

THE PAINTED PRESTONGRANGE CEILING



THE PAINTED PRESTONGRANGE CEILING

CISWO for future use as a bar. Ambient air pollution was not a significant issue, but:

“...a much more serious menace arises from the decision to use the room in which the painted ceiling is situated as a bar thereby creating serious potential sources of pollution, firstly from the tendency for the spread of mould growths associated with fumes arising from the storage of liquor and more important from the contamination of the atmosphere and consequent deposit of nicotine from the intensive smoking which will take place when the bar is in use.”⁵¹

Ideally the requirements of preservation would be best served by re-designating the room for alternative use. Failing this it would be necessary to cover the ceiling once again, this time behind a modern ceiling, and to install an independently suspended floor in the rooms above to prevent further damage from vibration, using the space between the original and new floors to house preservation equipment such as an insulation quilt to equalise temperature and humidity on both sides of the boards and to allow fumigation for protection from insect damage.

Given the cost and complexity of these works, the possibility was raised that the interests of preservation might be best served by removing the ceiling from its original location either for storage or re-installation elsewhere. At the time this was considered by the conservators to be the most viable option.

“It could be argued that it is unethical to remove a work of this kind from its original context and to some extent it undoubtedly is. However it is equally true to say that the style and content of the work is valid in the context of the age in which it was painted as much as in the particular context of its relevance to Prestongrange House.”⁵²

There is some value to the argument that the impact of Prestongrange ceiling as a work of national importance would not be significantly diminished by its removal. However, the historic and artistic significance of any such work is heavily reliant on its preservation within its original context and the above discussion has exemplified this beyond any reasonable doubt.

In the case of Prestongrange the quality and extent of the work, the date of its creation and the nature and impact of its

THE PAINTED PRESTONGRANGE CEILING

imagery at both a local and national level all contribute to a very considerably enhanced understanding of the social climate of the time and the thinking of the Baron at the time. For these reasons its removal has been subject to a considerable degree of criticism.

“The Prestongrange ceiling, removed for safe-keeping to Merchiston Castle in recent times, has lost its power of association with place forever.”⁵³

However in terms of its preservation for the future it was judged at the time to be the only valid solution bearing in mind the usage that CISWO and the Royal Musselburgh Golf Club had in mind for the room.

“We are all aware of the inevitable loss of significance when a work of art of this type is removed from its original context and this must be particularly true in the case of the Prestongrange ceiling in view of the special association which the painting had with the inhabitants of the house. It must be said that at the time of restoration this association was not fully appreciated but even then every attempt was made to bring about restoration of the ceiling leaving it in situ and in circumstances which would ensure its preservation for posterity.”⁵⁴

10 THE MERCHISTON TOWER

When the Prestongrange Ceiling was uncovered in the early 1960s a unique and ambitious project was already underway at Merchiston Tower in the City of Edinburgh. Although there are no records of the Tower’s origins its history is inextricably linked with the family who occupied it almost continuously for a period of five centuries – the Napiers of Merchiston.⁵⁵

The Napiers were merchant burgesses of the City of Edinburgh and close associates of the Royal family throughout the 15th century. But it is through John Napier, 8th Laird of Merchiston who was born in Merchiston Tower in 1550, that the family achieved international renown. John Napier is best known for his work on logarithms, an essential tool for subsequent mathematical advances. He also:

“published a treatise on ... multiplication ... which became known as Napier’s ‘Rods’ or ‘Bones’... In an appendix he explained ... a mechanical means of

THE PAINTED PRESTONGRANGE CEILING

calculation ... which makes him the grandfather of our modern day calculator.”⁵⁶

In keeping with many other Renaissance thinkers, Napier did not confine himself to mathematics alone.

“Amongst his other ‘Secret Inventions’ ... is ... a precursor of the tank; a ship which could travel under water; a burning mirror which would consume enemy ships ... and an artillery piece ... His ingenuity extended also to farming ... using salt as a fertiliser [and] other novel ideas for tilling the soil”⁵⁷

By the time the Tower came into the hands of Edinburgh Corporation in 1935 it had been the subject of much alteration in the course of its history. Over the 30 years up to the mid 1950s, various additions were demolished and emergency repairs carried out, particularly with regard to strengthening the roof and replacing missing slates. Throughout this time the building remained unoccupied except for temporary use by the National Fire Service during the Second World War until, in 1956, it was proposed that the Tower should be restored as far as possible to its 15th century condition and should form the centrepiece of a new technical college planned by the City to be named after John Napier. This college was the precursor to the present Napier University.

The Historic Buildings Council for Scotland was involved from the earliest stages and it was on their recommendation that approval was given for a grant towards its restoration by the Ministry of Works. In 1958, as part of a shared initiative by the City Architect’s Department, the Ministry of Works and the Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments, work was begun on integrating the Tower into a series of new buildings intended to house the college.⁵⁸

Initial work on the Tower was largely concerned with making sure that weak or dangerous sections resulting from careless alterations and poor workmanship were rendered safe. However, the major task was the detective work required in differentiating original or early building from a host of later additions, both architecturally and structurally inferior. This was a complex process since the Tower had been the subject of many changes in its three centuries of history. These additions had almost obliterated the original building and the proposal to restore the Tower as an integral part of the new college buildings, while simultaneously establishing its separate identity, presented a significant challenge to architects and restorers.

THE PAINTED PRESTONGRANGE CEILING

“The alterations carried out after 1800, being for the most part incidental to the attachment of other buildings, naturally did nothing to enhance the appearance of the tower as a free-standing building, and indeed did much to mar it. In these circumstances a purely conservative preservation has not been feasible, and a bold policy of reconstruction has been adopted. The junction with the new College has been calculated to make the tower truly the heart of the College without compromising its essential free-standing character ... The resulting amalgam of fifteenth and seventeenth century features will in fact be of a kind which never existed at any one time in the history of the tower, but which will nevertheless be a fair reflection of its past, and – it is hoped – a seemly piece of architecture.”⁵⁹

Decisions regarding external work were the first priority, the interior being left until further detective work on establishing as far as possible the nature of the original had taken place. However, once building work was underway external work was accompanied by a radical renewal and remodelling of the interior with conservators striving to identify as much of the original structure as possible. Merchiston Tower today is very much the centrepiece of the college buildings and is in no way diminished in impact by the 1960s architecture which surrounds it.

11 REMOVAL AND INSTALLATION AT MERCHISTON TOWER

The ongoing project at Merchiston Tower suggested the fortuitous possibility of a home for the ceiling which would allow conservators to maintain it within a context largely contemporary with the date of its creation. Indeed it is highly likely that the owners of Prestongrange were known to the Napiers, most particularly the Morisons, since John Morison, who bought Prestongrange in 1609, was treasurer of the City of Edinburgh in 1588 four years before Sir Archibald Napier received additional land from the Town Council in recognition of his contribution to the defence of the City.⁶⁰

By May 1964 the decision had been taken by the National Trust and the Ministry of Public Building and Works to remove the ceiling from Prestongrange and transfer it to workshops provided by Edinburgh Corporation at Links Place in Leith, where preservation work would be carried out.

THE PAINTED PRESTONGRANGE CEILING

The painted surface was protected by covering with tissue and the location of each piece marked. The additional flooring in the room above was removed, followed by the boards themselves, and the beams were then lowered from the ceiling by use of block and tackle.⁶¹

The boards had suffered extensive damage on the back from woodworm infestation, which probably occurred when they came into contact with 19th century timber during Playfair's alterations and the laying of the additional floor in the room above.⁶² Removal of the ceiling from its original location made the work of treating woodworm infestation easier, since the boards were fumigated in a special chamber. Extensive repair and strengthening work was carried out by the addition of timber supports to the back of the boards.

The painted surface itself required extensive work due to the flaking and powdering of the paint layers. This required the impregnation of the surface with a fungicide in a gelatin medium. However, emphasis was on preservation of the original with minimum restoration:

*“No repainting, design reconstruction or retouching of the paintings will take place. The integrity of the original work will be maintained throughout. Missing areas will be repaired and tinted in neutral tones to ‘lose’ them against the decoration of the ceiling.”*⁶³

This hands off approach offers an interesting contrast with the ‘bold reconstruction’ undertaken at Merchiston Tower by the same body of conservators, illustrating how each individual conservation and restoration project must be approached with an awareness of the unique nature of each project. While the painstaking process of repairing damage and protecting the ceiling from further deterioration was ongoing, work continued on the restoration and reconstruction of the interior of Merchiston Tower.

The eventual transfer of the ceiling to the Tower was not an easy task. Firstly, the ceiling in its present form was too large for its new home. Before installation it was necessary to record the original layout of the ceiling, remove sections for which space was not available and rearrange the boards. This offered the advantage of allowing for the removal of sections which had suffered damage when fireplaces were inserted in the room above. However, the paintings on these boards, now stored in an attic space above the ceiling include images from de Vries' 1565 *Caryatidum*.

THE PAINTED PRESTONGRANGE CEILING

“Movement of parts was kept to a minimum as far as the different room shape would allow...It was felt that altering the relationship of component parts was justified on this account and in view of the fact that the juxtaposition of motifs appear to be quite arbitrary and in no way following a continuous narrative.”⁶⁴

Given the nature of the Tower with its fortress-like walls, limited doorways and narrow windows, the actual process of introducing the ceiling into the third floor board room presented a significant challenge. Beams and boards were delivered to the site by lorry, where they were lifted by block and tackle to the roof of an adjoining building then passed, beam by beam, through a narrow window on the upper floor measuring approximately 3' square.⁶⁵ The component parts were then assembled to form the Council Chamber's ceiling.

Since its installation at Merchiston in 1964 responsibility for maintenance of the condition of the ceiling has been shared between Napier University and Historic Scotland. Equipment was installed to measure humidity to ensure that the environment provided is appropriate to its preservation and various maintenance tasks have been undertaken including the removal of dust layers⁶⁶ and further treatment against beetle infestation with a product selected to avoid undue staining of the painted surface.⁶⁷

12 EPILOGUE FROM PRESTOUNGRANGE 2004

In 2001 the present and 14th Baron of Prestoungrange purchased the Prestoungrange Gothenburg Tavern in Prestonpans with the intention of restoring both its delightful arts and crafts interior and simultaneously returning the public house to the Gothenburg principles on which it had been founded in 1908. The Gothenburg movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was based on principles first enunciated by the City Fathers of Goteborg in Sweden i.e. to encourage the working population to avoid alcoholic excess. When The Gothenburg opened its doors in Prestonpans in 1908 it accordingly offered bonuses to its managers solely for the sale of food and non-alcoholic refreshment. After 5% return on capital invested had gone to the original investors the remainder of the profit was directed towards enhancing the recreational life of the local