

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

Part 14: Aberdour Castle

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Aberdour Castle (Fig. 1) is located on the southern coast of Fife on the northern bank of the Firth of Forth. Parts of the castle date back to the early 13th century and it was extended in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries. It is one of the oldest datable castles still standing in Scotland. However, only the 17th-century wing is still roofed and the tower has mostly collapsed. The castle has been owned in turn by the Mortimer, Randolph and Douglas families and is now in the care of Historic Scotland. The Earls of Morton, the last owners, were part of the Douglas family.

In volume 5 of *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*¹ of 1892 Thomas Ross identified a vertical dial built into a niche in the corner of the castle. He said:

“This quaint dial [Fig. 2] is placed in a kind of niche formed on a projecting corner of the castle; it cuts diagonally across the corner, and faces in a south west direction. Over one of the windows in this part of the castle are the initials of William, Earl of Morton, who built it between the years 1606 and 1648, the year of his death. Since the sketch of this dial was made, it has been pointed out that on the upper corners it contains the initials of William, Earl of Morton, and Anne, Countess of Morton, with the date beneath 1635. These are all faintly cut, and easily escape observation.”

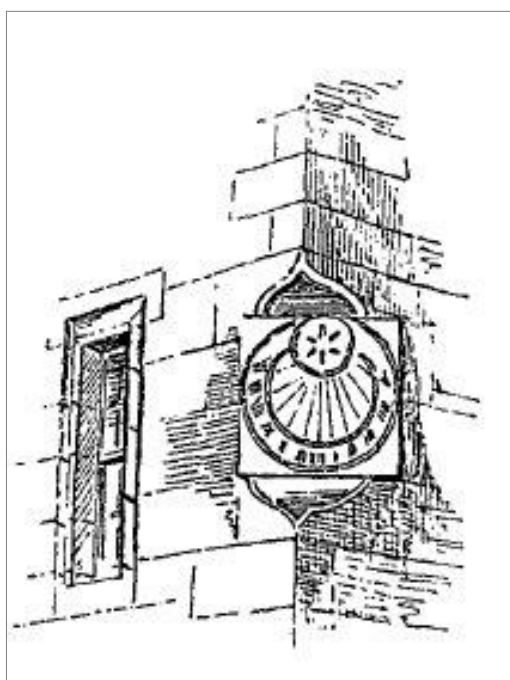


Fig. 2. Ross's sketch of the vertical dial.



Fig. 1. Aberdour Castle.

It can be seen from Fig. 3 that in a recent restoration, the initials mentioned by Ross have been picked out and can be easily seen today, but the date of 1635 has been lost. A gnomon, missing in Ross's day, has been added. Despite Ross's note that the dial faces in a south west direction, today it faces due south.

However, this is not the only sundial at this location, although it was the only one in 1892. Ross did record a horizontal dial at Aberdour House, also known as “The



Fig. 3. The vertical dial today.



Fig. 4. The horizontal dial showing the vertical dial in the background.



Fig. 5. Ross's sketch of the horizontal dial.

Place" next door to the castle, and this dial is now in the castle's garden (Fig. 4). Ross said:

"This quaint dial [Fig. 5], drawn from a sketch by Mr. John D. Michie, artist, stands in the gardens of "The Place" of Aberdour. It belongs to the second class of horizontal dials. Its square ornamented pedestal, resting on four large balls, is similar in idea to the pedestal of the dial at Pitreavie, about four miles distant, and both rest on a raised pavement, which is of a circular form here, and octagonal at Pitreavie. From information supplied by Mr. Patrick Borrowman, it appears that on the north-west face of the pedestal there is a coronet with the insignia of the Order of the Garter, and the motto HONI SOIT QUI MAL Y PENSE, and on the south-west face the Douglas heart. The south-east face contains what appears to be a clam-shell, and the north-east face a grotesque and undecipherable sculpture. The dial is set north-east and



Fig. 6. Detail of the horizontal dial showing the remains of the gnomon and the numerals going all the way around the dial.

south-west, so that twelve o'clock falls exactly at the north-east corner of the stone. The letters are on the edge of the stone, and a circle contains the degrees numbered on it within."

Ross's comment that this dial belongs to the second class of horizontal dials, merely reflects the fact that the dial is carved directly on to the stone table of the pedestal, rather than having a metal dial placed on it.

This stone dial has unfortunately lost its second replacement gnomon in recent years through vandalism (Fig. 6), but it is correctly orientated. Unusually, the Roman numerals go completely around the 24-hour clock.

The dial mentioned by Ross as being at Pitreavie is now at Inveresk Garden in East Lothian and will be included in a future article. Interestingly, there is another dial with a similar pedestal only about one mile away at St Colme House, also on a raised pavement, this time of square form. Three similar pedestals within a few miles – could all three pedestals be the work of the same mason?

There is yet another dial at Aberdour Castle, this time in the centre of the walled garden. It was originally at Castle Wigg, now a ruin, north of Whithorn in the very south west of Scotland and was moved here in the 1970s.

Ross obviously did not visit this location himself, as he says:

"We are indebted to Mr. Galloway² for a sketch of this fine sundial [Fig. 7]. It is of square, massive construction, 8 feet 5 inches high, and has four dial faces, each about 16 inches square (on one of which there is a table from which the difference between Greenwich and local time may be calculated). On the top ball there is a central line divided to indicate time by the shadow travelling round the ball itself, a divided circle with a gnomon at top, and another on one side at bottom."

There are a couple of errors with this description and sketch, as no mention is made of the four reclining dials

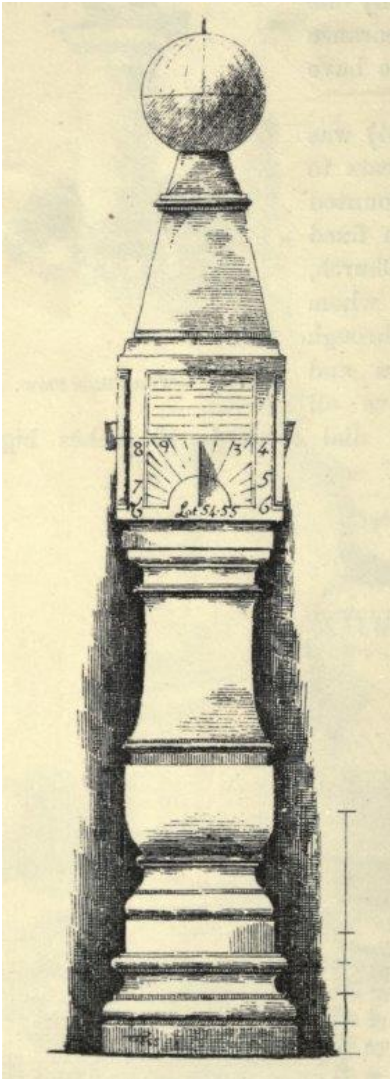


Fig. 7. Sketch of the multi-faceted dial.



Fig. 8. The multi-faceted dial showing the reclining faces.

(Fig. 8) that sit above the main cube and they are not shown on Mr Galloway's sketch. They do appear to be contemporary with the rest of the dial. Also his sketch shows Lat 54/55 on the north face of the cube whereas it is actually 54/45 (Fig. 9), the correct latitude for Castle Wigg.

There has been considerable damage to the south reclining face, which was poorly restored in the 1970s, and this is likely to be when the gnomons on the dial were replaced. Many of these copper gnomons aren't seated properly against the dial face but have a slight gap, and many are wrongly positioned.

I was originally confused, however, regarding the table on the north face which can be seen in Fig. 9, and Ross's (or Galloway's) statement that its purpose was to calculate the difference between Greenwich and local time, as I couldn't make any sense of it. (Castle Wigg is around 20 minutes behind Greenwich Mean Time.) However, if you accept that "Greenwich time" in this instance meant Local Mean Time and "local time" meant Local Solar Time then it makes sense that this is an Equation of Time table.

That indeed is what it looks like, but the figures on it did not immediately make sense. I would have normally expected that the first column would have been dates of the



Fig. 9. The north face of the multi-faceted dial showing the latitude and the non-intuitive EoT table



Fig. 10. Part of the EoT table for four dates in October (1, 7, 15 and 29). 'Oct' is written running upwards on the left of the block of eight numbers and the 'SC' which follows 'Oct' stands for 'Slower Clock'.

month whilst the second column would be the minutes fast or slow. This obviously wasn't the case, as the figures appear to be all over the place.

But thanks to some expert advice, it does make sense, but not in an intuitive way.

For each month (see Fig. 10 where October is taken as an example) there are eight numbers arranged in four rows. The first and third rows are dates of the month and the second and fourth rows are the corresponding EoT values. These are appropriate for the first half of the 18th century using the Julian calendar, which was replaced by the Gregorian calendar in 1752.

The fact that the table uses the Julian calendar ties in nicely with the dial's probable early 18th-century date. Aberdour Castle is well worth a visit and is open every day, but closed on a Thursday and Friday during the winter months.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge gratefully the expert advice from Frank King and John Davis, particularly regarding the definition of Greenwich and local time as described by Galloway, and the interpretation of the EoT table on the north face of the multi-faceted dial.

REFERENCES and NOTES

1. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892)
2. William Galloway was an architect practising in Whithorn, which is only a few miles from Castle Wigg. He provided plans for ten of the castles and churches, including Castle Wigg, that MacGibbon and Ross described in *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland* and *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Scotland* (published by David Douglas in 1896). He was born in 1832 or 1833 and died on 11 September 1897.

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