

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

Part 22: An Aberdonian Triad

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In volume 5 of *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*,¹ Thomas Ross groups three sundials from Aberdeen and the surrounding area together. These sundials are from Ellon Castle Gardens, about seventeen miles to the north of Aberdeen, Pitmedden Garden, just a few miles to the west of Ellon, and the third in Duthie Park in Aberdeen itself.

Of the dial at Ellon Castle, Ross says:

“This extremely beautiful example [Fig. 1] is one of two sundials which stand in the castle garden. It differs, as will be seen, very considerably from the normal type, but as a graceful object of architectural design it will hold its own with the best examples of its class. The general contour of the dial corresponds with that of the obelisks, but is modified in all its details. Thus, the shaft, instead of rising abruptly from the platform, or resting on a pedestal, has a fine and boldly moulded base.

“The faces of the shaft are richly carved with well-executed ornaments of fruit and flowers hung from open-mouthed masks. A few simple mouldings with a double necking connect the shaft and capital, which contains hollows on all its twenty-four faces an unusual arrangement, and found only on the Pitmedden dial, figured in the next illustration. The finial, with its neck-moulding and stone-ball termination, also resembles the same example, and it is not improbable that the design of the one influenced that of the other, although the Ellon dial is considerably richer and more delicate in its details. The finial of the dial in



Fig. 1. Ross's sketch of the Ellon Castle dial.

Duthie Park, Aberdeen, appears to have been modelled somewhat after the style of these two dials at Ellon and Pitmedden, indicative of a decided local peculiarity. The Aberdeen dial is dated 1707, but we incline to the opinion that the Ellon and Pitmedden dials belong to the previous century.

“The appearance of the Ellon dial is greatly enhanced by the fine and wide moulded steps on which it stands. The steps, each 7 inches high, measure respectively 8 feet square, 7 feet square, and 4 feet square. The dial itself to top of ball is 8 feet 6 inches high.”

My first visit to Ellon in 2014 didn't go well. I turned up at the castle only to find that the gates to the grounds were boarded up, and peeking through a gap I could see that the gardens were in a totally overgrown state. Further investigation, which I should have done before I set off for Ellon, revealed that the castle was in a ruinous condition. This didn't sound good for the sundials.

A couple of years later in 2016 I discovered by chance that a charitable group, Ellon Castle Gardens Board, had been set up to revitalise and conserve the gardens as a lasting



Fig. 2. The shaft of the Ellon dial still in its original position in the garden.

resource for the people of Ellon. This was good news indeed – but had the sundials survived?

Then, early in 2017, I managed to make contact with Elaine Cooper-Wilcox, the Board Member who is responsible for PR and Marketing at the gardens and she confirmed that both of the sundials mentioned by Ross were indeed still there. We made arrangements for my visit, as the gardens are open only for special occasions at this stage of their conservation.

When I arrived there I found that the shaft of the dial was still in its original position (Fig. 2) on the moulded steps in the garden, but without the capital and finial which had been stored for safekeeping. The carvings on the shaft described by Ross have survived well and can be seen in Fig. 3.

The capital, which was in an outbuilding, has not fared so well. It has serious cracks and is held together with a metal band (Fig. 4), so couldn't easily be moved to get a better view. All of the faces as far as I could see were circular, triangular and square sunken dials. The gnomons, which may have been replaced, appeared to be complete and the numerals that I could see were all Arabic. Unfortunately I wasn't able to see the finial which had been stored elsewhere.



Fig. 3. Detail of the carvings on the shaft of the Ellon dial.



Fig. 4. The capital of the Ellon dial held together with an iron band.

Ross suggests that this dial is very similar in outlook to the obelisk dials, but with differences as he describes above. The main obvious difference, in my opinion, is in the shaft where this example has carvings of masks, fruit and flowers rather than the dial faces to be seen on the typical obelisk shafts.

As Ross says above, there are two dials at Ellon, and although not intended to be part of this triad, it would make sense to include the other dial here. Surprisingly, Ross doesn't provide a sketch of this dial and only says that it is similar to a dial at Fergie (Fig. 5), some thirty miles to the north-east of Ellon. According to Somerville,² the Fergie dial originally came from Foveran which is less than five miles from Ellon. It is quite probable therefore that both of these dials were made by the same hand.

Fig. 5. Ross's sketch of the dial at Fergie which is very similar to the second Ellon dial.

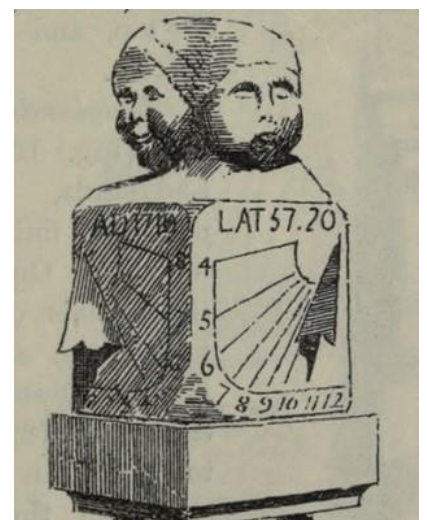




Fig. 6. The second Ellon dial's 'wee hoose' built to protect it from the elements.

This second dial was originally positioned just outside the castle, but today it has its own 'wee hoose' (Fig. 6) designed specifically to protect it from the elements for the time being. The roof was lifted off for me and I was able to see the dial and its granite pedestal (Fig. 7). Like the capital of the other dial, it hasn't fared well. The gnomons that I could see were bent and battered, and the numerals and hour lines were no longer visible. However, its similarities to the dial at Forgue were immediately apparent.

The dial, which is believed to date from around 1717, has four children's heads on top. It is said that it was erected in memory of Bailie Gordon's two sons who were murdered in Edinburgh in 1717 by their tutor, after they saw him take liberties with their mother's maid. Wikipedia wrongly attributes this story to the other dial at Ellon.

The good news is that the Trust intend to restore both dials at some stage in the future.

Situated a few miles to the west of Ellon, Pitmedden Garden is a National Trust for Scotland site and its design and maintenance give it its own unique charm: it must surely be one of Scotland's best gardens. It dates back to



Fig. 8. Some of the clipped box hedging at Pitmedden Garden.



Fig. 7. The second Ellon dial and its pedestal inside the 'wee hoose'. The similarities to the Forgue dial can be clearly seen.

1675 when it was originally laid out, but fell into neglect in the 19th century. The plans for the garden were lost when the original Pitmedden House was destroyed by fire in 1818 but the Trust re-created the garden in the 1950s based on the 17th-century plans for the gardens at the Palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh. There are six miles of clipped box hedging, some of which can be seen in Fig. 8, and 30,000 annual bedding plants are used to make up the colourful designs in the parterres, which unfortunately were not in flower at the time of my visit.

Mr Robert Duthie of Pitmedden House provided Ross with details of this dial and Ross comments:

"In describing the [first] Ellon dial above, the peculiarities of this fine sundial [Fig. 9] are commented on. Its capital being placed on a slender stock or neck, unlike those of the type in general, has a more than usually striking



Fig. 9. Ross's sketch of the Pitmedden dial.

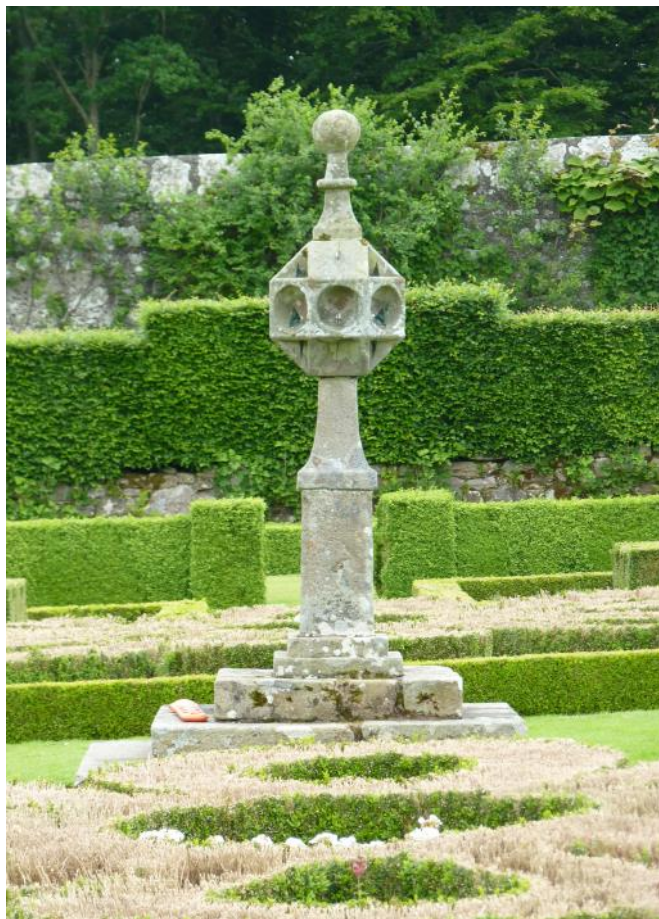


Fig. 10. The Pitmedden dial sitting within the parterres today.

appearance. Mr. Duthie believes the dial to have been made about 1675, about which time the garden walls at Duthie House were erected.³ We agree in thinking that it is certainly as old as this date. The dimensions are width and



Fig. 11. Detail of the Pitmedden dial.

height of the capital on the square, 1 foot 1 1 inches; total height from ground, 8 feet 9 inches; width of lower step, 4 feet 11 inches; width of pedestal, 12 inches."

The dial today (Fig. 10), which is now situated amongst the fine parterres, looks much as it did in Ross's sketch and the similarities to the Ellon dial's capital can be clearly seen in the detail photograph in Fig. 11 with the circular, triangular and square sunken dials. Like the Ellon dial, it has twenty-four dial faces.

An interesting feature in the parterres near to the dial incorporates the words *TEMPUS* and *FUGIT* (Figs 12 and 13) elegantly made out in box hedging.

Fig. 12. Tempus...



Fig. 13. ...Fugit.



Fig. 14. The west-facing dial described by Ross as having no special interest.



Fig. 15. The south- and east-facing dials with the wrongly positioned gnomon on the south face.

Ross goes on to say that:

“There are two other dials here on the corner of a garden house, but they have nothing of special interest about them.”

Both of these vertical dials are carved directly on to the quoins of the building. One is a single-faced west-facing dial (Fig. 14) and the other is a two-faced dial (Fig. 15): one a direct south face and the other east facing. Both have replacement gnomons, but the gnomon on the south face has been mounted too high. All have Arabic numerals.

Ross says above that these dials have nothing of special interest about them. I disagree and think that they have, but unfortunately not in a good way! Both of these dials appear

to have been carved on separate blocks of stone which can give the appearance of vertical cracks in the dials. The gnomon on the south face, apart from being too high, has been crudely held in place and it really is an example of how not to carry out a restoration.

The third dial of the Aberdonian Triad is in the Winter Gardens contained within Duthie Park in Aberdeen. These Winter Gardens were once the largest indoor gardens in the UK until the advent of the Eden Project in Cornwall, but are well worth a visit. Of the dial, Ross says:

“The dial [Fig. 16] belongs to the city, and stands in a property formerly called Arthur's Seat, now absorbed in the Duthie Park, a public pleasure ground presented to Aberdeen by the late Miss Duthie of Ruthrieston.⁴ The dial-faces and the ball on the top are painted a light blue colour, and the lines and figures are gilt; there are shields on each of the four sides of the supporting baluster bearing respectively the initials C.G., G.B., the date 1707, and a representation of a mortar and pestle.”

This dial is situated today in an outdoor area of the gardens and the blue colour on the dial faces and the ball mentioned by Ross are still apparent. Unfortunately incorrect gnomons have been wrongly fitted to some of the faces as can be seen on the north-facing upper dial and the sunken dial below it in Fig. 17, and also on the south-facing sunken dial in Fig. 18.

Ross's comment that the dial, in part, was painted raises an interesting question. I have always been of the opinion that Scottish stone dials were not originally painted but this is the first such dial that I have seen that has traces of paint on it, apart from the Mercat Cross at Inverkeithing which was painted white in only relatively recent times. Was the Duthie Park dial painted when new in 1707 or did it have a 19th-century paint job?

Fig. 16. Ross's sketch of the Duthie Park dial.

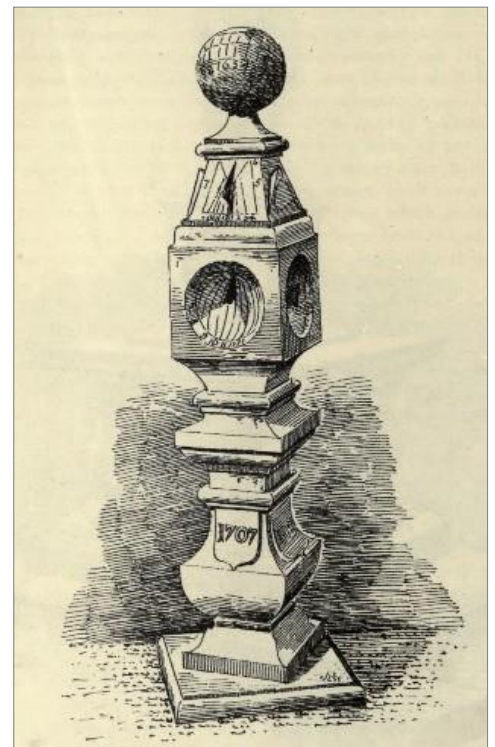




Fig. 17. The north faces of the Duthie Park dial with the wrong gnomons.

This whole question of whether these Scottish monumental stone dials were painted when new, is something that I need to investigate at some point in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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REFERENCES and NOTES

1. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892).
2. Andrew R Somerville: *The Ancient Sundials of Scotland*, Rogers Turner Books, London (1994).
3. I have attempted to ascertain if the house at Pitmedden was originally called Duthie House but to no avail. So did Ross make an error here and mistakenly name Pitmedden House as Duthie House? He says that the garden walls were erected in 1675 which was when the gardens at Pitmedden were laid out.
4. Miss Duthie of Ruthrieston was part of the wealthy Duthie family of shipbuilders in the north-east of Scotland, but there is no evidence that I can find that links her with Mr Duthie of Pitmedden.

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Fig. 18. The south face of the Duthie Park dial with the incorrect gnomon on the sunken dial face.