

THE STIRLING HEADS AND THE STIRLING SMITH

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The re-presentation of the royal palace within Stirling Castle has been many years in the making and it is time to consider the contribution of the Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum to the end result.

Stirling does not have a particularly good record of caring for its antiquities and historical artefacts. The carved oak charter chest, 1636, from Cowane's Hospital was carried off by the Jacobites in 1746, served as a meal chest for over a century, and was only recovered at auction in 1882. The key of Stirling, taken by Bonnie Prince Charlie at the same time, was only returned in 1961, courtesy of the collector Captain Charles A. Hepburn of Red Hackle Whisky, Glasgow, who purchased it at auction. The frame carved from the Wallace oak of Elderslie in which the letters of the European liberators Garibaldi, Mazini, Kossuth, Blind and Blanc were exhibited in the Wallace Monument, was purchased in a junk sale by a private citizen who intended to make a bathroom mirror of it. The purchaser died and the letters and frame were recovered in 1998. The architect's drawing for the National Wallace Monument was seriously 'mislaidd' and recovered in 1999. All of these artefacts are in the Stirling Smith.

Referring to the disappearance of Stirling's antiquities before his time when Cowane's Chest was recovered in 1882, a correspondent wrote to the Dean of Guild as follows:

'There is nothing surprising... after what we know of the Stirling Heads and other relics which have been recovered. Our forefathers place a little value upon these things, and were as likely to utilise an old oak chest for a corn bin as a butter shop to use old manuscripts for wrapping around butter, which has been found out on more occasions than one.'¹

Unfortunately, attitudes have not changed with the times, and rescue operations for Stirling's material culture are still mounted by the Stirling Smith when resources permit.

Antiquities outwith the museum have also suffered. The Heading Stone on the Gowan Hill was for long used by a butcher at the Old Bridge as a block for chopping off the horns of sheep, prior to its rescue in 1888.² In the *Forth Naturalist and Historian*, Vol. 29, J. Malcolm Allan described how the town of Bridge of Allan lost two museums and their collections.

The loss of artwork and artefacts from Stirling Castle over the last 400 years has not been assessed in any detail. Items of considerable value from the Castle "from which thrown out among other woodwork during some repairs" still appear in auction house catalogues today³ and disappear without trace. The

more recent military history of Stirling Castle has been obliterated in favour of Renaissance-style re-display. There is now no trace of the pikes and other instruments taken from the radical weavers of 1820. The Diary of Helen Graham 1823-1826, daughter of Lieutenant-General Samuel Graham (1756-1831) of Stirling Castle, recounts how the children of the Castle re-enacted the Battle of Bannockburn, playing with the pikes of the weavers. The objects were still in the castle when the Diary was published in 1956, as was the collection of antiquities shown to visitors in the Douglas Room, from the 1860s onwards.⁴ All have since disappeared.

The loss of artefacts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries pales into insignificance when the destruction of the original Renaissance fittings is considered. The popular present day press fables⁵ about the dismantling of the ceiling of the King's Presence Chamber for safety reasons in 1777, and the gathering together of the Stirling Heads two hundred years later, is one which is very economical with the truth.

The closest contemporary comment which can be obtained are the Stirling Lines of Robert Burns, scratched on a pane in Wingate's Inn (now the Golden Lion Hotel). Burns visited Stirling on 27 August 1787 when he had dinner with Lieutenant Forrester of the Castle garrison, Dr David Doig of the Grammar School and Christopher Bell, a singing teacher. This was fully ten years after the destruction of the ceiling with the Stirling Heads, but the condition of the Castle left a profound impression on the poet:

*Here Stewarts once in glory reign'd,
And laws for Scotland's weal ordain'd;
But now unroof'd their palace stands,
Their sceptre fallen to other hands;
Fallen indeed, and to the earth,
Whence grovelling reptiles take their birth;
The injur'd Stewart line are gone.
A race outlandish fill their throne;
An idiot race, to honor lost –
Who know them best despise them most.*

This critique almost cost Burns his employment as an exciseman.

A report on the destruction, filed with the Society of Antiquaries in 1828, fully fifty years after the event, was not less passionate:

'The whole ceiling was destroyed and dispersed in different directions. A gentleman who witnessed this barbarity states that, on the day the ceiling was pulled to pieces by the workmen who were employed to repair the roof of the Palace, beautifully carved heads, larger than life, supposed to be of the Scottish (sic.) Sovereigns, their Queens, and men of renown in the kingdom – among them the effigy of Sir William Wallace – were rolled down the streets from the Castle. Several bakers seized on some of them, and heated their ovens with

them. Others found their way into the jail, where the prisoners amused themselves with bedaubing them with red paint, ochre, and other colours; whilst a few only out of many scores fell into the hands of those who appreciated their value.⁶

Ten years previously in 1817, Jane Graham (1767-1846), wife of Lieutenant-General Samuel Graham and sister of the novelist Susan Ferrier published a splendid folio volume *Lacunar Strevilenense*, with her own drawings and written descriptions of thirty-eight of the then surviving Stirling Heads. The report of 1828 concerned a panel in Jane Graham's possession, measuring five feet six inches high, by two feet in width, which was purchased from a woman in Torbrex, who had obtained it from the sheriff-substitute of Stirling, who in turn had obtained it from Stirling Castle. The panel featured a carved portrait, thought to be that of James V, with a thistle, fleur-de-lis and crown below. It is quite unlike the wainscot panelling now in the Stirling Smith collection, and has not been deposited in any public collection.

The author of the 1828 report, Major General Sir James Alexander KCB (1803-1885) was a Stirling man and a regular contributor to the Society of Antiquaries. A Stirling antiquary of the next generation, David Buchan Morris (1867-1943), Town Clerk, wrote an account of how some of the Stirling Heads came to be in the Tolbooth. Ebenezer Brown, Governor of Stirling Prison in 1777 met a young girl with a bundle of firewood which contained interesting shapes. He hastened to the Castle, and rescued thirteen of the Heads from being chopped into firewood. These were housed in the jail, then passed to the burgh council in the same building.⁷

Jane Graham's book of 1817 ensured that the existence of the Stirling Heads were at least known among antiquarians. The Society of Antiquaries managed to secure three for their museum collection in Edinburgh. In 1843, John Waddell, a Gunner and Driver of the Royal Artillery in Stirling Castle, advertised for sale sets of miniature (eight and a half inches in diameter) Stirling Heads, suitable for the 'Hall of the Antiquary or the Withdrawing room of the Modern Gentleman'⁸ but these were so rare that no set has found its way into a public collection.

For most of the nineteenth century, there was no public display or general knowledge of the Stirling Heads. John Lessels (1808-1883) architect of the new Smith Institute, working with Alexander Croall (1804-1885) its first curator, and the Smith Trustees put this to right in the fabric of the building. The collection of twelve heads remaining in the council chamber in the Tolbooth was gifted to the Smith Institute. To demonstrate their use as ceiling ornamentation, the heads were cast, and the casts built into a panelled ceiling measuring 50 by 28 feet in the Reading Room of the Institute. Additional ornamentation included shields with the Stirling Wolf and the Old Bridge from the arms of the Royal Burgh and the monogram of Thomas Stuart Smith. The contract for all the plasterwork, and the production of this special ceiling was in the hands of John Craigie of Stirling, who had executed the plaster work of most of the Victorian

villas in Stirling and the country houses in the district. The Smith was his last job before retirement.⁹

The decorating contractors were the esteemed Edinburgh partnership of Bonnar and Carfrae. The groundwork of the ceiling panels were turquoise, the whole being enclosed in bands of soft red, and the Heads and other woodwork were stained to look like oak. The Reading Room walls were painted in 'drab Etruscan' to harmonise with the ceiling.

When the new Smith Institute opened on 11 August 1874, the general public had the opportunity of inspecting the Stirling Heads for the first time, and seeing their use in a ceiling setting. The Heads, created for a royal palace and dispersed in private hands, were at last in the public domain, and being treated with respect. They were displayed in the Small Museum (now the Lecture Theatre) opposite the Reading room. This initial donation attracted several others. Purchases were also made, and in 1924, an intensive fundraising campaign took place to secure an additional twelve Heads from Langton House in Berwickshire. Prominent people in the area were asked to make pledges to a guarantee fund to secure the purchase, an operation successfully concluded in June 1925, when an event was organised to celebrate their acquisition for the Smith Institute.¹⁰ This brought the total to 28 of the 38 recorded by Jane Graham in 1817. The printed letters of appeal, the written responses and the subscription calculations are part of the Stirling Smith's archive.

The fifteen fine carved oak panels, purchased by Provost George Christie at Nancy Lucas's sale in 1876 and presented to the Smith Institute, came from wainscot panelling in Stirling Castle. Michael Bath in *Forth Naturalist and Historian*, Vol. 29, dismissed them as a pair of wardrobe doors on the mistaken assumptions that the Lucas family sought to deceive and that the Provost was gullible.

Provost Christie (1826-1904) is commemorated by the Christie Memorial Clock in Allan Park, Stirling. He was a smart businessman, who guided Stirling through the local government reforms of 1870. More important still, he persuaded Thomas Stuart Smith to bequeath his fortune to establish a museum and art gallery in Stirling; Smith's original preference was to support the Artist's Benevolent Fund. Within a month of writing his Last Will and Testament, Smith died, and Stirling had the prospect of a gallery, thanks to Provost Christie.

The story of the dismantling of the panelling to accommodate it in the Lucas household was well known in the community, and as the sale took place after the death of Nancy Lucas (1810-1876), the last member of the family, there was no financial interest on her part.

The fifteen panels are small in size (264 x 355 mm) and must have been part of a very large arrangement to require them to be removed from their setting. The Lucas family home, Marieville, was a large Georgian structure of three storeys and many rooms, built by physician and surgeon Dr Thomas Lucas

(1754-1822) in 1810. He built it in the area which became known as Upper Bridge Street. After his daughter Nancy's death, the house and grounds were sold to the Roman Catholic Church. The house was demolished and the present St Mary's R.C. Church was built on the land.

Dr Lucas's diary is an important local history source for Stirling¹¹ and his work book, with its record of patients and prescriptions is in the national archive.¹² He was a precise individual, meticulous in his notes on contemporary events, and personally very acquisitive. He managed to privatise a public well by building his wall around it in 1809.

His records of the pageant processions of the Shoemakers and the great Bannockburn demonstration of 1814 are invaluable, as is his record of the garden and orchard on his land. When his fruit crop was badly damaged in 1821 he knew that the culprits were the sparrows which nested in the thatched houses belonging to Dr Buchan on Upper Castlehill.

His son James Lucas who collected the panelling from the Castle did so after his father's death, otherwise we would have a detailed diary record. James Lucas was a Stirling solicitor who was chiefly known for his interest in antiquities, and who contributed information to the local press under the name *Sterlinense*. In 1835 he fought and won an important case against the builder of Valley Lodge house, who wanted to encroach on the public land on Castlehill known as 'The Valley', now the Valley Cemetery.¹³ With his legalistic and forensic attention to detail, it is unlikely that he would have been mistaken in the matter of panelling from Stirling Castle. The iconic painting of Stirling by Johannes Vosterman (1643-1699) was also in his collection and was sold in the same sale. There is also no indication of any interest in wishing to communicate information about the panelling or the painting. The Lucas family were very private people, brought to public attention through their posthumous house sale and the manuscript material acquired by W.B. Cook of the *Stirling Sentinel* in the early years of the twentieth century.

An additional carved figure from Stirling Castle in the Smith's collection takes the form of a robed figure, 500 mm high, kneeling with a crown at his feet. A heraldic historian, the late Dr Patrick Barden noted that the crown was Scottish, and prior to the time of James V when the imperial arches were added. He identified the figure as representing the Earl of Fife, who served at the inauguration of most kings of Scotland, and postulated that any carved scheme depicting a Scottish coronation would have included members of the royal family, the bishops of St Andrews and Glasgow, and the Abbot of Cambuskenneth.¹⁴ Such information deserves further investigation, contextualisation and acknowledgement.

There is bountiful evidence that wainscot panelling, both plain and carved, was the stylistic preference in Scottish aristocratic houses of the sixteenth century. The carved examples from Stirling Castle in the Smith collection are less elaborate than other panels of the same date from town houses in Edinburgh and Dundee, in the collection of the Museum of Scotland. However,

the Stirling panels bear a remarkable resemblance to the panelling thought to be from the royal palace at Dunfermline, now in Pitfirrane House¹⁵, only 27 miles distant from Stirling. Although the present arrangement was constructed in the nineteenth century, the thirty eight carved panels in the window embrasures are contemporary with, and similar to, the fifteen in the Smith collection. James VI drank his farewell to Dunfermline and to Scotland from the Pitfirrane Goblet before riding south in 1603; the Halkets of Pitfirrane were the nearest beneficiaries in the break-up of Dunfermline palace and monastic complex. The last of the Halkets of Pitfirrane died in 1951.

If the panelling in Stirling was arranged similar to that of the 1828 report on the now-missing panel, there would have been quantities of plain panelling below each head. It was undoubtedly the size and quantity of this to which Agnes Lucas had objected.

For almost a hundred years, the Stirling Heads were part of the Smith Institute collection, and Stirling's public heritage. During that time – until 1969 – they were advertised in the annual guide books to the burgh, as one of the main attractions of the Smith Institute. They were loaned to important exhibitions, such as the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1901¹⁶ and the Scottish Art Exhibition organised by Stanley Cursiter at the Royal Academy, London in 1938. Conservation was also undertaken. The Heads purchased in 1925 were repaired by Robert Cowie of Edinburgh, using oak from the Duke of Gordon's town house in Castle Wynd 'which was almost identical in use and texture'. All traces of paint and varnish were removed. Between April and October 1927, Cowie also removed the paint and varnish from the Heads given to the Smith in 1874, and at no cost.¹⁷ This was the generation which believed that Classical sculpture was unpainted, and that only the prisoners in the Tolbooth would have been so uncouth as to apply paint to the carved wood.

Given the depredation and destruction which goes with military occupation, the survival of the 31 Heads and 15 panels in the Smith collection is a minor miracle. The collateral damage to the Smith itself, through use as a barracks in two World Wars, was substantial. The Stirling Ceiling of 1874 was severely damaged in 1945, and had to be dismantled completely in the early 1970s.

With the poor condition of the building after the War, pressure was put on the Trustees to return the Heads to Stirling Castle. Much of this was exerted by R.B.K. Stevenson of the Museum of Antiquities (now the Museum of Scotland) and it was believed that the ceiling in the King's Presence Chamber was to be reconstructed. Interestingly, there was never any question of the three Stirling Heads in the Museum of Antiquities being returned, and these are still on show in the Museum of Scotland today. 1997 saw another change in Historic Scotland's plans as regards the Heads. At a lecture in the Smith, Richard Fawcett said that as they were 'too valuable' as works of art, they would be displayed in gallery conditions and replicated for the purposes of the ceiling in the King's Presence Chamber. In 2003 the contract for reproducing the Stirling Heads was advertised.¹⁸

In 1997 in the Smith, the plaster Stirling Heads from John Craigie's ceiling were re-cast by sculptor Tim Chalk in fibreglass,¹⁹ and painted to demonstrate the aesthetic change which colour brings. Only through the use of colour can the finer details of the carving be seen at a distance. These have been part of the Smith's interpretive displays for ten years, and it is good to know that Historic Scotland's conservators have recently recognised that the Heads were indeed painted.

If the same effort could be expended on locating and securing material which has gone missing from Stirling Castle, and looking at Scottish woodwork rather than French tapestries, the end result might be an interpretative scheme with some credibility. Without the Smith's care and curation of 1874-1970, Historic Scotland would have had a great deal less with which to work, and the large team presently involved in developing the Castle displays have due cause for gratitude to the past efforts of the few Smith curators.

References

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3. See for example *Christie's Scottish Sale Catalogue*, 28 October, 2004, Lot 1, Franco-Scottish School portrait of a gentleman, 16th century, oil on panel. Sale price: £16,000. Mentioned in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*, 12 March, 1883, p.290.
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13. *The Stirling Antiquary*, Vol. 4 (Stirling, reprinted from the *Stirling Sentinel*, 1908), pp.283-284.
14. *The Times, The Herald, The Daily Express, The Courier and Advertiser, The Press and Journal*, 4 October, 2001.
Stirling Observer, 5 October, 2001.

- 15 I am grateful to the geneologist Sheila Pitcairn, the Carnegie Dunfermline Trust and the Dunfermline Golf Club for allowing access to, and permission to photograph, Pitfirrane House and its panelling.
- 16 International Exhibition Glasgow 1901. Official Catalogue of the Scottish History and Archaeology Section, p.211.
- 17 Stirling Smith Archive.
- 18 *The Scotsman*, 25 February, 2003.
- 19 The series can be inspected at <www.scran.ac.uk>, together with the wainscot panelling and other artefacts in the Stirling Smith collections.



Figure 1 Head from the Stirling Castle panelling.



Figure 2 Head from the Pitfirrane House panelling.

