

THE PAINTED PRESTONGRANGE CEILING

following century and beyond, until the last witch burning in Scotland in 1727.⁴¹ Between 1580 and 1680, almost no-one in any community in Scotland was safe from the accusation of witchcraft. In Prestonpans alone, the year 1590 saw 39 persons out of a population of approximately 1,000 executed for witchcraft.⁴²

Unlike many of the accused, the Ker family were favoured intimates of King James. But high position itself was not necessarily a guarantee of protection and rumour has a way of embellishing itself until the truth is wrapped in obscurity. A memoir from a recent publication illustrates this rather well:

*'In the middle of Musselburgh there's a big house and it's supposed to be haunted by Lady Susan, but when they renovated it they took away a false ceiling and they found all these paintings of witches and warlocks up in the ceiling in the Royal Musselburgh. And it's that bad the men wouldn't take the ladies up to let them see them. It was really outrageous the things that was painted on the ceiling. So it must have been a witch's coven in the Royal Musselburgh years and years ago when it was Lady Susan's house. Now it's the Royal Musselburgh Golf Club.'*⁴³

Betty Nisbet's words recorded not in the 17th century, but in the 1990s offer an insight into the social climate which existed in the years following the creation of the painted ceiling at Prestongrange and the possible reasons why the ceiling, though no doubt admired, was never imitated. Its subject matter, though rooted in highly respected traditions of European art, may well have contributed to the rumours surrounding the Kers and if so, was clearly not worth the risk.

By the 1660s, the style of the ceiling was unlikely to be repeated for a somewhat more mundane reason. By this time, the fashion for 'antique work' had evolved far beyond its classical origins to the point where its exuberant imagery was considered fit only for the alehouse and the skill exhibited by the painter of the Prestongrange ceiling in terms of both brushwork and re-interpretation of de Vries' images had become merely:

*"... a kind of unpolished painter's work."*⁴⁴

The Prestongrange ceiling, as the earliest dated example of a Scottish Renaissance painted ceiling, was bound to be experimental, created before habits of style were fully formed.

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It offers an invaluable insight into the origins of the decorative style so typical of the 17th century Scottish interior. But its relevance goes beyond the artistic: it is a testimony to the spirit of the time, a means of reading the mood of a nation on the brink of a new era.

8 A NEW SCOTLAND

1581 as the inscribed date of the Prestongrange Ceiling's creation places it at the moment when the rigid structure of a Europe dominated by the medieval world view was being dismantled. According to Philip Thomson:

*“It is no accident that the grotesque mode in art and literature tends to be prevalent in societies and eras marked by strife, radical change or disorientation.”*⁴⁵

Without rationality, endless possibilities beckon. The hidden ceiling from Prestongrange employs the art of the grotesque to open a window on a universe populated by the fantastic and the unreal. Imagination is unfettered by the constraints of any conventional reality. This freedom was an essential component in the development of the new world view. The period of the Enlightenment saw the birth of the application of scientific method to a rational universe where natural laws could be observed and quantified by means of deductive reasoning. However, such rationality also demanded the power to imagine what might be by observing what was. It was this reconciliation of the opposing elements of imagination and reason that encouraged the intellectual blossoming typified by men such as John Napier of Merchiston, who combined the ability to visualise new concepts with the rigorous mental discipline necessary for the development of valid mathematical rules.

Subsequent decoration placed far greater emphasis on symmetry and logic, where the grotesque exists as an element within a more orderly context. The decoration of Sir Alexander Seton's Pinkie House shows a formality of content, style and structure characterised by heraldic devices and emblematic imagery. These later ceilings emphasise restraint and dignity. Mark Ker's ceiling at Prestongrange was the antithesis of restraint employing the art of the grotesque as a celebration of the inventiveness of the human mind. It speaks to us today across more than 400 years as a testament to the moment when the Scotland was poised on the brink of its

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philosophical and intellectual flowering which later became known as the Enlightenment.

9 THE CEILING'S PRESERVATION

The uncovering of the ceiling in 1962 was a moment of high excitement for the National Trust conservators who were called in to deal with its discovery. However, once the plaster was fully removed the conservators found themselves facing a number of preservation issues to do with the beams and boards, the paint layers, the ambient conditions and their likely effect on the uncovered painting.

The beams which supported the ceiling had suffered significant deterioration due to their age and the effect of building works since they were originally installed. Areas of the boards had been removed at some time in the past to allow the insertion of electric and plumbing pipes and to accommodate adjustments to the hearths in the room above.

“The beams are old, of inadequate dimensions to give support for such a span; in some places rotten at the ends, in some places weakened by subsequent cutting and in other places of frankly unsound construction.”⁴⁶

The floor of the room above was found to be a later additional layer placed on top of the painted boards which had originally formed the floor of that room. Moreover the room above had been partitioned to create smaller rooms, a circumstance which had increased pressure on the beams which were supporting their weight. Together with deterioration due to the age of the ceiling these additions had caused the beams to bend under pressure.

“There is a notable sag in the floor above in some places as much as 3” and considerable movement can be felt when walking.”⁴⁷

Steel reinforcement of the beams was a possible solution but this would have prevented use of the rooms above since it would not prevent movement in the floor.

“The paint layers are not able to follow the movement of the boards and this together with the decomposition and loss of binding power of the glue medium by prolonged wetting or especially desiccation leads to flaking and powdering.”⁴⁸

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The only valid solution was the insertion of an additional floor in the room above suspended on steel beams. Next the nature of the paint layers also created issues in terms of protecting the boards from attack by wood boring beetles. Standard treatments were not an acceptable option since they were likely to have a damaging effect on the painted surface. Instead the use of methyl bromide gas would be necessary. The major preservation issue, however, was the nature of the painted surface. The vivid background shining through subsequent layers of colour so typical of such painting would not be possible without the glue-tempera mix. There is, however, no other method than the original to fix the paint to the surface while simultaneously retaining the texture of the paint and providing protection.

“No binding medium has yet been discovered which completely fulfils the threefold function of re-fixing glue-tempera paint which has flaked or powdered off and retaining the important characteristic texture of the paint while at the same time providing a protective coating.”⁴⁹

The purity of the glue, its chemical composition, the temperature of application, the skill required to fully impregnate the paint layers before the glue has set and the need to clean dirt, dust, cobwebs and other accretions from the surface were all vital components in the preservation of the ceiling, all taking place within the context of the conservators' determination to preserve the original work. The painting had never suffered from previous attempts to repaint or retouch the original and:

“... the necessity to preserve this integrity cannot be too strongly emphasised. All temptation to reconstruct or retouch areas of missing paint on original boards must be resisted...any kind of retouching on glue tempera results in the destruction of the original. Areas of new board should be tinted to match adjacent background colours and the missing areas on beams should be treated likewise ... all that should be necessary to achieve visual harmony while retaining antiquarian integrity is smoothing off and painting to match the original background colour of the beams.”⁵⁰

However, perhaps the most significant issue of all faced by the conservators was that of its *future* preservation. The room in which the ceiling was found had been designated by