

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

Part 21: Pencaitland Parish Church (and Bowden Kirk)

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In Part 15 of this series of articles (on Scottish Churches),¹ I deliberately did not include Pencaitland Parish Church, as I had intended that it would be in a standalone article. At the same time, I mistakenly did not include Bowden Kirk. These omissions are rectified here.

Pencaitland Parish Church is in East Lothian, situated about 12 miles south-east of Edinburgh. The church is mainly of 16th/17th-century origin with many alterations over the centuries, and probably stands on medieval foundations.

It is unique amongst Scotland's churches in that it has three sundials, all of them different. In volume 5 of *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*,² Thomas Ross says:

"This is an extremely interesting church, presenting as it does examples of architecture ranging over a period of about three centuries. The earliest part—the Winton aisle—is pure Gothic of the fourteenth century, and not being connected with our subject is not shown here. The tower at the west end [Fig. 1] is dated, over the doorway, 1631.

"The main body of the church is believed to have been built soon after 1560. The west buttress of this part, shown in detail in [Fig. 2], contains a fine sundial with three faces. [Fig. 3] shows another dial which terminates the east gable. It will be observed that there is still another dial near the top of the tower, its gnomon being visible in the view."

Perhaps this description was written before Ross developed his interest in sundials as it is included not in the section on sundials, but within an earlier section in this volume specifically on churches. In the section on sundials he merely comments that:

"There are five³ dials on this church. Three are placed on the three faces of the south-west buttress, one on the east gable, and one at the top of the tower."

The first sundial indeed has three faces and is wrapped around the south-west buttress on the main body of the church (Figs 4 and 5). It is in a quite poor condition with no numerals remaining and only some hour lines on the south face, which declines slightly west of south. The hour lines appear to have been re-carved but it is debatable whether

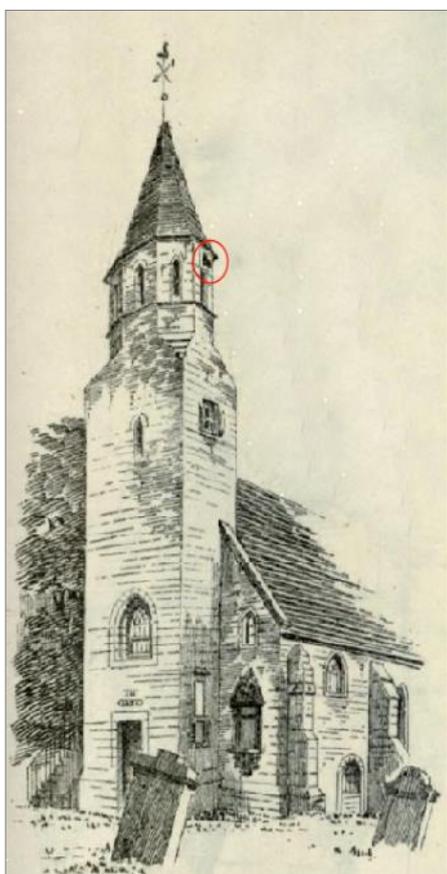


Fig. 1 (left). Ross's sketch of the tower at Pencaitland church with its sundial circled.



Fig. 2. Ross's sketch of the three faced sundial on the south-west buttress on the church at Pencaitland.

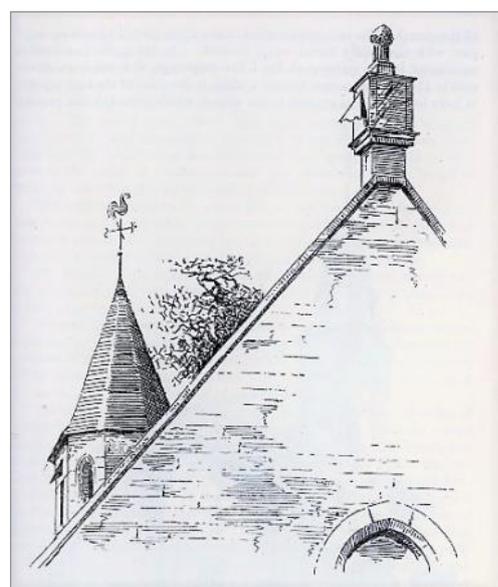


Fig. 3. Ross's sketch of the east gable of Pencaitland church showing the south and east faces of the cube dial as well as the sundial on the tower.



Fig. 4. The south and west faces of the dial on the south-west buttress of Pencaitland church.



Fig. 5. The south and east faces of the dial on the south-west buttress of Pencaitland church.

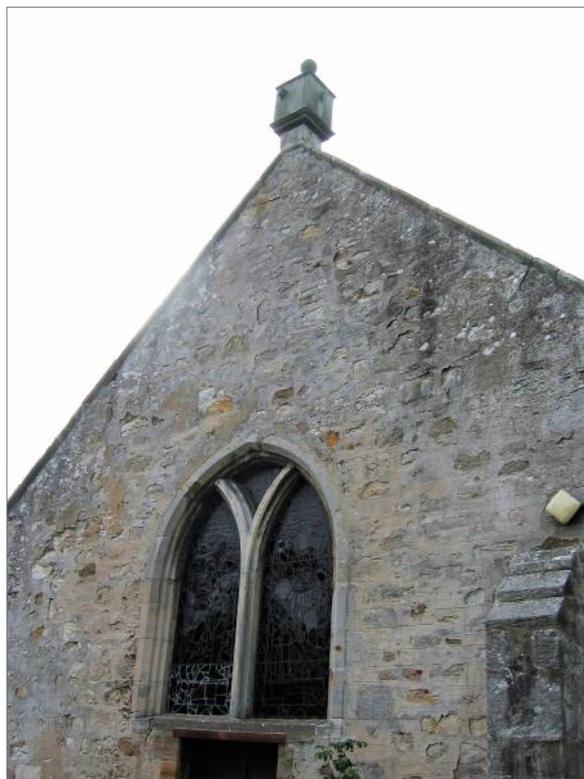


Fig. 6. The east gable at Pencaitland church with the cube dial on top and the north and east faces in view.



Figs 7 and 8. The cube dial at Pencaitland church. Above: the south and east faces; below: the south and west faces.

the east and west faces have ever been marked out. All three faces have metal gnomons but they may have been replaced at some point. I'm not convinced that it ever was a working sundial.

As Ross says, the second sundial is on the east gable (Figs 6 to 8). It is a stone cube with dials on all four faces, and is topped with a pineapple-like finial. All faces have Arabic numerals and are complete with intact metal gnomons. It is without doubt the finest of the dials on this church.

The poorest of the dials is next. This third sundial (Fig. 9) is a south-facing vertical single-face stone dial high on the tower at the west end of the church, which contains an octagonal belfry and a dovecote. The dial is so high that it must have been of no use whatsoever! The metal gnomon



Fig. 9. The dial on the tower at Pencaitland church.

exists but in a precarious state. Only by zooming in closely, can some very faint hour lines and a possible Roman iii be seen. I'm not surprised that Ross gives no detailed sketch of this dial.

As to the sundial at Bowden Kirk near Melrose in the Scottish Borders, Ross says:

"A sundial [Fig. 10], a feature very common on the churches of this period, occupies the usual position at the south-west corner [Fig. 11], a few feet below a skew-stone, bearing a fleur-de-lis. The dial is dated 1666, and tells the hours with accuracy."

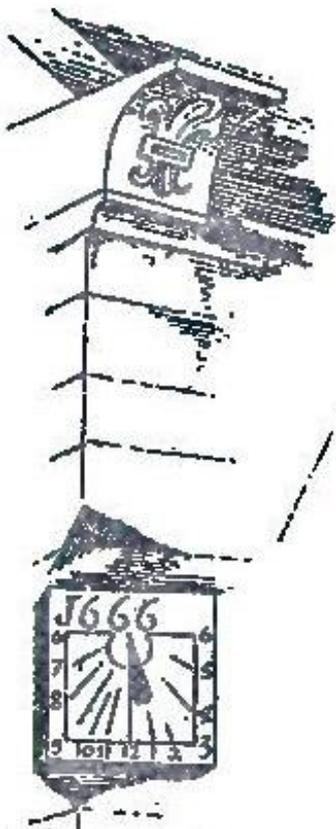


Fig. 10. Ross's sketch of the sundial at Bowden Kirk.

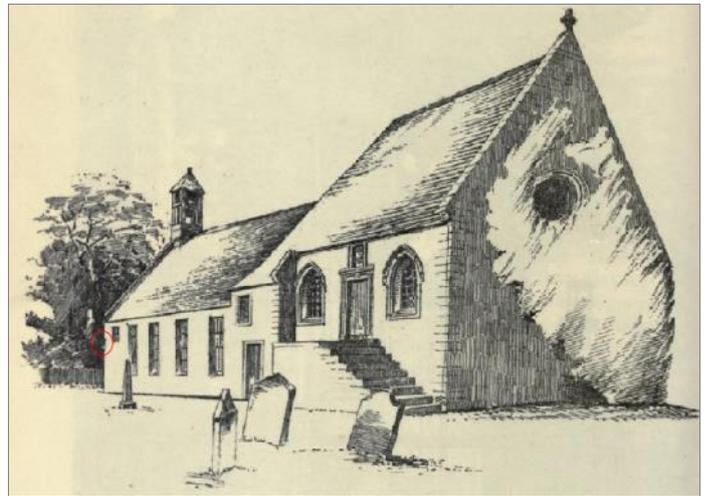


Fig. 11. Ross's sketch of Bowden Kirk with the sundial at the south-west corner (circled).



Fig. 12. The Bowden Kirk sundial today.

Although parts of Bowden Kirk are from the 15th century, most of the present kirk dates from the 17th century and Ross comments that as usual for a church of this age, the dial is on the south-west corner. Unfortunately, this sundial is no longer in place. It has been replaced by a modern dial generally of the same design. This new dial shows the years 1766 and 1989 (Fig. 12) and a cross patty for noon. Other than that they are fairly similar.

One noticeable difference, however, is that in Ross's sketch in Fig. 11, it can be seen that the dial is canted to the south (the church faces about 15 degrees to the east of south), whereas the new dial (Fig. 12), which like the original is a south-facing design, is not canted. This is, unfortunately, a major error in the installation.

Although the skew-stone mentioned by Ross is still in place (Fig. 13), there is no longer any sign of the fleur-de-lis.

In order to find out what happened to the original dial and some information of the new dial, I e-mailed the church secretary, but other than a note to say that it had been



Fig. 13. The dial at the south-west corner of Bowden Kirk with the skew-stone above. The external bell rope, a common feature of many 17th-century Scottish churches, can also be seen.

passed on to the Fabric Convenor, no further response was received. So unfortunately I have been unable to find out any relevance to the year of 1766. I assume that 1989 was when the new dial was installed.

BSS member Kevin Karney visited this church a few years ago and was advised by someone at the church that the maker of the dial was Ken Grant, but that is the limit of our knowledge.

REFERENCES and NOTES

1. D. Cowan: 'In the Footsteps of Thomas Ross Part 15: Sundials on Scottish Churches', *BSS Bulletin*, 28(ii), 20–25 (June 2016).
2. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892).
3. Confusingly, in this second passage, Thomas Ross is now counting the first sundial as three dials.

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