

A heraldic panel from Aberdeen

by Charles J Burnett

Although there are many carved heraldic panels still remaining in Scotland, there are few which show the Arms of a woman, particularly a woman who was the widow of a peer. The science of heraldry has evolved a system of symbols which give personal information in a compact and artistic manner and this is well demonstrated in the panel which is the subject of this note (pl 33a).

The Arms belong to Henrietta Mordaunt, daughter of Charles Mordaunt, third Earl of Peterborough and Monmouth. She married the Duke of Gordon on 5 February 1707 and by all accounts was a woman of energy and ability who introduced several agricultural improvements to N Scotland, including the use of English ploughs.

Her husband Alexander, tenth Earl and fifth Marquess of Huntly, second Duke of Gordon, was 'out' in 1715 and as a result forfeited his estates and was imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle. He was later pardoned and restored to his estates by the intercession of the Earl of Sutherland. A close friend of Cosmo de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, the Duke of Gordon named the eldest of his five children, by Henrietta Mordaunt, Cosmo George in honour of the Grand Duke. On 28 November 1728 the Duke died at Gordon Castle and was buried in Elgin. The Duchess of Gordon survived her husband for 32 years, spending a considerable part of her time in the NE until her death on 11 October 1760 at Prestonhall, Edinburgh.

When she resided in the North, the Duchess worshipped in the Episcopal Chapel of St Paul in Aberdeen, erected in 1721 on a site described as being 'betwixt the Gallogate and the Loch'. A handsome Georgian building with a 3 decker pulpit and 2 tiers of galleries, this was the church used by Johnson and Boswell during their weekend stay in Aberdeen while on their tour of the

Hebrides. Later Lord Byron worshipped there as a boy when he lived with his mother at 68 Broad Street, Aberdeen.

In the same year as her husband's death, in recognition of the £10 promised by the Duchess for the Chapel Funds, the Managers of the Episcopal congregation appointed 'a seat for the family to be erected in the body of the Chapel or in the front gallery as my Lady Duchess shall choose and that the Coat of Arms of the family with a Duchess' Coronet shall be put upon the breast of the seat which seat shall be appropriate for the use of the Duchess of Gordon's family'. So the Arms of the Duchess came to be carved in December 1728 or at the beginning of 1729 and have survived to the present day.

The heraldic importance of the panel lies in showing the Arms of a widowed woman. No woman, apart from a female sovereign, can bear Arms on a shield unless they are shown on an inescutcheon as part of her husband's Arms, where they denote the woman to be a heraldic heiress. Plate 33b demonstrates this; the inescutcheon of Henrietta Mordaunt is shown on the arms of Alexander, Duke of Gordon.

Female Arms, on their own, are always borne on a lozenge, as seen in the Aberdeen panel, and, if the female is a widow, they are surrounded by a cordelière, an interwoven tasselled rope. This was originally the collar of the extinct French Order of the Cordelière, instituted in 1498 by Anne de Bretagne, after the death of her first husband Charles VIII, for widow ladies of noble families, but has long been used generally to symbolise widowhood. Few armigerous widows in Scotland seem to have gone to the trouble of having their status shown in this way, though it is understandable that the Duchess of Gordon, widowed at a comparatively young age, should, when a carved version of her Arms was required, have them surrounded with the cordelière to fit her new situation.

The size of the carved panel was determined by the existing panel arrangements on the front of the pew and it is made up of three pine boards, varying in width from $8\frac{1}{4}$ in to 9 in by $2\frac{1}{4}$ in thick, butt-jointed to form one piece 27 in by $26\frac{1}{2}$ in. The Arms are carved in relief up to a maximum of $1\frac{1}{4}$ in in height and coloured with oil paint and applied gold and silver leaf. There are indications on the reverse of the panel that the design was first sketched out in pencil to see how the heraldic elements would fit in to the almost square shape. There is a small locating groove running round the edge of the carved face for the frame which has now been lost. The carving is well done, the proportions of the animal supporters are good, the deer-hound on the dexter side being particularly graceful. Apart from being carved in pine there is nothing to indicate local manufacture.

The Arms can be described as follows: On a lozenge the impaled Arms of Gordon and Mordaunt, dexter: The Arms of Gordon quarterly, first azure, three boar's heads couped or, for GORDON; second or, three lion's heads erased gules, langued azure, for BADENOCH; third or, three crescents ascendant within a double tressure flory counter flory gules, for SETON; fourth azure, three fraises argent, for FRASER. sinister: The Arms of Mordaunt, argent a chevron between three estoiles sable. The lozenge is surrounded by a cordelière or, ensigned with a ducal coronet and on an escrol azure with the motto BYDAND are set for supporters, dexter a deer-hound argent, gorged with a collar gules, charged with three buckles, or; sinister an eagle argent, armed or. All within a robe of estate, gules trimmed ermine, tied with ribbons azure.

When the Chapel of St Paul was demolished in 1866 to make way for a Victorian edifice conforming to Gothic Revival ritual, the heraldic panel was transferred to the new church and mounted on one wall of the nave. There it remained until 1966, when the second St Paul's Church was sold, and moved to St Andrew's Episcopal Cathedral in King Street, Aberdeen. During recent restoration and cleaning of the Cathedral the panel was unfortunately given a resin-based coating

of sand to make it look like a stone carving. This obliterated the crisp detailing and of course hid the heraldic tinctures. The coating of sand has now been removed and the panel restored to its former colourful state; some slight retouching was necessary. Complete restoration was not attempted where the passage of time has caused the loss of part of the deer-hound's tail, the loss of one tassel from the ribbon holding the robe of estate on the dexter side and part of the bow in the top centre of the panel.

The Arms of Henrietta Mordaunt are the property of the Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney and are now on loan to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland. I am indebted to the Rev Canon D Bovey, the Rev D Strachan and Mr W G R Bodie for additional information for this paper.

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