

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

Part 11: The *Dyallis* of William Aytoun

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Not much is known of William Aytoun. We do know though that he was assistant to William Wallace, master mason who was responsible for Heriot's Hospital in Edinburgh; on Wallace's death in 1631, Aytoun took over as master mason. He was also responsible for Innes House in Morayshire in 1641 and we know that he probably died in 1643. Other than that, nothing appears to be known of his life. Much more research is needed.

However, we do know that both Heriot's Hospital and Innes House have a large number of sundials incorporated into their respective buildings.

For more than 350 years George Heriot's School in Edinburgh has served as one of Scotland's most distinguished schools. Today, it flourishes as an independent co-educational day school.

Originally known as Heriot's Hospital, it was founded from a bequest by George Heriot, also known as 'Jinglin' Geordie' on account of his vast wealth, and the rumour that his pockets were always full of gold. Heriot was a native of Edinburgh coming from a family of goldsmiths. He rose through the ranks and moved to London, eventually becoming Jeweller and Goldsmith to King James VI (James I of England). He died childless in London in 1624 and was buried in St Martin-in-the-Fields.

After payment of considerable private legacies of about £6,826, he bequeathed the remainder of his estate for the purpose of founding a hospital¹ in his native city for the

upbringing and education of "*puire faitherless bairnes, friemenes sones of that Toune of Edinburgh*". His bequest amounted to some £23,625 and represented a huge fortune in those days.

The plan for the building is of special significance. It was the first completely regular design in Scotland with four equal ranges of buildings around a central quadrangle, with a square tower at each of the four corners rising a storey higher (Fig. 1). No other building in the country had previously been conceived on such a scale and it was the first prominent building to be built outside Edinburgh's city walls.

The foundation stone was laid on the north-west tower on 1 July 1628. There are eleven sundials, each with two declining faces, incorporated into the design of the original building: three on the inner walls facing into the quadrangle and eight on the outer walls. There are another two dials elsewhere in the grounds of the school.

But when I entered the grounds of the school, it was not a sundial that first caught my eyes, it was the view of Edinburgh Castle. The castle is most often viewed and photographed from the northern aspect from Princes Street, but George Heriot's lies to the south of the castle and it was the castle from this direction that dominated the skyline (Fig. 2).

When I was able to draw my eyes away from the castle, I started to contemplate the reason for my visit. It was to see the sundials identified and described by Thomas Ross.



Fig. 1. George Heriot's School.



Fig. 2. Edinburgh Castle from Heriot's.

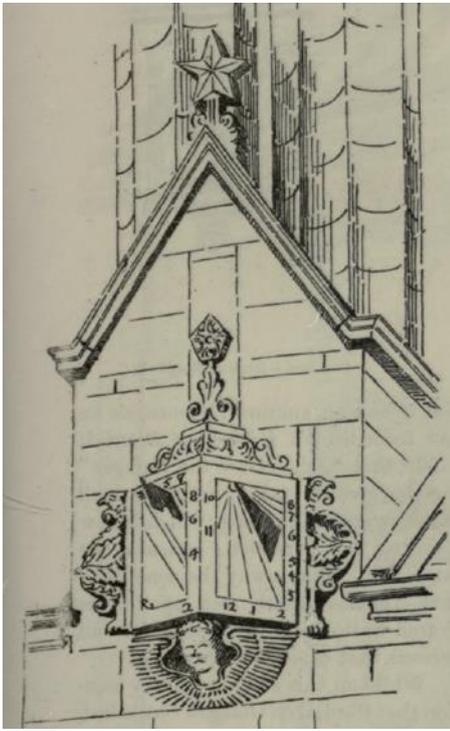


Fig. 3. Sketch of dial on Heriot's west-facing inner wall.

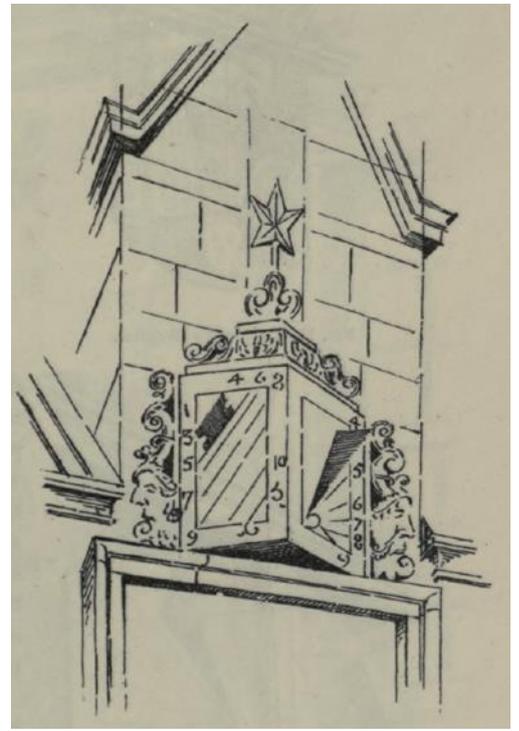


Fig. 4. Sketch of dial on Heriot's east-facing inner wall.

In volume 5 of *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*,² Thomas Ross describes the sundials as follows:

“Perhaps the finest specimens of attached dials in Scotland are to be seen on this building. There are eleven of them, eight being on the outside walls and three facing the courtyard. They are all of the same general form. [Figs 3–5] represent those of the courtyard. Those on the

outer fronts are similar to the above, and they all differ from each other chiefly in their supporting brackets. One has this feature rounded, as shown by [Fig. 6]. Others have brackets, consisting of cupids' heads with wings, similar to [Figs 3 and 5], and to the dials at Peffermill. Others have demons' heads, with wings similarly disposed; and one on the east side [Fig. 7] rests on what appears to be intended for an elephant's head.”

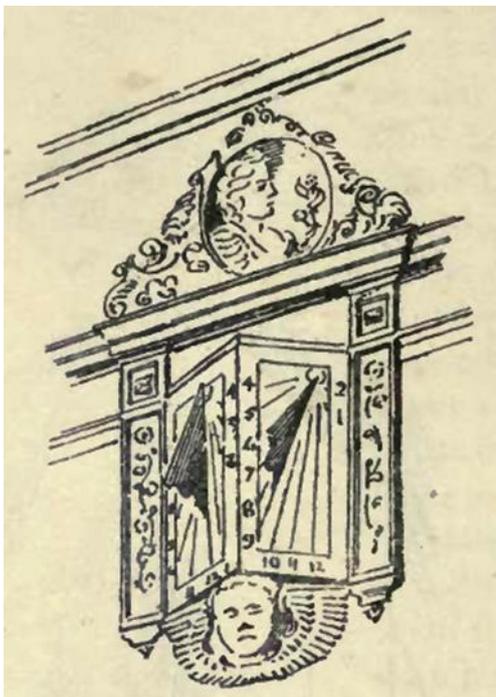


Fig. 5. Sketch of dial on Heriot's south-facing inner wall.

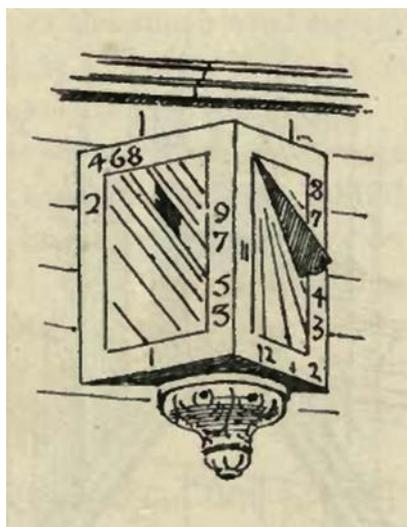


Fig. 6. Sketch of dial on Heriot's west-facing outside wall showing rounded support.

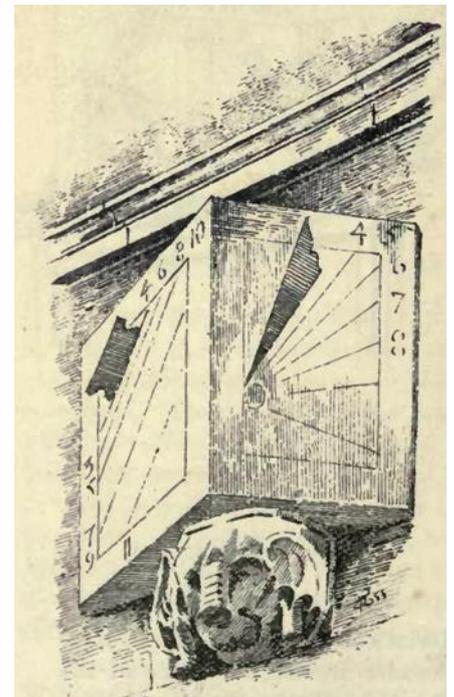


Fig. 7. Sketch of dial on Heriot's east-facing outside wall showing elephant support.

Photographs of the inner courtyard dials are shown at Figs 8–10 and those on the outer walls are shown at Figs 11–18.



Fig. 8. Heriot's west-facing inner wall dial.



Fig. 9. Heriot's east-facing inner wall dial.



Fig. 10. Heriot's south-facing inner wall dial.



Fig. 11. Heriot's north-facing outside wall dial.



Fig. 12. Heriot's north-facing outside wall dial.



Fig. 13. Heriot's east-facing outside wall dial.



Fig. 14. Heriot's east-facing outside wall dial with elephant's head support.



Fig. 17. Heriot's west-facing outside wall dial.



Fig. 15. Heriot's south-facing outside wall dial with demon's head support.



Fig. 18. Heriot's west-facing outside wall dial.



Fig. 16. Heriot's south-facing outside wall dial.

Ross continues:

"These dials seem to have been made by William Aytoun, who succeeded William Wallace as architect and superintendent of the hospital buildings in 1631–32. In the contract between Heriot's Trustees and Aytoun, the latter was bound 'to maik and carve his Majesties portratt or any other portratt he beis requyrit to mak in that wark; and to mak all sort of dyallis as sal be fund fitting for samyn.'"

The date of 1631 ties in nicely with the beginning of the rise of sundials in Scotland and it is perhaps no surprise that the Trustees wished that their new building should be so adorned.



Fig. 19. Heriot's lost (and found) multi-facet dial.

Ross continues again:

“There ought to be another dial at Heriot's Hospital, but it seems to have disappeared. In 1679 ‘Mr. Alexander Burton, laity one of the doctors of the High School, had gifted freely to the hospital a dial for the hospital garden, which he is to put up at his own expense.’

“Dials are very liable to get broken, and during repairs and alterations they are apt to disappear; while coveting and taking away a neighbour's dial is not an unknown offence, as we find from Scott's History of Berwick, p. 306, that ‘Johne Orde the younger’ was charged ‘for taking away the dyall that was at the Newgate, which is now standing in his garden. As also the same hath taken away the sone dyall that Thomas Smith sett up on the church wall which was a benefit to all persons that came that way.’”

Unfortunately the theft of sundials is not a modern phenomenon!

Luckily though, according to the *Sundials of the British Isles*³ edited by Mike Cowham, the sundial referred to above appears not to have been stolen, but simply lost and then found again, having been excavated in the grounds of the school in the 1970s. It is now in a small quiet area of the school grounds well hidden from view. It is a large multi-faceted dial (Fig. 19) with 25 separate dial faces with a cup hollow/scaphe dial on each of the cardinal faces. Unfortunately, the maker of this sundial is unknown.

There is yet another dial at Heriot's, this time a modern direct south-facing dial situated on a wall of the primary school (Fig. 20), which features a bird on a ball looking at a mouse on the end of a tee square, in memory of an architect. Nowhere in Scotland are there so many sundials to be seen in one location, and BSS members took full advantage when access was arranged with the Governors of the school during the Edinburgh conference in 2013.



Fig. 20. Heriot's modern south-facing dial.

Moving up north, Innes House near Elgin in Morayshire provides us with another five sundials, four of which are attributed to William Aytoun. Now owned by the Tennent family, Innes House is a private home built in 1641.

Ross says:

“There are numerous dials on this house, which is one of great interest, as it is known, from an account of the building kept by the laird, to have been designed by ‘William Aytoun, maister massoun at Heriott his work.’ As might be expected, the dials here resemble those on Heriot's Hospital.”

Unfortunately Ross does not provide any sketches of the dials at Innes House but he does provide a sketch of the house (Fig. 21) where, if you look closely, three of the dials can just be seen between first- and second-floor levels.



Fig. 21. Ross's sketch of Innes House showing dials between first and second floors.

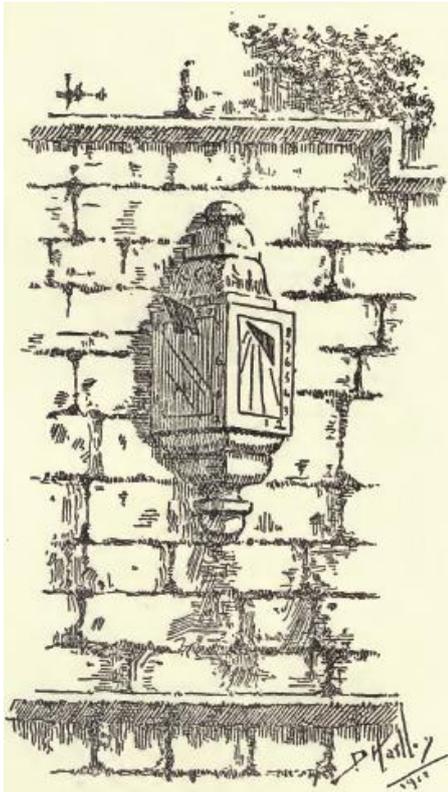


Fig. 22. Henslow's sketch of an Innes House dial.



Figs 23–26. Innes House dials – the last (Fig. 26) with missing face.



Fig. 27. Innes House icosahedron.

However, in *Ye Sundial Booke*⁴ Geoffrey Henslow does provide a sketch (Fig. 22) of one of the four dials. Photographs of the four dials are shown at Figs 23–26, the last of which appears to be the one in Henslow's sketch. Although the sketches in Henslow's book are not always accurate in terms of the background and placement of the dials, it appears as though this one has probably been repositioned and lost one of its faces in the process.

We don't know the maker of the fifth dial at Innes House, which is a splendid icosahedron with triangular dial faces and complete gnomons, probably of 18th century on a later pedestal (Fig. 27).

When Ross described the dials at Heriot's he made reference to Peffermill House, which is but a short distance from George Heriot's School and is believed to have been built in 1636. Ross says:

"There are three dials on this house, all of the same design [Fig. 28]. They have a considerable resemblance to those of Heriot's Hospital... and as the house is contemporaneous with Heriot's, being dated 1636, and only two miles distant from it, the dials may be the work of the same designer."

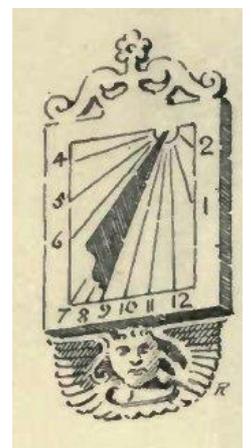


Fig. 28. Ross's sketch of a Peffermill House dial.

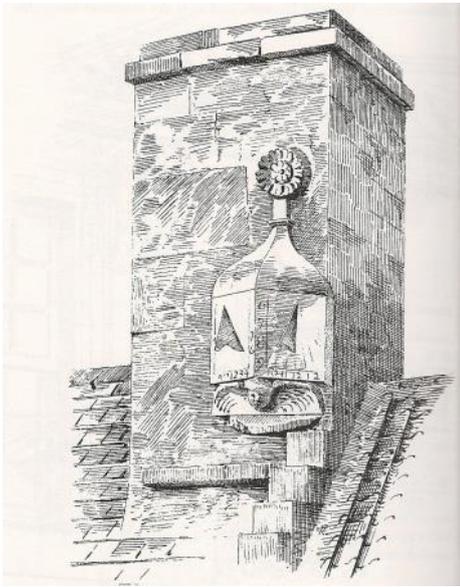


Fig. 29. Ross's sketch of the South Queensferry dial.

As Ross says, the dials at Peffermill and at Heriot's are so similar that they could very well have been designed by William Aytoun.

Unfortunately, to date I have been unable to obtain access to the house which has changed ownership within the last couple of years. The gates are always locked and my letters have been unanswered.

It is interesting to note that a sundial at South Queensferry⁵ is similar in design to these Aytoun dials. Ross describes it thus:

"The dial from South Queensferry, Linlithgowshire [Fig. 29], is built into a chimney-stack on the south side of a house near the east end of the village. It has had rough



Fig. 30. South Queensferry dial showing altered roofline.

usage, and the ledge projecting at the base has been broken as indicated. The dial is about level with the road behind the house, and is not visible from the street; it is doubtless of the same age as the Heriot's Hospital examples."

It took me several months on and off to find this sundial – as can be seen above, Ross did not give many clues as to its exact whereabouts, and for some time I was virtually certain that it no longer existed. But I eventually found it, although the roofline had changed in the intervening 120 years or so (Fig. 30). It seems possible that this too was an Aytoun dial; at the very least it is in the same style with its winged cherub below and flower above. See Fig. 31 for a close up photograph.

So there we have it – William Aytoun, master mason, who probably died in 1643 and was responsible for eleven dials at Heriot's, four dials at Innes House, probably three dials at Peffermill House and possibly another at South Queensferry. He deserves to be better known.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to the Governors of George Heriot's School and to the owners of Innes House and the house at South Queensferry for allowing me access to their grounds to view and photograph their sundials.

REFERENCES and NOTES

1. In Scotland at that time a hospital, as referred to here, was in fact a school.
2. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892).
3. M. Cowham: *Sundials of the British Isles*, M.J. Cowham, Cambridge (2005).
4. T.G.W. Henslow: *Ye Sundial Booke*, E. Arnold, London (1914).
5. Previously described in *BSS Bulletin*, 25(i) (March 2013).

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Fig. 31. Detail of South Queensferry dial.