

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

Part 16: Easter Coates House

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The architects David MacGibbon and Thomas Ross co-wrote *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*,¹ a five-volume work published in stages between 1887 and 1892. As we know, the second half of volume 5 concerned itself with the sundials that they had encountered during the course of gathering information for their work.

Thomas Ross is generally given the credit for the section on sundials, probably because he presented a paper entitled *The Ancient Sundials of Scotland* to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, which was subsequently published in 1890.² In that paper he stated that the illustrations had all been made by himself either from sketches or from photographs. These same illustrations were used in volume 5 of *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland* as well as the text virtually word for word, apart from some additional dials that were included in the later work.

Just occasionally a sundial would find its way into one of the other volumes of MacGibbon and Ross's work, but then it would also normally be referenced in volume 5. However, at least one example was missed.

East (or Easter) Coates House (Fig. 1) is only included in volume 2 of *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*.³ Of the house, Ross says:

"This old country mansion of the seventeenth century was formerly in the western suburbs of Edinburgh, but during the last fifty years the town has greatly extended in that direction, and has completely surrounded the old mansion. It now stands in the grounds attached to St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral, having been bequeathed, along with the lands adjoining, by the late Misses Walker for the purpose of building and endowing the Cathedral."

"The angle turrets of the south gable are very large for their position, and reduce the gable to a small slip of wall between them. This is a good example of the manner in which the gable came to be engulfed by the angle turrets. As often happens in late houses, the angle turrets are of sufficient size internally to be used as small dressing-rooms."

"The dormers are finished in the simple manner not uncommon in seventeenth-century work, i.e. the gablets are built with ashlar, the edges of which are cut so as to form the skews, without any moulding or separate coping on the slope, but with a small moulding at the 'putt' or springing."

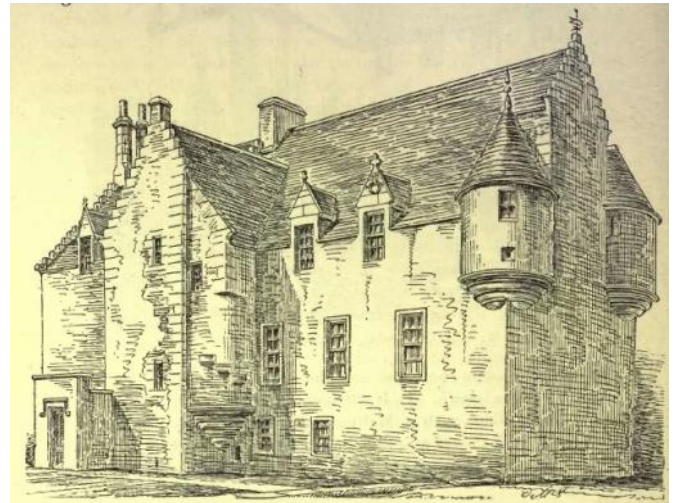


Fig. 1. Ross's sketch of Easter Coates House showing the sundial on the nearest turret.

They are also crowned with the pattern of finials, then almost universal, viz., the Rose, the Thistle, and the Fleur-de-lis; and the south-west angle turret bears the never-failing sun-dial.

"The southmost dormer in the sketch contains a shield, with the date 1615, and the initials I.B. and M.B. [Fig. 2]. The former are those of John Byres, an Edinburgh merchant of eminence, by whom the house was built as a country residence. It is not clear for whom the initials M. B. stand. They would in this position naturally represent the proprietor's wife, but the monument in the Greyfriars'



Fig. 2. The southmost dormer today showing the date and initials.



Fig. 3. The Easter Coates sundial on the south west angle of the building.

Churchyard to the memory of 'John Byres of Coites' mentions that it was erected 'by his wife A. S. and children.'⁴ Sir John died in 1629, after having filled for six years the office of Treasurer of the City, for two years that of City and Suburban Bailie, six years Dean of Guild, and two years Lord Provost.

"Amongst other changes which this old mansion has undergone, a north wing has been added to it, in which many of the quaintly carved stones with curious inscriptions from the demolished houses of the Old Town of Edinburgh have been introduced and preserved. It is said that amongst other stones here inserted was the lintel from the town house of the worthy merchant, situated in Byres' Close (doubtless named after him), and which was demolished about fifty years. The lintel is stated to have contained the initials of Sir John and his wife, with the motto, 'Blessit be God in all his gifts', but no trace of it is now to be found. Carved stones from 'the French Ambassador's Chapel' and other buildings taken down when the 'South Bridge' over the Cowgate was erected, have also been preserved, either in the building or in the grounds of Coates House."

In the quite extensive text, only part of which is reproduced here, there is only the briefest mention of the sundial with no description of it whatsoever. This is surprising considering that it is, in my opinion, a fairly important example. So why was it virtually ignored?

Volume 2 was published three years before Thomas Ross presented his paper on *The Ancient Sundials of Scotland* and five years before volume 5 was published. Could it be that Ross had not yet developed his interest in sundials? In fact, in *The Ancient Sundials of Scotland*, Ross says that it was his publisher David Douglas who suggested that he produce the paper in the first place, and presumably was keen for it to be included in the later work too.

Or could it have been that David MacGibbon was the lead on Easter Coates House and Ross had no involvement? Notice the spelling that was used (sun-dial). This spelling

was in common use in Victorian times, but it was not a spelling that Ross used either in *The Ancient Sundials of Scotland* or in volume 5.

My own view is that it was probably a combination of both of the above. MacGibbon was the lead on Easter Coates House whilst Ross had not yet developed his interest in sundials, and because of the very brief mention, he missed it when he compiled his initial paper.

But what of the sundial itself? The only comment made is that it is on the south-west angle of the building (Fig. 3). This is in common with many 17th-century Scottish churches, although as can be read from the description above, Easter Coates House was a private dwelling and never a church.

The dial does bear some resemblance to a type of which there are only four known examples,⁵ three of which are on churches (Figs 4, 5 and 6) with another at Seton Palace in East Lothian (Fig. 7). The significant difference is the lack of a semi-cylinder on the Easter Coates example although there are other differences. The main similarity, other than the general shape of the stone block, is the proclining face on each of the dials.



Fig. 4. The sundial at Cockburnspath.



Fig. 5. The sundial at Fogo.



Fig. 6. The sundial at Oldhamstocks.



Fig. 7. The sundial at Seton Palace.



Fig. 8. Easter Coates sundial's proclining face.

The Easter Coates dial's proclining face is south facing and several Arabic numerals and hour lines can still be seen as well as the remains of the gnomon (Fig. 8). It also has east- and west-declining dials with only the east-declining dial having any remaining Arabic numerals (Figs 9 and 10), but both dials have gnomon holes. There is no evidence that

there have been dials on the vertical faces at the cardinal points.

How old is this dial? The three similar dials on churches are thought to be contemporary with their buildings and this would make them late 16th or possibly early 17th century. This ties in nicely with Easter Coates House's date of 1615. So was it part of the original building? Well, maybe but maybe not.

As can be noted from the description of Easter Coates House, many carved stones from the demolished houses in Edinburgh's Old Town were preserved at Easter Coates, although mostly at the north wing. Of course if the sundial was one of them, it wouldn't have been sited to the north at Easter Coates but would have been placed logically in its current position. It could possibly have been relocated from an Old Town church, or could it have come from the French Ambassador's chapel mentioned by Ross? However, that doesn't necessarily change its likely date which I am still inclined to think is early 17th century.



Fig. 9. Easter Coates sundial's east declining face.



Fig. 10. Easter Coates sundial's west declining face.

My original article ended here, but I still had a nagging thought that maybe the upper horizontal surface of the dial block contained a sundial. The only way to find out would be to gain access to the window in the turret above the dial.

The house in recent times has been used for the Cathedral's music school, so I thought the best option would be just to turn up at the door. Alas, when I did so, it was being used as a nursery school. Using the intercom, it was suggested that I phone their Head Office and I was given their phone number. The young lady there said as they only leased the building I would need permission from the Cathedral. On contacting the Cathedral they said that it was OK with them, but I would need permission from the nursery. When I phoned the nursery's Head Office again, I was asked when I would like to make an appointment. On explaining that I was standing at the door, she quickly said that she would get Paul the janitor to meet me and take me up to the turret.

Paul arrived very quickly and immediately asked if I knew of the sundial at Pilrig House in Edinburgh (Fig. 11). When I said that indeed I did and thought that it was a fine example, he said that he was a stonemason by trade and that he had carved it in the 1980s and was paid £1,800 for it. We were best friends from that point on!

When we arrived at the turret room, it was full of the nursery's soft play equipment which we started to remove. Immediately one of the young children asked why we were getting the soft play stuff out, as it wasn't time for it yet!



Fig. 11. The sundial at Pilrig House carved by the Easter Coates janitor in the 1980s.



Fig. 12. The upper horizontal dial face at Easter Coates viewed from the small window above.

At last we gained access, but the window was jammed. Undaunted, my new friend Paul pulled a screwdriver from his pocket and soon the window was open. There was a sundial (Fig. 12) on the upper surface!

In my mind, that changed things. If you were to site a sundial under an upper floor window in the 17th century, then you would logically have a dial face on its upper horizontal surface, so that you could just pop your head out of the window to check the time.

So although the dial could have come from a similar building in the Old Town, I now conclude that the sundial is original to Easter Coates. However, like the Courts of Law in Scotland's ability to have a 'not proven' verdict, there is insufficient evidence to support my conclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the young ladies at the nursery's Head Office and at the Cathedral who responded positively to my request when I gave them no advance notice at all, and in particular to Paul the janitor/stonemason who likewise was most helpful.

REFERENCES and NOTES

1. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892).
2. T. Ross: 'The Ancient Sundials of Scotland' *The Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 161–273, Neill and Company, Edinburgh (1890).
3. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland – Vol 2*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1887).
4. What Ross didn't realise was that John Byres had been married twice. The initials are those of his first wife, Mary Barclay.
5. Dennis Cowan: 'Scotland's oldest sundials – the forerunners to lectern sundials?', *BSS Bulletin* 24(ii), 31–33 (June 2012).

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