

THE NEWSTEAD SUNDIALS

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Newstead is a small village of around 200 inhabitants, reputed to be the oldest inhabited village in Scotland. It is in the Scottish Borders just outside the town of Melrose which itself is famous for its beautiful ruined abbey, one of several in this part of Scotland. The stonemasons and architects and other tradesmen who built Melrose Abbey were all lodged in Newstead and it was possibly this link that caused Newstead to be the site of the first Masonic Lodge in Scotland.

The Lodge was set up by the masons, mainly to control the level of training and craftsmanship of the apprentices, before becoming journeymen. However, the building fell into disrepair after the Lodge moved its premises into Melrose in 1742 and only a marker stone and plaque now remain.

But my interest is in sundials and, in the *Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland*, Thomas Ross states that “there are numerous dials in this village, a fact which is accounted for from the circumstance of Newstead having been the home of many first-class working masons, who had the taste to set up dials on their own houses.”¹ Ross went on to describe and sketch six of these dials.

Ever since I first read Ross’s account I have wanted to see these sundials. I have been to Newstead several times in attempts to find them but, despite my efforts, I have only been able to locate one of them. I was beginning to think that all of the others had been lost in the intervening 120 years or so.

But that changed in August 2011 when I had yet another attempt. I surfed the internet once more and eventually found an organisation, the ‘Trimontium Heritage Trust’,² who organise walks during the summer months from Melrose through Newstead and on to Trimontium, the site of an old Roman fort. On their website, describing the walks, it said that whilst passing through Newstead that amongst other things, they would see some sundials.

This was what I needed. Unfortunately, their walks were held on Tuesdays and Thursdays and I was unable to attend any of them. There was a contact e-mail address on their website and so I contacted Donald Gordon, their Secretary, to ask if he could tell me where the sundials were. He replied that better than that, he would give me a personal guided tour.

I should say at this point that I do not have a copy of the *BSS Register*, as part of my enjoyment is the research that goes into tracking down Scottish sundials. Rightly or

goes into tracking down Scottish sundials. Rightly or wrongly, having a copy of the *Register* would perhaps take some of that enjoyment away, so I don’t know if any or all of these dials have been recorded by the BSS. But I’m still in a quandary. Should I get a copy of the *Register* or not? Does anyone have any thoughts on this?

We made our arrangements and one Sunday a few weeks later we met up in Newstead, unfortunately on a very wet day. I soon realised that it was unlikely that I could ever have found any more sundials on my own. The first sundial (Fig. 1), a cube surmounted by a ball, could be seen from a public lane, but it was so out of the way that it was no wonder that I hadn’t seen it before.



Fig. 1. The dial on the stone arch.

It was on top of a stone arch leading to the garden of the house just where the arch joined on to the building, and from the lane it was half hidden by the arch itself. Only two faces could be seen, one of which has the initials “JB” for J. Bunyan, an old mason’s name in Newstead. The date of 1754, which was on the right hand face according to Ross, is now missing, as that part of the face has since flaked away.

The next dial (Fig. 2) was locked up in a hut in a private garden! There was no chance that I could have found that one on my own. Donald had kindly arranged for access to the hut and we took the dial outside in order to photograph it. Ross reported that this dial “is dated 1683, and has the initials W.M. and L.M., standing for the surname of Mein... another old mason name in Newstead.” The initials M. and L.M. (or is it I.M.?) can still be seen but the date which was on the right hand face is now missing, as that part of the dial has gone. The Arabic numerals and ini-



Fig. 2. The dial locked in a hut.

tials have been cut very deeply into the stone and are extraordinarily clear for such an old dial. Stubs of the two gnomons remain in place.

The third dial (Fig. 3) was in the same garden but it was now mounted on a two-pieced rectangular shaft, rather than on a corbel on a building as Ross had described it. It is unusual in that it has a semi-cylindrical dial, similar to those on some Scottish lectern sundials, on its west face. The other two dial faces had had their solid gnomons replaced at some point, quite possibly when the dial stone was mounted on its new shaft, which apparently took place at the beginning of the 20th century. The shaft has the motto “Sunshine and shade by turns but love always” apparently scripted by the wife for her deceased husband.

Next, Donald took me into another private garden where a single-faced stone dial dated 1659, not mentioned by Ross, was mounted above the back door of the house (Fig. 4). A



Fig. 3. The semi-cylindrical dial.



Fig. 4. The back door dial.

porch has since been built around the doorway and the dial, so it spends its life in the shadows. The motto on the dial is “Ut umbra sic [vita]” translated as *Life is like a shadow*. How apt for this dial now. It also has a motto in Hebrew and the dial itself is surmounted by a much-worn head.



Fig. 5. The date-stone dial.

We then moved on to another single-faced dial, again not mentioned by Ross, on the north facing wall of a house known as ‘the Auld Hoose’. This dial was rectangular and measured only about 8” by 5” (200 × 125 mm). Despite the fact that it was on the main street, I had not noticed it on my previous visits even though, in retrospect, it stands out like a sore thumb, as the whole wall is covered in white painted harling apart from the sundial itself (Fig. 5). My excuse is that I was looking for dials like the ones sketched by Ross and not for a small single face dial like this. However, not even the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) have recognised it as a sundial. They say it is “a small exposed date-stone now too indistinct to read”.³ But even though the lower half has flaked, it most clearly is a sundial as the hour lines, the remaining numerals of 4 and 5 and the gnomon hole testify.



Fig. 6. The corbel dial.

The only sundial that I had been able to find previously (Fig. 6) is mounted on a corbel on the corner of a house in the main street and can't really be missed. It is dated 1777 and its central south face has Arabic numerals from 6am to 6pm whilst its west face has Arabic numerals from 1pm to 8pm and the east face also has Arabic numerals, this time from 4am to 10am. All three of the gnomons are complete.

So at last I have seen six Newstead dials, although only four of them were those described and sketched by Ross. I can only assume that the other two have unfortunately been lost. The first missing dial (Fig. 7) is dated 1751 whilst the second dial (Fig. 8) appears to be identical in design to the dial on the archway in Fig. 1.

However, there are many instances of various carved stones being re-used in the walls and buildings in Newstead. Why indeed should a mason throw away good stone? A possible fragment of a sundial (Fig. 9) has been found re-used as a

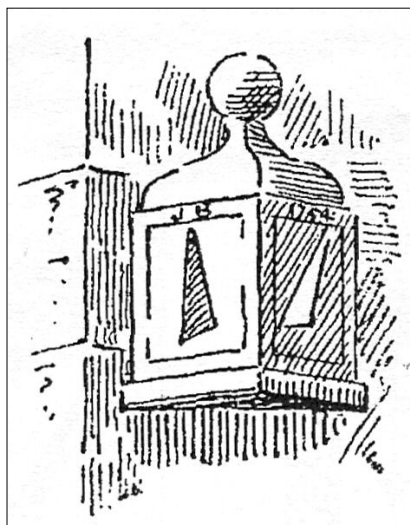
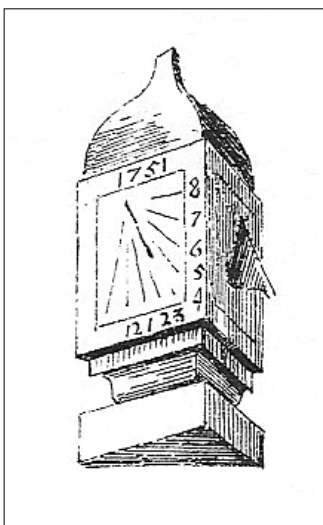


Fig. 7 (left). The first missing dial. After MacGibbon & Ross.¹
 Fig. 8 (right). The second missing dial. After MacGibbon & Ross.¹



Fig. 9. The dial fragment.

stone in a building just off the main street in the village and its filled-in gnomon hole, if that's what it is, can be easily seen. If there is one, then there are possibly others, so I expect that I will still have to visit Newstead again and again, this time looking very closely at all of the walls and buildings in the village. Maybe parts of the two missing dials will eventually turn up.

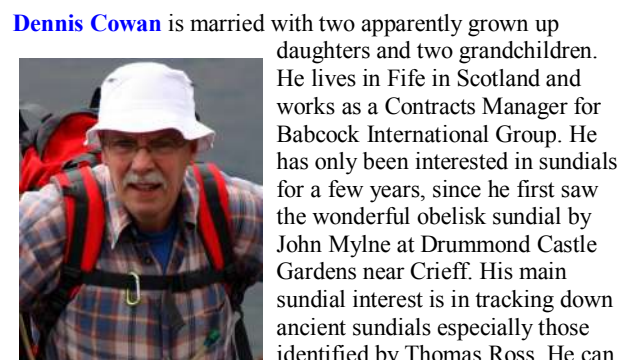
So the quest continues.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful thanks are due to Donald Gordon, Secretary of the Trimontium Heritage Trust, who very kindly gave me a personal guided tour of the sundials in very wet weather! He also arranged access to a locked hut and to private gardens not normally open to the public.

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Dennis Cowan is married with two apparently grown up daughters and two grandchildren. He lives in Fife in Scotland and works as a Contracts Manager for Babcock International Group. He has only been interested in sundials for a few years, since he first saw the wonderful obelisk sundial by John Mylne at Drummond Castle Gardens near Crieff. His main sundial interest is in tracking down ancient sundials especially those identified by Thomas Ross. He can be contacted on dennis@sundialsofscotland.co.uk and has a website www.sundialsofscotland.co.uk. His other main interest is in climbing all of Scotland's Munros (mountains over 3,000 feet). He is a member of the Cioch Mountaineering Club in Dunfermline and he has now climbed 231 of the 283 Munros. He was Treasurer and Webmaster of the Club for many years before standing down early in 2011 to give more time for his other pursuits.

