Pitsligo Castle & Ivan the Terrible

Until the mid-16th century, Pitsligo Castle stood as a simple keep, much like many other. In this fairly poor corner of Aberdeenshire, it would be reasonable to expect that it might have remained like that, perhaps with some simple extensions, but that was not the case. A period of considerable building activity occurred in the late 1500s, which may or may not be related to a curious historical event that happened nearby.

In 1556, Ivan the Terrible, Czar of all the Russias, sent an Ambassador and a shipload of treasure (supposedly furs, amber, gold and lots of other precious goodies) to Mary Tudor (elder daughter of Henry VIII, and half-sister of the future Elizabeth I), the ruling Queen of England, with whom he wished to form an alliance. It is said to have been the richest treasure ever loaded onto one ship!

Unfortunately, as the 'Edward Bonaventure' sailed down the North Sea with the Russian Ambassador and all the goodies onboard, a huge storm blew up and when the ship tried to find shelter in the Moray Firth, it was driven ashore near Quarry Head – just 2 miles west of Pitsligo Castle. By the time the authorities reached the wreck, the treasure was nowhere to be found!

There followed a flurry of diplomatic activity between the courts of England, Scotland and Russia (whose Ambassador had survived the wreck and seen much of his treasure being salvaged). Mary Queen of Scots being still a child, Scotland was being ruled by a Regent - her mother, Mary de Guise, who ordered a judicial enquiry into the disappearance. The enquiry was apparently conducted in the Hall of Pitsligo Castle’s old keep, where the two main suspects, Forbes of Pitsligo and Fraser of Philorth were interviewed. The lairds pleaded complete ignorance, there was a fair bit of shoulder shrugging, “Fit likes” and “Dinna kens” and that was pretty much the end of the business!

Except - that the properties of Pitsligo and Philorth both thrived from that time on - in fact the two families even went on to build their own towns nearby!! The Frasers built the town and port of Fraserburgh (which even had a university for a while) and the Forbses built Rosehearty. In 1577 a substantial new ‘palace block’ was added onto the east side of Pitsligo Castle, to be followed by various other extensions and improvements over the following years, which changed the simple 15th century keep into the substantial courtyard castle that we see the ruins of today.

It would seem likely that much of this was funded inadvertently by Ivan the Terrible’s wealthy imperial treasure!

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THIS MAP SHOWS THE LOCATIONS OF ROSEHEARTY AND FRASERURGH

