A HISTORY OF FINGASK CASTLE

First mention of the lands of Fingask occur in the Foundation Charter of the Abbey of Scone in 1115 by Alexander I. St. Peters Well, in the dell below the Castle, has been a place of pilgrimage since the days that pilgrims would land at Port Allan on the Tay to walk to the shrine of St. Queen Margaret at Dunkeld.

The oldest part of the Castle was built by Partick Bruce in 1594. The Threiplands first came to Fingask at the end of the 16th Century, when Partick Threipland married a Miss Bruce. The Bruces had lived at Fingask since at least the 14th Century. During the 18th Century Fingask was plundered and occupied by Government Dragoons.

It was confiscated by the Crown as one of the forfeited estates as a result of the Threipland family's support of the Jacobite cause. It was repurchased by Sir Stuart Threipland in 1783 and remained in the Threipland family until the early 1920's when it was purchased by Brian Gilroy who was responsible for extensive renovations and restoration work.

The Castle returned to Threipland ownership in 1968. Eminent visitors have included James VIII in 1716, Bonny Prince Charlie in 1745 and Sir Walter Scott. The Threipland's unwise political choices and the oddities of life have meant that the Threipland family have bought Fingask four times in the last 400 years!

The topiary's odd shapes are characteristic of the general style at Fingask, a place which has never paid much attention to fashion, has sometimes been behind the times, sometimes in advance of them, but mostly has ignored them completely. The estate has belonged to the Threipland family for most of the past 400 years, though they had to buy it back four times. (They lost it twice in the 18th Century, for supporting the old and then the young pretender. Cue the obvious comment by Lady Bracknell in the voice of Dame Edith.) Conscious ornamental gardening seems to have begun here in the late seventeenth century when Sir Patrick, the Threipland of the day, and his resoundingly named second wife, Eupheme Conqueror, planted quantities of box, holly and yew, which tradition has it eventually became the first pieces of Fingask topiary.

Nowadays, the topiary pieces are mostly arranged in an erratic sort-of-line in front of the Castle (not in a line any sergeant-major would allow to pass muster). As a visitor comes up the steep slope from the village they provide, as the first things are seen, a quirkily dramatic 'The aliens have landed' moment. One group of pieces is reputed to represent the crown jewels but, just as they are arranged according to no particular pattern, so most have no particular subject. What they do have, though, is a common style: a very informal one, of drunken leanings and irregular swirls; and it is precisely that home-made, hand-made, doing-our-own-thing quality which gives them their charm.

Originally that charm was enhanced by an even odder accompaniment, one even more suggestive of a landing of aliens: Fingask's collection of almost life-sized statues, dotted at random among the topiary. Made at some point in the first half of the nineteenth century, carved from single pieces of granite, later covered in a cement wash, these naively realistic pieces of 'folk art' were described by Gavin Stamp as the nastiest things he'd ever seen. (A comment which, characteristically, was repeated to me with great glee by Fingask's current owner, Andrew Threipland.)

Many of the groups of statues have literary subjects. They commemorate scenes from the works of favourite Scottish authors of the day, including Burns (from *Tam O'Shanter*, Tam and his wife Kate, and the three jolly beggars), his disciple Alexander Wilson (Watty and Meg, from his song of that name) and Scott (from the Lay of the Last Minstrel).

Among them, though, is one exception, which by its complete inappropriateness is, in this bizarre assemblage, somehow completely appropriate: a single figure representing Pitt the Younger.

The main creator of the statues was apparently a Dundee man, Peter Anderson, though some of the later ones may have been by his son. There is no firm evidence for the date of their creation. It is usually assumed to have been the 1840s but that seems doubtful. First, because the elder Anderson was by then indeed elderly (he died during that decade) and, second, because it is difficult to imagine why Pitt should be so honoured, 40 years after his death and when the Napoleonic Wars were becoming a distant memory. Sadly, though in his day Anderson had a considerable local reputation and even exhibited his work as far afield as Liverpool, little information seems to have survived about his career or about his work elsewhere. And I don't know of any other actual pieces by him which have survived. If anyone reading this does, I should be delighted to hear from them.

For much of the nineteenth century, the inhabitants of Fingask were a bachelor, Sir Peter, the last Threipland baronet, and his three spinster sisters. No one knows why they had the statues installed. No one knows if they commissioned those specific subjects or if they were bought as it were 'off the shelf'. Whether they commissioned them or chose them from among Anderson's existing pieces, no one knows why they dose those subjects rather than others. The whole assemblage of topiary remains fascinating because the reasons behind its existence are so mysterious.

In recent years, Andrew Threipland has moved many of the statues from their original positions, because, as he puts it, 'I thought they looked like a graveyard'. Now they have mostly become formal vista-stoppers at various points throughout the garden. For example, Pitt and the Three Jolly Beggars now contemplate each other – disapprovingly in Pitt's case, bibulously in that of the beggars – from either end of The Parade, a long grassed promenade running out from the side of the Castle. Moving them has had obvious advantages – but obvious disadvantages, too.