

Barbara Mackintosh, chatelaine - obituary

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Hostess and post-mistress who dispensed old-fashioned Highland hospitality at Inverailort Castle



Barbara Mackintosh: post-mistress and last chatelaine of Inverailort Castle

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Barbara Mackintosh, who has died aged 83, was the last surviving chatelaine of Inverailort Castle where, for more than half a century, she and her friend and companion, the late Mrs Lucretia Cameron-Head, dispensed Highland hospitality. The 50-room house, resembling a cross between Kensington Palace and Paddington Station, is the accretion of several centuries and stands near the head of Loch Ailort between Fort William and Mallaig. Originally one of MacDonald of Clanranald's old shooting lodges, it was enlarged in 1828 by Major General Sir Alexander Cameron with the proceeds of a military pension, a propitious marriage and French loot brought home from the Battle of Waterloo. It went on to acquire east and west wings under the ownership of James Head, a director of several shipping lines who married into the Cameron family in 1890 and died in 1922. In 1940 Inverailort and its 12,000 acres was requisitioned by Lord Lovat and David Stirling as a Special Training Centre – out of which was born Britain's first

Commando unit. The Cameron-Heads (who had amalgamated their names in 1910) watched impotently from the nearby Lochailort Inn as their pictures, china and furniture were carted off in Army trucks. Within days the entire estate was converted to a barracks and assault course for 3,000 commandos.



Inverailort Castle at the time of the military requisition

When the war ended, the Cameron-Heads' sole heir, Francis, returned with his young bride Lucretia to take up residence. They described what they found as "a broken-down Victorian biscuit factory", but went on to turn it into the living heart of the local community.

Since the River Ailort was well-known for its early run of sea trout and the deer forest was one of the best in the West Highlands, there were seldom fewer than 20 guests in the house for 11 months of the year, despite the rooms being, in the words of an American journalist, "as cold as the kiss of death". Passers through might include cabinet ministers, crofters, playwrights, fish-farmers, television presenters and even the odd Russian Prince. A regular guest at dinner was a Roman Catholic priest who had called in to say Mass in the Castle chapel and had simply stayed on.

When Francis Cameron-Head died in 1957 his widow ("Putchie" to all who knew her) invited Barbara Mackintosh to join her as a companion and general factotum in running Inverailort. Old-fashioned standards continued to be strictly maintained. An unmarried Australian couple were ferried to different railway stations and put on separate trains to London after they had been found sharing a bath. When another unmarried couple, vaguely related to Putchie, turned up wanting a bed for the night,

they were briskly despatched to single rooms at opposite ends of the house, while a guest in a bedroom midway between the two was instructed to get up and intervene if he heard the floorboards creaking during the night.

Barbara Mackintosh was born in Kinross on October 13 1931 and was descended from a Thomas Mackintosh who sailed with Captain William Bligh on Bounty. Her father and grandfather were doctors and landowners and from them she inherited a strong interest in medicine and healing.

She was educated at Ochertyre House, an exclusive girls' school outside Crieff in Perthshire.

Little is known of her early life but upon her arrival at Inverailort she quickly blossomed as the ideal co-hostess, major domo, housekeeper and hen-wife. To these duties were added maintenance of the local weather station for the Meteorological Office, and even running the local Post Office when it was relocated to the morning room following the Royal Mail's decision to withdraw its services.

Although rather shy, she loved a good party and earned something of a reputation for her mischievous sense of humour. She also had a great love of animals. If she was away from home when chickens were due to hatch, she would carry the eggs around in her coat pockets to prevent them from going cold. She also cared for a large colony of cats that patrolled the castle, keeping it free of vermin, including "Paul" (named after Pope John Paul II), who was rechristened "Paul Paisley" after taking over the manger of the hall crib and throwing out the baby Jesus.

Following Putchie's death in 1994, Barbara carried on living at the castle, entertaining visitors, welcoming former commandos and continuing her duties for the Met Office and the Royal Mail.

She is survived by her beloved orange poodle, William, an orphaned greyhound , two geese, six guinea pigs and 50 hens.

Barbara Mackintosh, born October 13 1931, died April 3 2015