

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

Part 9a: The Mercat Crosses of Scotland and their Sundials

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A mercat cross, as a market cross is known in Scotland, signifies that the right to hold a regular market was granted by the monarch or a bishop. The cross was the place around which market stalls would be arranged and where merchants would gather to discuss business. It was also the spot where state and civic proclamations were publicly read. To this day, royal proclamations are still ceremonially read in public at the mercat cross in Edinburgh's Royal Mile, including the calling of a general election and succession of a new monarch.

The essential element of the market cross is not a cross, but a shaft often crowned with an appropriate heraldic or religious emblem. Heraldic beasts, armorial bearings and sundials are popular subjects for the capital and finial of market crosses. In many cases the cross is topped by a royal unicorn or lion, symbols of the Scottish monarchy.

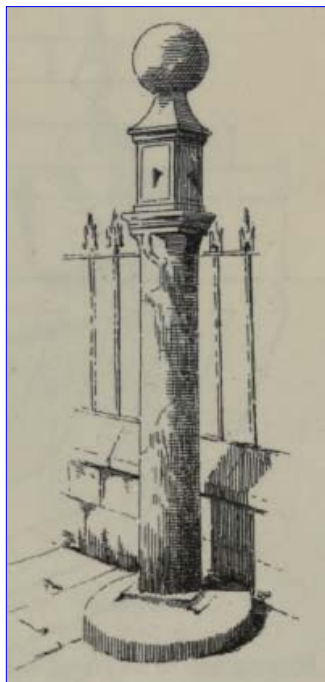
There are somewhere between one hundred and one hundred and twenty-six such crosses in Scotland¹ and I have so far identified that seventeen have sundials incorporated into them. In *'The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland'*² Ross describes and sketches ten of them. He states that "we are not surprised to find that many of the market-crosses erected during the seventeenth century have been adorned with dials; the sentiment peculiar to a dial is well fitted for such a symbolic structure".

In the Scottish Borders, Ross describes the mercat cross in Peebles as follows: "*The Peebles cross is an octagonal shaft about 12 feet high, and is dated 1699 [Fig. 1]. It has an iron vane on the top, with open figures of date 1662. The shaft rose from the top of an octagonal building about 10 feet high and 12 feet across, in which Dr Chambers, in his 'History of Peebles', says there was an inside stair which led up to the platform. But in a paper read before the Society in February 1861, Mr James Drummond asserts that there was no stair leading to the platform. This cross was taken down so as not to obstruct the traffic on the street of Peebles, and is now in the Chambers Museum.*"

Despite Ross's comment that the cross is dated 1699, it is probably 15th-century and has had several sites in its history. The cube sundial was added in 1662 to mark the restoration of Charles II to the throne. In 1807, the Cross was in such a ruinous condition that the council ordered its removal but the town's people were opposed to the decision. Eventually, in 1858, it was placed in the quadrangle of the Chambers Institution. It was re-erected on its former site at the junction of Eastgate, Northgate and High Street in 1895 minus the octagonal building referred to by Ross, and was moved slightly to the east in 1965 where it remains today on a traffic island (Fig. 2). The four dial faces are octagonal with Arabic numerals and all gnomons are intact (Fig. 3).

Figs 1, 2 & 3.
The Peebles cross. L to R:
Thomas Ross's
sketch; a general
view and the
north-west and
south-west faces.





Figs 5 & 6. The Nairn Cross.

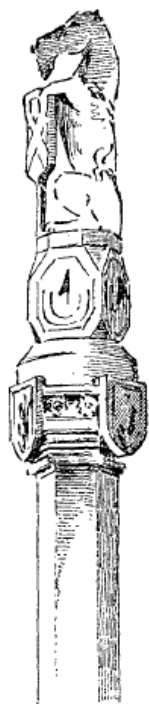
ball finial is missing, but some traces of decorative moulding remain on the cornice. It was removed from its original position in the centre of the High Street and re-erected on the pavement at the manse wall. In 1968 it was moved again and now stands once more on the High Street, on the pavement outside the Courthouse (Fig. 5).

There is a fine mercat cross in Inverkeithing in Fife on the north side of the Firth of Forth. Ross tells us that “*this beautiful market-cross [Fig. 6] was illustrated by Mr James Drummond and from the heraldry on the shields on the capital (The Royal and Drummond Arms Impaled – and of the Earl of Douglas) he connected the cross with Anabella Drummond, queen of Robert III, and says,*

‘May not this cross have been a gift of the queen on the occasion of the marriage of her son, the Duke of Rothesay, with the daughter of the Earl of Douglas, in 1398, as the heraldry suggests.’ There is no reason for doubting Mr Drummond’s conclusion, and his suggestion is extremely probable, so far as regards the cross proper, with the unicorn on top, but in this case the dial is without doubt an addition of the seventeenth century. The height from the base of the pillar to the top of the unicorn is 14 feet 6 inches.”

Ross says that the cross at Nairn in the Highlands is “*in a very dilapidated condition, and is entirely given over to the use of the billsticker, behind whose handiwork it can hardly be recognised. The top ball is broken away and the dials and capital are very much defaced. The height of the whole structure is about 7 feet 6 inches*” (Fig. 4).

If it was dilapidated in Ross’s day it is certainly more so now. It is dated 1757 and replaced an earlier mercat cross. It is on a circular shaft on a round base, but unfortunately the square head is no longer recognisable as a sundial. The



Figs 6, 7 & 8. The Inverkeithing Cross. Although Ross’s drawing seems to indicate a direct south face, the photograph shows the dials do not face the cardinal directions but decline significantly,

Despite some claims that the cross is from around 1400, it is probably 16th-century with the sundial and unicorn probably being added in 1688. Like many mercat crosses, this cross has moved around over the years. Originally standing in the High Street, it was moved a short distance to Townhall Street in 1799 before moving to its present position at the top of Bank Street in 1974 (Fig. 7). The cross underwent restoration in the second half of the 20th century with a replacement stone for the shaft, whilst the capital, sundial and unicorn have been recently re-painted. The sundial has four octagonal faces but only the north face has the remains of a gnomon, the others are all missing (Fig. 8).

The High Street of Airth near Falkirk is now bypassed by the main road a hundred yards or so to the east, so not many travellers see the mercat cross standing in the old town centre. Ross states that “*This fine market cross [Fig. 9] stands in the centre of the village. On the top of the shaft a square architectural composition, which resembles an old-fashioned eight-day clock, contains two sundials. Over one of them is the date 1697. On the other two faces there are first the Elphinstone arms and motto DOE WELL LET THEM SAY, and above are the initials C.E. On the other face are quartered the Elphinstone and Bruce arms, above are the initials, probably of Richard Elphinstone, eldest son of Sir Thomas Elphinstone of Calderhall; along with his initials are those of his wife, i.e., Jane Bruce, heiress of the estate of Airth.*”

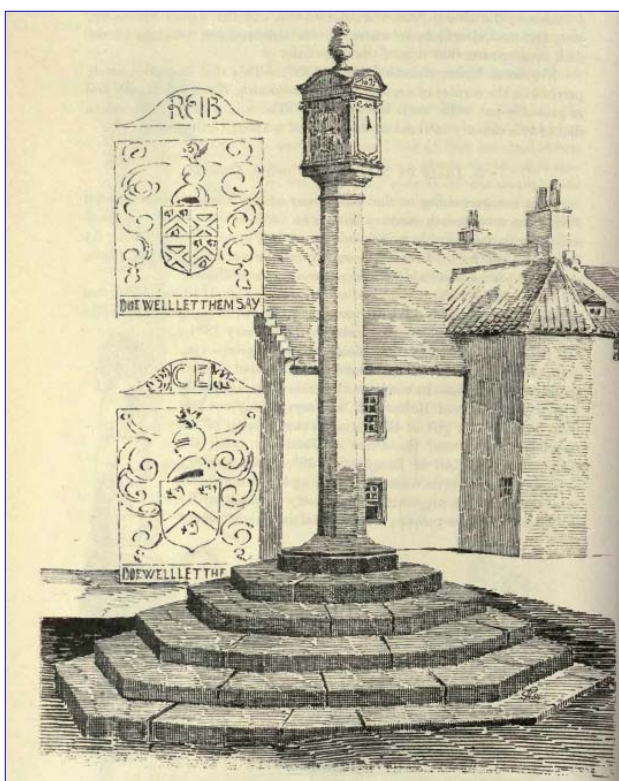
This mercat cross seems to be still in its original position (Fig. 10). It consists of a stepped octagonal pedestal, an octagonal shaft with a splayed base, and a square head with a finial apparently representing an acorn. Its total height is just over seven feet. The SW and SE faces of the head bear shield-shaped sundials, the latter bearing the date 1697

Fig. 11. The Airth Cross

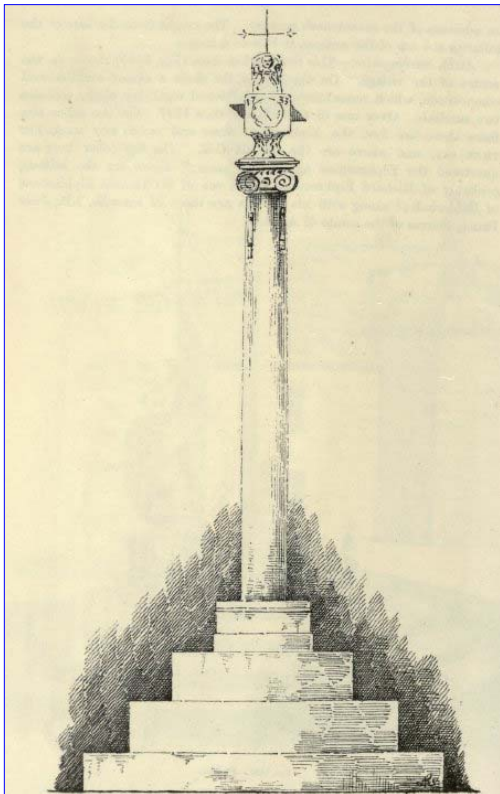


(Fig. 11), and there are heraldic devices on the NE and NW faces as described by Ross.

Back up north to the county of Moray, Ross describes the mercat cross in Elgin as “*this sundial [Fig. 12] surmounts what is known as the ‘Little Cross’.* There is a dial on each of the four faces, and the north face bears the date 1733. The shaft and steps are supposed to be much older, and to have been erected at the expense of Alexander, third son of the Lord of the Isles, about 1402; but this date appears to be extremely doubtful. The steps and shaft are circular on plan. The height of the former measures 3 feet 8 inches, and to the top of the capital from the ground 12 feet 4 inches, the total height being about 15 feet.”



Figs 9 & 10. The Airth Cross.



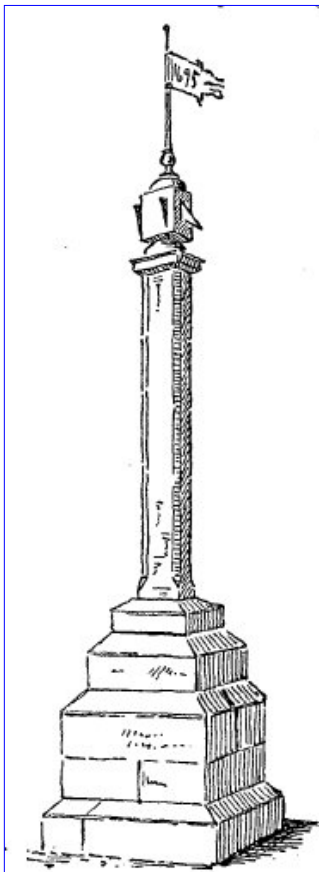
Figs 12 & 13. The 'muckle' Cross at Elgin.

[Again, if the RH face is direct N, the gnomon on the LH face is wrong for East. The drawing seems right]

This cross is known as the Little Cross as Ross says, as there is a larger mercat cross (without a sundial) called the Muckle Cross nearby, muckle being Scots for large. The Little Cross stands in the High Street across the road from the Elgin Museum (Fig. 13). In its present form it consists of a tall column set on a flight of steps and capped by a sundial dated 1733, during which year the Cross was probably re-built, but the copestone with carved figures is from an

earlier structure. The original sundial and top of the column are now across the road in the museum having been copied and replaced in 1941.

Back in the Scottish Borders, Ross informs us that the upper part of the mercat cross at Galashiels (Fig. 14) "was



Figs 14, 15 & 16. The Galashiels Cross.

brought to the ground by the foolish freak of a young man who climbed to the top and overbalanced the vane and sundial. They were, it appears, little damaged, and the youth escaped with a broken leg. When the cross was subsequently restored, it is supposed that the dial was renewed after the original pattern. The date on the vane is 1695.”

The Galashiels cross does not stand in the town centre, but is a short distance away at the junction of Church Street and Scott Crescent (Fig. 15). Built in 1695, it was restored in 1887. It consists of an eight feet high octagonal shaft of red freestone set on a newer base. The capital is also newer but it supports the 17th century sundial surmounted by a spherical finial with a wrought iron vane pierced with the date 1695 (Fig. 16). It has declining dials on all four faces, all with Arabic numerals, and is in excellent condition.

A fine mercat cross stands in Pencaitland in East Lothian and Ross states that “this market cross [Fig. 17], surmounted by a dial, stands in the centre of the village. It is a good example of its kind, and is doubtless of late seventeenth century work.”

This cross may date from 1695, when the village became a burgh, but to me it looks much older. It comprises of a tapering octagonal shaft with a cubic top bearing sundials on each of the four faces (Fig. 18) set on a tall square pedestal of much-weathered ashlar and a base of five shallow steps (Fig. 19). A plaque on the pedestal tells us that Pencaitland was one of the last places in Scotland where body snatching was attempted. A party of watchers caught two body snatchers in the very act and tied one of them to the cross where he received very rough treatment from a very angry crowd, many of whom were women.

Figs 18.
The Pencaitland
Cross in East
Lothian.



Ross describes the cross at Dryburgh Abbey in the Scottish Borders by saying

“This dial [Fig. 20], situated in the abbey grounds, is not unlike some of the market crosses just described, and more especially the one at Houston, the dial being the termination of an octagonal shaft. There are four faces. The one to the south has at the top of the dial the round face of the sun, with a goat above, and the motto WATCH WEEL. On the north side, in a position corresponding to the sun, is carved a rude figure, bearing a cross in one hand and something like a bell in the other, with the motto above FIDUCIA CONSTANTE. On another face are the Scott arms, with the initials T.H., and on another the Campbell arms first and fourth, girony; second and third, a galley, with the initials J.C.



Figs 17 & 19. The
Pencaitland Cross
in East Lothian.



Figs 20, 21 & 22.
The Abbotsford Cross.

Reading Ross's words again, although he describes it within his section on mercat crosses, he does not actually say that this dial was on a mercat cross, only that it is not unlike some of them described! He did like to make things difficult for me sometimes. Subsequent discussions with the curator at Abbotsford revealed that the dial had come to them from Drygrange near Melrose in 1989. Abbotsford and Melrose are only about three miles apart with Dryburgh Abbey

a further ten miles distant. How and when it had made its way from Dryburgh Abbey to Drygrange is not known. However, Andrew Somerville³ identifies that it was taken from Dryburgh to Nenthorn House near Kelso in the 1920s so perhaps it made its way from there to Drygrange. The dial (Fig. 22) is much more weathered today and although the hour lines and numerals are clear enough, the mottoes and other depictions are difficult to decipher.

Interestingly, parts from Edinburgh's original mercat cross, demolished in 1756, are incorporated into the South Court garden wall at Abbotsford. The current mercat cross in Edinburgh is of Victorian origin, although it is understood that parts of the original stone shaft are embedded in its structure.

Houston is a lovely village to the west of Glasgow. Ross says only "This is a simple village cross [Fig. 23] with a square block on the top having dial faces". It can be seen



As regards the conjunction of the Scott and Campbell arms on this sundial, the only circumstance known to us as at all likely to account for it is that Walter Scott, well known as "Beardie," the paternal great-grandfather of Sir Walter, married, in 1690, Mary Campbell, a niece of the Blythswood family. But as telling against the theory that this dial was set up by them we have to point out that the initials accompanying the arms on the dial do not correspond with theirs."

This dial gave me a bit of bother to say the least. Other than Ross's words, I could find no record of a mercat cross at Dryburgh, a visit there was fruitless and the staff at the Abbey could not help either. Then in the summer of 2013, my wife and I visited the newly re-opened home of Sir Walter Scott at Abbotsford. This house has undergone a multi-million pound refurbishment and is well worth a visit, but even more so when I saw the totally unexpected cube dial in the South Court at the front of the house (Fig. 21). I immediately recognised it as the missing dial from Dryburgh Abbey although it was not on a mercat cross.

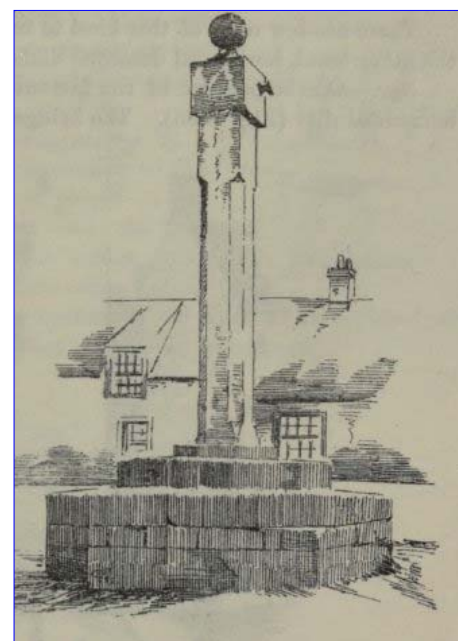


Fig. 23. The
Houston Cross,
sketched by Ross.



Fig. 24. The Houston Cross.

that there is a ball on top and that the gnomons survive, but they are replacements. The south face has a ☼ for the noon mark (Fig. 24).

Ross identified and described one other mercat cross at Fettercairn in Aberdeenshire. He says “*This market cross [Fig. 25] is an octagonal shaft, surmounted with a capital having a sundial on its southern face. It bears the coroneted initials of John, first Earl of Middleton, and his arms (a lion rampant within a double tressure flowered and counterflowered with fleur-de-luce, all countercharged), and on its north side is the date 1670. This cross stood originally in the now decayed village of Kincardine, which lost its prestige by the courts being removed to Stonehaven in the year 1600. It is probable that the shaft only was brought from Kincardine, and that the Earl had the present capital made for it then. On the shaft, as will be seen by the sketch, there is a representation on one side only of the standard Scotch ell, 3 feet 1½ inches long. This cross was noticed by the Queen in the ‘Leaves from the Journal of Our Life in the Highlands’.*”

Queen Victoria travelled widely in this area whilst staying at Balmoral, her Scottish Highland residence. The cross now stands on six octagonal steps (Fig. 26) as it did in Ross’s day, and the single dial face is now rather worn and has lost its gnomon (Fig. 27). A reminder of past times is



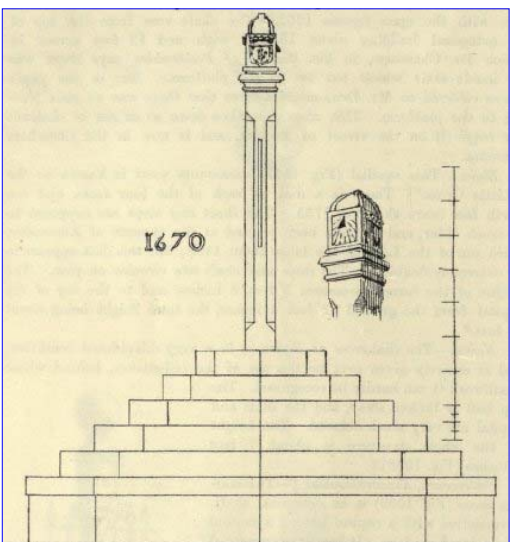
Fig. 27. The south face of the Fettercairn Cross.

the iron hasp with two links still attached. Those guilty of minor crimes were locked into an iron collar, ‘the joughs’ and chained to the cross.

He also mentioned separately the mercat crosses at Leven and Lochgoilhead, but these are obelisks and will be described in a future article. He noted, but did not provide a sketch or description, the cross at Doune in Stirlingshire (Fig. 28) which has a very eroded dial on one face.



There are also sundials on the mercat crosses at Duns (Fig. 29) – on a huge shelf and wrongly orientated; Lochmaben (Fig. 30); and Cumnock, which I have not yet visited, none of which Ross mentioned. Neither did he identify the cross at Melrose which also had a sundial. Restoration after 1986, when it was known that the sundial was present, appears to have replaced virtually the whole cross other than the base



Above: Fig 28. The eroded mercat cross at Doune

Left: Figs 25 & 26. The Fettercairn Cross.



Fig. 29. *The Duns Cross.*



Fig. 31. *The clockface at Melrose.*

Left: Fig. 30. *The Lochmaben Cross.*

and the unicorn on top, and in doing so replaced the dial face with the numerals of a clock face! (Fig. 31.)

You can't win them all.

REFERENCES and NOTES

1. Wikipedia identifies that there are 126 mercat crosses in Scotland, but only lists 100 of them. John W. Small identifies

106 mercat crosses in *Scottish Mercat Crosses*, Eneas MacKay, Stirling (1900).

2. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892).
3. Andrew R. Somerville: *The Ancient Sundials of Scotland*, Rogers Turner Books, London (1994).

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