

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

Part 18: The Kelburn Castle Obelisks

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Kelburn Castle, the ancestral home of the Earls of Glasgow, has been in the family since the 13th century. It is in North Ayrshire on Scotland's west coast just a little south of the seaside town of Largs, and about 33 miles from Glasgow. Since 1977, the estate has been a Country Park open to the public.

In 2007 it was found that the harling which covers the walls of the castle was causing problems with the stonework

underneath and would have to be removed. But before that had to happen, the current Earl's children had the idea to give the harling a paint job. The Earl decided to bring in four graffiti artists from Brazil to carry out the work. As can be seen from Figs 1 and 2, the result was a little out of the ordinary!

But the reason for my visit, remarkable as the paint job was, was to see the two obelisk sundials which were in the grounds of the estate. Incidentally, Kelburn was the venue in September 1978 for BSS founder member Andrew Somerville's first foray into searching out Scotland's ancient sundials. It was an inauspicious start as it was pouring with rain. It apparently caused a great deal of laughter with the park wardens when Andrew said that he was there to see the sundials.¹

In volume 5 of *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*,² Thomas Ross had the following to say about Scotland's ancient obelisk sundials, of which only twenty-six complete examples are known to exist.

"This name, while it fairly describes the appearance of the dials of this class, has a further fitness from the circumstance that the Egyptian obelisks are believed, amongst other purposes, to have acted as gnomons.

"The constant parts of these dials are a square shaft, a bulged capital, and a tapering finial. Where the dial is of the normal type and unaltered, the shaft is divided on each side into five horizontal spaces by incised lines, thus presenting twenty compartments. These compartments are hollowed out with cup-shaped, heart-shaped, triangular, and other sinkings, which are generally lined so as to mark the hours, and were without doubt always meant to be so. The sharp edge of the figure casts the shadow, which is especially distinct in the angular shapes and at the top of the heart sinkings, where there is often a certain amount of undercutting.

"Stone gnomons of various forms are frequently left in the cup hollows, and metal stiles are to be found in all the dials. Occasionally some of the spaces are left blank, and on the north side initials, dates, and arms sometimes occur.

"The capital is always bulged out so as to form an octagon in the centre, with an upright facet on each of the eight sides, having a dial on each. Above and below each facet over the four sides of the shaft are sloping facets, with a reclining dial or a proclining dial on each the former being those dials whose faces slope towards the sky, and the



Figs 1 and 2. Kelburn Castle and its Brazilian graffiti paint job.

latter those whose faces slope towards the ground. The eight triangular pieces formed by the meeting of the square and octagon are cut out, and most effective shadows, from an artistic point of view, result from this arrangement, giving an air of dignity to the capital.

“The upright facets of the octagonal part have heart shaped and cup-shaped sinkings, as in the shaft; but the proclining and reclining parts seldom have sinkings. Nor has the tapering finial, although usually covered with dials, ever any sinkings; like the shaft, this part is divided by horizontal incised lines, the number of spaces, for which there appears to have been no rule, varying according to the height of the finial.

“The obelisk-shaped dials are generally set on some kind of base, consisting either of steps or a pedestal; the former frequently alternate, being set square and diagonally as they ascend. The pedestals have a general resemblance to each other, being frequently ornamented with representations of the sun and moon.”

The first of the two obelisks at Kelburn sits on three steps and is in the private garden just west of the castle. Ross tells us that:

“These companion dials adorn the gardens which surround the fine old castle of Kelburn. They seem to be in their original positions, and they are in no way designed to balance or harmonise with each other, not being visible from any point at the same time. The shafts are set diagonally on a moulded base. The obelisk of one of these dials [Fig. 3] terminates with a wrought-iron vane of delicate design and workmanship, enclosing the entwined and coroneted monogram of the Earl of Glasgow and his wife, the whole being surmounted with a Scotch thistle



Fig. 4. The vane on top of the finial today.

[Fig. 4]. This is beautiful piece of wrought-iron work; it was loose and otherwise worn by time, but the Earl of Glasgow has just had it carefully restored.

“There is the date 1707, with the initials EDG and CLC. These stand for David Boyle of Kelburn, who was created Lord Boyle in 1699, and Earl of Glasgow in 1703, and his first wife, Margaret Lindsay Crawford, daughter of the house of Kilbirnie.

“The dimensions of the dial are height of shaft, 3 feet 8 inches; height of capital, 1 foot 8 inches; height of finial, 2 feet 5½ inches; height of moulded base, 9 inches; total, 8 feet 6½ inches. The moulded base is 2 feet 1½ inches square, and the breadth of the shaft is 9½ inches.”

This dial is still in the same location today and looks to be virtually the same although some gnomons appear to have been replaced (Fig. 5). As with all obelisk dials, there are

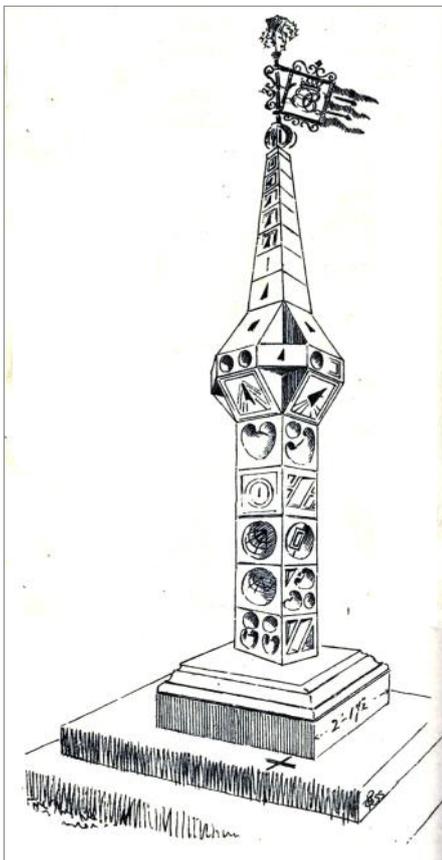


Fig. 3. Ross's sketch of the first obelisk.

Fig. 5. The first obelisk today viewed from the south-east.





Fig. 6. Close up of the capital's east face.

many cup hollows and heart and geometric sinkings as well as reclining and proclining dials. A close up of the east face of the obelisk capital is shown at Fig. 6.

Somerville obviously thought highly of this dial as he saw fit to use an illustration of it on the cover of his book, *The Ancient Sundials of Scotland*.³

The second obelisk is some distance away in what is now known as the New Zealand Garden, also private but occasionally open to the public. Ross says:

"The other dial [Fig. 7] is generally of the normal type, but certain deviations therefrom seem to show that it has been altered. The shaft has only four spaces, and there has been

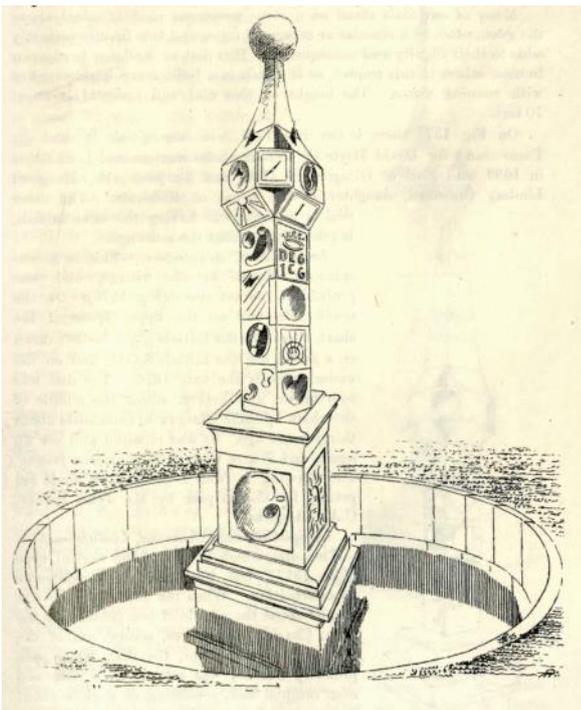


Fig. 7. Ross's sketch of the second obelisk.

mending done on it, and probably a space has been lost; and attention may be drawn to the unusual circumstance that the spaces on each face are not all of one size. The curved finial on the top and the ball termination are no doubt the result of a repair, like the altered finial at Craigiehall.⁴ The dial stands angle wise on a pedestal which resembles somewhat that of the Meggatland dial [now believed to be at the Burrell Collection in Glasgow]; on both there will be observed similar figures of the sun and moon.

"Many of our dials stand on a stone pavement slightly raised above the grass, often of a circular or octagonal form, and this feature certainly adds to their dignity and consequence. This dial at Kelburn is superior to most others in this respect, as it stands in a built stone basin supplied with running water. The height of this dial and pedestal is about 10 feet. This dial is undated, but having the same initials [as the other dial at Kelburn], is probably of about the same age."

Unfortunately, this dial has not fared very well. It still stands in the same stone basin that it did when Ross saw it, but the water is very low in the basin and does not appear to be running. Worse than that, the capital and finial have broken off from the shaft (Fig. 8). After a bit of rummaging around, the capital was found to be lying in the undergrowth nearby (Fig. 9). The finial and ball were also lying nearby although they were in many pieces. As Ross says, however, they were probably not original and had no dials on them.



Fig. 8. The broken obelisk today.



Fig. 9. The capital lying in the undergrowth.

Looking at Fig. 8 and Somerville's photograph from 1978 (Fig. 10) which were both taken from approximately the same position, the surrounding vegetation seems to have changed somewhat! The obelisk though looked to be the same in 1978 as it had in Ross's day.

But what about the castle's graffiti paint job? The castle is a category A listed building, so planning permission had to be obtained to allow the work to be carried out. In 2007, Historic Scotland agreed to the project and planning permission was then approved on the basis that the graffiti



Fig. 10. The second obelisk in 1978 (Photo: Andrew Somerville).

would be removed when the castle was re-harled, with a three-year time limit stipulated.

In 2010 the Earl formally wrote to Historic Scotland asking permission to keep the graffiti as a permanent feature as it was now a major tourist attraction. In fact, it had been named as one of the world's top ten examples of street art on a par with that of Banksy's⁵ art in Los Angeles.

Historic Scotland visited the site in 2012 and discovered that the harling was indeed severely damaging the castle walls and urged the Earl to remove it. Despite conflicting reports in the press that it was or was not going to be removed, at the time of writing, some four years later (November 2016) it was still in place.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES and NOTES

1. A. and A. Somerville: *On the Sundial Trail in Scotland*, Unpublished.
2. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892).
3. A. Somerville: *The Ancient Sundials of Scotland*, Rogers Turner Books, London (1994).
4. D. Cowan: *In the Footsteps of Thomas Ross Part 2 – The Sundials at Craigiehall*, *BSS Bulletin* 24(iii), pp. 16–18 (September 2012).
5. Banksy is a well-known graffiti artist.
See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banksy>

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