

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THOMAS ROSS

Part 15: Sundials on Scottish Churches

DENNIS COWAN

Although I have seen around sixty-five sundials on Scottish churches, Thomas Ross recorded only around thirteen of them in volume 5 of *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*.¹ Four of them have previously been covered in other articles in this series,^{2,3} and another will be the subject of a future article, so this article will only concern itself with the remaining eight locations.

The sundials that I have seen on English churches have in the main been south facing and mounted on either the tower or the porch, but this is not generally the case in Scotland, particularly on 17th-century churches. These are almost invariably mounted on the south-west corner with many having a pair of dials on the south and west sides of the corner as at Legerwood (Fig. 1), indicating to me that services probably tended to be held in the latter part of the day rather than in the morning. There was a practical purpose too – where there was an external bell rope, it was always to be found hanging down on the west side of the church (Fig. 2). Very convenient – check the time on the sundial and walk backwards a few feet to ring the bell.



Fig. 2. The external bell rope at Legerwood.



Fig. 1. A typical 17th-century Scottish church with a two-faced sundial wrapped round the SW corner. This dial is at Legerwood in the Scottish Borders where I later found that my great-great grandmother was christened in 1830!

However, only one of the eight sundials described below follows this exact pattern.

Ross says of the dial on the church at Yarrow in the Scottish Borders:

“The sketch of this dial [Fig. 3] is taken from the Reminiscences of Yarrow. It contains the motto WATCH AND PRAY TYME IS SHORT, with the initials I.F.M. with M. above and 1640 below. The maker’s name is concealed in the monogram, R.M. FECIT.”

The dial has Roman numerals and looks very much the same today (Fig. 4) except that part of the gnomon is missing. There is some dispute as to whether this dial is original to Yarrow, but as the church was built in 1640 and the dial is dated 1640, I suspect that the dial is original to the church. Despite what I said above, in Yarrow’s case the church bell is unusually at the centre of the church; however, the polygonal apse including the bell and its tower

Fig. 3. Ross’s sketch of the dial at Yarrow.





Fig. 4. The Yarrow dial today.



Fig. 5. Yarrow church showing the polygonal apse and tower that were added in 1906.



Fig. 6. Ross's sketch of the dial at Cortachy made from a rubbing provided by Mr George Miln.

were only added in 1906 (Fig. 5). The church's most famous worshipper was the 19th-century poet and writer, Sir Walter Scott.

Moving up north to Cortachy in Angus, Ross commented that:

"the dial here [Fig. 6] is surrounded with an ornamental frame in the convoluted style of the seventeenth century. On either side of the frame are the initials K.C., which



Fig. 7. The Cortachy dial today.

probably mean either Kortachy Church or Kirk of Cortachy; on the lower side the motto UT HORA FVGIT VITA, and on the top the date 1675. The gnomon is fixed in the centre of a figure of the sun. This sketch is made from a rubbing kindly made for us by Mr. George Miln, architect."

Today the dial, which has Arabic numerals, is still as it was in Ross's day apart from some flaking most notably in the bottom left-hand corner (Fig. 7). This church was built in 1828 on the site of a medieval church so was still fairly modern to Ross. Perhaps the dial, dated 1675, came from the earlier church.

At Inveresk in East Lothian, only a few miles from Edinburgh, Ross says that:

"there are two dials here, lying loosely against the walls of the church. One of them [Fig. 8] is of very great interest, as it bears the inscription ARCHIBALDI HANDASYDE PISCATORII FECIT MDCCXXXV, with the motto SIC TRANSIT GLORIA MUNDI. Piscatorii is a classical form

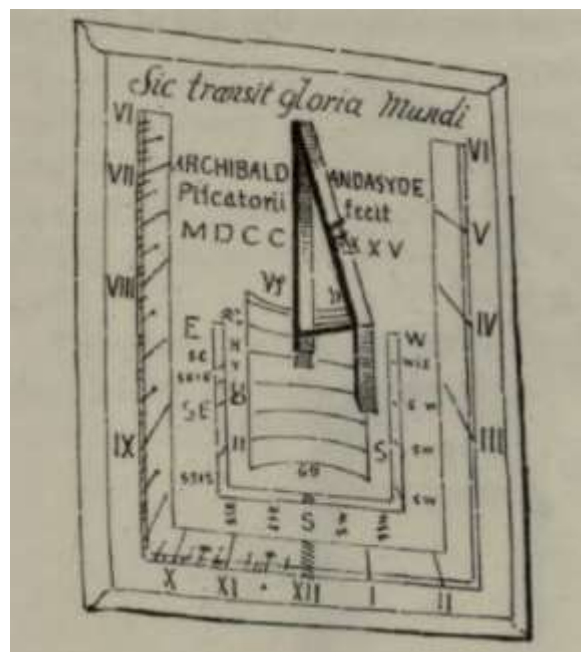


Fig. 8. Ross's sketch of the south-facing dial at Inveresk showing the detail.

of the name of the neighbouring village of Fisherrow, where Handasyde lived at that time. He was fond of classical names, and he invented the name of “Conchi Polensis” for the town of Musselburgh when he lived there. Handasyde was evidently a regular dial maker, and probably made the plain dial lying beside the above one [Fig. 9] ... The chief dial at Inveresk has a rounded moulding on the edge, and is, scientifically speaking, of complicated construction; the gnomon is open, and made of hammered iron, with a slight artistic touch in the centre.⁴ The companion dial has a similar moulding round its sides, and has also a wrought-iron open gnomon.

Fig. 9. Ross's sketch of the west-facing dial at Inveresk.

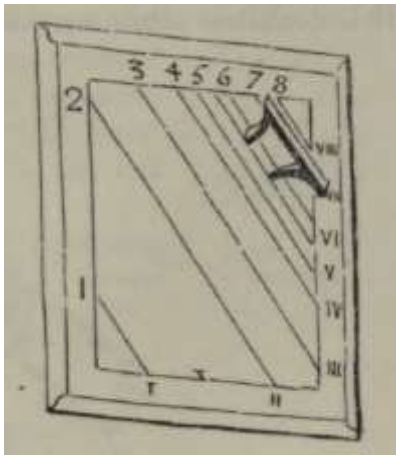


Fig. 11. The south-facing dial at Inveresk today.



Fig. 12. The west-facing dial at Inveresk today.



Fig. 10. The main entrance of Inveresk church showing the two dials.

Like the church at Cortachy, this church was built on the site of an earlier medieval church in 1806. It is not known though where these two dials originally came from. Today they are mounted on either side of the main entrance to the church (Fig. 10), obviously incorrectly as one is a south-facing dial (Fig. 11) whilst the other is west facing (Fig. 12)! The south-facing dial dating from 1735 with Roman numerals is much weathered and is badly flaking around the gnomon, whilst the west dial is in better condition and has both Arabic and Roman numerals. I must claim these two dials as my heritage as I have links to the 18th-century Handasydes of Musselburgh, although I still have to make a direct link to Archibald the maker of these dials, but I will keep trying!

Several miles south of Inveresk is the small village of Borthwick. Ross doesn't say much about this dial other than:

“this neat dial [Fig. 13], dated 1707, is inserted in the south-west corner of the south porch or transept of the church, which probably dates from the fifteenth century”.

It might have been neat in 1890, but nothing much remains of it now other than the framework and the gnomon stubs (Fig. 14), but it still sits in its niche in the south-west corner of the transept.

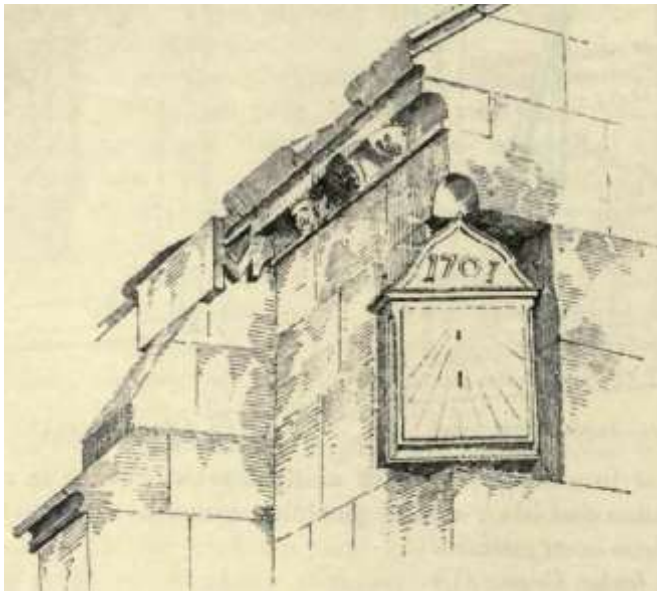


Fig. 13. Ross's sketch of the Borthwick dial.



Fig. 14. The remains of the Borthwick dial today.

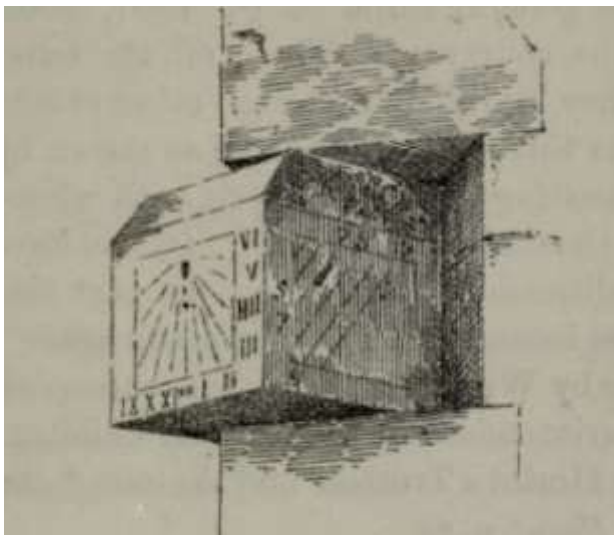


Fig. 15. Ross's sketch of the dial at Prestonpans.

Ross comments on the church at Prestonpans in East Lothian that:

“on the south-west corner of one of the south aisles of this picturesque church there was a projecting angle dial [Fig. 15]. The aisle has been taken down since the sketch was made. The Old Statistical Account says that this church, with the exception of the steeple, which is much older, was rebuilt in 1774.”

As Ross indicates, this dial is no longer there as the aisle on which it was mounted has been removed (in 1891). It is not known what became of the dial.

Some ten miles east of Berwick-on-Tweed lies the town of Chirside. Of the dial on the church, Ross says:

“the dial here [Fig. 16] is not unlike the one above referred to at Prestonpans, both in design and position; it bears the motto HOC AGE DUM LUMEN ADEST, and the date 1816; but the dial itself is older than the lettering. The church dates from the Norman period, and some work of that time is still left; but it has undergone many transformations and repairs, and on the north gable there is a stone inscribed REPAIRED 1705. This is a much likelier date for the dial than 1816, the date it bears. Dr. Stuart, Chirside, states that there are several old dials in the village, and that a man named Dunbar was in old times in the habit of making them.”

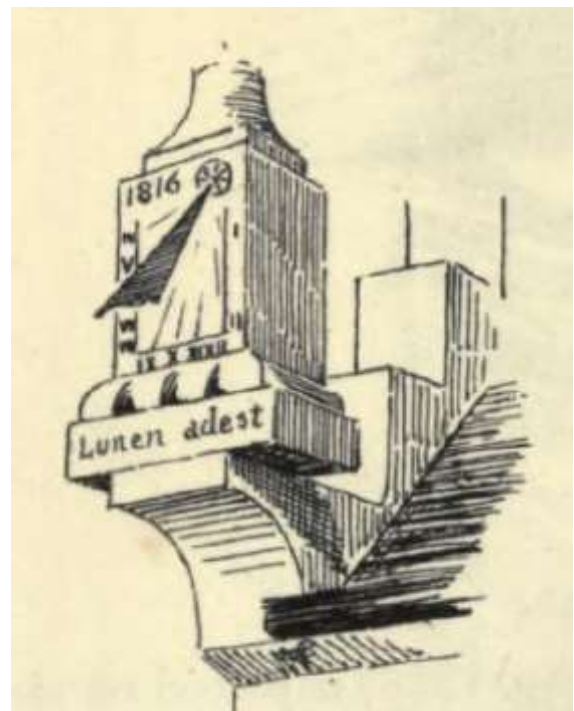


Fig. 16. Ross's sketch of the Chirside dial with all the detail that is missing today.

There may have been several old dials in the village in Ross's day, but I have been unable to locate any of them other than this one on the church which has undergone significant changes since Ross's day. In 1904, following the death of Lady Tweedmouth and her burial in the churchyard, her husband Baron Tweedmouth built a hall, a new vestry and added a new tower to the church.



Fig. 17. The Chirnside dial today in its new position in a niche on the tower.

To facilitate the new tower, the dial was removed. Fortunately, unlike the dial at Prestonpans, a new position for the dial was created in a niche on the tower, where it remains to this day (Fig. 17). However, it is in very poor condition and the date can no longer be seen, as is the case with the numerals and hour lines. All that remains on this stone cube with two dial faces are parts of the motto, the gnomon roots and part of a sun motif.

Jim Clark, the Formula 1 racing driver who was killed in a crash at Hockenheim in Germany in 1968, is buried in the churchyard, and there were fresh flowers at his graveside at the time of my visit.

Auchterhouse is situated around ten miles north-west of Dundee, but its church is nearly two miles further away in the nowadays larger village of Kirkton of Auchterhouse. Ross says that:

“this very interesting Gothic church has two dials—one, perfectly plain, on the south-east corner of the chancel; the other, on the gable [Fig. 18], may appropriately be introduced here. It consists of a semi-cylinder sunk into the stone with a triangular hollow on each side. On the same gable occurs the stone with the date 1630.”

Not much is left of the canted south-facing dial (Fig. 19) other than some very faint hour lines and the gnomon root. The other dial (Fig. 20) is still as sketched by Ross and some hour lines can be seen on the semi-cylinder.

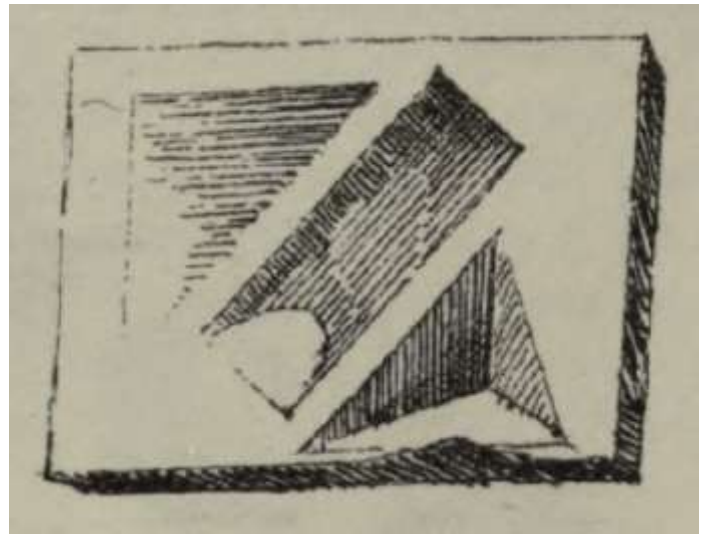


Fig. 18. The semi-cylinder dial at Auchterhouse as sketched by Ross.



Fig. 19. The canted south-facing dial at Auchterhouse today.



Fig. 20. The Auchterhouse semi-cylinder dial today.

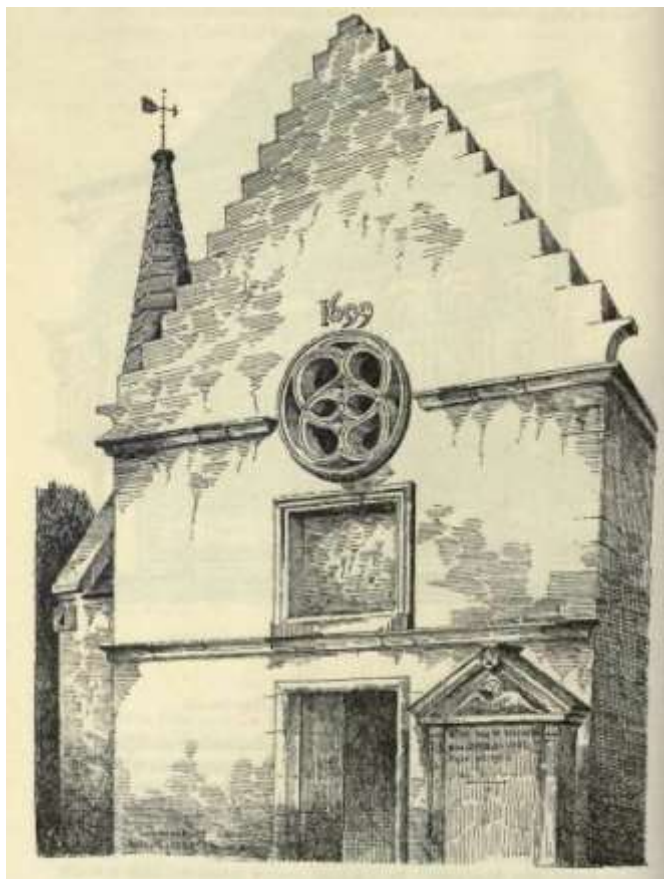


Fig. 21. Ross's sketch of Glencorse church showing the dial at the left-hand side.

At last Ross records a typical Scottish church sundial at Glencorse in Midlothian, wrapped as it is round the south-west corner of the church. He did not provide much detail though and it can only just be seen at the left-hand side of his general sketch of the church (Fig. 21). He says:

"on the south-west corner of this abandoned church there is a very simple dial of this type [dials with two faces on angles of buildings]. The date on the Woodhouselee aisle of the church is 1699."

The church today is inside a private estate and is sometimes used for wedding ceremonies. The gates of the estate are kept locked and access was difficult as the owners never answered my e-mails. However, I was lucky as on the second time that I turned up hoping to gain access, the gate was open as a tractor was just leaving. When I explained why I was there, the driver wasn't keen but I eventually managed to convince him that I would be in and out within ten minutes.

The dial is in a poor condition today with only some of the Arabic numerals and hour lines visible including the cross patty for noon on the south-facing dial (Fig. 22). The west-facing dial isn't any better with only some Arabic numerals and the remains of a bent gnomon. But it has survived.



Fig. 22. The typical Scottish church dial at Glencorse wrapped round the south-west corner.

REFERENCES and NOTES

1. D. MacGibbon and T. Ross: *The Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, David Douglas, Edinburgh (1892)
2. D. Cowan: 'In the footsteps of Thomas Ross. 1: Scotland's oldest sundials – the forerunners to lectern sundials?', *BSS Bulletin* 24(ii), 31–33 (June 2012).
3. D. Cowan: 'In the footsteps of Thomas Ross. 10: A mixed bag of sundials in Edinburgh', *BSS Bulletin* 27(i), 33–37 (March 2015).
4. Frank King comments that the "artistic touch" that Ross refers to appears to be a nodus. The dial plate in Ross's sketch clearly includes constant-declination lines, so a nodus would be required. Comparison of the sketch and the dial as it survives today shows that the sketch is not a very faithful representation. It shows eight constant-declination lines and the equinoctial line is not quite straight. Ross appears to have got tired when making this sketch. The morning hours are meticulously subdivided. All have half-hour and quarter-hour tick marks and many show tick marks at five-minute intervals. At XII there is clear evidence of a noon gap but, for the entire afternoon, only hour lines are shown, with no sub-divisions at all. Between the panel containing the constant-declination lines and the main chapter ring, there is a scale labelled with compass directions. The tick marks of this scale appear to radiate from the base of the horizontal strut that supports the gnomon. If we assume that the dial as a whole is direct south-facing then, *at an equinox*, this scale just about plausibly serves to indicate azimuth. The sun rises due east (when the shadow falls on the tick mark labelled 'E') and sets due west (when the shadow falls on the tick mark labelled 'W'). In between, the tick mark labelled 'S' is extra wide, echoing the noon gap in the hour scale. Most of the other azimuth tick marks and their labels in the sketch are somewhat awry but the surviving tick marks and labels of the dial appear to be correctly placed. This seems to be a most unusual azimuth scale, functioning as it does only two days a year.

dennis.cowan@btinternet.com