

SIR GEORGE SKENE'S HOUSE IN THE GUESTROW, ABERDEEN – ITS HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE Guestrow is one of Aberdeen's most ancient thoroughfares – it has shared in the storms and in the glories of the burgh's history since at least the fifteenth century. Its short, cobbled, narrow causeway saw many famous personages traverse it and dwell in its old houses – today little is left, for by the late nineteenth century the ancient tenements had become slums to be condemned to demolition; and forgotten were the medieval mansions of provosts, bishops, nobles, advocates and generals; vanished were the sloping walled gardens built over by later accretions which obscured the original good Scots architecture. Today all that we see of the Guestrow is the street itself denuded of its mansions, save the restored town-house of Provost Sir George Skene, standing somewhat starkly, deserted by its neighbouring buildings whose foundations lie beneath the surrounding waste areas and car parks. It is much to be hoped that future developments will not obscure permanently the line of this ancient Guestrow, for the very name is embedded in Aberdonian history and the derivation of the name has been the subject of much interest and even controversy.

The name 'Guestrow' is pronounced 'Gaistra' in the dialect of the Aberdonian and has nothing to do with guests or guest-houses. Although Parson Gordon in *A Description of bothe Touns of Aberdeene* is doubtful whether 'guests' or 'ghosts' led to the name, G. M. Fraser in *Historical Aberdeen* claims its origin from the fact that it overlooked the kirkyard of the Toun Kirk of St Nicholas and was thus associated in the medieval mind with ghosts. Now it is of course impossible to see the burial yard of St Nicholas from the Guestrow today because high buildings intervene. But even in the fifteenth century it scarcely 'overlooked' the kirkyard, and between street and the Toun Kirk flowed the Loch or Flourmill burn and parallel to that along the west side of the Guestrow gardens flowed the lade for the Mid or Flour Mill. However, a charter of 1439 refers to 'Viculus Lemurum' (the street of the spectres) and, while this may be medieval latinisation, it is the only acceptable explanation of this intriguing name, failing a possible derivation from Gaelic, as in other Aberdonian place-names, i.e. Mounthooly (Monadh-tulach): Green (Grianan): Fitty or Footdee (Feithe).

By the sixteenth century, the Guestrow was already somewhat built up – each tenement consisted of a house fronting, and parallel to, the street, through which a pend gave access to an inner court, one side of which was occupied by a building at right angles to the street house. The back of the court might be closed by another house also giving pend access beyond to the 'four-neukit' garden sloping to the west. We know from Parson Gordon¹ (1661) that in his time the houses were of stone and

¹ *A Description of bothe Touns of Aberdeene* (Sp. Club, 1842), 9.

lime, slate-roofed, mostly three or four stories high, some higher. Streets were carefully paved and house frontages were adorned by timber galleries and forestairs. Adjoining most dwellings were gardens and orchards with so many trees that the whole town would seem to be set down in a woodland.

Throughout the centuries, the now-demolished houses of the Guestrow were the mansions of famous personages, for, apart from Sir George Skene, the 'Bloody' Duke of Cumberland, and Major James Wolfe (later the victor of Quebec) who had occupied the 'Cumberland' House which is our subject, several civic chiefs resided along this street: Provost Leslie, Provost Jaffray and Provost Bannerman, the Jacobite of 1715. The latter lived in the house known as No. 1 Shepherd's Court just off Guestrow; earlier occupants were Sheriff-Depute Andrew Thomson and his wife Agnes Divie in 1673, whose initials appear on a plaque over the gateway, originally leading to the court but now re-erected in Union Terrace Gardens. However the gateway itself is at least early seventeenth century, similar in date to the old house, which old photographs show to have been a semi-castellated building consisting of a rectangular block having attached at one corner a strong round conical-roofed tower with entrance door. Sheriff-Depute Thomson's house had possessed the interesting qualities of sturdy Scots domestic architecture at its best. Unfortunately, when the Guestrow slum properties were demolished, few discerning eyes could distinguish good medieval buildings from relatively modern squalor. Even up to about 1850 the Guestrow was a 'respectable' neighbourhood – in 1807 for instance, the celebrated Duchess of Gordon was present at an elegant ball at Major-General Macdonald's residence; the Society of Friends had a meeting-house in the street; the Episcopalians a small chapel, and the Aberdeen Savings Bank their office from 1838 till 1858. At No. 15 Guestrow was born Archibald Simpson, now famed as architect of Aberdeen's finest granite buildings, while the only other house now remaining in the street, other than Skene's House, belonged in the late eighteenth century to the family of Black of Cloghill. This building, often referred to as the 'Dispensary', has little architectural merit, being much altered and added to during its more recent conversion into offices. However, it retains its walled and tree-lined garden, grass-planted nowadays, but offering visual proof of the fact that the enclosed gardens contributed much to the Guestrow being a desirable residential neighbourhood, as it undoubtedly was until a century ago (fig. 1).

2. DESCRIPTION

(a) *Exterior* (figs. 3 and 4)

Sir George Skene's House presents an impressive external appearance due to its massing and its sturdy granite walls (Pl. XIV, 1). There is a stark and austere quality given by the severe line of the flat roof and the comparative absence of decoration, a circumstance to be noted when one considers the exuberance and often grotesque features present on many seventeenth-century country castles and town lodgings.

The frontage to the south is by far the most attractive although the other aspects are of a certain aesthetic interest relative to the evolution of the building. The south elevation, with its projecting forestair porch, its two lofty corbelled-out angle stair

turrets, and its almost symmetrical fenestration, was intended to be viewed from the point where the arched pend led through from the Guestrow on to a courtyard of granite paving slabs walled in by a high Scotch-coped dyke. This aspect is now quite lost, for, together with the huddle of lesser buildings which stood around, the pend and the Scotch dyke have now disappeared.

Entry to the main building is at the base of the eastmost stair tower by way of a very decorative entrance doorway with freestone surround carved with a 'Restoration' pattern of thistle and rose motifs. Above the ornate over-lintel with grape and vine-leaf pattern in relief is a panel holding the personal coat-of-arms of Sir George Skene and the motto 'Gratis a Deo Data' meaning 'Thanks be given to God'. Sir George Skene's arms were 'Gules, a chevron argent between three skeens of the second hefted and pommelled or, surmounted by as many wolfs' heads coupéd of the third, tusked proper'. The wooden studded door with massive timber deadshot lock is late seventeenth-century work. Under the eaves of the stair tower, high up on the south-west angle, is a double-face sundial, undated but evidently late seventeenth century – the oldest and probably the only one of its type in the town. The square stair tower is one storey higher than the four-floor main house and the flat roof is reached by the eastern turret stair while the main flat roof is accessible from the western turret. Save for the smaller openings in stair tower and turrets, most windows are large and generous – nearly all jambs and lintels are in chamfered dressed freestone with the exception of four windows with wave-roll moulding surrounds. Masonry is granite generally, rough in texture, built in uncoursed rubble, with many 'heathen' boulders – the original finish to the stonework had been harling, only the dressed surrounds of openings being left exposed.

The west wing is slate-roofed with one dormer window at second-floor level, overlooking the courtyard. The semicircular pediment to this window, topped by a finely carved stone finial, bears a relief panel of the coat-of-arms of Maister Matthew Lumsden and his wife Elizabeth Aberdour, being initialled M.M.L. and E.A., with the date 1626 – a very intricate piece of carved heraldry, signed by the craftsman's own interesting mason's mark. The shield displays two wolves' heads coupéd in chief and an escallop in base for Lumsden impaling, for Aberdour, first and fourth quarterly, a pale surmounted on a bend charged with three mascles, second and third quarterly, a cross moline (Pl. XV, 1).

Entry to the west wing is through a piended-roofed porch of early nineteenth-century date, although the outer doorway, with its delicate roll moulding, is evidently an insertion from some other, earlier building. The west elevation of the west wing is of a simpler and more domestic character – there is an asymmetry of fenestration, with a nicety of scale distinguishing each of the three floors, while the steep pitched roof with its three dormers, flanked by sturdy gable-end chimney stacks, is dominated by the gable and western stair turret of the main house.

The north elevation exhibits a fortress-like character quite unrelated to the south frontage. The small, often square, windows, the batter of the walls, the plain gable-end parapets and the severity of the eaves line suggest a grim Highland stronghold rather than a Lowland merchant-laird's douce toun-ludging. This rugged exterior,

composed of stonework in places almost Cyclopean in size, conceals interior apartments displaying all the elegance and adornment available to the seventeenth and eighteenth-century aristocracy. An interesting feature of the north side is the small corbelled-out turret (with overlapping capstones instead of conical roof) fitted in between the main block and Lumsden's wing.

To the east the main house presents no features other than a wee square window, originally a lozen – this east wall was at one time the mutual gable with the property which fronted on to the Guestrow.

Excepting the south and west frontages which were intended to be appreciated from courtyard and garden respectively, the other exterior aspects suffer from the lack of neighbouring buildings – only the immense bulk of the House itself counteracts in some degree the appearance of isolation.

The restoration work on this important piece of Scots domestic architecture began in 1951, and while no major rebuilding was required, its latter-day near-slum condition entailed considerable cleaning up and other urgent remedial measures. Roof and ceiling timbers, and some panelling, showed evidence of woodworm attack, but no signs of dry rot were apparent anywhere in the buildings.

Of outside works, two single-storey buildings, attached to the main block but of fairly modern date, were demolished. All remnants of old harling were removed, and the joints of the original granite masonry were repointed, while any recent accretions in brick work were cut out and rebuilt in stonework. Dressed quoins and jambs, where decayed, and several fractured lintels, were replaced in Moray sandstone. The main house and square stair tower were originally roofed over in sheet lead – one small portion having been repaired with zinc sheeting. This lead platform roof had been in its day a most excellent job of plumbing craftsmanship, but lack of maintenance had caused it to be so far deteriorated that it had to be replaced by a more weatherproof covering of bituminous asphalt – these flat roofs are nowhere visible from the ground. A survey of the building made twenty-five years ago suggests an open balustraded parapet and corbel course round the platform roof, but there is no evidence in the form of toothings or other fragments to support a claim that such an attractive feature originally crowned the wallhead.

The west wing roof was entirely re-slatted using Scottish slates; the three west dormers, two of which had had brick pediments, and the central one only a skylight, were reconstructed, using Moray sandstone, as simple pedimental dormer-heads. Most chimney heads had moulded copes damaged or missing – these were restored or replaced. All chimneys, each consisting of several flues divided up by flagstone feathers, were sealed off on top with slates, as the need for open fires was obviated: the house is now heated by electric tubular convectors at floor level. The considerable array of rainwater piping on the walls was swept away to be replaced by a minimum number of downpipes inconspicuously positioned.

Many built-up openings were restored to their original use as windows. Frames and sashes were either in disrepair or of a modern design – practically all were replaced by traditional Scots domestic small-pane windows more in keeping with the character of the house. The stone decoration in relief round the main entrance, the Skene arms panel above, and the Lumsden arms dormer panel were cleaned, restored and given specialist treatment by craftsmen of the Ministry of Works, Edinburgh. The two-face sundial on the square stair tower was restored to use by re-gilding the lines and numerals, and replacing the missing gnomons. To the south side of the house is the old courtyard with its original granite slabs and stone gutters. The original high Scotch-coped dyke and other enclosing walls were replaced by a length of granite balustrading¹ not wholly in keeping with the elevation, while the type of formal garden to the south lacks the shady walks, the rows of hedging and fruit-trees, and above all, the privacy of the medieval garden.

¹ Originally *in situ* at Craigelea House, in the Mannofield district of the city.

(b) Interior (figs. 1 and 2)

The main entrance to the House is by the large decorative doorway at ground level on the south face of the stair tower. Within, one finds the spacious stone stairway and to the left is (i) a short passage leading to a barrel-vaulted room which originally had a floor of beaten earth and had served as a store; and (ii) another short hallway to a larger barrel-vaulted storage chamber now subdivided into two small stores and one large room. This large vault has two windows to the courtyard, and there are still traces on the opposite side of two similar windows built up at a later date in the House's history. The east partition of this vault has the interesting construction of vertical and horizontal timber strut framing with brick infilling – typical late eighteenth-century work.

The ground floor level is, on the average, 12 in. below that of the courtyard slabs outside – evidence of the gradual heightening of the surrounding ground since the sixteenth century.

The west vault of the main house – also lit by two windows to the court – is reached by a doorway through a masonry partition. Just within this doorway a rectangular opening in the floor and seven stone steps lead down to a small underground apartment which served as a wine-cellar with stone shelves and arched recesses built in brick and probably late eighteenth-century work: it has been claimed without substantiation, that the steps gave access to a 'secret passage' (a persistent tradition regarding the House) – this passage leading underground to the harbour.¹

In restoring the original number of vaulted rooms, two relatively modern brick partitions were removed. The stonework of the barrel vaults was left exposed and the joints repointed. Floor repairs led to the discovery of the underground wine-cellar and among the debris removed from the lower level, much broken glass and earthenware and crockery fragments of early nineteenth-century date were found, but nothing of unusual interest or value.

In the main house the first floor is reached by the fine stone-stepped stair of simple proportions, this stair continuing to second-floor level, with semicircular arches with double-roll mouldings at each landing.

The walls of the main stair and of the turret stairs have been replastered, and many stone steps required repairing or replacement. The sturdy timber balustrading at the second-floor stairhead was cleaned and the natural oak surface restored.

At first-floor level access to the large hall is by a double-leaved door within a doorway with chamfered stone surround. This large apartment was evidently the original dining hall, the ancient arched fireplace at the east end having been built up to provide a smaller opening with a mural closet behind. This closet and the arched alcove on the same wall were revealed by the removal of panelling of a later date. Two small square sixteenth-century windows have been restored at clerestory level in the north wall. The present screen of pine panelling replaces the timber partition which in more recent times had divided the old hall into kitchen and dining room. The latter apartment still retains the atmosphere of an eighteenth-

¹ A possible reference to some past incident involving the uncovering of either a medieval sewer or the culverted burn running underground between Broad Street and Guestrow.

century dining hall with its panelled walls of Baltic pine and its imposing Corinthian columns, executed in mahogany, flanking the Victorian fireplace surround (Pl. XV, 2). The patterned flagstone floor had originally extended throughout the entire hall.

West of the hall is a square apartment – a withdrawing chamber. Here three walls are panelled in two different designs and mouldings. The fourth wall, from which the panels were removed, was found to contain a large wide-lintelled fireplace of considerable interest. The opening is flanked by two finely-carved fluted square pillars in sandstone, and the fire cheeks were painted in a black-and-white diced tile pattern: over the lintel is a sunk empty coat-of-arms panel with painted imitation frame. The whole design is similar to several other examples in late medieval castles and dates from a period not later than 1600 (Pl. XV, 3). The floor here is modern pavestones but the plaster ceiling displays seventeenth-century plasterwork decoration in the best Scots tradition, the design being a ribbed surround with a centre piece of Restoration motifs, the rose of the monarchy in the midst of encircling crowns, thistles and fleurs-de-lis.

At the first floor the large hall and withdrawing room contain panelling and decoration not all dating from the same period. The hall had a large area of pine panelling which required to be cleaned of numerous accumulated paint layers, as did the panelled and pillared fireplace. The walls at the east end of the old hall were plastered and, where original flagstones on the solid floors over the barrel vaults were missing, these were replaced with cast stone paving. In the withdrawing room, the intricate details of the ceiling design were obscured by layers of whitewash. These were removed and the plasterwork restored. The wall panelling, of two different types, required renovation: the moulded stone pillars and painted cheeks of the fine sixteenth-century fireplace were all given restoration treatment.

At second-floor level there are four rooms – three of these apartments in the east portion being arranged *en suite* with connecting corridor leading from top of main stairway, the access door opening having a simple roll moulding surround. All three apartments and the corridor are panelled, the panelling with dado moulding being more carefully executed and undoubtedly later in date than that on the first floor. In the westmost room of the suite the panelling is rounded at the corners and the ceiling is coved; and its excellent proportions make it the most pleasing apartment in the house – the marble fireplace surround with overmantel and mirror is an unfortunate insertion of the early Victorian period. The small middle room of the suite contains most interesting painted panelling dating from the eighteenth century, the subjects recalling the painting work of the Norie family in Edinburgh. The styles and rails are painted to represent pastoral and classical landscapes with figures and buildings rendered in the picturesque manner, while the panels have been given an all-over marbling effect. These three rooms are floored with pitchpine cross-tongued floor boarding – eighteenth-century work.

A doorway had at one time connected the east portion of the second storey with the fourth room in the west part. The fitting up of the panelling has blocked this original access which is clearly discernible from the fourth room. This apartment has much of interest, particularly the plaster ceiling – late seventeenth century in date – a masterpiece of the plasterer's craft with ribbed panels, and floral and classical

figurine decoration. The fireplace has roll and hollow mouldings at the sandstone jambs with plain lintel; the hearth composed of black and white tiles. At the north-west corner is a wee one-windowed mural closet built into the thickness of the west gable. The chamber itself has no panelling but the wooden strip rail around the edges of the ceiling is indication that the walls were hung with tapestries.

All the excellent pine panelling of the suite of three rooms and corridor was given restorative treatment, and the plain plaster ceilings here were renewed. The oil painted panels of the small apartment have been partially restored – their pristine appearance could not be regained by cleaning. The flooring here, of good pitchpine cross-tongued boarding, was in good condition and was retained, but elsewhere in the building wooden floors had to be renewed, all new boarding being treated by staining and wax-polishing. The late seventeenth-century decorated plaster ceiling in the fourth or west second storey room was restored to its original state by cleaning off numerous accumulated layers of whitewash.

The topmost floor of the main house is reached from the head of the stairway by means of a spiral turret stair turning left-wise, thus indicating its late date. The entry to the turret is by a doorway with chamfered jambs displaying masons' marks – the timber studded door and its latch are very probably sixteenth century in date. Under the platform roof of the main house there are two rooms, but as there are three fireplaces, it is likely that there were originally that number of rooms. The east gable fireplace has no special feature, but flanking it to the south is a small square winnock, the old traditional shuttered 'lozen' being now replaced by a glazed pane. The second fireplace in the larger attic room is on the north wall; it has a bolection-moulded stone jamb and lintel, the cheeks being tiled in black and white, while the overmantel consists of the only piece of panelling on the top floor.

The most interesting feature of these attic apartments is the most unusual ceiling under the platform roofs. The ceiling of the larger room has unfortunately had to be completely restored but that in the smaller room is original. The construction consists of massive oak beams carrying, by means of blocks, the rafters supporting the purlins. On these latter are laid the wide sarking boards, the joints of which are covered by moulded timber strips (Pl. XVI, 2, 3, 4). The only roof in Scotland similar to this was that over the James VI building on the north side of Linlithgow Palace – it was destroyed by fire in 1746 during its occupation by troops of the Hanoverian monarchy under General Hawley.

Also of interest in the smaller attic room are the fireplace with its original bowtell moulded jambs and lintel, and the mural closet with small window at the north-west corner. The chamfered jambs of the linking doorway between the attics contain masons' marks.

The east turret stair leads to two apartments, one over the head of the main stairway, the other at fifth-storey level under the platform roof of the square stair tower. The lower chamber is small, but has an excellent example of a plaster ceiling, contemporary with others elsewhere in the house, with the familiar grape and vine-leaf motifs. The small fireplace has bolection-moulded lintel and jambs, and the walls, originally panelled, are now plastered: in the thickness of the east wall is an 'aumry' recess, indicating the chamber's possible use as a study. The topmost room

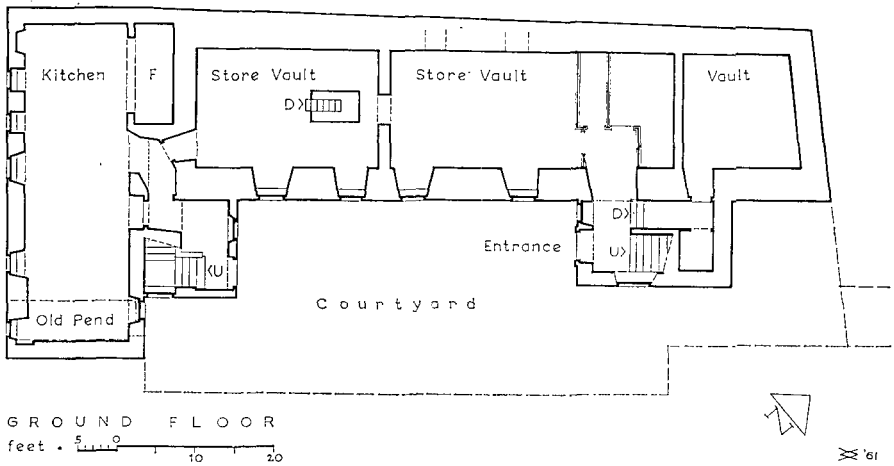
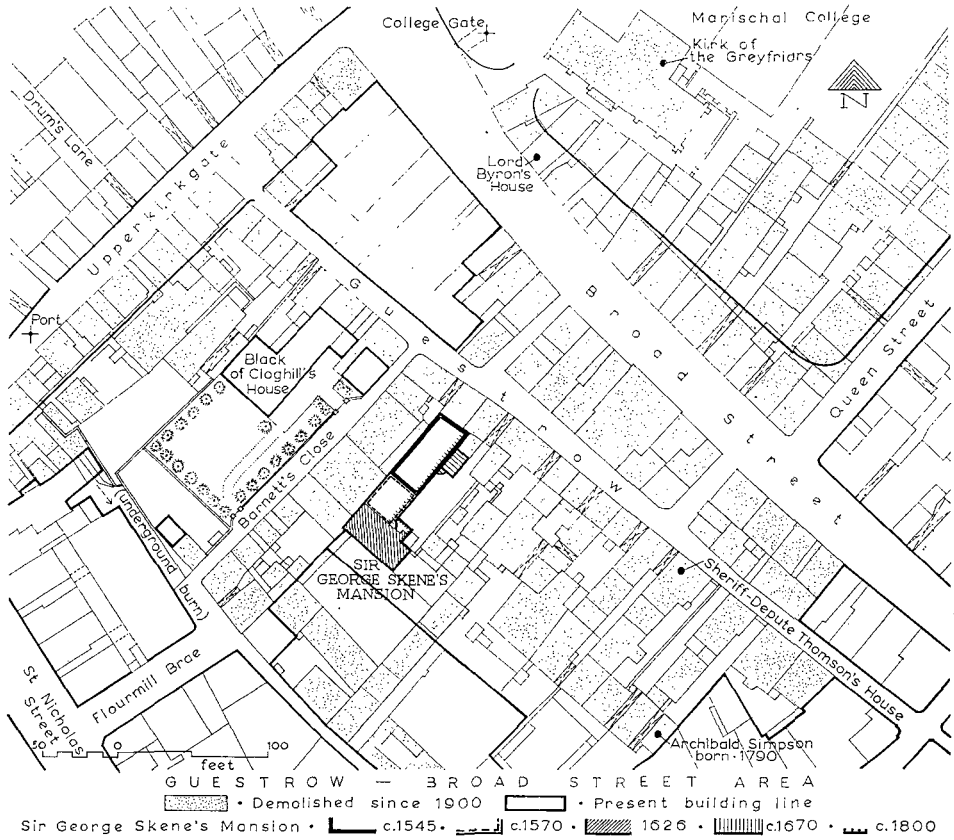
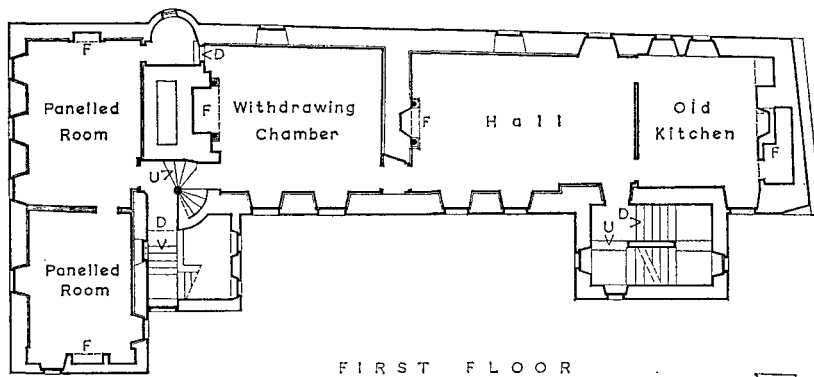
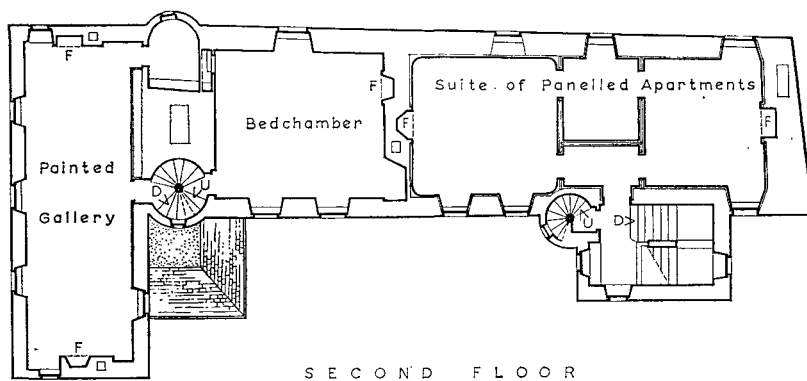
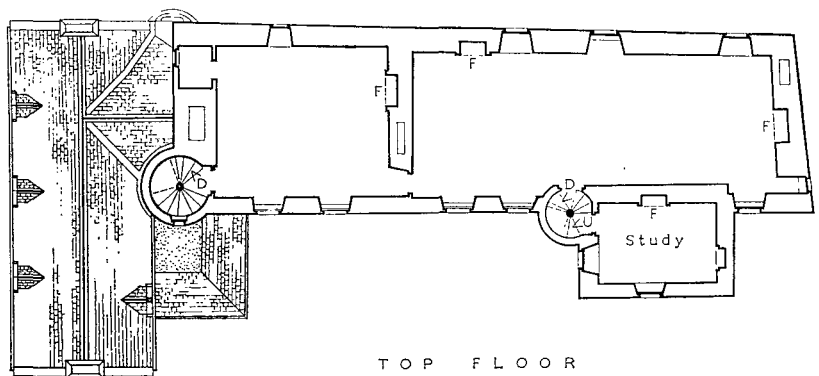


FIG. 1

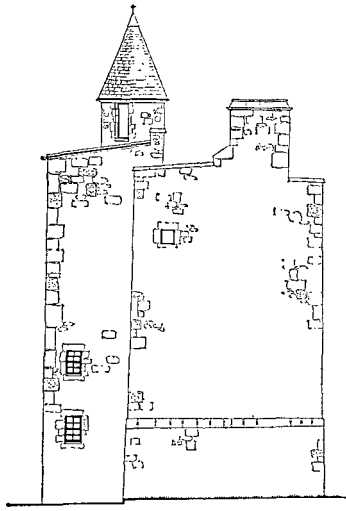


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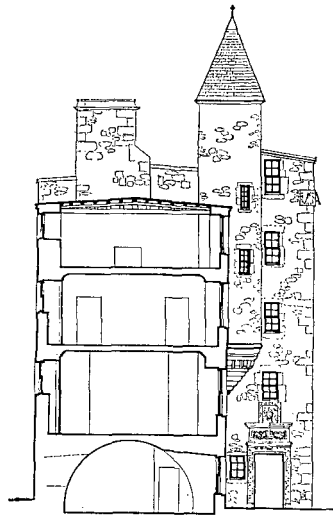


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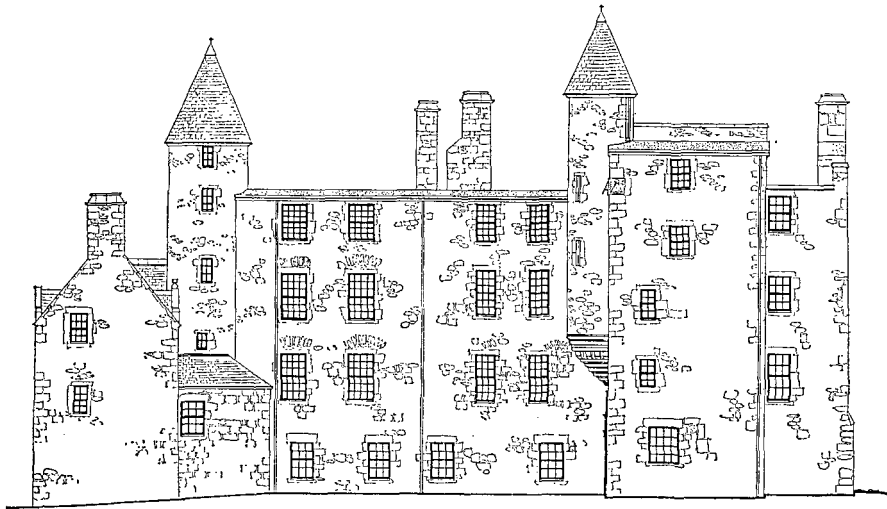
FIG. 2



EAST ELEVATION



CROSS-SECTION
AND MAIN DOOR



SOUTH ELEVATION

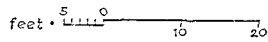
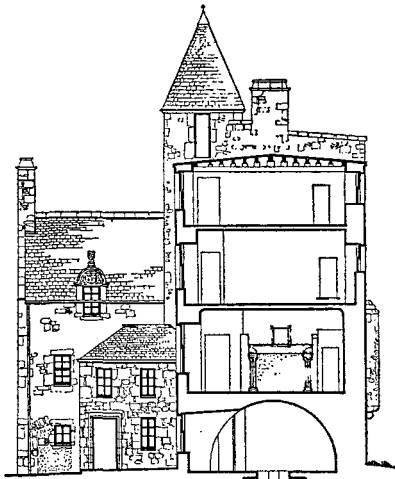
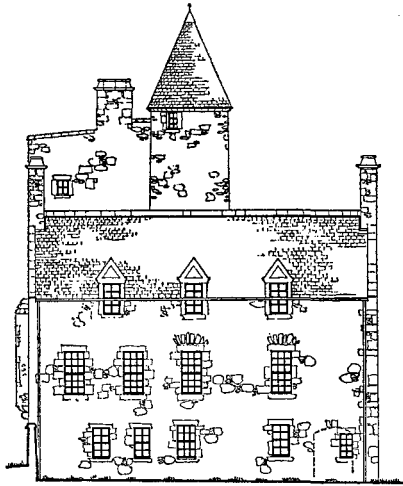


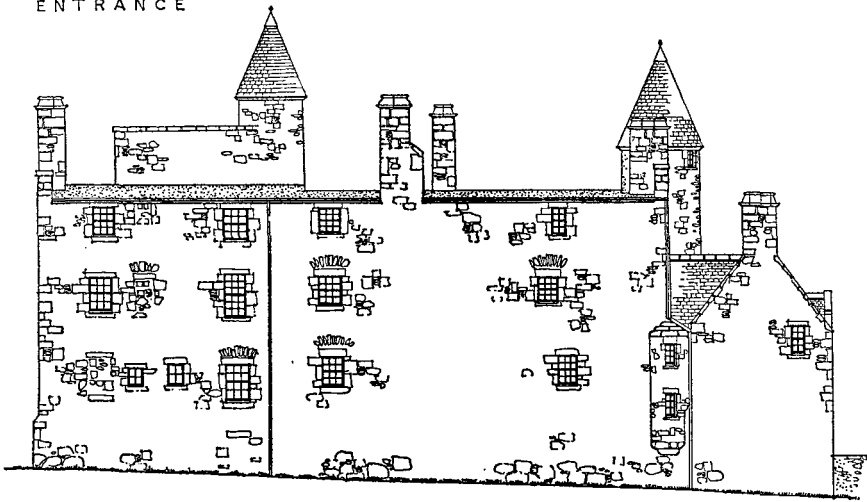
FIG. 3



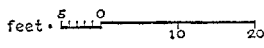
SECTION and
LUMSDEN WING
ENTRANCE



WEST ELEVATION



NORTH ELEVATION



X 61

FIG. 4

has panelled walls with a press hidden behind the panels along the length of the east wall. The fireplace has a moulded surround suggesting an eighteenth-century date – the timber ceiling here is not the original one.

Under the platform roof, the two attics in the main house have had flooring renewed and walls replastered. The unique roof construction was for long partly hidden by a false ceiling. This was removed, and during the roofing operations the woodwork of the ceiling of the larger room was found to be in such bad condition as to be unsafe. It had to be replaced by a similar construction in new timber, thus reducing its interest considerably. In the smaller room the original roof timbers remain, although two new timber beams for extra stability had to be inserted under the supporting purlins at the load-bearing walls. Of the stair tower rooms, the topmost has had the roof timbering and flooring renewed, and the panelling cleaned and restored, while in the lower chamber the walls were re-plastered and the splendid, though small, decorated plaster ceiling cleaned down to its original state.

Although all three floors of the west, or Lumsden, wing are linked to the main house floors (although the levels are not similar), there is a separate entrance door from the courtyard by means of a stout timber studded door within a roll-moulded doorway in the small pavilion-roofed porch under the western stair turret. The porch was added about the end of the eighteenth century with the purpose of enclosing the dog-leg forestair (originally external) leading to first-floor level. At this level the porch or annex had a small compartment (latterly a privy) – this was removed during restoration to reveal the corbelling of the stair turret and the deep-chamfered round arch leading to the ground floor. On this floor were two rooms, now formed into one, although the door to the old south apartment remains; adjoining it is the doorway (the east jamb only remaining) to the kitchen. From the short passageway under the forestair an access was slapped to lead to the ground floor vaults of the main house. The old kitchen of the Lumsden wing contains a very good example of a deep fireplace with wide stone arch (Pl. XVI, 1).

The forestair at first-floor level (where the original main entrance to the west house had been) leads to two apartments, access to the south room being made from the north room. Originally both apartments had separate doors leading directly off the stone-slabbed platt at the top of the stairs. Traces of these doors (lintels and jambs) are still visible, the south doorway being flanked by a double-barred window (originally external). These first-floor rooms have several most interesting features: decorative plaster ceilings of the late seventeenth century, good pine panelling on every wall except that on the south, where over the fireplace, faint traces were apparent of a mural painting in tempera, most likely a portrait and possibly dating from about 1626. Unfortunately the remnants were not sufficient to justify restoration. On the east side of the southern chamber are two hidden recesses (probably used as cupboards), fitted behind the panels – one of these recesses being formed behind the original door now blocked. The centre piece of the ribbed ceiling in this room is the heraldic shield of George Skene and the initials G.S., indicating that he commissioned the decorative plasterwork before 1681, when he received his knighthood. The north panelled room has a good example of a bolection-moulded fireplace and the plaster ceiling contains the ribbed patterns and Restoration motifs seen in the other designs (Pl. XIV, 2). This room has also two recesses on the east

wall, one being simply a cupboard and the other leading by way of a veritable 'secret' panel to a small semicircular chamber (originally the lower half of a turret stair), connecting with the first floor of the main house. This turret stair was probably wooden and was the original access to the top floor of the Lumsden wing – two small closets replaced the timber stairway when the west stair turret was built, forming vertical circulation between all floors of both the main house and the west wing.

Restoration work in the Lumsden wing consisted of repairs to the steps of the dog-leg forestairs, and the addition of the balustrade. The removal of the small first-floor closet in the porch led to the revealing and cleaning up of the stone corbel courses under the stair turret. The pended roof over the annex was re-slatted using Scottish slates. The main feature of the old kitchen – the great stone-arched fireplace – had its later brickwork infillings removed to display its original large dimensions. The floor here has been renewed where the original paving no longer existed – building of storage and toilet accommodation at the east end of the ground floor involved the removal of the old paving where the pend had at one time led through the south end of the wing on to the garden. The two first-floor rooms have excellent pinewood panelled walls, which, in common with other panelling throughout the house, were either heavily whitewashed or painted dark brown. Cleaning revealed the finely grained woodwork – on the ceilings removal of layers of limewash revealed the details of the decorative plasterwork.

At second-floor level in the west wing is the most interesting room in the House – the Painted Gallery. Access is from the west turret stair by a timber panelled door which has been clumsily cut down to fit the opening – however, the original access had been in the north-east corner, where the old timber studded door now leads to the closet which had been the upper part of the wee spiral stair from the floor below. The Painted Gallery, which was divided into three apartments before restoration, has now regained something of its original splendour. The ceiling consists of lining boards with a flat central portion, running longitudinally, and with sloping sides under the roof pitch. The west side is broken up by the soffits of three dormer windows and the east side contains one dormer. Although some of the paintwork has now vanished from the north-end of the Gallery, enough remains to show that the whole original conception, painted in tempera using the complete colour range with yellows and blues predominating, consisted in all of ten rectangular framed panels; on the flat ceiling is one oval panel centrally positioned and one rectangular panel on each side. There are four panels to each sloping side, all these panels being linked into one grandiose design by a pattern of sacred decorative emblems, cartouches and representations of winged cherubs, fruit and floral motifs. The cartouches contain paintings of the Five Sacred Wounds and of the sacred monograms in the Latin form I.H.S., and in the Greek form X.P.E. The panels on the west side are painted to display scenes of Christ's Nativity, and on the east, scenes from the Passion. The flat portion contains the central oval panel indicating that the subject is the Ascension, while flanking this to the south is an excellently preserved rectangular panel representing the Resurrection with the Roman soldiers clad in late sixteenth-century armour; at the north end another rectangular panel, its painting lost, may have displayed either Christ sitting in Judgment or the Coronation of the Virgin. On the west sloping ceiling the panels, starting at the south end, are (1) the Annun-

ciation to the Virgin, (2) the Adoration of the Shepherds, (3) possibly Christ in the Temple, (4) unknown, being completely blank. The sloping ceiling on the east has two panels, one displaying the Crucifixion (Pl. XVII, 1) and the other the Deposition (Pl. XVII, 2) – missing panels at the north end may have illustrated the Last Supper and Christ before Pilate.

The most interesting of the sacred emblems is that of the Five Sacred Wounds, represented heraldically as the 'Arma Christi', and consisting of the heart placed centrally with the pierced hands above and pierced feet below arranged in saltire; this emblem is very prominent in the Gallery.¹ The Instruments of the Passion (on the flat ceiling) are arranged in four sets of four, each set surrounding a star and separated by the oval and rectangular panels. From the south end of the Gallery, and taking the emblems in the chronological order of the events with which they are associated, they are as follows: (1) relating to the Betrayal; including the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the betrayal by Judas; the torch and lantern by the light of which Christ was taken; St Peter's sword and the ear of Malchus; the cock which crowed at Peter's denial: (2) relating to the Condemnation; the basin and ewer of Pilate; the column against which Christ was bound. Symbols of the Crucifixion are the emblems which follow, and the Cross itself does appear, but the remainder are missing completely, although there are indications that all sixteen Instruments of the Passion had been originally portrayed.

On the soffit of the south dormer in the west wall, the arms of the Lumsden family are displayed as a part of the painted ceiling: this indicates that the great work of painting this gallery was about the year 1626² – the completion date of the Lumsden wing. The name of the painter is not known – the fact that the scenes show Flemish influence and may have been reproduced from Flemish originals has caused the belief that the ceiling may have been the work of George Jamesone, the first great Scots painter, or of his less-talented uncle, John Anderson.

The plastered walls of the Painted Gallery also bear some traces of paintwork representing round classical arches and columns with capitals and bases. On the side wall between the two doors there is an excellent example of old oak panelling, forming cupboards; the fitting together of the panels is a unique example of work by some seventeenth-century master-craftsman. On the opposite wall, the plaster has been cut back to display the roof construction by exposing the hammer-beam timbers where they are built in to the wall.

This Painted Gallery has been referred to as the 'chapel' but there are no records to substantiate that it was ever used as such.³

Originally one long compartment, the Painted Gallery was, until restoration, divided into three rooms – only in the central smallest compartment of the three were there traces of the paintings,

¹ Representations of the devotional cult of the Five Wounds are to be found in the Aberdeenshire castles of Craig, Gight and Towie: the first two were Gordon houses, the last-named a Barclay stronghold – both staunch Roman Catholic families (see Simpson, W. D., *P.S.A.S.*, LXIV, 48–106).

² Most post-Reformation tempera ceilings of this type are datable to the period 1625–40, e.g. Stobhall Chapel; St Mary's Kirk, Pitcairn, Grandtully; Skelmorlie Aisle, Largs Kirk; Pinkie House, Musselburgh; Earls Hall, Leuchars; The Palace, Culross (see Hay, G., *Architecture of Scottish Post-Reformation Churches* (1956), 223 *et seq.*).

³ Roberts, D., *Innes Review*, v, 119, claims it to have been a Popish chapel.

although it had long been thought probable that they extended along the length of the top floor ceiling. When the partitions were taken out and a low false ceiling at the south end carefully removed, the complete timber vault, resplendent with colourful religious scenes painted in tempera on the boarding, was revealed. Many of the boards were missing, some had been whitewashed over, and others had been split up and used as laths. Almost all the ceiling can now be seen, completely new boarding having been inserted where the original painted boards had totally vanished. The work of piecing together the ceiling boarding required infinite patience and care, while the clever restoration of the tempera paintwork was successfully accomplished by the skill of experts. The plasterwork on the walls was renewed, except where traces of painting were discovered; part of this was preserved to indicate the original state of all four walls.

During the general restoration work, some interesting relics were discovered, including fragments of patterned tiles found at one or two fireplaces: these tiles appeared to be of Netherlands origin, but insufficient examples remained to reconstruct a complete tiled surround. A hand-written visiting card of Provost Chalmers (whose years of office were 1738-40 and 1746-8) was discovered among debris removed at the sixteenth-century fireplace on the first floor. Here also was found a George III penny of 1806, a piece of decorated eighteenth-century china and a miniature round brush with handle.

3. HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURAL EVOLUTION

The title-deeds of the house and property are held in the charter room of the Town House: they date back to 1545 when the oldest part of the house was built by a member of the family of Knollis (Knowles and Knox are variant forms), who are frequently mentioned in accounts of burghal affairs during the sixteenth century.

The Knollis family evidently originated in Galloway: in 1465 James III granted lands there to Johan de Knowis *familiari scutifero suo*. By 1488, when he was granted lands at Westir-Essintulye (Ashentilly in Durriss), John Knollis had become a burgess of Aberdeen. His son, also named John, was granted his late father's property in 1492, and in 1503 he also acquired the lands of Cults. In 1506, a second son, David, bought land on the west part of the Gallowgate, doubtless referring to the property on which the descendant of Johan de Knowis later built a town-ludging: until the mid-seventeenth century, the present Broad Street was considered as part of the Gallowgate, and in 1500 the Guestrow was hardly separate from the Broadgait. Sandris (Alexander) Knollis, of whom there is mention in burghal records in 1531, apparently succeeded David Knollis.

In 1545, the original Knollis house, built by Sandris Knollis, was a simple rectangular building of no more than three floors, with perhaps an attic lit by dormers in the pitched roof: built with gable facing the street and parallel to the run of the tenement, access had originally been by external (and possibly timber) fore-stairs to first and second floors. At this period most Scots dwellings contained much timbering in external stairs, balconies and boarded gables, while roofing, despite the constant fire danger, was almost invariably thatch. Portions of the Knollis house can be seen today in the present structure: the sturdy barrel vaults; the traces of old first-floor windows (indicated by relieving arches), removed to allow for the later insertion of stair tower and turrets; the arched fireplace, now built up, at the east end of the hall; the two small square windows nearby; and the paving of the original hall.

At the west end of this first house an extension was built in the same style and to the same height: another barrel vault at ground level with access slapped through

the wall from the adjoining vault; a withdrawing room with well-preserved late sixteenth-century fireplace at first floor; above that a bedchamber, at the south-east corner of which is a connecting door, now blocked by panelling, to the older house. This extension seems to have been added about 1570 by Alexander Knowis, son of Sandris Knollis, whose other son Gilbert was murdered in 1574 at the Causewayend by James Gordon, brother to the Laird of Abergeldie, and whose daughter Janet was the paramour of the worldly William Gordon, last pre-Reformation Bishop of Aberdeen, to whom she bore three sons and three daughters.

The sons of Alexander Knowis were David, apparently his heir (1582); William (1584) and George (1585). It was at the last date that the Guestrow ludging passed to Alexander Duff of Torriesoul, burgess of Aberdeen, who in 1597 was put to the horn, i.e. was declared rebel and outlaw for non-payment of debts. In 1598 the House belonged to Thomas Bisset, burgess, and to George Bisset, whose son Robert is mentioned in 1601, the Bissets remaining owners until 1610 when Peter Blackburn, Episcopalian Bishop of Aberdeen, bought the property and lived in the House until 1615. Bishop Blackburn was one of the three wisest and most moderate ministers of the reformed Kirk appointed by James VI in 1600; in 1593 as a Master of Arts he was one of the witnesses who signed the foundation charter of Marischal College, where in 1598 he became a Dean of Faculty. In his tolerant outlook in an age of religious bigotry, he was a worthy predecessor of the liberal 'Aberdeen Doctors'. From 1615 the owner was Duncan Wilson until 1622, when Matthew Lumsden acquired the property. He was the son of Robert Lumsden of Clova, and the namesake of his uncle Matthew Lumsden of Tillycairn, the historian and genealogist. The heraldic dormer pediment dated 1626 indicates that Master Matthew Lumsden was the builder of the west wing, and the inclusion of the Lumsden arms in the painted ceiling indicates that the Gallery was commissioned by him. He was appointed Baillie in 1634, and in 1639 he was regarded as a 'known Covenanter', being held as hostage by Lord Aboyne while his Guestrow house was used as billets for Royalist troops. In 1644 Baillie Lumsden was one of the many citizens of Aberdeen killed at the disastrous Battle of the Justice Mills when Montrose gained a victory for his king and later pillaged the burgh.

By 1641 the House had passed from Lumsden to Alexander Simpson, from whom it came into the possession of William Christie (1651): three years later Alexander Davidson is mentioned as proprietor and by late 1654 Andrew Skene of Ruthrieston became owner. Skene was Dean of Guild in 1667: two years later he sold the Guestrow house to the man whose name it now bears – George Skene.

George Skene was born in 1619 at Mill of Potterton: he was the son of David Skene and his second wife Claris Seaton, and was brought up by his half-brother David, who apprenticed him to George Aedie, an Aberdonian merchant trading in Danzig. Like other Aberdonians before and after him, George Skene amassed a considerable fortune as a merchant in Poland, enabling him to acquire the estate of Wester Fintray in 1666, his 'ludging' in the Guestrow in 1669, and the estate of Rubislaw in 1687. One of the most important and most wealthy men in the burgh in the later seventeenth century, he was Provost from 1676 to 1685, Commissioner

to the Three Estates in the years 1678, 1681 and 1685, and was knighted in Edinburgh in 1681 by the Duke of York, later James VII.

Provost Skene carried out major alterations to his Guestrow property, which he used as his town house while most of his days were latterly spent at Rubislaw House.¹ By the improvements and reconstruction work which he made around 1670 to both the frontage and the interior of the old Knollis house and the West wing, Skene was responsible for the architectural design of the house as we see it today. The master-mason who carried out the work is unknown, but John Montgomerie, the Old Rayne mason who built the Mercat Cross in 1688, may have been involved: the ornate stone carving of the entrance doorway is strikingly similar to the decoration on the Cross.

The alterations made to the south frontage resulted in a more regular pattern of fenestration, window openings were enlarged, the square stair tower over the entrance door replaced the original timber forestair, and the two stair turrets contributed to improved vertical circulation – the west turret also giving access to the Lumsden wing, where the old spiral stair between first and second floors was removed. In the interior the good pine panelling in most of the rooms (save in the second-floor suite, which is later work) was carried out by Skene, and recurrent features in the decorated plaster ceilings are Restoration and Royalist motifs and emblems, including royal crowns, thistles, roses and fleurs-de-lis, which appear both on plasterwork ceilings and in the relief carving enriching the entrance doorway. Heraldic devices in the shape of the coat-of-arms of Skene are executed in plasterwork and stonework. The platform roof construction and its lead covering had been executed in Provost Skene's time, when more top-floor accommodation was gained by thus converting the attics and coved ceilings of the earlier house. This is the possible explanation for favouring a flat roof as against the traditional steep-pitch slating, unless there had been an intention to carry a balustraded parapet on a corbel-course round the wall-head – an intention which never became reality. It is probable that at this period the old pend which had given access through the Lumsden wing to the garden and Flourmill burn beyond, was blocked up, thus enlarging the ground-floor accommodation.

It is significant of Sir George Skene's individuality that, despite the many Renaissance houses and classical styles he must have been conversant with in his journeys at home and abroad, he chose to reconstruct his 'toun ludging' in the traditional Scots manner, only the south front betraying the influence of formal design. This would appear to be typical of the man – he disregarded the fashion in architecture, he preferred heraldry and conical turrets and spiral stairs. Sir George was frankly a Royalist, a supporter of the Stewart cause and a Scot in the late-medieval merchant-laird tradition – by 1670–80 the old architecture which he favoured was becoming outmoded. In 1694 he made over his Guestrow property to David Aedie, the husband of his half-brother's daughter – in 1698 it belonged to

¹ A most interesting seventeenth-century laird's house, built by Arthur Forbes (1675) – the garden contained the Earl Marischal's sundial, now at Schivas House, Aberdeenshire. The House of Rubislaw was demolished in 1886.

David Aedie junior. 1707 was the year of Sir George Skene's death – he was buried in the Rubislaw family burial place in St Nicholas Kirkyard.

At the end of the Aedie family's ownership in 1732, the whole mansion was divided in two parts, the east house being entered by the main doorway and separated from the west portion by the masonry wall which had been the west gable of the 1545 house. The west house, entered by the flight of stone forestairs consisted of the Lumsden wing and the rooms entered off the east side of the turret stair.

Alexander Thomson of Banchory was the owner of the west house from 1732 to 1776, and it was during this period that the whole mansion was occupied by the Duke of Cumberland and his staff previous to the Battle of Culloden. The house was commandeered on 27th February 1746 when the 'Bluidy Butcher' (the epithet given him by the Highlanders) entered Aberdeen. Cumberland's troops were billeted in the incomplete Gordon's Hospital, renamed 'Fort Cumberland', and it is of interest that Major James Wolfe, later the General who captured Quebec, was one of the Duke's officers, being aide-de-camp to General Hawley. The Duke was 'guest' in Thomson's house and Hawley and Wolfe in the east house, where Mrs Gordon of Hallhead was the tenant. The stay of these gentlemen occasioned bitter complaints from the displaced occupants who claimed that provisions and liquor, and many valuables, were plundered from their houses. The Town Council, on the other hand, endeavoured to find favour with His Royal Highness by presenting him with the freedom of the city before he left the town on 8th April. It cannot now be established whether it was because of this latter honour or because of the above-mentioned charges of dishonour that the mansion became familiarly known as 'Cumberland House' for the succeeding two hundred years.

From 1732 till 1738 the owner of the east house was George Keith, advocate, during whose occupancy the pillared fireplace and adjacent panels of the dining hall, and the excellent panelled work in the second storey suite of apartments had been executed. The intricate oil-painted panelling in the smallest chamber adjoining are also of this period, being contemporary in feeling with similar work in the 'primitive' Scottish landscape style of James Norie of Edinburgh (1684-1757). Other eighteenth-century proprietors of the house were John Douglas from 1738 to 1748, Patrick Souper of Auchlunies from 1748 to 1762, thereafter William Thom until 1795 and Mrs Mary Thom until 1808.

In 1776 Alexander Duthie, advocate, acquired the west house, and his son Alexander Duthie of Ruthrieston acquired the east house in 1808. Another son, James Duthie, solicitor in London, became owner of the whole mansion in 1832. The porch built to enclose the west wing forestairs would date from about the end of the eighteenth century, during the ownership of Alexander Duthie, advocate. The property remained in the hands of the Duthies – a legal family – until 1885. Walter Duthie, owner from 1844 to 1870, was a Writer to the Signet in Edinburgh and it was during his ownership that the building became a House of Refuge some time before 1857. Alexander Duthie, an Aberdeen advocate, was owner from 1870 to 1878, when it passed to his sister, Miss Elizabeth Duthie (who granted the Duthie Park to the city). In 1879 she leased the building as the Victoria Lodging House,

the proprietor from 1885 until 1926 being John Lyall Grant, an Aberdeen merchant. In 1926 the City Corporation of Aberdeen bought the house and left it standing while the surrounding slums of the Guestrow closes were demolished in the early nineteen-thirties. The House was saved from destruction only after long controversy, those who campaigned for its retention including the late Dr William Kelly the architect, and many others interested in the Aberdonian heritage of architecture, and history. Nothing of restoration was actually done, although the Office of Works (now the Ministry of Works) in Edinburgh submitted a complete restoration scheme as early as July 1933. The building remained as a common lodging house until October 1951 when restoration work began – to be finally completed two years later. The complete restoration scheme was the responsibility of the City Architect to the Corporation of the City of Aberdeen, and the general work was carried out by the Corporation Works Department under his supervision. Restoration and preservation proceeded with the assistance, interest and advice of some of the staff of the Ministry of Works, whose officials made the preliminary investigations, and whose experts, including the late John Houston, A.R.I.A.S., worked on the Painted Gallery ceilings, the decorative plasterwork and the carved stonework.

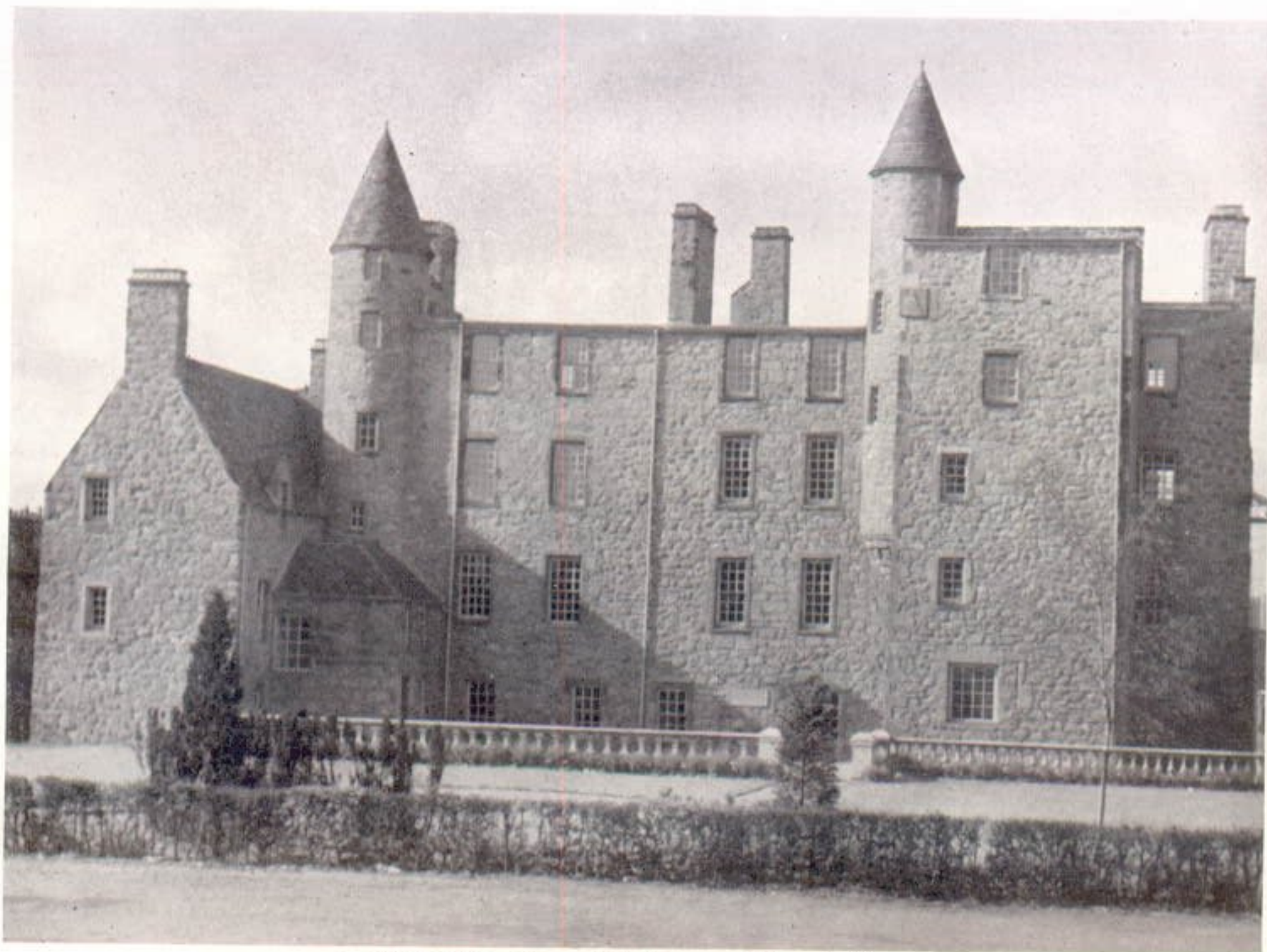
It was decided that it would come under the care of the Art Gallery Committee as a Period House, to be used to display seventeenth- and eighteenth-century furniture, the top floor becoming a local history museum.

Sir George Skene's Mansion in the Guestrow, its restoration complete, was opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother on 30th September 1953.

APPENDIX

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCE WORKS

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- (8) Lawrance, R. M., *The Skene Mansion* (1933).
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- (10) Wyness, F., 'Provost Skene's House', *Weekly Scotsman*, 24th September 1953.

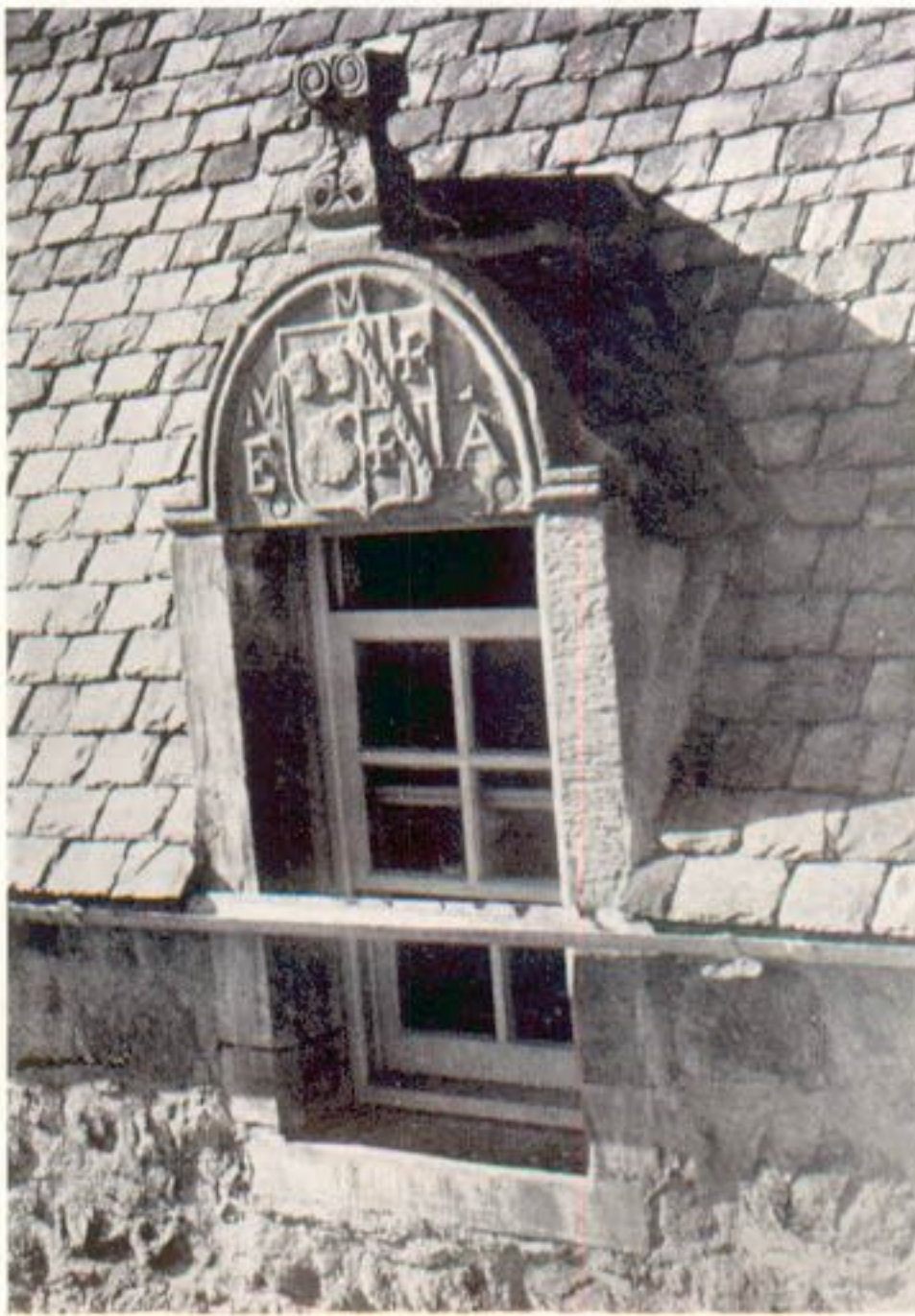


1. Main Elevation of Sir George Skene's House

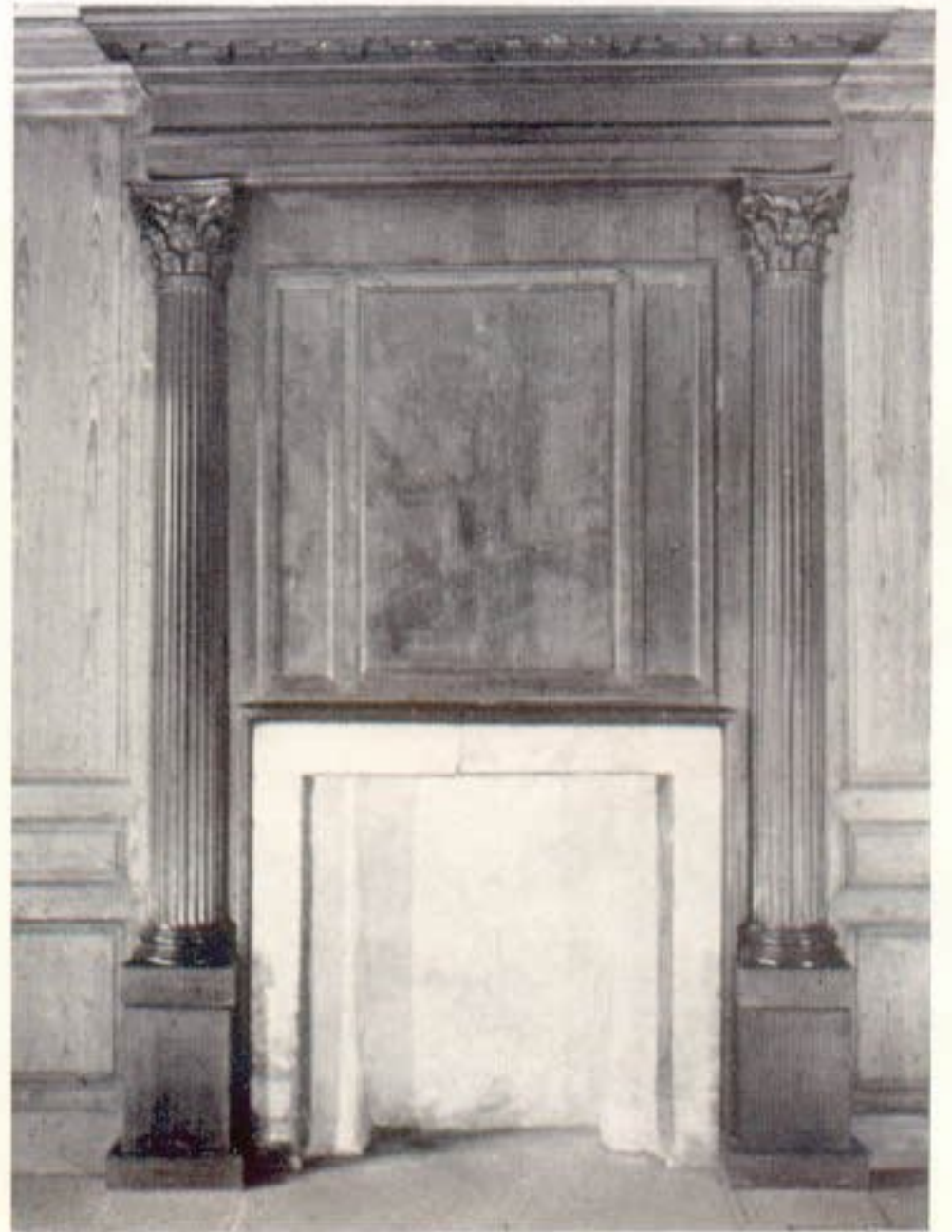


2. Panelled chamber: first floor: Lumsden wing

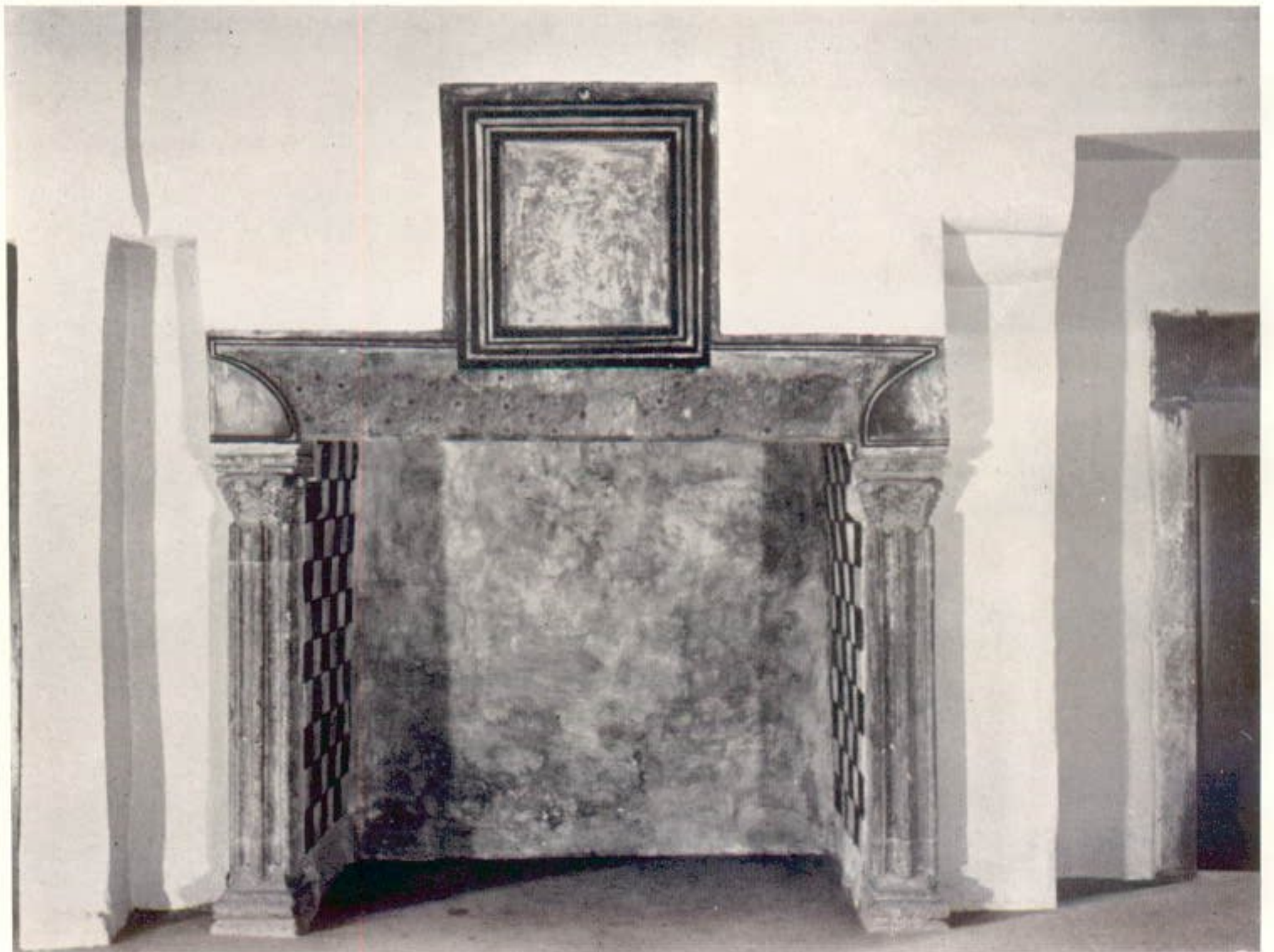
EDWARD MELDRUM.



1. Dormer window 1626: Lumsden wing



2. Dining hall:
fireplace with overmantel



3. Withdrawing chamber: sixteenth century fireplace

EDWARD MELDRUM.



2. West attic chamber: ceiling construction



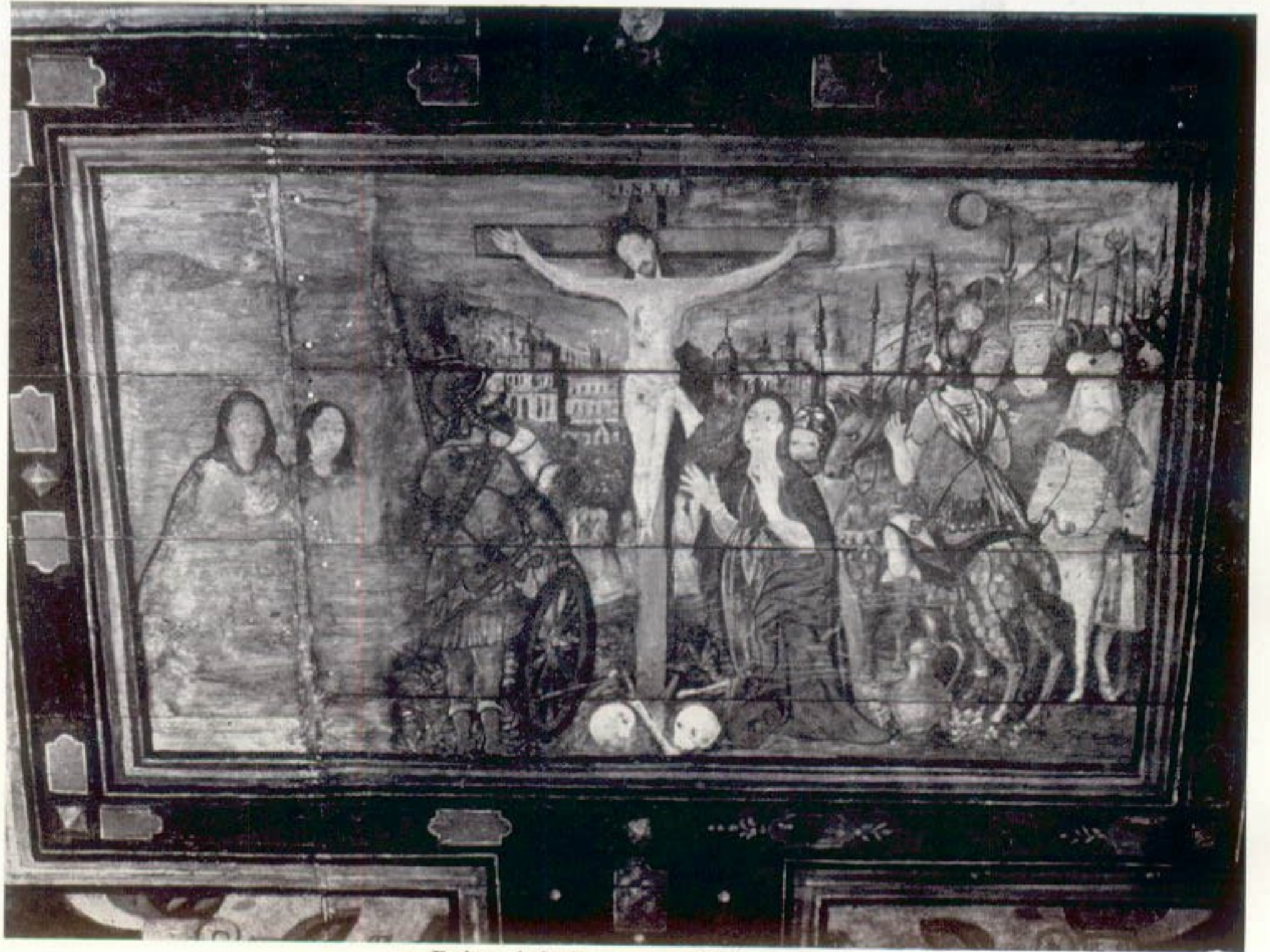
4. Original ceiling of attic: east end



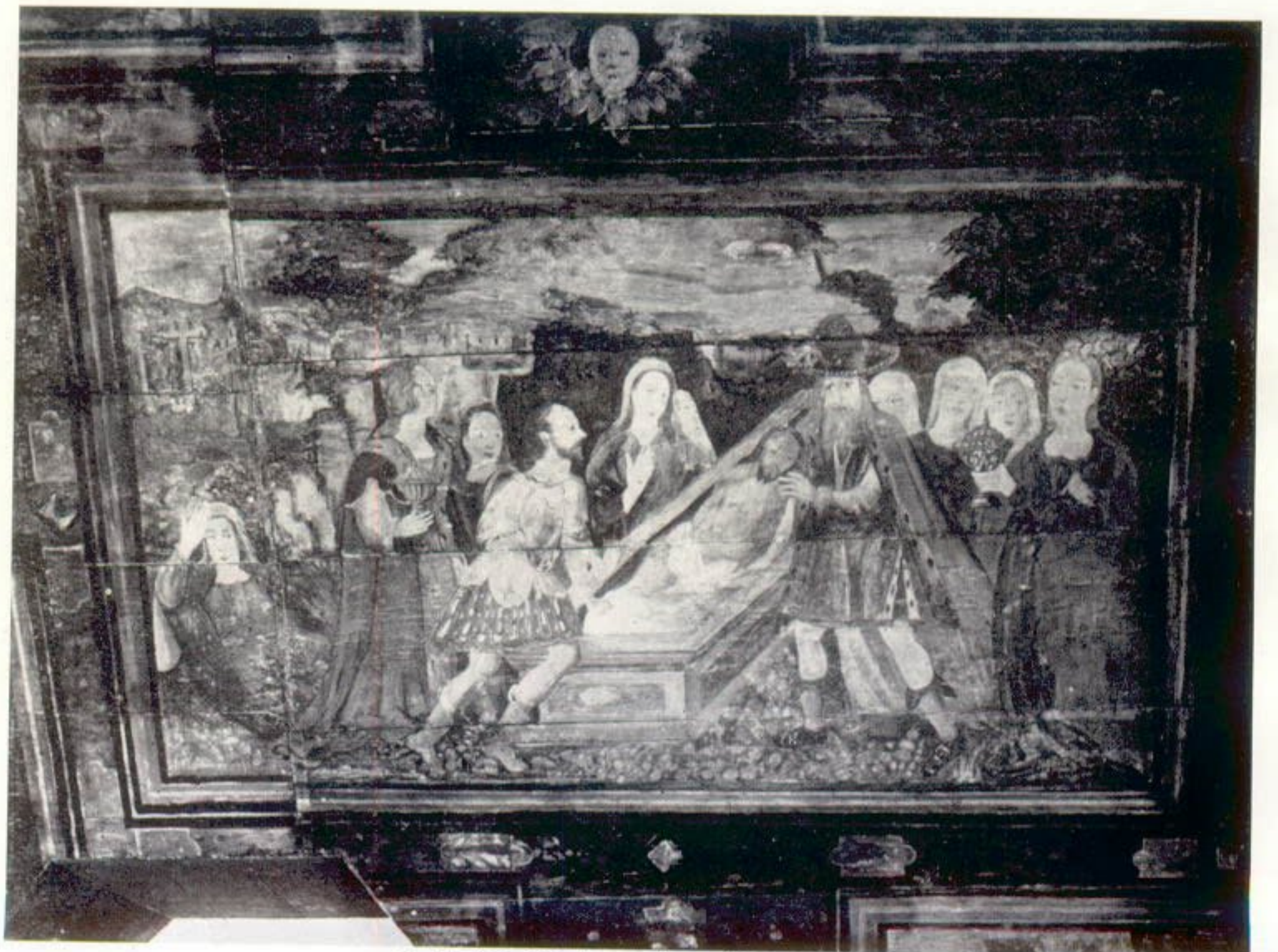
1. Kitchen: Lumsden wing: arched fireplace



3. East attic chamber: original ceiling



1. Painted Gallery: crucifixion panel



2. Painted Gallery: deposition panel

EDWARD MELDRUM.