

THE PAINTED PRESTONGRANGE CEILING

took place,²⁵ nowhere in the records of Playfair's work is there any mention of the existence of the ceiling.

The Grant-Suttie family were undoubtedly aware of the historical value of the ceiling. Sir George was a great-grandson of Lord Cullen of Monymusk House, a building which is notable for the preservation of the painted ceiling and walls of the Great Hall on the ground floor.²⁶ However, the Grant-Sutties were commissioning a building which would offer all the amenities of 19th century modernity. Furthermore, their Victorian sensibilities were no doubt offended by the coarse nature of some of the images. The family, models of respectability and Presbyterian rectitude, were unlikely to welcome such a riotous celebration of a world turned on its head on their new drawing room ceiling.

For the next 120 years the ceiling was once more consigned to obscurity behind a coating of plaster, until the purchase of the building and grounds by CISWO (Coal Industry & Social Welfare Organisation) in 1958 for the benefit of its current occupants the Royal Musselburgh Golf Club. The Club had already been tenants there for more than 30 years since the Grant-Sutties themselves finally moved away to Dunbar. CISWO initiated the first major repair and remodelling of the house undertaken since Playfair's work in the 19th century.²⁷

6 THE CEILING UNCOVERED IN 1962

By the early 1900s there was a growing awareness of the value of Scotland's historic buildings, many of which had been reduced to partial remnants and many almost obliterated over time by war, reconstruction, neglect, environmental damage and in some cases misguided efforts at preservation. The need to create some means of preserving these buildings brought about the establishment of agencies responsible for their protection and restoration. The first recorded programme of conservation in the 1930s was commissioned by The National Trust for Scotland and undertaken by the Department's Office of Works, now known as the Conservation Centre at Stenhouse. Since that date the Conservation Centre has been involved in the provision of advice, specialist reports and practical conservation on behalf of the National Trust and others.

In 1962, when renovation work at Prestongrange was interrupted by the discovery of the painted figures on the

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boards and beams behind the old plaster ceiling, CISWO requested advice from the Historic Buildings and Monuments Department of the Scottish Office, which in 1991 became Historic Scotland. It was this agency which provided specialists from Stenhouse Conservation Centre to free the ceiling from its plaster covering.

Its excellent state of preservation is rare in the context of such interior painting: apart from some damage to the beams and to some sections close to the fireplace, the Prestongrange ceiling, at 20' by 40' one of the largest in Scotland, emerged wonderfully intact from behind its layer of protective plasterwork. The technical report in 1963 to the National Trust for Scotland reveals the excitement generated by its discovery:

*“The interest of the ceiling is manifold; the undoubted quality of design and draughtsmanship; the importance of content in relation to style and source development; and last but not least the original and untouched state in which the ceiling has survived ... its importance in the peculiar context of the development of Scottish Renaissance interior decoration is beyond doubt.”*²⁸

Although there is no clue either in contemporary documents or on the ceiling itself to the painter's identity Ian Hodkinson, a senior conservator with Historic Scotland, who was closely involved with the discovery and subsequent treatment of the Prestongrange ceiling, was confident that the painting on the ceiling boards was the work of a single master craftsman:

*“The modelling is exceptionally well-rendered with a subtlety and sureness of touch ... intimate study of the brushwork and other stylistic and technical considerations obtained during restoration of the painting leaves me in no doubt that the entire ceiling was executed by one painter.”*²⁹

The painting which once existed on the oak beams has been almost completely obliterated and most of what remained appeared to be a later addition in a different hand. However,

*“...there are underlying traces of an earlier chevron pattern executed in pigments which match those of the boards.”*³⁰

The colours used for interior decoration of this type were pigments derived from a range of natural sources. The

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addition of whiting or chalk to the glue tempera mix was an essential element in the preparatory work, creating a background with very specific properties:

“The ground ... reflects through subsequent layers of paint to give the work its characteristic sparkle.”³¹

Clearly the colour palette selected for use in individual cases was an essential element in determining the impact of the finished work. In the case of Prestongrange, the colours chosen were intended to achieve a striking effect.

“The entire surface of the beams and boards was primed with a middle tone of grey composed of whiting and carbon black. All the decoration was carried out in three simple pigments, black (carbon) and white (whiting) used for the grisaille of the motifs, and red oxide of lead for the background ... In its original state red lead, or minimum as it was called, is a brilliant orange and the decorative effect of the monochrome motifs against such a strong colour must have been quite extraordinary.”³²

Fragments of other decorative work within the house show that at one time there was extensive painting throughout the building. These traces include the monogram of Mark Ker though it is not definite that this is the first Mark Ker since his son bore the same name. There is, however, no evidence of any wall painting in the room containing the ceiling and this, taken together with partial evidence of contemporary hooks and nails attached to the beams,³³ suggests that the walls were originally hung with tapestry. The combination of the ceiling, together with wall hangings and presumably other fabrics within the room which echoed the painted surface in their colour and style, undoubtedly resulted in a striking piece of decoration; this must have been a showpiece room.

7 READING THE PAST

It has been mentioned earlier that such painted ceilings were often a means of expressing statements of individuality on the part of the patron who commissioned the work. The choice of sources and, most particularly, any variations from these sources is therefore closely bound up with the character of the patron. Although Whitney's *Choice of Emblemes* was not published until 1586, five years after the date when the

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Prestongrange ceiling was completed, this cannot necessarily be taken as confirmation that the Prestongrange ceiling lacks emblematic detail due to the unavailability of sources, since such books were extensively available on the continent from the mid-sixteenth century onwards.³⁴ The emphasis on grotesque imagery in the Prestongrange ceiling must therefore be interpreted as a conscious decision on the part of the patron who commissioned the work.

A feather-headed figure seated on a wheeled vehicle has been identified³⁵ as originating in an 1552 engraving by the Dutch designer, Cornelis Bos, whose work is typified by patterns incorporating dream-like, impossible figures and activities, but the major source for many of the ceiling images is the *Grottesco* pattern book by Hans Vredeman de Vries. The images also include elements of his *Caryatidum* – pillars in the form of a human figure. These two pattern books were produced between 1565 and 1571. Therefore, in 1581, the date on the ceiling, they were of fairly recent publication. A further confirmation of the contemporary nature of the work is found in another source for the Prestongrange images, *Les songes drolatiques de Pantagruel*. This work, published in 1565 and probably illustrated by François Desprez was claimed by its printer Breton as a posthumous work by the great French humanist, Rabelais. This source, when taken together with the ceiling's significance as the most extensive example of 'antique' style, gives the work a unique flavour, since Rabelaisian imagery does not appear to have provided a source for other Scottish Renaissance decorative work of the period 1550 to 1650, when the fashion for such work was at its height.³⁶

Today the term Rabelasian is synonymous with coarse humour but Rabelais himself was a subtle, complex individual. The humanist movement, of which he was an adherent, questioned the ethic of absolute obedience and subordination to higher authority, both secular and religious. An accompanying interest in the values of individualism and intellectual freedom led to a reinterpretation of a world view previously based on the teachings of the Catholic church. This embraced the revisiting of classical traditions drawing on the civilisations of Greece and Rome, but Rabelais also drew on the oral traditions which had formed part of the community life of generations of peasantry. Such folktales bear little resemblance to sanitised modern versions of such stories now regarded as fit only for the nursery. Rabelais' tales comprise frequently ribald accounts of the adventures of Gargantua and