

George Hay, Architect

Dr George Hay, a Fellow of the Society from 1953 to 1986, was one of the most accomplished practitioners and interpreters of the distinctive architecture of Scotland. Characteristically, however, he saw it as the product of indigenous expertise drawing upon notions of form and purpose extending over many centuries and essentially European in their scope and inspiration.

Born in Edinburgh on 5 July 1911, his family background was that of the artisan craftsman, his father being a skilled metal-worker and his own first employment with a firm of high quality furniture designers and manufacturers. His initial education was at the James Clark School, splendidly housed in a building (now converted into prestigious flats) looking out from the back of the Pleasance towards Arthur's Seat. Designed by John A Carfrae in 1913 almost in the manner of a great Jacobean mansion, its architectural distinction was matched by the excellence of its teaching, particularly in history and literature.

On leaving school in 1925, at the then minimum age of 14, the young Hay became an apprentice draughtsman with Scott Morton and Company, an Edinburgh firm specializing in the production of house furnishing to their own designs for retailers in the city, also to the designs of some of the most eminent architectural firms of the day, such as that of Sir Robert Lorimer. It was through this connection, probably, that George Hay transferred in 1928 to Lorimer and Matthew and began his own architectural training there and at evening classes in the Edinburgh College of Art.

The association with Lorimer and Matthew was to last for five years, but even before Sir Robert's death in 1929 the sheer volume of work in which it was involved, much of it of a character rather different from earlier days, made the drawing office a less stimulating place than George may have expected. He seems to have spent much of his time on science laboratories for Edinburgh University on its new 'King's Buildings' site which allowed little scope for his particular talents and in 1933 he transferred to the Scottish headquarters of H M Office of Works.

Here he prepared plans, under the principal architect J Wilson Paterson, for the conservation and public display of historic buildings in Crown ownership or guardianship. From this work, and his association with James S Richardson as Inspector of Ancient Monuments and a visiting lecturer at the College of Art, George acquired an excellent understanding of such structures and the architectural tradition to which they belonged. He was a superb draughtsman with an appreciation of practical problems that ensured harmonious relations, now and later, with those involved in the implementation of his designs. In the longer run, however, his creative instinct found work with the Office somewhat limiting, and in 1936 he accepted a post as assistant in the firm of Orphoot, Whiting, and Lindsay. In the following year he completed his studies for the Associateship of the Royal Institute of British Architects with the rare award of distinction for his thesis on *Scottish Architectural Woodwork of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*.

In this way began one of the most fruitful associations in Scottish architecture of the present century. Ian Gordon Lindsay, whose office in Alva Street was virtually a separate entity within the partnership, had received his early training in Cambridge and London but latterly, most congenially, with Reginald Fairlie in Edinburgh. As Fairlie had in his time been an assistant with Lorimer, there was thus a shared professional ancestry, and although from backgrounds almost as different as their personal identities – Ian romantically monumental, George small, neat and purposeful – both were perfervid Scots with an intense interest in everything pertaining to their native land. In George's case this came to include a command of Gaelic (as of several languages of continental Europe) giving him an understanding of Highland matters unusual in a Lowlander.

In the short period before the Second World War the most important development was undoubtedly when Ian Lindsay (on the virtual insistence of J S Richardson) was appointed by the

Iona Trustees as architect for the restoration of the conventual buildings of the Abbey – primarily for use by the Iona Community. Although little construction was undertaken at this stage the commission involved the preparation of plans for virtually the entire group. In this George Hay's experience with the Office of Works, his grasp of architectural form, and his mastery of detail, were invaluable. Preliminary designs were also made for the restoration of a church of very different character, the early classical Kirk of the Canongate in Edinburgh, a form of architecture on which George would become the acknowledged Scottish expert.

In preparation for the anticipated outbreak of war specialists such as architects were instructed to continue with their normal work until called up for military service. But when this occurred, in 1940, George spent quite some time (not entirely uncongenially) with the Gordon Highlanders before being transferred, more appropriately, to commissioned rank in the Royal Engineers. His service took him from North Africa to Austria by way of Sicily and Italy where he trained his men in, among other things, a proper respect for historic monuments in the course of military operations.

After demobilization in 1946 Ian Lindsay re-established his practice in his home at Houstoun House in West Lothian in association with George Hay and Walter Schomberg Scott, but still in partnership with B N H Orphoot, and it was not in fact until 1952 that the new firm of Ian G Lindsay and Partners (Hay and Scott) was set up in Great Stuart Street, Edinburgh. Even there accommodation was scarcely adequate for a rapidly expanding practice and George in particular rarely had the assistance to make the best use of his talents. Of much of this Ian was only remotely aware, over-committed as he was to virtually every organization concerned with the preservation of the historic buildings of Scotland – with enduring benefit to his country but in part at the expense of his own professional interests. Regrettably, these and other complications would eventually lead to the break-up of the partnership, George moving quietly back to the Ministry of Works in 1960, as he said, in order to maintain a friendship that seemed otherwise at increasing risk.

Among his contributions to the achievements of these years, his work on ecclesiastical buildings was of particular merit, above all at Iona (1947–60). There the restored structure had not only to incorporate such features as had survived but reconstruct the remainder in the most correct form, and ensure that the whole group could function as the home of a living community. Other schemes involving ecclesiastical fabrics – but without such extensive re-building – included St Leonard's Chapel, St Andrews (1948–52), King's College Chapel, Aberdeen (1953–54), St Mahew's Chapel, Cardross, and the parish church of Lochgoilhead (both 1955).

The last, having been enlarged into a 'T-plan' structure in the 18th century, demanded an understanding of the requirements of reformed worship which George was uniquely equipped to provide here and in buildings of such different character as the Georgian classical North Leith Church (1948–50) and the Victorian gothic Hope Park Church at St Andrews (1954–55). But his most important commissions were concerned with two 17th-century Edinburgh churches – the return of the Canongate to its pristine form (1946–54) and the re-ordering of the major furnishings of Greyfriars to give its interior greater dignity in line with its reformed tradition (1951). And in a new church at Colinton Mains (1954) he showed how these same functional principles could be employed to produce a contemporary building of exemplary simplicity and dignity.

The background of this aspect of George's professional work lay in wide-ranging research into the theological, liturgical, and architectural context of Scottish reformed churches that took all Europe in its purview and involved extensive travel and much learned correspondence with continental experts. The actual structures were also examined with meticulous care. As he himself always emphasized, the origin of what became a nationwide survey lay in notes for the south and far north of Scotland made by a fellow-architect, John Duncan, who had died on active service in the war and whose brother Walter was a close personal friend. But the extension of these to the remainder of the

country, often by weekend rail and cycle journeys, involved meticulous planning and great physical endurance. In 1957, however, the enterprise was completed with the publication by the Clarendon Press of the magisterial *Architecture of Scottish Post-Reformation Churches 1560–1843*.

While it was in church architecture that George Hay achieved a unique distinction, he had an excellent understanding of other traditional buildings and was largely responsible for the rehabilitation, partly by renovation, partly by judicious ‘infill’, of the historic heart of Dunkeld for the National Trust for Scotland in 1954–58. And when he set up house on his own in 1958 at the top of 29 Moray Place, Edinburgh, he showed how an elegant Georgian apartment could be contrived out of somewhat unpromising attic space.

This last work was undertaken in preparation for his marriage, in that year, to Joan Macdiarmid. As this important and most happy development occurred, in his case, at a rather later time of life than usual, George had to consider very carefully whether it could be sustained on the basis of his existing professional status. After much thought and with profound regret on his part – as of Ian Lindsay in retrospect – he decided to return to government service for the remainder of his career. Among buildings which benefited particularly from his care were Edinburgh Castle, Glasgow Cathedral, and the Palace of Holyroodhouse, where in 1963 he completed the ceiling of Sir William Bruce’s Gallery with his customary mastery of detail.

While so committed to his professional responsibilities George continued to write with verve and authority. In 1969 came an exemplary historical survey of *The Architecture of Scotland* (in the Oriel Guide series), which went into a second edition in 1977. He also did much work on a collaborative study of the medieval cathedrals of Scotland now nearing completion. Among articles his reconstruction of the layout and furnishings of the late-medieval ‘High Kirk of Edinburgh’ (St Giles’) in the *Proceedings* of the Society for 1975–76 (*Proc Soc Antiq Scot*, 107 (1975–6), 242–60) and his exposition of the sources and forms of ‘Scottish Renaissance Architecture’ (Breeze, D J, ed, *Studies in Scottish Antiquity*, 1984, 196–231) showed his capacity alike for meticulous analysis and perceptive generalization. And beyond the Antiquaries of Scotland he was active in the affairs of a wide range of scholarly organizations, the Society of Antiquaries of London, the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain, the Scottish Ecclesiological Society, the Scottish History Society in particular. After his retirement in 1976 he served from 1977 to 1983 on the Historic Buildings Council for Scotland and as a special adviser on church matters thereafter.

For the last 10 years of his life George suffered increasing paralysis from Parkinson’s Disease, but with the devoted help of his wife and a particularly skilful physician – and his own quiet determination – he managed to maintain something of his accustomed activity. It was during this period that he was accorded two well-merited awards that, characteristically, he insisted on receiving in person – an Honorary Doctorate of Letters of the University of St Andrews in 1979 and Membership of the Order of the British Empire from the Queen in 1982.

He remained active almost to the end, walking unaided from his flat in Moray Place to the Lindsay-Fischer Lecture of the Society on 27 October 1986 and attending the annual meeting of the Dalrymple Archaeological Fund in Glasgow as one of its representatives on the 29th. Nine days later he suffered a severe stroke and died in Edinburgh Royal Infirmary on 5 December. At the funeral service in Greyfriars, of which he was an elder as well as consultant architect, due tribute was paid to his many admirable qualities, his professional skill, his scholarship, his unswerving integrity and courage.

Ronald G Cant