

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

Part 17: Some Sundials of East Fife

DENNIS COWAN

The eastern part of the region of Fife is located between the Firth of Forth and the Firth of Tay, more or less between Edinburgh and Perth, and east of the M90 motorway which runs between these two cities. In volume 5 of *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*,¹ Thomas Ross mentions a number of dials in this area, and six of them will be covered in this article.

Setting off along the north shore of the Firth of Forth and heading east, we come to Kirkcaldy, once famous for the manufacture of linoleum. Ross makes a brief mention of a dial at Dunnikier House, “a mansion at the eastern end of the town”. He says:

“The dial on this house [Fig. 1] is similar to the one just described.² The house faces the road, on the top of the hill at the east end of Kirkcaldy, and is dated 1692.”

The present Dunnikier House is a hotel to the north of Kirkcaldy, and a visit there confirmed my suspicions that it was not the building with the sundial. However, by a lucky chance, when just passing one day several months later, driving east out of Kirkcaldy, I noticed a sundial on the corner of a building (Fig. 2) known as Path House.

Although not immediately recognised as one of Ross’s dials, when I returned home and looked at my photographs,



Fig. 2. Dunnikier House today, now known as Path House.

even though the photograph and sketch are from different angles, there was no doubt that Path House and Ross’s Dunnikier House were the one and same. Ross did not provide a detail sketch of the dial but the dial today showing both the south-east and south-west faces is shown at Fig. 3.



Fig. 1. Ross’s sketch of Dunnikier House with the dial at the left of the sketch.



Fig. 3. Detail of the Dunnikier House / Path House dial.

Further east along the coast, the seaside villages of Earlsferry and Elie lie side by side without any gap between them and Ross identifies dials in both places. Firstly, of the dial in Earlsferry (Fig. 4), Ross says only that it “is neat and graceful in design”.

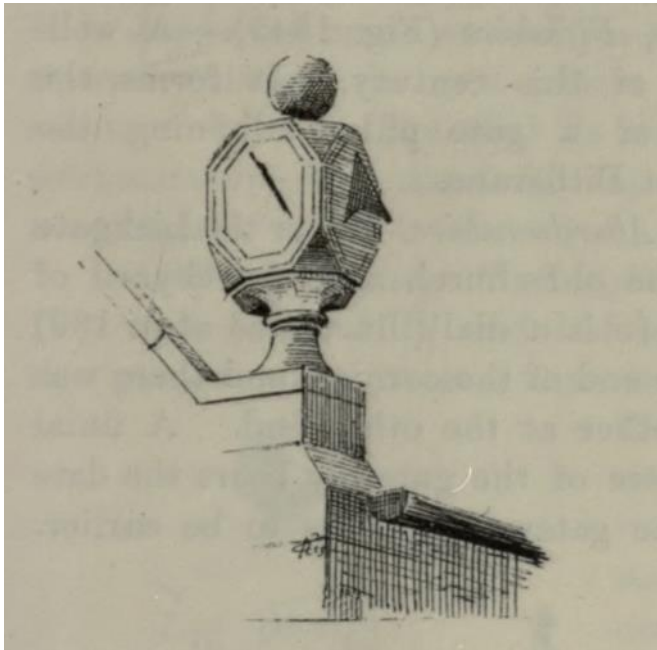


Fig. 4. Ross's sketch of the Earlsferry dial.



Fig. 5. The Earlsferry dial today.

Fig. 7. The Muckle Yett prior to its demolition in the middle of the 19th century. The dials sit above the elaborate doorway.

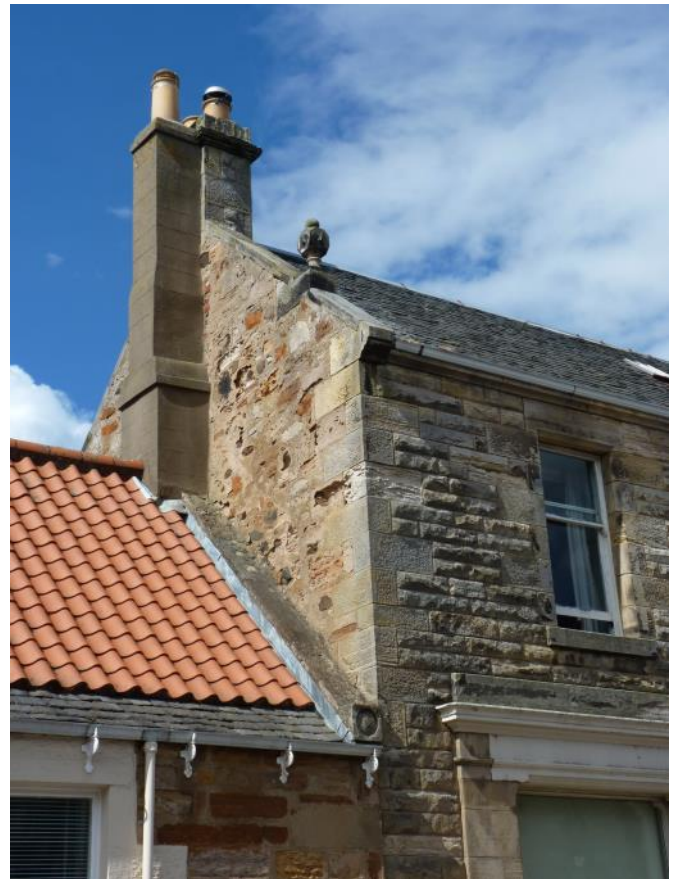
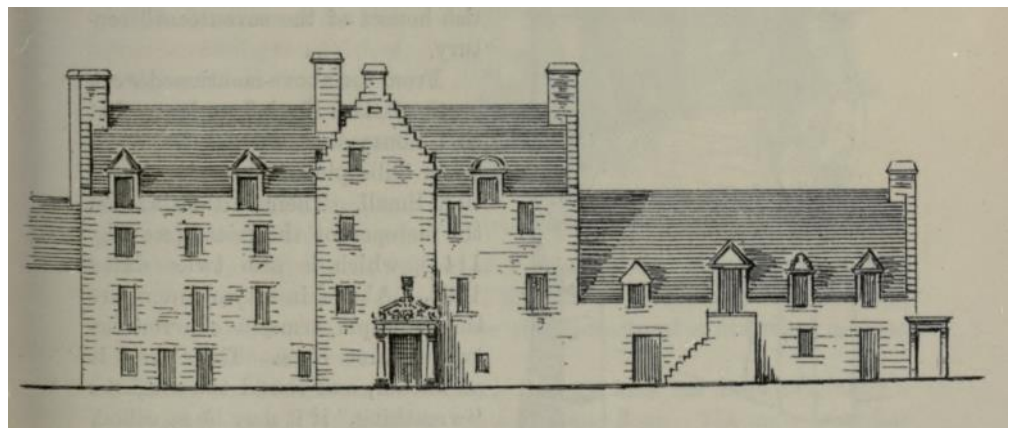


Fig. 6. The Earlsferry dial showing its position on the gable.

As can be seen from Fig. 5, it is a stone cube with octagonal dials on the south-east and south-west faces, but a comparison between Fig. 4 and Fig. 6 shows that the dial now appears to be in a different position to where it was in Ross's day, as it is now half-way up the gable as opposed to the gable foot.

Moving along to Elie, Ross has this to say:

“Elie, like most of the Fife towns bordering the Frith³ of Forth, seems at one time to have contained a great many stately old Scottish houses, of which the Muckle Yett [Fig. 7] may be taken as an example; but the hand of the philistine has been laid heavily on them, and Elie has now become a commonplace, modern, seaside resort, with whatever of architectural or historical interest it ever had almost crushed out of it.”

Elie wasn't his favourite place, then! He goes on to say:

The Muckle Yett [English – Big Gate or Door] was a fine old Scottish house in Elie, which, as it projected some 10 or 12 feet into the street, had to be taken down about thirty years ago. On the projecting part there was an elaborate doorway which contained a curious terminal dial, of which a drawing is shown at [Fig. 8]. The dial and doorway are still preserved. The former unites some of the peculiarities of the unattached dials with those of its own class, such as proclining and hollow cup-dials with upright ones. On the doorway is the date 1682, and the initials of Alexander Gillespie, and his wife, Christian Small."

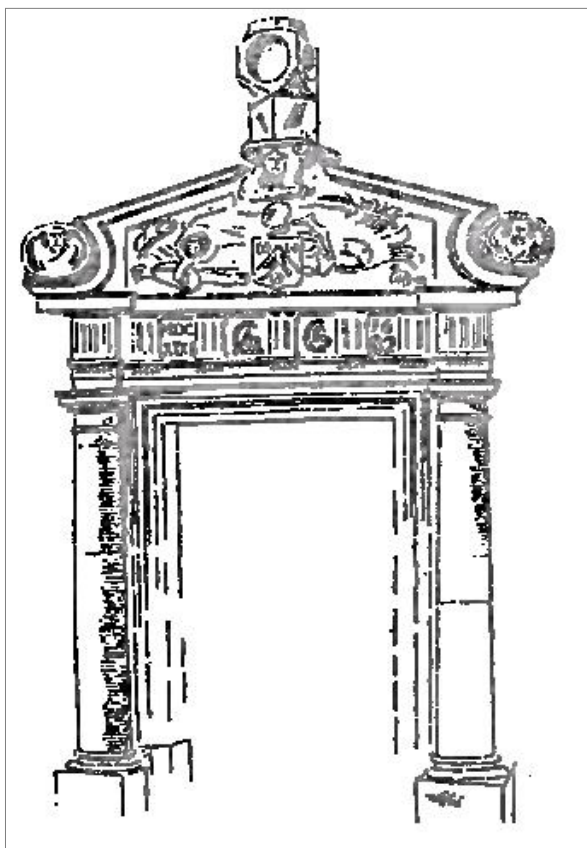


Fig. 8. Ross's sketch of the Muckle Yett doorway and the sundial above.



Fig. 9. The top of the Muckle Yett doorway today.



Fig. 10. Detail of the Muckle Yett dial showing three of the five dial faces.

The doorway (Fig. 9) and its dials (Fig. 10) are today located rather anonymously in their new location in South Street. The dial has seven dial faces in total, two of which, like the previous two dials discussed, have south-east and south-west vertical faces. This is quite a common configuration in Scottish sundials. There are three cup hollow (scaphe) dials above these two dials, facing east, south and west. In addition, there are two triangular proclining dials again facing south-east and south-west. It has to be said that the whole is in a rather poor condition.

A few miles north-east of Elie but lying inland is Kellie Castle, a National Trust for Scotland property. Ross merely directs us to Volume 2 by saying:

"A sketch is given in Vol. II. p. 127 of a square dial at Kelly Castle,⁴ with an ogee top, which serves to mark one of the corners of the garden wall."

He provides no detail sketch of the dial, but it can be seen on the wall at the lower right-hand side of his sketch of the castle at Fig. 11. This cube dial, which is dated 1722, now

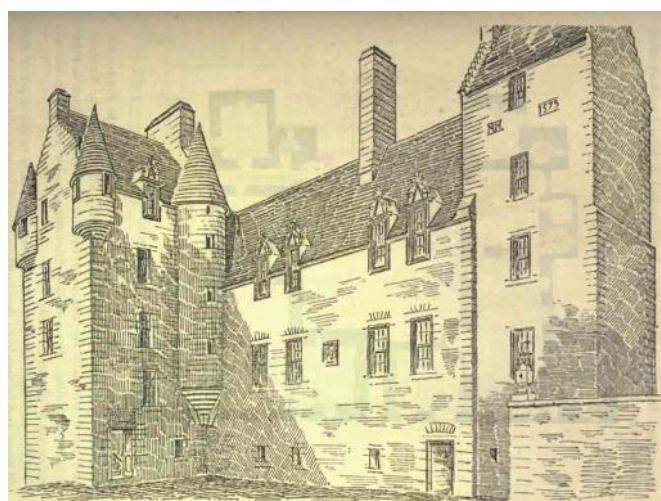


Fig. 11. Ross's sketch of Kellie Castle showing the dial on the wall at the lower right.

sits on top of the doocot (English – dovecote) in roughly the same position (Fig. 12) although it has lost its ogee top. Detail of the south and east faces is shown at Fig. 13 and the north and west faces at Fig. 14.



Fig. 12. Kellie Castle dial sitting on top of the doocot.



Fig. 13. South and east faces of the Kellie Castle dial.



Fig. 14. North and west faces of the Kellie Castle dial showing the date of 1722.

Back to the coast and just a few miles or so north-east of Crail is Balcomie Castle, said to be haunted by a boy playing a tin whistle. Of the dial here, Ross notes that:

“This is a very modest dial, hardly seen beside the rich heraldic carving which fills the three adjoining panels over the entrance gateway. The initials on it are those of John Learmonth of Balcomie, and his wife, Elizabeth Myreton of Randerston, whose arms occupy the panels. On the frieze above the panels is the inscription (EXCEPT) THE LORD BVLD THE HOUSE THEY LABOVR IN VAIN THAT BUILD IT. The date of the gateway, which faces the south, is 1660.”

His sketch is shown at Fig. 15; again there is no detail sketch, but it can be seen from Fig. 16 that it is very much in the same position today. However, Ross’s comment that the gateway faces south is puzzling as the gatehouse today faces just slightly north of east, and the clearly east-facing sundial today (Fig. 17) reflects that by being canted slightly. There is no evidence that the gateway has been

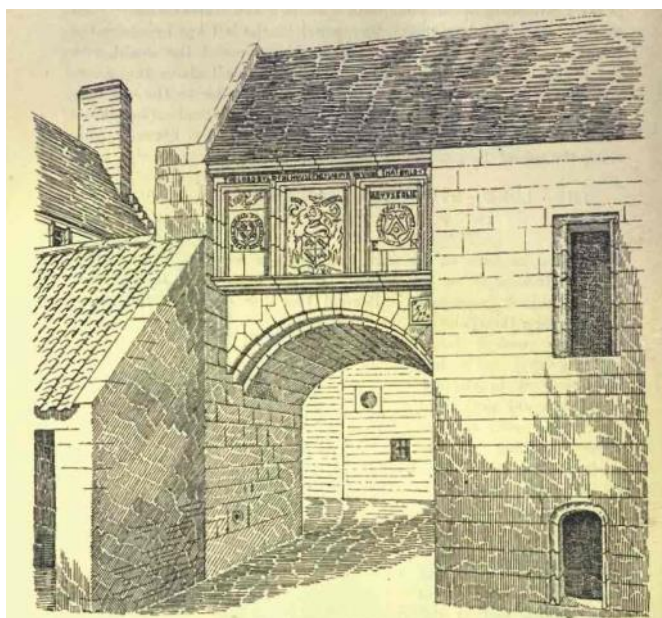


Fig. 15. Ross’s sketch of Balcomie Castle gateway with the dial visible under the right hand panel.



Fig. 16. Balcomie Castle gateway today.



Fig. 17. Detail of the Balcomie Castle dial.

moved, certainly not since Ross's time. Looking at the very small image of the dial in Ross's sketch in Fig. 15 it does look to be canted, but does not appear to be delineated in the manner of the current dial. My guess is that it is an artistic impression rather than an accurate reflection of the dial, but I cannot explain Ross's comment that it faces south.

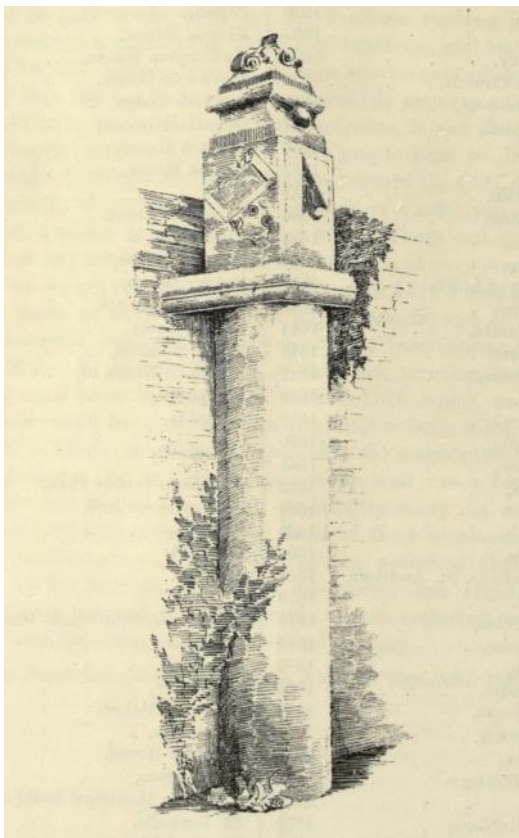


Fig. 18. Ross's sketch of the St Mary's College dial.



Fig. 19. The St Mary's College dial today in its position on a lawn.

Following the coast, the next place we come to is the university town of St Andrews and it is the dial in St Mary's College quadrangle that interests us. St Mary's College is the home of the Faculty and School of Divinity



Fig. 20. Detail of the south and west faces of the St Mary's College dial.

within the University of St Andrews and students have attended there since 1579.

Strangely, Ross makes no mention of this dial at all, other than including a sketch of it (Fig. 18) on the very last page of the section of his work on sundials where it sits against a wall. The sundial today is on a lawn (Fig. 19) and is a stone cube with four vertical faces on top of a circular shaft. It is dated 1664 and carries the initials of Dr Walter Comrie (Fig. 20) who was Principal of the College at that time. It too is in a very poor condition with no hour lines or clear numerals visible, with the W of DWC (Dr Comrie's initials) also missing.

REFERENCES and NOTES

1. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892).
2. The dial that Ross says was "just described", is at Fountainhall in East Lothian and will be covered in a future article.
3. In Victorian times, it was common to use Frith of Forth rather than Firth of Forth.
4. Ross interchangeably used the spellings "Kelly" and "Kellie" throughout his work.

dennis.cowan@btinternet.com