

Origins of the Sinclairs in Scotland

Like many other clans and families Sinclairs have had to rely on ‘old’ works and books usually printed in the 1800’s when researching family history. Our ‘bibles’ have been Father Richard Hay *Genealogie of the Saintclaires of Rosslyn* published in 1835, JT Calder *Sketch of the Civil and Traditional History of Caithness from the Tenth Century* 1861, RW Saint-Clair *The Saint-Clairs of the Isles* 1898. One of the difficulties these writers faced was lack of access to the original documents. Just as happens now, inaccuracies and suppositions by one writer soon became entrenched as gospel truth by another. Father Hay is often used as evidence, even today, but he only quoted the fabulist Jacob Van Bassan. Many forget that he also commented that Van Bassan’s work was inaccurate and did not agree with evidence, history or registers. Also, the further back in time one delves there are less records and accurate registering of events. These sort of problems cover not only genealogy but history in its entirety. A good example is the work at Castle Sinclair Girnigoe which revealed a totally different construction and history to that in the ‘bibles’ on it. We are fortunate that Gerald Sinclair and Rondo BB Me in writing their book *The Enigmatic Sinclairs – A definitive guide to the Sinclairs in Scotland* took a fresh look at all the primary sources (charters being the main one) and deposited papers and come up with a rather different perspective of the family. However it is much more interesting as it is as accurate as it can be. It reveals that we did not suddenly arrive escorting a future queen but, like most other families, gained increasingly important positions through hard work, acumen, backing the winning side and good marriages. This does not necessarily mean that some of the ‘history’ with which we were brought up did not happen but rather it cannot be proved on the evidence available now and is therefore excluded. What we know might change in the future if new reliable evidence is unearthed.

Like everyone else a Sinclair is an amalgam of a number of families. The name Sinclair, or St Clair/Santo Claro or any other spelling of it, most probably comes from the Normandy region of France. We know Sinclairs came over with William the Conqueror in his invasion of England in 1066, or soon thereafter, and some were granted lands of their own. They also managed land for others. For instance, William and Haimo Sinclair managed the estates of Eudo Dapifer, Steward to William the Conqueror. However, there is no proof positive that these Sinclairs were the ancestors of those who later settled in Scotland but equally it cannot be said they were not. As in so much of ‘history’, the evidence is missing. There is undoubtedly Norse blood in some of us, but certainly not all, that derives from the later Caithness and Orkney connection. Those Norse invaders and settlers of Shetland, Orkney and Caithness doubtless married the local Picts, so we are a healthy mix. Unlike the settlement in England of families of French descent, that into Scotland was gradual and peaceful and occurred mostly in the reign of King David 1 (1124 - 1153).

It is not surprising therefore to find the first charter to a Sinclair in Scotland was in 1162. It was to a Henry de St Clair, not from the King but from his 'employer/patron' Sir Richard de Morville, High Constable of Scotland, for the lands at Herdmanston, about fifteen miles east of Edinburgh. Henry had to provide knight service to Richard and thus became known as Sir Henry. That was an important feature in the feudal system and was widely used both by the King and Barons. Henry was then granted more land by Richard's son William at Carfrae in Lauderdale, about ten miles south of Herdmanston. It is believed there were two sons of Sir Henry – Sir Alan and Sir John, who both married well and became increasingly influential in the Borders. As the power of the de Merville's rapidly declined so the Sinclairs aligned themselves with the Earl of Dunbar who was close to the King. Sir John's son Sir Robert (Rob de Sco Claro) witnessed a charter at the Royal Court in 1203. His name was the last on the list but the king's was the first and amongst the others was William Comyn, Earl of Buchan - another family with whom close ties were made. Robert fought with King Alexander of Scotland in the Scottish English war of 1215 -17. The Sinclairs were now firmly established in the lands south of Edinburgh.

In the late 1100s King William of Scotland moved his court north because the English were occupying Edinburgh Castle and Sir Robert of Herdmanston was probably in Aberdeen which is Comyn country in the early 1200's as were John and William Sinclair. William appears to be a retainer in the Comyn family and is later also in Edinburgh. It is then that the Sinclairs probably acquired land in Aberdeenshire. A John de St Clare (Sinclair) certainly owned land there in 1281.

It is likely the Sir Henry Sinclair II who lived at Herdmanston in the mid 1200s was Sir Henry I's grandson and his son Sir John Sinclair I of Herdmanston fought against the rebellious Thane of Argyll before his daughter married (although the paperwork is missing) Sir Colin Campbell of Lochawe and helped found what became the Campbell dynasty. Sir John built a 'no expenses spared' chapel at his home and also commissioned a book of choral music sung at Mass.

A fierce power struggle had taken place over who controlled the regency council of King Alexander III was won by the Comyn family. The King dispensed with the council in 1261 and in the same year a land charter from Robert the Bruce's grandfather was witnessed by four people, one of whom was a William Sinclair who was clearly part of the Comyn cabal. He became a very close and influential to the King and two years later was Sheriff of Edinburgh, Linlithgow and Haddington. Ten years later the King made this a lifetime appointment. He was made guardian to the eldest son of the King. On 14 September 1279, some 120 years after Henry Sinclair gained his land at Herdmanston, King Alexander III granted William Sinclair, who was probably unrelated, the lands at Rosslyn and Catcune to be held in service of half a knight. It was this family that soon became the premier Sinclair family in Scotland.

With the death of King Alexander III's only surviving heir in 1284, the political elite of Scotland, including the now Sir William Sinclair, met at Scone and agreed the next monarch should be Margaret, the infant daughter of King Erik II of Norway and King Alexander's daughter Margaret. With her death, and King Edward I of England keen to absorb Scotland into his kingdom, there was a period of great uncertainty in which Sir William played a significant role. He was captured at the Battle of Dunbar in 1296 as part of the group of rebellious Scots who tried to stand up to King Edward and was taken to the Tower of London. One of his sons, Thomas, was killed and two others, Henry (later released) and William were captured. Two other Sinclairs, Alexander and Reginald, also possibly sons of Sir William, were also captured. When Sir William died is not certain but he was survived by, Sir Henry who succeeded him at Rosslyn and William, who became Bishop of Dunkeld. At this time this southern part of Scotland was under English control so the Sinclairs, like many others, paid homage to King Edward I otherwise their lands would have been confiscated. Before April 1312 Sir Henry changed allegiance to Robert the Bruce as soon afterwards did Sir William of Herdmanston. Together with 'William - the Fighting Bishop' – a title given to him after his courageous display at a battle against the English near Inverkiething in 1317 - these two major Sinclair families fought at the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314. After it Robert the Bruce presented Sir William of Herdmanston with a sword inscribed with *Le Roi me donne* (the King gives me) on one side and *St Cler me porte* (St Clair carries me) on the other for his bravery. Sir William died at the Battle of Teba in Spain in 1330 when accompanying Sir James Douglas, who had been made overlord of the land occupied by Sir William. Sir William's son, Sir John II, married Margaret Sinclair daughter of Sir Henry of Roslin uniting the families for possibly the first time. Sir Henry, who was the 12th out of 31 barons to sign (the order of signature denoted one's importance) the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320, married Alice de Fenton and it was through this marriage that he added considerably more land to his estate including some near Inverness. He held the important position of Justiciar of Forests and Baillie of Caithness in 1321 which meant he was the King's tax collector there.

Sir William Sinclair II of Roslin succeeded his probable father, Sir Henry, and gained more influence when King David II came back from being a prisoner of the English, who rewarded him for his loyalty. The Sinclair fortunes, with the younger children forming their own branches of the family such as the Sinclairs of Longformacus, were growing rapidly and successfully with the transition from the Bruces to the Stewart monarchs. A substantial increase took place when William married Isabella of Strathearn daughter of Malise V Earl of Strathearn, Caithness and Orkney. She became the last surviving heiress of the Norse Line of the Jarldom of Caithness and Orkney even though the Norse had acknowledged that Caithness was part of Scotland in the Treaty of Perth in 1266. She owned land in Caithness, as well as Orkney and Shetland which were still owned by Norway. The title, equivalent to a Prince, returned to the Norse crown as

there was no male heir with a heritable right. However in 1379, King Haakon of Norway granted Sir William's and Isabella's son, Sir Henry of Roslin was granted the title subject to a number of conditions – some of which he wilfully broke. The Sinclairs of Roslin for the next one hundred years successfully served, and had to provide armed knights and men for, two monarchs – the Kings of Scotland and Norway – defying the old tradition that one cannot serve two masters. The family's wealth and power increased hugely and they also controlled one of two trade routes round Britain – the other being the Dover Strait between England and France. Earl Henry (Sir Henry of Roslin) married Jean Haliburton and their large family did well – only one of the eleven daughters did not marry someone with a title and his second son became Governor of Shetland securing the property there. His date of death is unknown and subject to speculation.

Henry and Jean's son, Earl Henry II, married Lady Egidia Douglas and they were given more land by her father in Stirling and she then inherited the barony of, and land in, Nithsdale in Dumfriesshire. He was one of fifty Scottish nobles captured at the Battle of Homildon in 1402 but was soon freed with the payment of a ransom. He was custodian of Prince James, the young heir to the Scottish throne.

William Sinclair III of Rosslyn, 3rd Earl of Orkney, succeeded his father Henry and is probably the most influential Sinclair ever. He became Chancellor of Scotland, organized and led the embassy taking Princess Margaret (daughter of King James I of Scotland) to Paris with a retinue of 1,200 to marry the future King of France, was granted the Earldom of Caithness by King James II thus holding two Earldoms from different monarchs and successfully managed a wide variety of land holdings and business interests throughout Scotland. He started the construction of that 'moste curious werke' Rosslyn Chapel - now of international fame. He foresaw that he would have to surrender the Earldom of Orkney when Orkney and Shetland became part of Scotland which they did and prepared for it by acquiring non-royal land there. He married twice and effectively disinherited his eldest son by his first marriage William, Lord Sinclair. He carefully distributed his holdings between his two sons by the second marriage with the eldest William receiving the title and lands of the Earl of Caithness while his second son Oliver received the lands in the south of Scotland. This family became Earls of Rosslyn in 1801. He also fathered illegitimate children, the ablest of whom was Sir David Sinclair of Sumburgh, who had a conspicuously successful career firstly in Norway and then in Scotland. The Sinclairs were never the same potent force either in Scotland after Earl William's death and the break-up of the family land holdings, nor in Norway after Sir David's demise.