

# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

## Part 3. The Sundials of James Gifford

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James Gifford was a 17<sup>th</sup> century stonemason from the village of West Linton, situated about 18 miles south-west of Edinburgh, in what is now the Scottish Borders region. A number of his sundials feature in *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*<sup>1</sup> although Ross does not actually name Gifford in this work.

Gifford's house in West Linton was demolished in 1864, but a cube sundial (Fig. 1) surmounted with a sphere on four scrolls and attributed to Gifford<sup>2</sup> is on the stone cottage nearby to where his house once stood. This sundial appears to have had dials on all four faces. The south face, which is the only face that can be clearly seen to have hour lines and numerals, has Arabic numerals and the remains of

a gnomon. All other gnomons are missing although their positions can be seen. There is damage to the upper left part of the south dial face and the corresponding upper right part of the west face which has been crudely repaired, losing all marks in the process. The sphere has faint lines marked.

Also on the gable wall of this house are three elaborately carved stone panels featuring Gifford and his wife and carved by him. These stone panels originally adorned the insides of his own house.<sup>3</sup>

Another cube sundial, again surmounted by a sphere (Fig. 2), is mounted on the south-west corner of a building only 40 yards further up the road and is also presumed to be by Gifford. This dial is similar in design to the previous example but without the four scrolls. It has Roman numerals on the south face with the remains of a gnomon. The east and west faces have Arabic numerals whilst the detail on the north face can not be easily seen. There does appear to be some very faint markings on the sphere.



Figs. 1 & 2. Two different cube-and-sphere sundials, only 40 yards apart in West Linton.



Fig. 3. The sketch by Ross of the dial shown in Fig. 1.

Ross mentions the West Linton dials only briefly by saying "Dials forming terminations at the eaves or lower ends of gables are of common occurrence, and a good example is shown from a one-storied cottage at West Linton" (Fig. 3). It can be seen quite clearly that this is the same dial as shown in Fig. 1.



Fig. 4 (far left). Sketch by Ross of the multi-facet dial at Newhall.



Fig. 5 (left). Close-up of the Newhall facet head.

Around four miles north-east of West Linton lies Newhall House and the grounds of this private estate, in which the actor Robert Hardy once lived, contain two sundials. There is not a great deal of opportunity to see these sundials as the grounds are currently open only on one afternoon a year for charity, under Scotland's Garden Scheme.

The first is a large elaborate multi-faceted sundial adjacent to the house. This dial is not by Gifford as it dates from 1810, far too late for him, but as it is described by Ross it is worth mentioning here. He describes it thus: "This dial, which may be regarded as a monument to Allan Ramsay, stands in front of the mansion-house of Newhall. Its appearance will be easily understood from the sketch" (Fig. 4).

He goes on to recite some of the many inscriptions on the dial which was erected in memory of the poet Allan Ramsay and of his poem *The Gentle Shepherd* in particular, which was based on Newhall. This sundial still stands in its original position, its eight dials having a mixture of Roman

and Arabic numerals (Fig. 5). It is in rather good condition despite its dial faces becoming encrusted with moss and lichen.

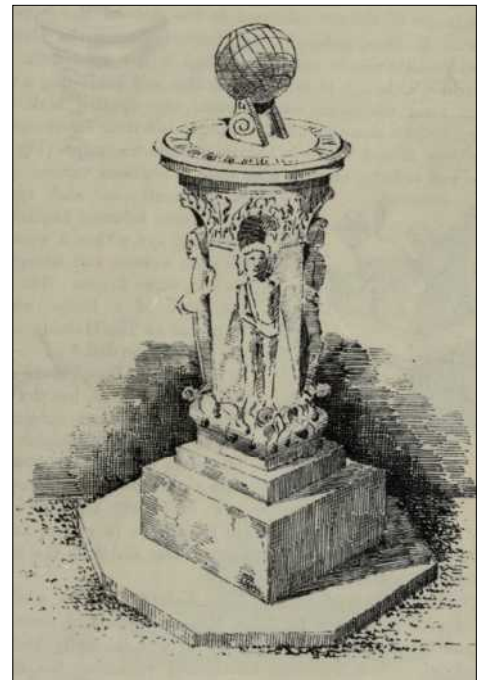
One of the inscriptions on the sundial reads "Observe how fast, time hurries past, then use each hour, while in your power, for comes the sun, but time flies on, proceeding ever, returning never."

The other sundial at Newhall is in the walled garden (Fig. 6). It consists of a globe sitting on top of a hollow cylinder which acts as the gnomon of the horizontal sundial underneath. It has a late 17<sup>th</sup> century octagonal shaft with figures of the seasons. This shaft is attributed to Gifford, but there is some discrepancy as to the age of the dial itself, which may or may not be Gifford's work.

There are hour lines on the sphere with the hours marked in Arabic numerals, whilst the half and quarter hours are also marked (Fig. 7). The stone horizontal dial face is badly obscured by moss and lichen, but it appears to have Roman numerals. This is confirmed by Ross's sketch of the dial.



Figs. 6, 7 & 8. The horizontal and globe sundial at Newhall.



Ross says “*This dial [Fig. 8] may be classed with those of the horizontal type, although the globe supported by the hollow cylinder-shaped figure which forms the gnomon is a feature unusual in such dials. The dial is probably the production of a local sculptor, specimens of whose work may be seen scattered about the village of West Linton. A dial there bears a considerable resemblance to this one, and they are probably by the same hand.*”

So Ross thought that these dials were by the same hand and there is evidence to support the fact that the hand belonged to Gifford.

But Gifford’s crowning glory is surely the multi-faceted dial at Lennoxlove near Haddington in East Lothian. Again, although Ross did not attribute this dial to Gifford in *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, there is evidence provided by Ross to support the fact that this is Gifford’s work.<sup>4</sup> When Ross sketched this dial (Fig. 9) it was at North Barr House in Renfrewshire and he described it as follows:

*“This singular and graceful sundial stands in the centre of the old-fashioned, semi-decayed gardens of North Barr, at a distance of a few minutes’ walk up the Clyde from Erskine Ferry. There is something extremely droll and*

*quaint in the conception of the lady who supports the dial-stone, with her remarkable headpiece and picturesque seventeenth century costume, as she stands gracefully holding a rose at her breast and smiling on the spectator. The two hair curls standing out in relief very considerably heighten her odd effect, and at the same time give apparent strength to her slender neck to carry the overhanging and weighty dial.*

Ross’s detailed description of the sundial is quite precise and the only thing that can be added is that all the hour lines and numerals, which are in the Arabic style, can still be clearly seen. The heart-shaped hollows to which Ross refers, whilst quite common on obelisk and lectern dials, are much less so on other types of sundial.

This wonderful sundial, which just has to be my favourite, now stands in the sunken garden to the east of the house of Lennoxlove (Fig. 12) and remains in excellent condition. It dates from 1679 and I wonder how it has managed to sur-



*Figs. 9, 10, 11 & 12. The multifaceted dial at Lennoxlove, including details of the scaphe dial and the sunken hearts.*



vive virtually intact for the last 330-odd years as the dial stone itself is in a very precarious position.

According to Andrew Somerville<sup>6</sup> it was moved from North Barr House to Lennoxlove early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This fits in with the date of 1912 when the sunken garden was designed by the architect Sir Robert Lorimer, who was commissioned by Major William Baird to carry out the restoration of Lennoxlove in that year.

This sundial is a fine testament to the skills of James Gifford and it is said that the young lady supporting the dial stone bears a strong resemblance to his wife. She is certainly dressed in a very similar fashion and strikes a similar pose to Gifford's statue of her in West Linton.

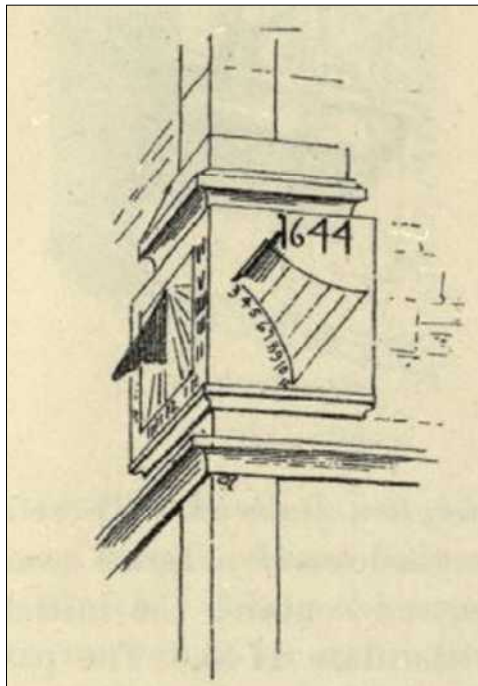
There is another sundial at Lennoxlove identified by Ross, but this sundial is not by James Gifford. This is another example of problems in trying to trace Ross's sundials. Not only do the sundials move from place to place, but houses change their names! It was only recently that I found out that the original name of Lennoxlove was Lethington Castle. Ross identified a two-faced dial on the south-east corner of Lethington Castle as follows:

*"On the south-east corner of the latest part of the castle may be seen the dial shown [Fig. 13]. The date (1644) shows that this portion of the building was erected after Lethington passed from the Maitlands into the possession of the ancestors of the present proprietor, Lord Blantyre."*

I have not yet had the opportunity to return there to see if this dial still exists. Hopefully it does.

## REFERENCES

1. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892).



*Fig. 13. Ross's sketch of the wall dial at Lennoxlove.*

2. British Listed Buildings Website  
[www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/sc-12888-west-linton-main-street-gifford-stones-ho](http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/sc-12888-west-linton-main-street-gifford-stones-ho)
3. Thomas Ross: *James Gifford and Some of his Works in Tweeddale*, Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Edinburgh (1899) p147.
4. Thomas Ross: *James Gifford and Some of his Works in Tweeddale*, Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Edinburgh (1899) p159.
5. Ross refers here to the multi-faceted sundial at the Palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh.
6. Andrew Somerville: *The Ancient Sundials of Scotland*, Rogers Turner, London (1994).

For a portrait and CV of the author, see *Bulletin* 23(iv).