

# IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

## Pt 1. Scotland's Oldest Sundials – the forerunners to lectern sundials?

DENNIS COWAN

Between 1887 and 1892, the architects David MacGibbon and Thomas Ross produced their definitive work, a five volume piece entitled 'The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland'.<sup>1</sup> The fifth and final volume was published in 1892 and the latter half of it contained details and sketches of the ancient sundials that they had seen during the production of their work.

In 1890, Thomas Ross presented a shorter version of the sundial section to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. This was published by them that year and for this reason, although the junior partner, Ross is mostly credited with the production of the whole section on sundials.

I have given myself the task of tracking down 'his' sundials and photographing them in their current locations. It is not always an easy task as his descriptions of the sundials often lack detail of the locations, many have been moved to other locations and many more are now missing. But it does take me to many interesting places that otherwise I would not visit. My wife, Evelyn, although she has no interest in sundials at all, thoroughly enjoys accompanying me to these out-of-the-way locations.

Scotland's oldest reliably-dated and authenticated sundial is the multi-faceted example from 1623 at Dundas Castle near South Queensferry, a few miles west of Edinburgh (SRN 1209). However, Ross identified three sundials which were almost certainly from the 16<sup>th</sup> century; those at Cockburnspath in the Scottish Borders, and Oldhamstocks and Seton

Palace both in East Lothian. They were all of a similar type and he described the first two at length as follows:

*This is perhaps the proper place to introduce the two very remarkable dials which are found on the churches of Cockburnspath and Oldhamstocks, situated about two miles apart.*

*These are sloping dials, and, so far as our observation goes, they are unique amongst attached dials, which are all upright; and as these two dials probably date from early in the sixteenth century, they may be regarded as the forerunners of the "lectern" dials, to be considered under a separate head.*

*The dial at Cockburnspath [Fig. 1] forms the terminal of the angle buttress at the south-west corner of the church; its face leans forward, and the sides are splayed away; the upper surface slopes backwards to the skew of the gable, and is hollowed like a half cylinder. A singular piece of stone sticks out like the stump of an amputated arm from the west side. Whether this was meant to tell the time by its shadow on the gable cannot be determined, as the wall is "harled" over. The west end of this church, including the buttress and the singular round tower as well as the east end, probably date from about the beginning of the sixteenth century, and without doubt the dial is a part of the original structure.*

Ross's "stump of an amputated arm" is still in place (SRN 1230, Fig. 2) and the harling noted by him has since been removed from the church wall. However, I can say that although it seems possible, there is no evidence at all that this arm's purpose was to cast a shadow on to the gable as there is nothing visible on the wall that would indicate this.

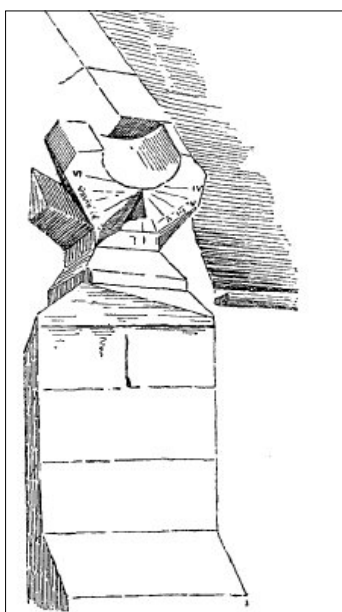


Fig. 1. Cockburnspath dial, sketched by Thomas Ross in the late 19th century.

Fig. 2. The Cockburnspath dial now.



Its purpose must remain a mystery for now. The hour lines and Roman numerals from 6am to 6pm can be easily seen on the main face of the dial, but only a slight stub remains of the gnomon. Otherwise everything is as described by Ross.

Ross continues as follows:

*The Oldhamstocks dial [SRN 1231, Fig. 3] is placed on the south wall of the church at the west corner; it leans forward, and has the top hollowed like a cylinder. Its proclining face having been cut out of a square stone, sufficient material has been left to form a gnomon, which is moulded like a Gothic rib. The face of the gnomon has itself formed a dial. Stone gnomons are of frequent occurrence on unattached dials, but are rare in those of this class. The stone is notched out and splayed away on each side, and has dials on the splays. Above each splay a portion of the stone is left square like horns at each side of the dial face; these horns act as gnomons.*

The dial is still pretty much as Ross described it in 1892 although there are no longer any signs of hour lines or numerals on the main dial face or on the gnomon as indicated by Ross and his sketch. Faint hour lines can still be seen on the east facing right hand 'splay' and the effect of the 'horn' gnomon can be easily seen in Fig. 4.

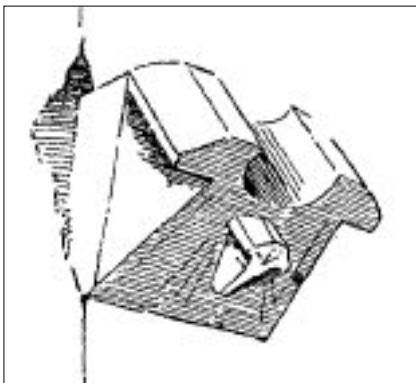


Fig. 3. The Oldhamstocks dial by Ross and, below,

Fig. 4, the dial today.



Ross continues once more:

*Cockburnspath [Fig. 5] and Oldhamstocks [Fig. 6] churches seem to be both of the same date. Oldhamstocks has a square projecting tower-like belfry in the centre of the west end, the position occupied by the round tower at Cockburnspath. It has a chancel with*



Fig. 5 (top). Cockburnspath church

Fig. 6 (bottom). Oldhamstocks church.

*an east window filled with rude flowing tracery. Alongside this window there is an inserted stone with arms, and the date 1581, "probably," writes the Rev Mr Hutton, "the date of the death of Margaret Sinclair, wife of Thomas Hepburn, incumbent of Oldhamstocks."*

*Without doubt the chancel is earlier than this date, and it is almost equally certain that the west gable is also earlier. The body of the church was partly rebuilt and repaired in 1701, that date being over the doorway in the south wall. Now, this is too late a date for the angle buttress at Cockburnspath, where buttress and dial are part of the original structure; and as there can be no doubt but that both dials are contemporaneous, the date 1701 is out of court altogether, and we have to fall back on some date previous to 1581 as the period of these dials. They measure horizontally about 20 inches in breadth.*

Ross went on to describe the dial at Seton Palace, which is about twenty-five miles north-west from the previous two, as follows:

*This dial [Fig. 7], of the same type as the two last mentioned, has not been so well preserved. It stands on a bastion tower, built at an angle formed by the walls of the old garden of Seton Palace. The tower is probably about 10 feet high. There have been cylinders on the upper sloping surface, but they have been smashed and broken so as hardly to be recognisable. On the flat top of the stone there is a horizontal dial seen from the inside of the bastion by ascending a stair.*



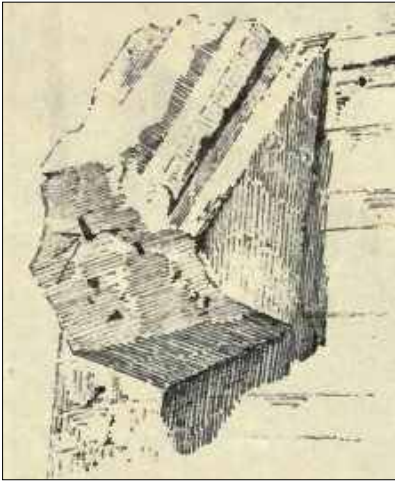


Fig. 7. The Seton Palace dial by Ross and

Fig. 8, the dial today.



Seton Palace is near to Longniddry and stands beside the main A198 between North Berwick and Musselburgh and the dial (not in Register, Fig. 8) is easily seen from the roadside. It still stands on the bastion tower but unfortunately it is badly eroded as indicated by Ross. Possible hour lines reminiscent of a mass dial can be seen on the proclining surface. No other markings are visible. It was not possible for me to be able to ascend to the top of the tower so I was unable to determine whether the horizontal dial as identified by Ross is still in place.

But there is a fourth dial of this type of which Ross was not aware. It is situated on the church at Fogo, a tiny hamlet in the Scottish Borders about twenty miles south-west from Oldhamstocks and Cockburnspath. Fogo is off the beaten track and can only be reached, regardless from which direction you approach, by narrow single track roads.

It is unclear when this church was built for there are no surviving records, but the foundations and the lower walls are thought to be well over 800 years old. It is possible that the current building was built around 1570<sup>2</sup> and it is known that there were extensive alterations in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The dial itself (not in Register, Fig. 9) is located on the south west corner of the church adjacent to the unusual outside stairs to the 'Laird's Loft' (Fig. 10) and it is very similar to the three dials described earlier. It is, however, badly eroded and no hour lines or numerals can be seen on the main proclining face. It does have the remains of a stone

gnomon, very similar to that at Oldhamstocks, on its main face and there are horns at the sides of this face again with similarities to Oldhamstocks, with the addition of a sunken triangular face at each side.

With the exception of the very few mass dials in Scotland, it is almost certain that these four dials are the oldest in Scotland. Were these four dials all made by the same hand? It seems that is possible – they are all similar, probably of a similar age and their locations are not too far apart. Were they the forerunners of the lectern dials? Again, it seems possible – Ross certainly thought so. There are similarities between aspects of these four dials and the later lectern dials such as the half-cylinders and the sunken geometric faces, but it is likely that we will never know.

#### REFERENCES

1. Text in *italics* is reproduced from D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892).
2. British Listed Buildings: [www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/sc-10512-fogo-kirk-church-of-scotland-including-in](http://www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/sc-10512-fogo-kirk-church-of-scotland-including-in) .

For a CV of the author, see *Bulletin* 23(iv) p.40.



Fig. 9. The dial at Fogo.

Fig. 10. Fogo church with the dial next to the steps to the 'Laird's Loft'.

