

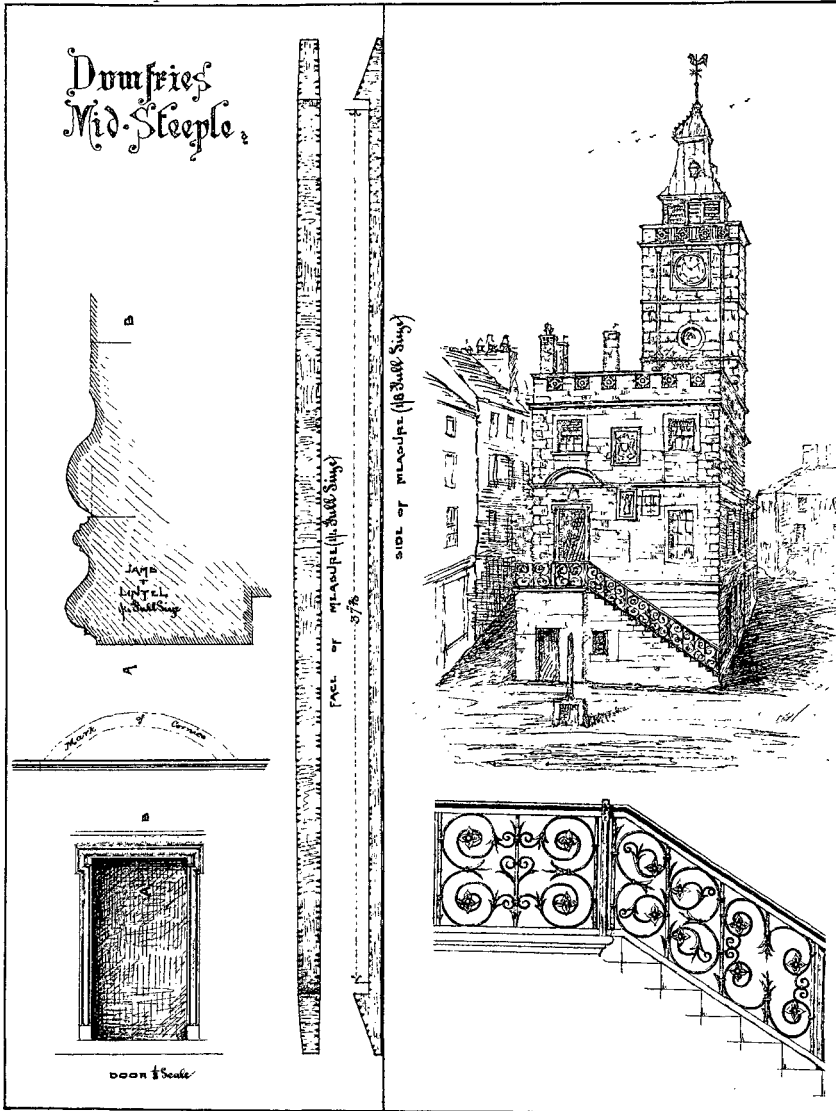
II.

NOTES ON THE OLD TOWN HALL OF DUMFRIES, COMMONLY CALLED THE MID STEEPLE. BY W. R. M'DIARMID, F.S.A. SCOT. (PLATE V.)

This is an interesting and a picturesque structure, which stands in the middle of the High Street, and nearly in the centre of the ancient burgh of Dumfries. The drawing and photographs which are exhibited will give members of this Society a better idea of the building than any description of mine (see Plate V.). The main part, as will be seen, consists of three stories; and access to the second or the principal floor and the third is given by a handsome outer staircase. The second floor contained what was first used as the Circuit Court-House, and afterwards as the Town Hall; but a more modern and commodious building, which was acquired by the Corporation in 1866, has since that date served the purpose of a Town Hall, and given accommodation to the burgh officials. The old hall and adjoining buildings are now occupied as shops and warehouses, and have fallen from their high estate; but from an architectural point of view, and especially as a specimen of the favourite style of Queen Anne, the hall and steeple will, as long as they stand, command attention.

From the north side of the old hall springs a short but neat tower, and this is surmounted by a quaint spire. On the front wall, facing the south, are two carved stones, one containing the Royal Arms of Scotland, which must have been cut shortly before the Union of the two kingdoms, the second a figure of Saint Michael, the patron saint of the burgh, and who gives his name to the chief parish church. The saint is portrayed as overcoming the spirit of evil with great ease. Below these has been cut the ellwand or standard of lineal measure, 3 feet in length. Not the least striking feature of the building is the railing of wrought iron surmounting the outer staircase, and which is, I have been assured, one of the finest specimens of the kind in Scotland; as will be afterwards shown, this was designed in Edinburgh.

A comparison betwixt the drawing and the photograph of the south side show a lamentable change in the principal doorway, an ugly



portico in the Grecian style having been introduced, entirely out of keeping with the original, and encumbering the landing-place at the head of the staircase. This change, which was doubtless regarded as an improvement at the time, was made in 1830, when, curiously enough, the Town Council first used the hall as a place of meeting. The resolution to build was taken in 1703, mainly for obtaining a proper Town Hall; but it was occupied after its completion in 1708 as the Circuit Court of Justiciary Court-House until the date mentioned, the Council contenting themselves with their old place of meeting at the Tolbooth. The Grecian portico seems to have been added in celebration of the change, but it has only served to disfigure the edifice, and to show how superior was the architectural taste in the age of Queen Anne to that in the reign of George the Fourth. In the sketch, which is a copy of a drawing taken about 1780, and with which I have been favoured by Mr James Barbour, architect, Dumfries, there is a small cross depicted, which was probably the original market cross of the burgh. The site in the early part of the present century was occupied as a fish market. There was a draw-well below the cross, 5 feet in diameter and 20 feet in depth, which has been covered up.

There are some points of interest in the story of the building of this old Town Hall, contained in a special minute book, which was long lost sight of, and accidentally recovered in a private library in 1857.

The tack of the customs and excise of Scotland fell into the hands of the Convention of Royal Burghs in 1697, and each burgh was allowed a share. The Town Council of Dumfries sold their share to Mr John Sharp of Hoddam, one of their number. This led to litigation, and eventually the burgh became the possessors of a bond for the sum of 20,000 merks. Urged by the community, the magistrates and council in 1703 resolved with this money to erect a building which would provide a proper prison, a steeple, a suitable council house, a place for the records of the burgh, and a magazine for the town's arms and ammunition. A prison was required, because several malefactors guilty of great crimes, and others confined for debt, had made their escape; and a steeple was needed, as there was not one in the whole town. A committee was appointed to carry out these resolutions, who reported

their proceedings to a meeting of the inhabitants, held on the 13th of March 1704. An attempt to procure an architect in Edinburgh had failed. Mr John Moffat from Liverpool had been engaged as an architect, and he was sent to Glasgow in search of a model. He returned to Dumfries in the month of April with a model which seems to have been accepted, and he was paid not only five pounds English money, as had been agreed upon, but three pounds in addition. In May the provost and a bailie reported that when in Edinburgh, they had searched for a Danish or Swedish bottom to be sent to Norway for timber, but had not succeeded in obtaining a vessel. Ultimately, after a great amount of search and trouble, trees were obtained in the Garlies Wood, in Galloway; these were cut down, floated for some distance down the river Cree, and then brought by gabbards to the banks of the Nith. Almost as much trouble was required to be taken to obtain lime, which seems to have been procured partly at Whitehaven and partly in Annandale. The building stone was obtained from a quarry now called Castle-dykes, on the Nith: the stones, of the red sandstone of the district, were floated up the river in boats constructed for the purpose.

Apparently the committee had intended to be their own builders, but tiring probably of the trouble, and after having rejected an offer from a local man in the early part of 1705, the services were procured of Mr Tobias Bachus, a master builder, then at Abercorn, and who is otherwise described as an architect in Alloway. He contracted to complete the building by Martinmas 1707, for the sum of 19,000 merks, he being supplied with all the materials which had been collected with such pains by the committee. Mr Bachus seems to have kept steadily to his contract, for the work was so far advanced in August 1707, that at a general meeting of the council and community, an offer from George Barclay, founder in Edinburgh, for three bells for the steeple was accepted. This offer was carried out finally in October 1708, when Mr Barclay's account of £1698, 14s. 6d. Scots, for stocking, tagging, tonguing, transporting, and hanging the said three bells, was ordered to be paid. He was allowed a guinea for his extraordinary attendance in the burgh.

In November 1707 the committee resolved to alter the contract of

Mr Bachus so far as to have an iron ravel substituted for a stone one on the outer stair, stone being thought incommodious and dangerous, and iron not only more profitable but more adorning. On the 7th of March 1708, the provost reported that he had met with Mr Patrick Sibald, smith in Edinburgh, according to the recommendation of the committee, and had reasoned with him about the making of an iron ravel for the council-house stair. The provost produced two draughts or schemes of the ravel, one to be wrought at £4, 10s., the other at £4 Scots, per stone, including the price of the iron; the more expensive plan was preferred, and a remit made to the magistrates to get proper iron. A drawing by Mr Barbour of this railing (reproduced in Plate V.) shows the elegance of the work, which, unfortunately, is much decayed, and is sorely in need of protection. A clock to adorn the steeple was procured from Stockport. The main building had been completed in February 1708, and a final settlement was made with Mr Bachus in the following December.

The record shows a rather remarkable difficulty in obtaining architects, contractors, and building materials, in a district which had been adorned in previous centuries with great and ornate abbeys and stately castles. It also shows that the popular belief in the unlimited power of the self-elected corporations of the Scottish Burghs up to 1834 was at least exaggerated. The committee originally appointed to carry out the work was composed jointly of members of council and community; their whole proceedings were closely scanned, and no important decision was taken without an appeal to a public meeting.

The sandstone used in the erection of this structure is soft, and has been much weather-worn during exposure to a humid climate for nearly 180 years. If these notes should lead the proprietors to pay some attention to the preservation of the Town-Hall and the ravel, they will not have been written in vain.