

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

Part 13: The One That Got Away – Nearly

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Some of the sundials identified by Thomas Ross in volume 5 of *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*¹ are very easy to find today, others less so.

But when I read what Ross had to say about the dial at Polton House in Midlothian I just knew that it was going to be difficult. He said:

“This drawing shows the ruins of what has been either one or two dials, apparently of exceptional design. They are now built up against the garden wall so as to form a rockery, and are here sketched as they appear [Fig. 1].

“The three lower dial-stones have been part of one structure. They are unusually fine in workmanship and design, all the figures and ornaments being raised in relief. The lowest stone is a cube of about 22½ inches, and has large cup-hollows of about 13 inches diameter. The next two tiers of dials are each cut out of one stone, the lower being a square of 13 inches by 22 inches in height, containing the date 1685; the next, of a polygonal section, is 9¼ inches high, with faces of about 6 inches in breadth. On one of the exposed sides are the initials I.I. and A.M. These have all formed part of one dial, and when the exceptionally large size of the lowest stone is considered, along with the careful finish and beauty of the whole, we are warranted in concluding that this must have been one of the finest of Scottish dials.

“The dial-stone immediately above, with the figure of Death and his scythe encircling the globe, appears to have belonged to a different structure. The two carved stones on either side are suggestive of having belonged to a dial similar in design to those of Newbattle;² the left-hand figure would fit such a position as those standing on the pedestal of the latter, while the carved head on the right hand, reclining on the scroll, recalls the similar features on the upper part of the Newbattle dials, and so likewise does the carved tapering finial. The lintel-like stone on which this latter rests may or may not be a part of the dial. It contains the date 1672.”

So these dials were built up as to form a rockery. Would that rockery still be there one hundred and twenty-three years later? But after a little more investigation, when I found that Polton House was demolished in the 1970s, this interesting dial went straight into the missing file.

A couple of years later, whilst I was in the Scottish Borders, I recalled that I had previously noted that there

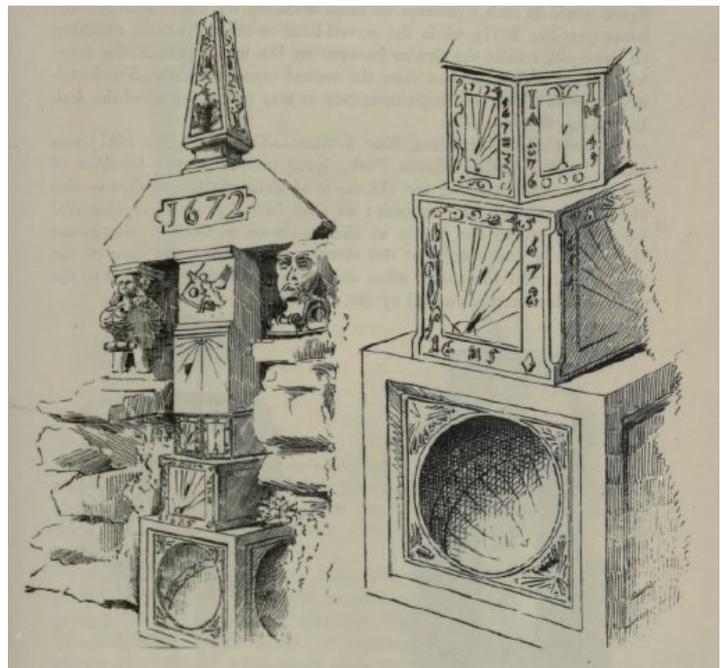


Fig. 1. Ross's sketch of the Polton House dials.

was a sundial at a house called Birkinshaw near Traquair. My wife and I were in that area, so I decided to see if I could find it.

After a few false starts, I eventually found the house. I was surprised to find that it was a relatively modern 1950/60s bungalow. It didn't look too promising but I rang the doorbell anyway. No-one answered. So that was that.

A few days later I carried out further investigation on the internet as I wasn't sure that it was the right house. It turned out that it was the right house, but more interestingly I uncovered a planning application from 2011 to move a sundial together with some 'stones' from Birkinshaw to a new location – Arniston House in Midlothian.

This sounded very interesting especially when the planning application noted that the 'stones' originally came from Polton House. Could this possibly be Polton House's missing sundial?

A covering letter from Mrs Dundas-Bekker, the owner of Arniston House, in support of the planning application tells the story better than I can.

An abridged version of this letter says:

“As the owner of Arniston House, Midlothian, I can confirm that it is my intention to re-erect the sundials and stones at Arniston. My daughter and I conduct tours round our home and inform visitors on the Dundas connection with Polton House.

“The stones from Polton House were presented by my father Sir Philip Dundas, to one of his younger brothers, James Dundas, in about 1946. James Dundas eventually set up the stones in the garden of his new house, Birkinshaw at Traquair in 1957.

“In view of the imminent sale of Birkinshaw, my cousin (and heir of James Dundas), Davina Findlay, wishes to return the stones to Midlothian. Although Polton House was sold by my father in 1946 and demolished by the subsequent owners in the 1970s, the archives and a number of other artefacts from Polton survive at Arniston. The stones will be re-united with these other records of Polton and will be well cared for in their new location at Arniston.”

What a stroke of luck, although the letter seemed to major on the stones and not the sundial, this must surely be the sundial described by Ross, but I had to see it to be certain. I should note that the planning application was approved, so the sundial hopefully was now at Arniston.

I eventually made contact with Henrietta Dundas, the daughter mentioned in the above letter. She indeed confirmed that the sundial was at Arniston and that although it was in her mother’s private garden, I was welcome to visit to see it.



Fig. 2. Arniston House.

A couple of weeks later, my wife and I visited Arniston (Fig. 2), and as soon as we entered the private garden I could see that this almost certainly was the missing Polton House dial. There were changes, the lowest (and largest) dial was missing, but the two tiers of dials above as described by Ross were there, albeit now mounted on a newer column (Fig. 3), with the uppermost having gained a horizontal dial on top. Actually on closer inspection, it was only decorative. A gnomon was in place but there were no



Fig. 3. The dials today on their newer column.

numerals or hour lines on its surface (Fig. 4), and a number of the other dial faces also had replacement gnomons.

As can be seen from Fig. 5, which more or less corresponds to Ross’s sketch, the date of 1685 on the north-east face of the cube dial can be seen as can the initials of I.I. and A (but the M cannot be clearly seen) on the north face of the six-sided polygonal dial above. This was definitely the same dial. What a stroke of luck that was in finding that planning application!

Unfortunately, although the new gnomon on the horizontal surface is set correctly with respects to the rest of the dial, and despite the assistance of Historic Scotland in setting up



Fig. 4. The horizontal surface with the added gnomon.



Fig. 5. The north-east face showing the date of 1685.

the dial in its new location, it is set to the south-west rather than north!

But what of the other parts of the dial that sat in the rock garden at Polton House all those years ago? Luckily, leaning against a wall nearby, was the topmost dial with the figure of Death and his scythe encircling the globe above (Fig. 6). It was in a poorer condition than the other parts of the dial, having much lichen, but some hour lines can be seen as well as the gnomon root.

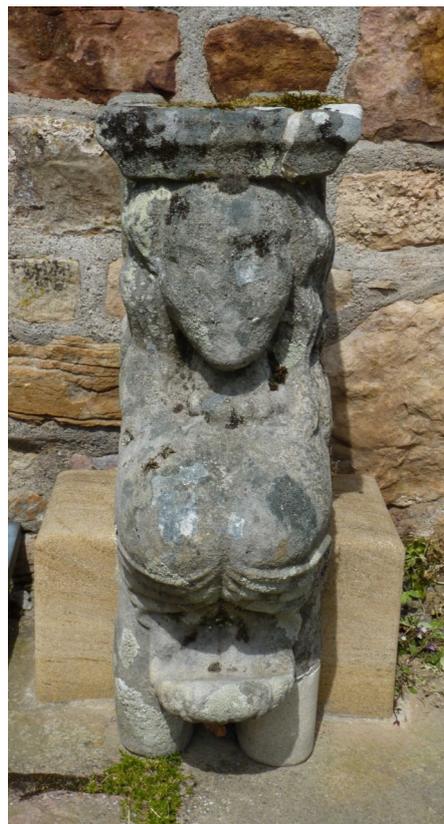
Also nearby are the ‘stones’ which have accompanied these dials for more than a century or even longer (Figs 7 and 8). However, the lower and larger dial at the base of the original structure as seen by Ross is missing and the owners of Arniston House have no knowledge of it. There is also no sign of the finial or the date stone of 1672 that stood below it. A great pity, but nevertheless the hunt for the Polton House dial has been a great success with a great deal of luck thrown in.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Many thanks to Mrs Dundas-Bekker and her daughter Henrietta Bekker for being most helpful and welcoming me to their home at Arniston House.



Fig. 6. The topmost dial with the figure of Death above.



Figs 7 and 8. The ‘stones’.

REFERENCE and NOTE

1. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892).
2. The Newbattle dials will feature in a future article.

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