

ERCHLESS CASTLE

If Wikipedia's statement that Erchless Castle was first built in the 13th century is true, that would have been on the motte site, across the A831 road from the present Erchless Castle. This is the motte now called Cnoc an Tighe Mhor.

The present castle is a composite construction in three phases:

- A L-shaped tower house, built at the beginning of the 17th century
- An addition at the north-west corner in early C19
- A large "baronial-style" extension to the north in 1895.

After the Chisholms established a permanent feu at Erchless in 1606, building started in a style then current throughout Scotland. At a time when English lords were building long low manor houses Scottish lairds, maybe influenced by French fashion, were building tall keeps. This may, though, reflect the relative lack of good building oak in Scotland, and therefore the need to keep the roof as compact as possible.



Erchless Castle 1842, from JSM Anderson's Memoir of a Chisholm



Erchless Castle 1870, painting by WJ Lyon

The castle as built in the early 1600's was L shaped, and survives complete as the southern and most attractive part of the present building. The main tower has four storeys; the lowest being vaulted and intended for use as ground floor cellars and store-rooms. The next floor was occupied by the great hall which covered the whole area, while the two upper storeys were divided into smaller rooms, the highest reaching well into the steep roof. At the south-east corner, the square tower completed the pattern. The present front door, which appears in an early 19th century engraving with a pillared portico, is on the south side of the tower, but the original entrance was on the west, protected by a gun loop (sometimes wrongly called an arrow slit) in the south flank of the main building and probably by another where the present front door stands.

To-day the whole of the interior of the south tower is taken up by an elegant and airy spiral stair, but this is certainly a later alteration. At the outset the stair, probably square rather than round, would rise from the west-facing front door as far as the great hall. From the hall there were two solid stone spiral (or turnpike) stairs at opposite corner of the main building in turrets, both of which are visible on the outside at the north-west and south-east of the block. The south east turret, inside which the beginning of the stair can still be seen, fills the angle (called the re-entrant) between the two towers and springs from an overhanging corbelled base decorated with an elaborate series of mouldings just above eye level.

In many cases these houses had a cluster of low buildings, perhaps of two storeys, within a courtyard adjoining one side of the tower. Here were the domestic offices - dairy, brewhouse and washhouse. These were much less solidly built and few such courtyards (or barmkins as they were called) remain intact today, but it seems likely that Erchless would have had one.

(Much of the information on this page comes from a brochure obtained from the Clan Chisholm Society)



Strathglass, Erchless & the Chisholms

The Chisholm name seems to have originated from *de Chesehelme* a Norman family extending up from England to the Borders in the 13th century. The first mention of Chisholm in Strathglass is 1368 when an Alexander Chisholm married Margaret del Ard "lady of Erchless". Their grand-daughter took Erchless with her as dowry to Walter Haliburton whom she married in 1432. At this stage the estate moved away from the Chisholm family for what proved to be 150 years.



A Wiland de Chesholm obtained a charter of the lands of Comer in 1513, marking the return of the Chisholms to Strathglass. (Comar has traditionally been the "seat" of the Chisholms, even though Erchless was the main residence in later centuries. Chisholm lands centre on Comar/Cannich, and stretch along Guisachan, Glen Affric and Glen Cannich). Most of Strathglass was Lovat land however, so Erchless was bought back from the Haliburtons by Hugh Fraser, Lord Lovat of Beaufort, in 1528. He then granted a tack of 19 years to John Chisholm of Comar in 1594, returning the Chisholms to Erchless for the first time in 150 years.

The tack was converted to a permanent feu in 1606. This surety of tenure allowed the Chisholms to start the building of a standard Scottish tower house in the following years. By 1717 the castle was being lived in by the clan chief. The keep became a bastion of resistance to the Crown after the battle of Killiecrankie in 1689. Being strongly Jacobite, The Chisholm also "came out" in both 1715 and 1745. William, the son of the clan chief Roderick Og Chisholm, led the clan at Culloden, leading a very small regiment of about 80 men. He was killed along with 30 clansmen. It should be noted however that two of Roderick's sons, ie William's brothers, were captains in the British Army of the Duke of Cumberland. The family was obviously divided.

After the '45, came the pressure to clear the land for sheep. This occurred in two waves, in 1801 and 1810, with large areas of Chisholm land "cleared to a man". Many of these cleared tenants emigrated to Cape Breton in Canada. Some were accommodated on Lovat land in Strathfarrar.

However, not all Chisholm tenants were cleared. Alexander, the 23rd chief, on his death in 1793 left his widow the rents of some of the township lands or joint farms and the grazings attached to them, centred around Comar. The dowager continued to live in Comar House with her daughter Mary. The rest of the Chisholm lands passed at Alexander's death to his brother William, who was influenced by his wife to effect the clearances. There is a well-loved story in the strath that even as a young girl Mary helped her father resist the influence of local clansmen who wanted to clear the strath. After the death of her father, Mary helped her widowed mother continue this resistance. Without Mary's influence, it is said, these Cannich lands too would have been cleared. She became Mrs Gooden in 1812, marrying a wealthy London merchant.

Succeeding Chisholms included:

- Alexander William, MP for Inverness, died "prematurely" in 1838. He was succeeded by his brother....
- Duncan MacDonnell Chisholm, died in 1858, succeeded by his cousin of the Muckerach branch
- James Sutherland Chisholm who married Annie Cecilia in 1861. On his death in 1885.....
- Roderick Donald Matheson Chisholm took possession at the age of 23. He died in 1887 aged 25, *with no heir*
- The next Chisholm, James Gooden-Chisholm, was a descendant of a junior branch of the family, the son of Mary Gooden. He built the 1895 extension to the castle. He died in 1916, succeeded by his son.....
- Roderick Gooden Chisholm, who died in 1943.

The last Chisholm to live at Erchless was Mrs Annie Cecilia Chisholm, wife of James Sutherland Chisholm, widowed for 20 years at the time of her death in 1905, and whose grave is on the motte. The estate was then owned by her trustees, and eventually sold in 1937 to "Highland Estates Ltd". The castle was requisitioned in the second world war, being used as a rest centre for staff employed in entertaining the troops. In 1946 the Erchless Estate and castle were bought, for the reputed sum of £26,000, on behalf of Baron Siegfried Nikolai von [Stackelberg](#) and his wife Baroness Phyllis von Stackelberg. The Baron, a former Russian Imperial cavalry officer, and his wife then ran the estate from Erchless Castle. The Estate was then bought by Lawrence Robson, founder of accountancy firm Robson Rhodes. On his death in 1982 the estate passed to his son, Maurice Robson, who is still the current owner (2016). Although he has rooms in the castle, he lives in the south of England.