

# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

## Part 10: A Mixed Bag of Sundials in Edinburgh

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John Knox was a 16<sup>th</sup> century Scottish clergyman who was the leading figure in the Scottish Reformation which resulted in the Protestant religion eventually replacing Catholicism as the major religion in the country. His house is situated in Edinburgh's Royal Mile and is a major tourist attraction today, but not many of the thousands of people who visit it or pass by it each day notice the two-faced vertical sundial (Fig. 1) on the corner of the building.

However, it did not escape the notice of Thomas Ross who described it in *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*<sup>1</sup> as follows:

*“On the south-west projecting corner of this house there is a remarkable piece of sculpture, containing a dial [Fig. 2] which does not appear to have been hitherto recognised. It contains a figure, very skilfully twisted round the corner of the house, representing Moses kneeling on the top of a mount pointing with his right hand to a figure overhead of the sun in glory, on which is carved, in Greek, Latin, and English, the name of God. The sun's rays are represented as flames of fire. The left arm of Moses is bent backwards, and the hand rests on one of the tables of the law.”*

The dial is not contemporary with the house, however, and appears to be a later addition. It has Arabic numerals from 1 pm to 8 pm on the left-hand west-facing dial and was restored by Alexander Handyside Ritchie in 1850. A plaque to the left of the dial has the initials “IMMA” for James Mossman and his wife Mariota Arres. James was one-time owner of the house and a supporter of Mary Queen of Scots and who paid with his head for his loyalties. This dial was visited by delegates from the BSS Edinburgh Conference in April 2013.

Still in the Royal Mile, but further down the hill towards the Palace of Holyroodhouse, is the Canongate Tolbooth. Ross records that there is a sundial on the tower and says:

*“There is a very weather-worn dial on the south front of the tower of this building. The date of the tolbooth is 1591, but the dial has the appearance of having been inserted at some later time.”*

Unfortunately there is no sign of the sundial today. Similarly, higher up the Royal Mile, Ross recorded a sundial on the famous St Giles Cathedral by saying:



Fig. 1. The dials on the corner of John Knox's House.



Fig. 2. Ross's sketch of the John Knox dials – note the difference in the hour lines and gnomon on the left hand dial.



Fig. 3. Huntly House multi-faceted dial.

*“In a view of this church, painted in 1790, and now in the possession of the Town Council, there is a large dial, surmounted by a cross, shown on the apex of the gable of the Chepman aisle.”*

So apparently the dial was missing in Ross’s day too as he does not provide a sketch and makes no comment as to having seen it.

Almost opposite to the Canongate Tolbooth is the Museum of Edinburgh, otherwise known as Huntly House. In a closed gated courtyard off Bakehouse Close which runs underneath Huntly House is a fine multi-faceted dial (Fig. 3). Luckily for the BSS delegates at the Edinburgh Conference in 2013, arrangements were made to open up the courtyard. The museum staff had no knowledge of the provenance of this dial other than that it originally came from either Grange House or Saughton House. However, I now understand that this dial is almost certainly an 1886 copy of an Archibald Handasyde dial from 1732 that used to stand at Cramond Tower in Edinburgh’s western outskirts as Ross’s description of the Cramond dial indicates:

*“This is a most remarkable dial [Fig. 4], and possesses certain peculiarities giving it a distinct character of its own within the type. It stands on a graceful square baluster, nicely moulded and carved, on which rests its peculiarly faceted double head. On the lower part of the head there are four circular upright dials with grotesque faces between and sloping dials above. The upper part of the head is of the form peculiar to the type. On one of the round dials is carved the name SIR ROB DICKSON, and the date 1732. Sir Robert was a descendant of the well-known David Dickson, Professor of Divinity in Edinburgh University. His father acquired the estate of Carberry and Sornbegg, now designed Inveresk, and sold the latter to the*

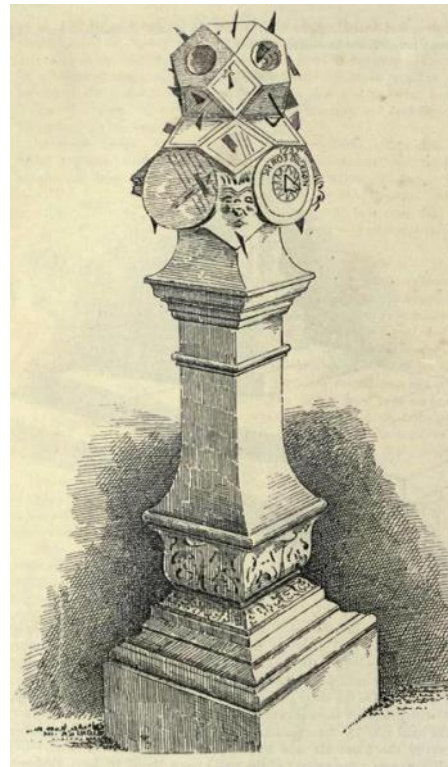


Fig. 4. Ross's sketch of the Cramond dial of which the Huntly House dial is a copy.

*Duchess of Monmouth at the beginning of last century. Sir Robert NVMS the chief bailie of Musselburgh during the rebellion of '45. He died in 1760. On the other side of the dial occurs the inscription ACH HANDASYDE FECIT. The same name occurs on one of the two dials lying in the churchyard of Inveresk, and others are mentioned as being known to be by the same maker. We are thus able to identify Handasyde as a dial-maker. Although the dials at Inveresk and Cramond are widely different in design, they have a point of resemblance in their open gnomons.*

*“A few years ago this dial was found lying in an outhouse, broken in several pieces, and we were then informed by the gardener that it once stood in the neighbouring grounds of Lauriestoun. In 1886 it was repaired and placed in the grounds of the Edinburgh Exhibition, and on being returned to Cramond it was set up in front of the house. It now bears a modern finial, which is the “poppy-head” of a cast-iron railing. While in the Exhibition it was copied, at least once, and a copy, with a different support, was shown in the Exhibition of Decorative Handiwork held in Edinburgh in 1888. The height of the square base is 9 inches, above which to the top of the cornice is 3 feet 2 inches, and from thence to the top of the dial (not including the finial) 2 feet 2 inches. The total height is 6 feet 1 inch.”*

I believe that the Huntly House dial is the one mentioned above with the different support. The Cramond dial was moved many years ago and was last heard of at the House of Aldie in Fife.

Edinburgh’s West Kirk, otherwise known as St Cuthbert’s Church, lies at the west end of Princes Street and Ross states that:

*“This finely-cut dial [Fig. 5] is placed on the west face of the steeple, and in design is not unlike those in Inveresk Churchyard. It has a bead and hollow moulding round its four sides, and has an open iron gnomon; above is the mot-*



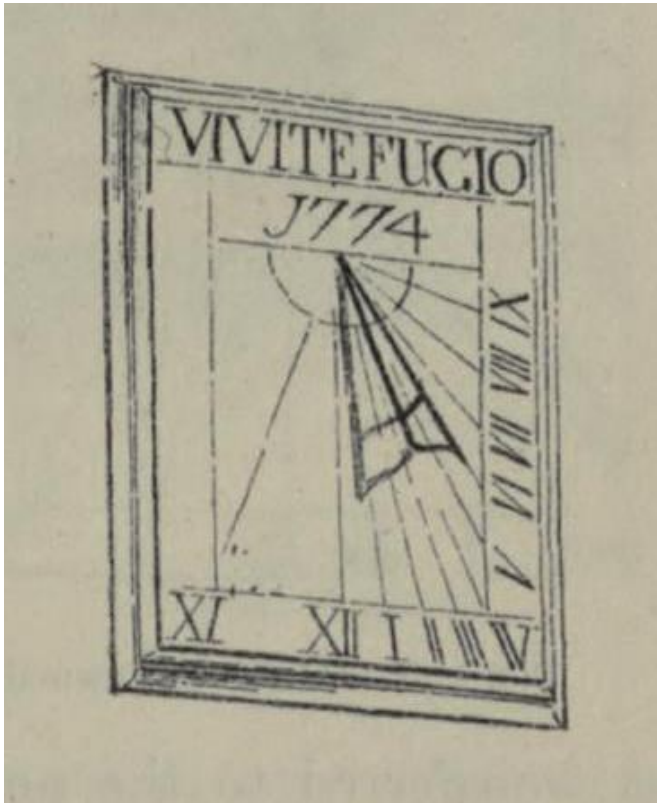


Fig. 5. Ross's sketch of the West Kirk dial.



Fig. 6. West Kirk dial today.

to *VIVITE FUGIO*, with the date 1774. The dial and its frame appear to be made of stones from different quarries. The builder and supposed designer of the church was a Mr. Weir.”

This church is not to be confused with the church on Princes Street itself but is to the immediate south of and behind this building. The vertical dial has a single face with a complete simple open gnomon and has Roman numerals from 11 am to 9 pm (Fig. 6).

Moving on to another church, this time in Corstorphine, now a western suburb of Edinburgh, Ross (and Mrs Gatty<sup>2</sup>) had it wrong when he said that “*there are seven dials on this church, all similar to the one shown in [Fig. 7]*”. Only the one on the SW corner was ever a dial – the others are all blank, and unlike the SW dial are not canted in the proper direction, and are just square to the building. There are three dial faces whilst the north face is blank (Fig. 8).

At Liberton House on the southern outskirts of Edinburgh, there is a fine stone dial set into the corner of the house. Liberton House was rescued from ruin by the current owners after a fire in 1991. They now run an architectural practice from an annex to the house. The house is home to one of the few ghosts that have been successfully photographed

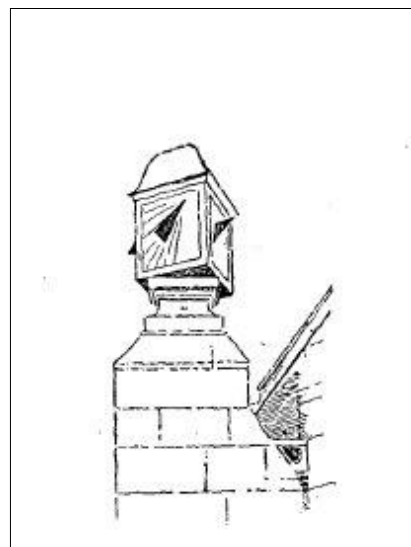


Fig. 7. Corstorphine Church dial sketch.



Fig. 8. Corstorphine Church dial today.



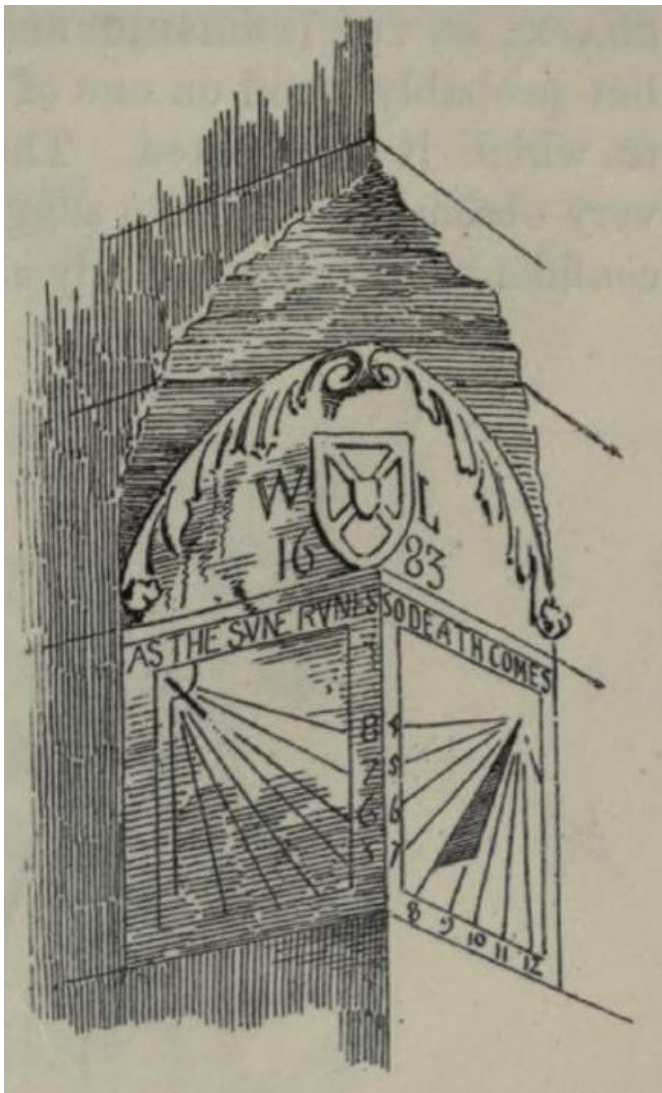


Fig. 9. Ross's sketch of the Liberton House dial.



Fig. 10. Liberton House dial today.

– the picture appeared in the *Scotsman* in 1936. The ghost has not been seen since the fire in 1991; however, its ghostly voice is still heard now and again. It appears to have developed a habit of interfering with electrical equipment which frequently malfunctions for no obvious reason.

Ross records that:

*“On the south-west corner of this house, the ancient mansion of the Littles of Liberton and Craigmillar, there is a fine angle dial [Fig. 9], round the top of which is the motto AS THE SVNE RVNES SO DEATH COMES. Above the dial the corner is rounded and enclosed with a carved scroll containing the arms of Little (a saltire with an inescutcheon) betwixt the initials of William Little and the date 1683.”*



Fig. 11. Ross's sketch of the precarious looking Hudson Cottage dial.



Fig. 12. Hudson Cottage dial looking rather more solid today.



The dial appears to be a little more worn nowadays (Fig. 10) but the west-declining face numerals can be seen to be Arabic from 1 pm to 8 pm although the gnomon is broken. The south-declining face has Arabic numerals which are a little indistinct today, but from Ross's sketch are from 4 am to noon.

Still in Liberton, but on the road back towards the centre of Edinburgh, a cube dial sits atop the gate leading to the garden of the house known as Hudson Cottage. According to Ross:

*"This sundial [Fig. 11] now occupies a peculiar position over a gateway leading through a small garden to a house on the roadside. It is supported on an arched bar of iron thrown between the gate pillars in the manner shown. The dial is of neat workmanship, but the finial on top is not original."*

The dial today (Fig. 12) is almost as described by Ross except that it is supported by two iron bars, and probably was in Ross's day too. It has Roman numerals from 4 am to 2 pm on the east-declining face and 10 am to 8 pm on the west-declining face.

Finally in Edinburgh's northern seaside Spanish sounding suburb of Portobello, a large cube sundial stands in Brighton Park. In Ross's day, however, it stood at Portobello Tower (now desecrated by an ugly amusement park butted up against it), and Ross records that:

*"There is a large collection of carved stones from various old buildings gathered together at this place, and amongst them is this sundial [Fig. 13]. It stands in front of the tower, and the steps are concealed with a garden rockery. The faces of the dial are very large, and consist of separate slabs cramped together; it is finished with a moulded tapering top, surmounted with a Scotch thistle."*

It no longer sits on its high shaft as sketched by Ross, and now sits much lower to the ground. All four dial faces have Arabic numerals (and some graffiti) and all four gnomons are now missing (Fig. 14), but at least it still survives.

## REFERENCES

1. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892).
2. Mrs Gatty: *The Book of Sun-Dials*, George Bell and Sons, London (1890).

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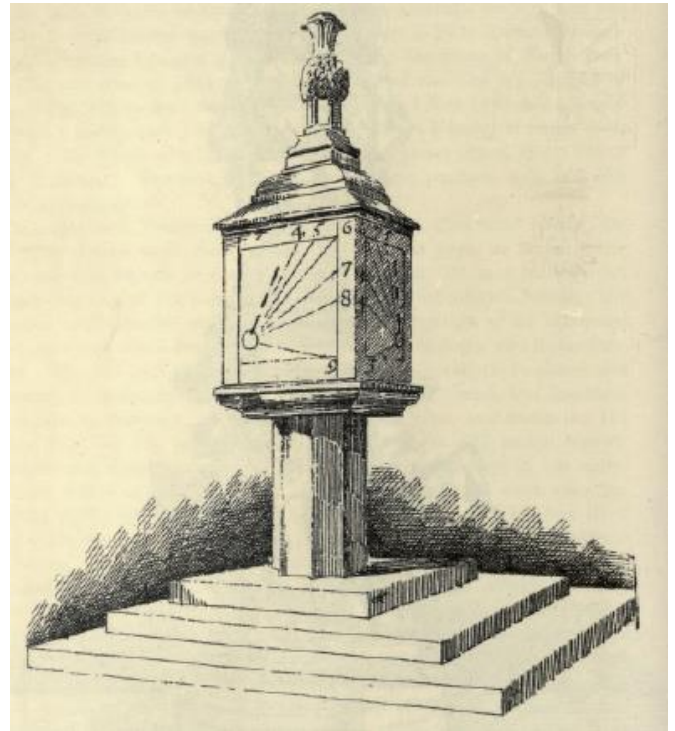


Fig. 13. Ross's sketch of the Portobello dial.



Fig. 14. Portobello dial minus its tall shaft.