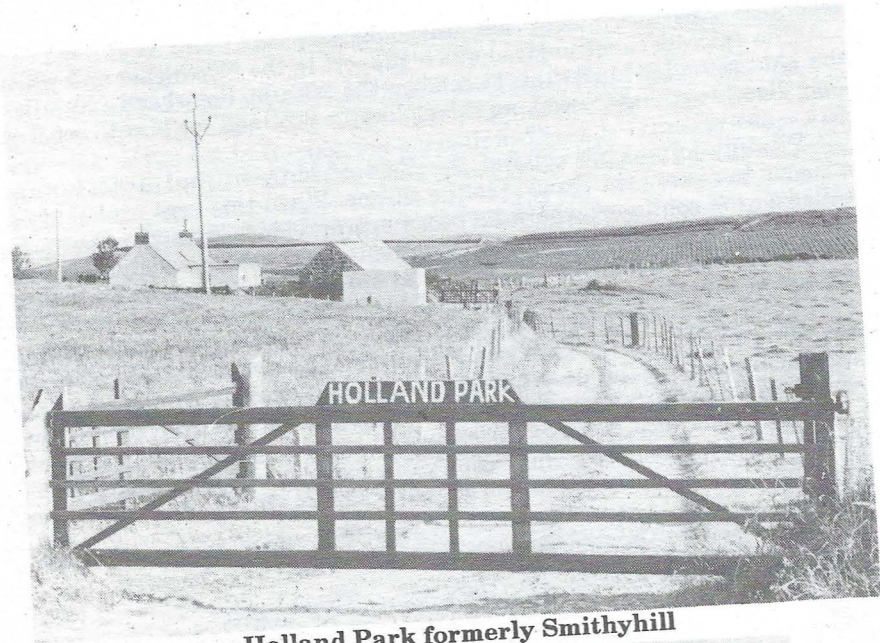
Pitsligo joined his cousin, the Earl of Mar, in that unfortunate struggle to restore the Stuarts to the throne. When this venture failed he sailed to the continent where he became firm friends with the Count de Metternich, a German mystic, and together they travelled widely.

In 1720 he returned to his castle at Rosehearty. There he turned to the life of a recluse, spending most of his time in mystical research and writing. During this period Dr Garden was a frequent visitor and according to Scott, Pitsligo was held "in the highest respect, by charity and benevolence to the poor and good-will to all ranks". While attending church in Fraserburgh one Sunday the congregation was overcome by the radiance of his face. This experience had such a tremendous effect on them that many told how this remarkable experience had changed their lives. Pitsligo obviously expressed more by silence than words could ever do.

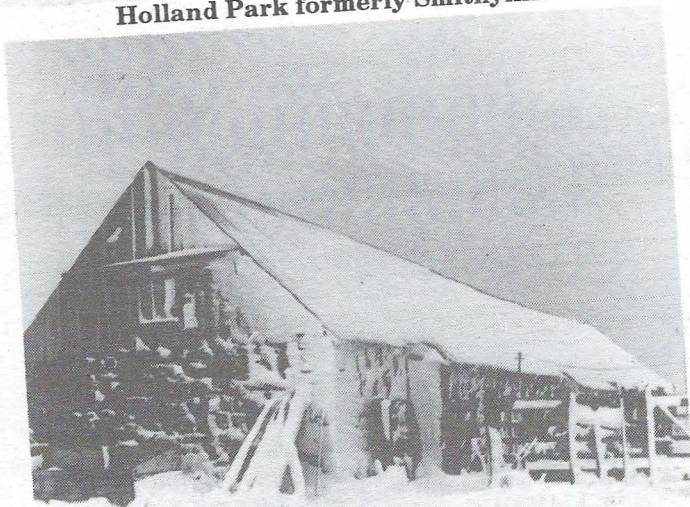


The Market Place at Rosehearty where Lord Pitsligo had more than one encounter with Hanovarian troops

However, in 1745, at the age of 67, Pitsligo's peace was shattered forever. He answered the call of Charles Edward Stuart. His wife desperately tried to persuade him not to go but he won the argument. This argument was lost by his neighbour, Cumine of Pitullie, when his wife poured a large basin of boiling water into his riding boots as he pulled them on. Pitsligo's servant, John Pirie, took the Laird's horse to



Holland Park formerly Smithyhill



**The old barn at Holland Park where
Lord Pitsligo hid**

the steps of the massive old towerhouse for the elderly gentleman to mount, but the Laird had found a new strength and leapt into the saddle.

He called at Dr Fraser's at Memsie en route to Aberdeen and on leaving the Doctor's son placed a stool near the horse for the Laird to mount. Pitsligo was amused and stated "my fellow this is the severest reproof I have yet met with, for presuming to go on such an expedition".

The Jacobite Laird rode to Aberdeen, mustered his horse troops, rode to the front and raised his bonnet and said "O Lord thou knowest that our cause is just. Gentlemen March!"

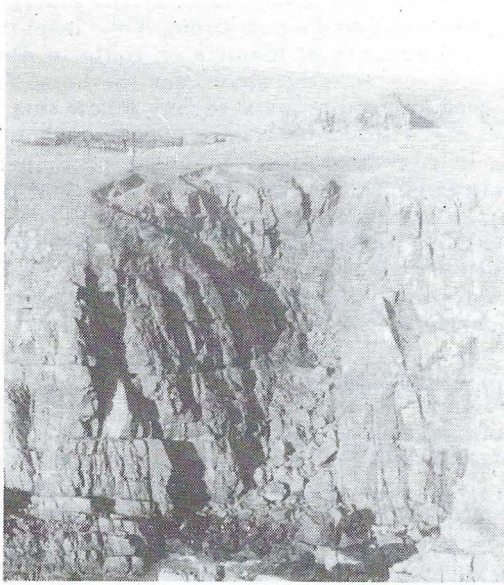
When his cavalry, named 'Pitsligo's Horse' reached Edinburgh the poet Hamilton of Bangour recorded "nothing could have fallen out more fortunately for the Prince than his joining them did; for it seemed as if religion, virtue and justice were entering his camp under the appearance of the venerable old man". John Murray of Broughton wrote of him as "deservedly the most popular man in the country."

After Prestonpans Pitsligo rode with the Prince in his carriage to Derby and in the course of that journey the Prince presented him with his treasured Jewel of St Andrew. Later, on the retreat through Scotland the army split into three divisions, Lord Pitsligo and Lord George Murray went by the coastal route through Aberdeenshire with the main body comprising all the cavalry, the Atholl and lowland regiments.

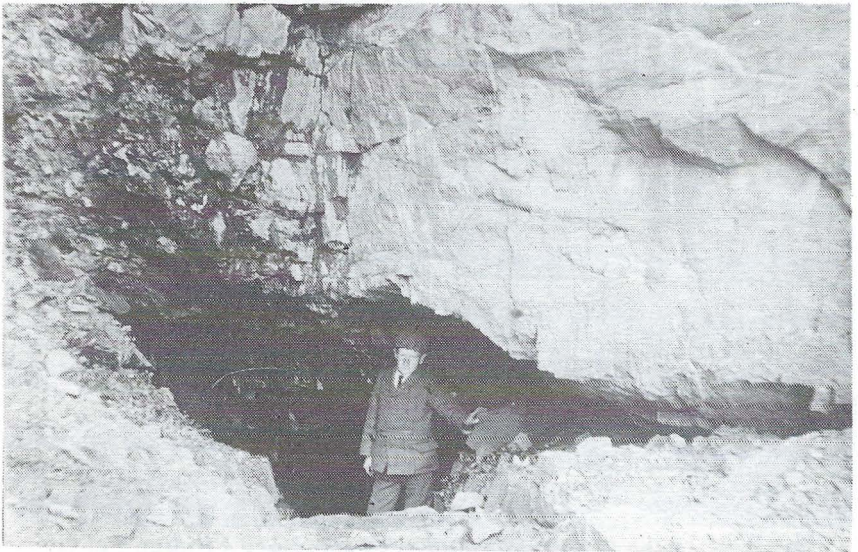
This force camped at Elgin where Lord Pitsligo was made Governor and placed in command of the army there. Pitsligo had other responsibilities thrust upon him being in charge of the prisoners and being consulted regularly by those close to the Prince. Pitsligo recognised



The West rocks of Rosehearty leading to Lord Pitsligo's cave



The dangerous cliff face at Reidcoo's Haven where Lord Pitsligo's Cave was situated prior to the destruction of the entrance



Cave where Lord Pitsligo hid during the summer of 1746



Another refuge for Lord Pitsligo at the farm of Ironhill

early the importance of holding the Spey but this was not listened to and such a surprise was what Cumberland feared most of all. However, Cumberland was fortunate enough to find it low in water and easily forded; on the 15th of April he rested at Nairn.

The slaughter of the Jacobite army the following day on that dreary moor of Culloden signalled the collapse of the Stuart cause forever and there began for Pitsligo a remarkable series of adventures that have become part of the lore of the North-east.

His escape from the battlefield was more than fortunate as his age did not help his hasty flight. However, on reaching Elgin he shared concealment with his friend, the Duke of Perth, in a secret room behind a fireplace in Greyfriars townhouse. When he felt safe to leave he travelled only in darkness until he reached the safety of Pitsligo Castle.

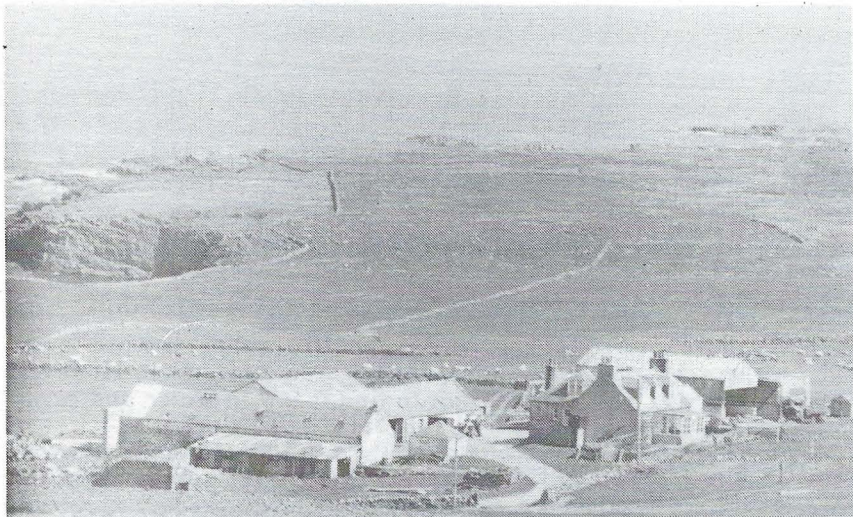
Once there Lady Pitsligo and her maid sewed together a beggar's disguise for him and he sat near them as they worked. Years later this maid marvelled at his cheerfulness and composure knowing full well the imminent danger his life and property was in.

From 1746-49 Lord Pitsligo spent his time in hiding on his estate, mostly at Roseheart. One of his favourite resting places was in James Rainnie's barn at Smithyhill croft – now called Holland Park. I frequently visit this croft and it pleases me to see that it still retains its ancient appearance. The barn remains unchanged, except for the roof, since the Jacobite hero crept through its doorway.

One night when the old Laird lay resting in the barn, in his disguise, a party of dragoons arrived from Fraserburgh and surrounded the entire complex. They hammered on the door arousing the entire household. The

crofter was asked if he had any lodgers and he answered "There's only an auld beggar sleepin' in i barn". Snatching Rainnie's lantern from his grasp they burst into the barn and apprehended the beggar, Every detail of his clothing was checked out and he was interrogated thoroughly.

When convinced he could not possibly be the notorious Jacobite they were seeking the dragoon captain demanded that he carry the lantern while the search continued. When they found no trace of the rebel the officer handed the beggar a shilling for his trouble. Little did he know this was the very man he sought.



The farm of Poukburn which is also associated with the Jacobite Laird's period in hiding

Scott once wrote "his mind soared in extremity of danger alike above fear" and of course his mystical beliefs had much to do with his immense courage. It was obviously a well controlled mind that saved him from discovery while undergoing the scrutiny of experienced soldiers.

The crofter was a faithful follower of the Jacobite Laird and his faith was tested when Lady Pitsligo entrusted him with her husband's movements. When the search was stepped up and the net began to close in, the old man retired to the cave at 'Reidcoo's haven', near Ironhill farm and about one mile from Rosehearty.

The cave entrance which was destroyed during World War II is vividly remembered by 89-year-old local historian Bob Wilson. "The entrance was low and narrow, but it was very spacious with a high dome roof inside. I remember water seeped through the roof into a hollow in the rock allegedly carved by the Laird's hand. I could see on my many visits to the cave why the Redcoats overlooked the area. The entrance was entirely hidden from view".



The Worlds End at Fraserburgh where Lord Pitsligo had a dramatic escape

While Pitsligo lived in the cave his wife Elisabeth sent food to Smithyhill each day and the crofter's young daughter Ann, who herded sheep on the braes of Ironhill, watched the movements of the Hanovarian soldiers and when the way was clear this courageous little girl descended a dangerous cliff ledge bringing food to the cave below. This she did faithfully until the snow hindered her progress and the Laird was advised to quit his retreat for fear that Ann's footprints be seen by the keen military eye; so Ann's mercy mission ended.

It has been said that Pitsligo found his cave a suitable temple for his meditation and I am sure he wasted little time in turning the cavern's eerie darkness into light. When his supply of food stopped he left the security of his cave for good and began a beggar's life for real.

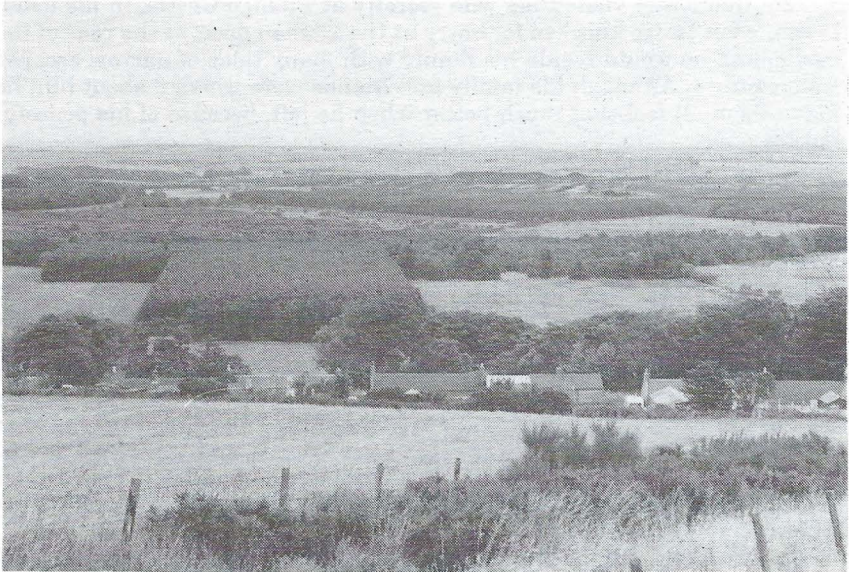
He slept and ate where he could but two of his favourite places were Smithyhill and Ironhill. The latter for its nearness to the rugged coastline with its high cliffs and Smithyhill because it was close to his castle and his wife.

On one occasion the garrison in Fraserburgh were informed that the much sought after Jacobite was in hiding in a cave near Rosehearty. Immediately soldiers were dispatched to comb the shoreline and cliffs near the town. On reaching Ironhill the dragoons called in for directions. The farmer's wife asked one of her "regular beggars", who was busy eating a meal, if he could show them the way. With great composure the old beggar led the search party to the braes below the farm and pointed to his erstwhile hiding place. Then making his way round to a ledge on the other side of the cove he was greatly amused watching the excited troops examining their latest discovery.

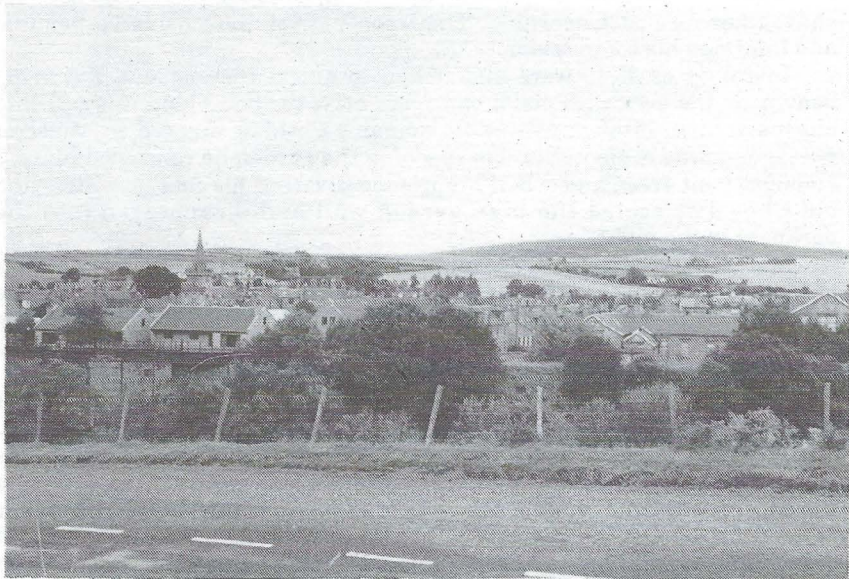
On returning to Ironhill, Pitsligo with his tremendous sense of humour pointed his fingers accusingly at the farmer's wife and retorted "ye should niver sin travellin' men on sic errand".

This Laird knew no fear and certainly did not fear death, as he once remarked to a close friend, "the horrors of a scaffold were seldom in view". Meditation became a safety device and obviously the key to his security. The hardened interrogators and the sharp penetrating eyes of the Hanovarians presented little or no difficulty for him.

Soldiers continually searched the town and district of Rosehearty for the Jacobite Laird as they felt sure he was there. The dragoons made door to door searches in the town one day when Pitsligo was actually on the street. He stealthily slipped through the doorway of a souter's (shoemaker's) shop in the market place. Hard on his heels were King George's men and no sooner had he donned working clothes, thrust at him by the souter, than the dragoons entered. Pitsligo pretended to be busy repairing shoes while the suspicious strangers cast their cold eyes around the workshop. It was not long before they finally came to rest on the Laird's clean hands. Seeing them scrutinising his new journeyman's soft white skin the souter roared commandingly at him to "Awa ootside an' keep yer watch o'er the horses!" The elderly man in a relaxed manner left to tend the troops' horses. This undoubtedly quelled their suspicions. On numerous occasions he was to jest on the day he was a Rosehearty souter.



**Looking across the Moors of Craigmaud, Boyndlie and Auchlin
from Turlundie Hill, New Pitsligo**



**Looking over Strichen towards Mormond Hill where Lord Pitsligo
lay amongst the heather watching the Redcoats movements**

He frequently visited his wife secretly at Pitsligo Castle, in his usual beggar's outfit. He knocked for entry at the kitchen door, at the rear of the castle, and he would regale his family with many tales of narrow escapes from capture. Although his family and friends were worried about him he made them all feel that much better when he left, because of his peaceful nature.

Still, one such visit almost ended in his capture. The garrison commander at Fraserburgh was informed of the Laird's presence at the Castle. He organised his horse soldiers and left for Rosehearty. Having had similar false alarms before he was in no real hurry as he found time to inspect Mr Fraser's garden first. He mistakenly confided his secret to Mr Fraser who in turn sent a horseman in all haste through the moors to warn of the impending danger. On their arrival the elusive Laird had vanished into the countryside.

Sometimes Lord Pitsligo escaped under the noses of the King's soldiers and this happened while he was hiding in Fraserburgh, near their barracks.

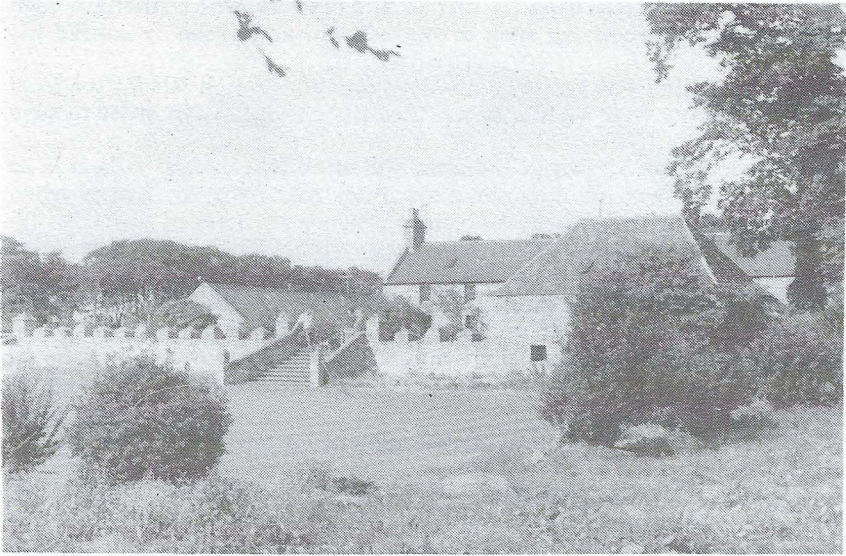
Norman Fordyce, a local historian, pointed out the site of the barracks and the 'World's End' a house once owned by Glenbucket that stands on Shore Street, Fraserburgh.

Mr Fordyce told me the following story connected with this building. "A maid employed at the World's End had a friendship with one of the dragoons stationed in Fraserburgh and one evening when they chatted she raised a laugh by telling the trooper of an older maid who secretly shaved her face each morning. The trooper carefully considered her tale and informed his commander.

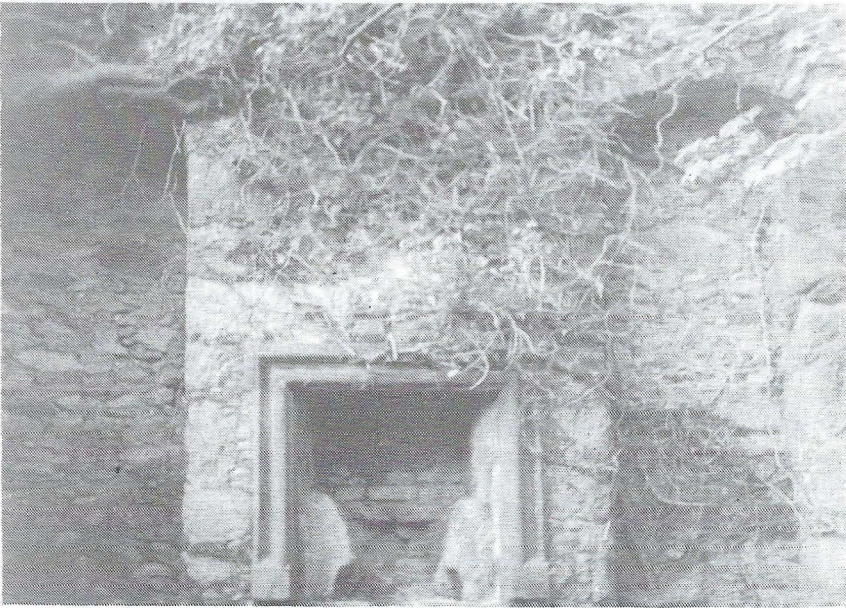
Instantly soldiers were dispatched to arrest the suspect. Battering heavily on the door with pistol butts for entry, the household was called to aid his escape. Pitsligo attired in woman's clothing was led to a secret passage by way of the cellar. On reaching the garden he concealed himself amongst fruit trees and when his friends diverted his foes' attention the old Chevalier scaled the high garden wall and disappeared into the darkness of the night."

Many times he was saved from the grasp of the Hanoverians because of kindness and charity to those in poverty. In 1740 there was a famine due to crop loss and starving people flocked to his estate when his granaries were opened to these unfortunate souls; they never forgot this deed.

One mentally retarded beggar called Sandy Annand had been saved from starvation by the Laird during that unforgettable year of famine. Sandy was in a local farmhouse when Pitsligo was present and he was showing his respect for the old Laird when some dragoons entered. Seeing the fuss Sandy was making the dragoons pressed him to identify other beggars. Pitsligo's calm nature gave no secrets away but neither did Sandy and when pressed to the point of telling he answered, "I kent him aince a muckle fairmer, bit his sheep a' deet in the forty" – meaning the famine of 1740. Treating Sandy's answer as foolish ramblings the troops



Auchiries, the final refuge for Lord Pitsligo



The frail old Laird was squeezed into one of these linen cupboards beside the fireplace at Auchiries, during the final daring attempt to capture him

left, lifting much stress from the farmer and his wife, who could have been prosecuted for harbouring such a wanted man and probably shared his fate.

However, this was typical of the love and admiration felt for the local Laird that many were willing to sacrifice their own lives in order to save his.

One story well known in the area and often told by Bob Wilson is as follows: Pitsligo was ambling along a country road near Roseheartly when he had an asthmatic attack. A troop of dragoons proceeded towards him as he decided to relax and sit on a large stone. The troopers were so concerned about his complaint that they gathered round him and comforted the ailing old man. When the attack lessened the dragoons conversed with the beggar and soon he laughed and jested with them. Receiving far more comfort than they had been able to give and being thoroughly entertained they departed in high spirits with one dragoon tossing him a coin as they went.

Always changing his place of concealment for fear of being caught he decided, when the search was stepped up, to travel inland amongst the poorer class who lived on the moors in his upper estate of Pitsligo. He wandered about from house to house amongst his tenants begging for food, across the Moor of Auchlin, the great Red Moor of Boyndie and the Moor of Craigmaud near New Pitsligo.

Although the King's forces were daily deceived by the Laird's disguise nothing could hide his true identity from his own tenants, who without acknowledging who he was, placed him near the top of the table.

One crofter's wife was upset because all she could offer her respected guest was kale brose, but the kindly old Laird understanding her position said in his usual jovial manner, "Beggars canna be choosers."

The troops were at their wits' end trying to uncover the Laird's whereabouts but this experienced old soldier was always ahead of his pursuers. He climbed Mormond Hill in the summer to watch troop movement and occasionally spending the night there in the open.

One summer's day he lay low on Craigmaud Moor while soldiers spread out to search for him. They knew he was in the area and desperately scanned the moors. He thought his hiding place was marked one day when a flight of birds took off as he moved, but it seems the soldiers ignored this happening.

A most uncomfortable hiding place he used was under the very low, six-arched bridge of Craigmaud. It seemed impossible for anyone to get below its arches, let alone a seventy-one-year-old, so the King's forces never gave it their consideration. Still under there he lay watching them do their searching in vain.

Four years he spent wandering around his estates seeking shelter, begging for food and avoiding the Hanoverians. After such an ordeal the wearied old Laird went to Auchiries, his son's country mansion.

I visited this old mansion with Bob Wilson and Norman Fordyce and



Pitsligo family pew in the Pitsligo Parish Church

although now a ruin it shows all the signs of being once a splendid building. Today Mr Peter Rodger lives in one wing of this house he has managed to conserve.

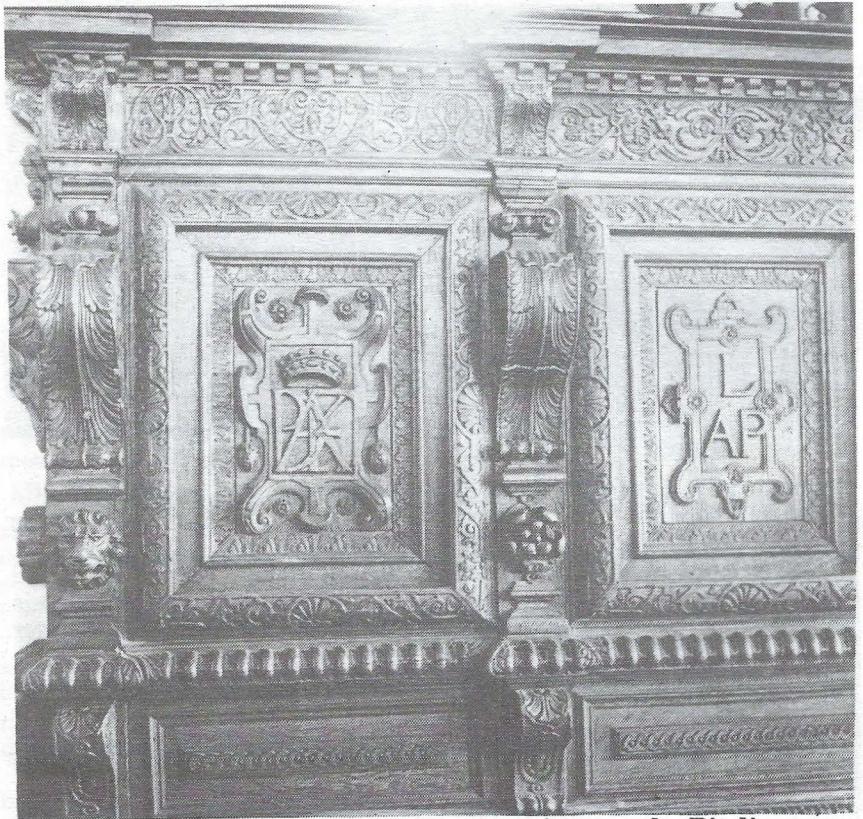
When Lord Pitsligo lived there he took the name of Mr Brown and Lady Errol regularly sent the Laird of Udney's fool to enquire about his welfare. This fool was questioned several times by troops, but he never betrayed his secret mission.

Pitsligo escaped capture twice at Auchiries. The first took place when two customs officers arrived to check for contraband goods. It was a dark November morning and extremely cold so the senior officer kept warm within the family coach, while the younger man searched around. Suddenly he rushed back breathless to his companion. He managed to gasp out "I've a more valuable find as Lord Pitsligo is in the house." The officer in charge dashed his junior to the ground and at pistol point demanded on oath that he would never reveal the identity of Mr Brown.

This was typical of the regard held for the elderly nobleman. Many people shielded him knowing that it endangered their own lives.

Perhaps the most dramatic and daring of all his escapes was in March 1756 when he was seventy-eight; his escape succeeded because of Mrs Sophia Donaldson's vivid recurring dream. She dreamt that red-coated soldiers were out in the garden and this turned into a nightmare which gave her little sleep. She eventually went and looked out of her bedroom window and was horrified to see red-coated soldiers moving towards the mansion up the avenue of holly trees. Their red coats set against the snow were clearly visible.

She awakened the household and the Laird was quickly sealed in a linen cupboard which lay behind a bed. Miss Gordon of Towie, a visitor to the house, lay in bed pretending to be ill with the cold. Nevertheless the soldiers searched her room and even checked the bed she lay in and still not satisfied they felt Miss Gordon's chin, ensuring it was a woman and



Details of the ornate Jacobean carvings on the Pitsligo family pew

not a man in disguise. Just then Pitsligo had an attack of asthma, but Miss Gordon coughed loudly to divert the soldiers attention; again the Laird had been rescued by providence.

Both weary and helpless he was assisted from the recess in the wall and as he caught his breath he uttered to James Gordon, his servant, "James go and see that those poor fellows get some breakfast and a drink of warm ale, for this is a cold morning; they're only doing their duty and can't bear me any ill-will."

On December 19th, 1762, at the age of 84, this fine old nobleman died. John Forbes, Master of Pitsligo, the son of the Laird, pleaded with the authorities for permission to place his father's remains in the family vault at Pitsligo Parish Church. When he was taken from Auchiries crowds descended on the old graveyard and many who knew only of his deeds and his plight wept openly.

So at last his earthly mission had ended, but for the enlightened Pitsligo perhaps his Spiritual quest continued. As a local contemporary said "His lamp shall never be extinguished as it is only moved from the anti-chamber into the Inner Court of the King Immortal".

It is now over two centuries since Lord Forbes of Pitsligo died but he still lives on in the hearts and minds of many in the North-east because so much of him survives in records and legend. Finally, tribute must be paid to Malcolm Forbes for saving the Laird's endangered home and adding strength to this strong Scottish legend.

To this very day exciting tales about the vanishing Jacobite Laird's dramatic escapes, terrible endurance and raw courage, abound in the northerly districts of Aberdeenshire.

His early life was devoted to mysticism and benevolence to the poor. However later when the Jacobite cause brought so much destruction to himself and his noble friends, it was the common people of the districts who safeguarded him from the Hanoverians who placed the high price of £400 on his head.

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