

Thomas Hadden: architectural metalworker

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a brief history of the ironworking firm of Thomas Hadden of Edinburgh, in operation from the late 19th century until 1975.

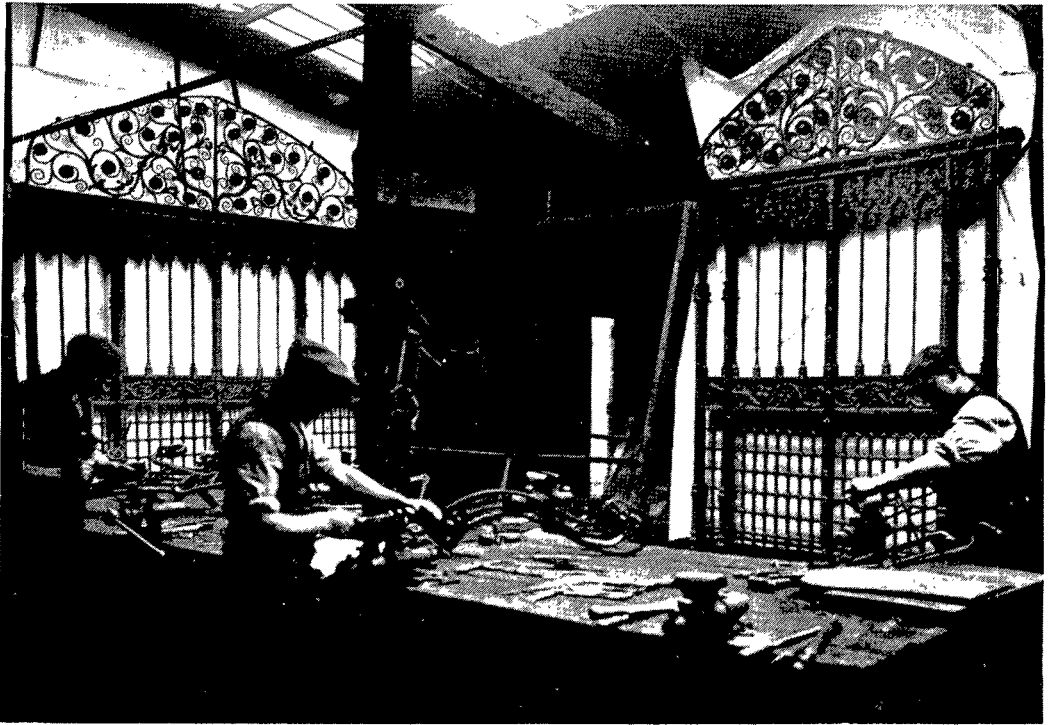
In 1986 and 1987, the National Museums of Scotland acquired a large collection of wrought-iron work, photographs and ledgers dating from approximately 1890 to 1960, relating to the ironworking firm of Thomas Hadden of Edinburgh. This acquisition, from Mr Robert Hadden, nephew of the firm's founder, was important for two main reasons. First, it provided a significant addition to a small group of material by Hadden's already held by the National Museums. Secondly, the archival material, supplemented by information provided by Mr Hadden, illustrated the development of a firm which was at the forefront of wrought-iron working in Scotland from the late 19th century until its closure in 1975. This paper draws on this archive to present a brief history of the company, which worked for and with many of the leading architects and designers of the first half of the 20th century.

The firm was established in Edinburgh at a time of renewed interest in the skills of the decorative wrought-iron worker. The revival of the wrought-metal trade, which had suffered in the 19th century from the mass introduction of cheaper cast iron, was the result of an increasing interest in the preservation and revitalization of traditional Scottish styles and skills, particularly in relation to architecture.

Thomas Hadden was born in Hamilton, Lanarkshire, in 1871. He came from a metal-working family and his father, grandfather and uncle all worked with iron in and around Haddington, East Lothian. Thomas trained initially at Howgate, near Edinburgh, and on the completion of his apprenticeship worked in Edinburgh for James Milne & Sons. In 1901, after a short period in London, he decided to set up in business in East Silvermills Lane, Edinburgh, in partnership with his brother Robert, a woodcarver. From its earliest days, the firm specialized in decorative smithwork, principally, though not exclusively, in collaboration with one of the leading exponents of the movement to revitalize Scottish vernacular traditions, Robert Lorimer.

In his book on the work of Robert Lorimer, written shortly after the architect's death in 1929, Christopher Hussey states that Thomas Hadden consulted Lorimer before setting up in business and that he was advised against the move (Hussey 1931, 108). Indeed, Robert Hadden recalled his uncle telling him that Lorimer had remarked that 'he might have his bread and butter but he would have no jam on it.' Despite this less than encouraging advice, Hadden proceeded and eventually worked with Lorimer on many of the architect's best-known projects.

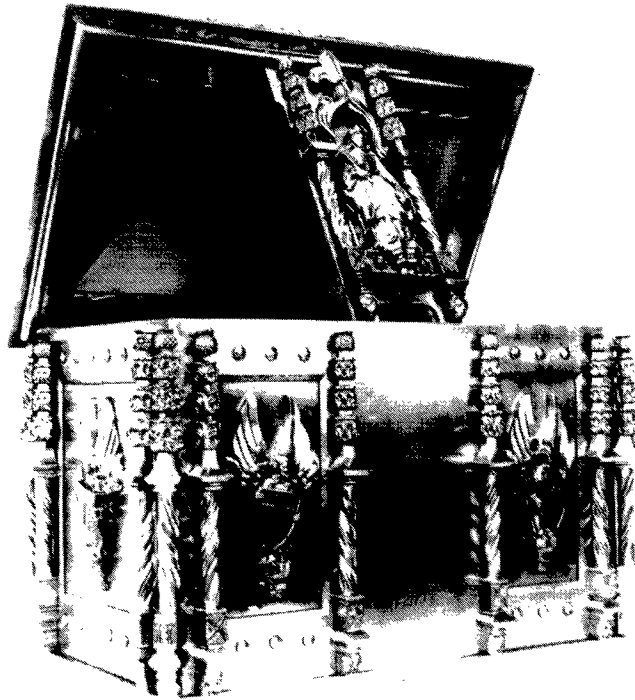
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ILLUS 1 Hadden's workshop showing the smiths working on the Thistle Chapel gates c 1910
(Copyright National Museums of Scotland)

Examples of this fruitful collaboration are to be found across Scotland, in houses such as Ardkinglass in Argyll and Marchmont in Berwickshire. Perhaps the most outstanding commissions undertaken by the firm under Lorimer's direction, however, were the wrought-iron screens in the Thistle Chapel in the High Kirk of St Giles in Edinburgh, completed in 1911, and the wrought-iron gates and steel casket in the shrine of the Scottish National War Memorial in Edinburgh Castle, completed in 1927.

The Thistle Chapel project was the result of a bequest by Lord Leven & Melville. Initially, it was intended to restore the Royal Chapel at Holyroodhouse as a meeting place for the Order of the Thistle. However, the trustees decided against the proposal and the original bequest reverted to the Leven estate. A new scheme was initiated, involving the addition of a chapel to St Giles. This suggestion received the support of the young Lord Leven and his brothers and was duly accepted by the Kirk Session, and in 1909 Robert Lorimer was appointed as the architect. Essentially, the chapel was to provide a permanent meeting place, where investitures into the Order could take place and where the Knights' banners could be hung. Lorimer's design for the chapel was based on medieval themes, and its realization brought together the skills of a variety of Scottish craftsmen such as W & A Clow, carvers of the choir stalls, Douglas Strachan and Louis Davies, stained-glass makers, and Thomas Hadden. The gates and screens which were constructed for the entrance into the chapel mirror the overall Gothic style. High pointed arches rise from a 'portcullis' of iron and the whole is surmounted by an arch containing a profusion of flowers, probably wild roses, with berries and robins. Hadden's also produced the metal 'medieval helms' which surmount the Knights' Stalls



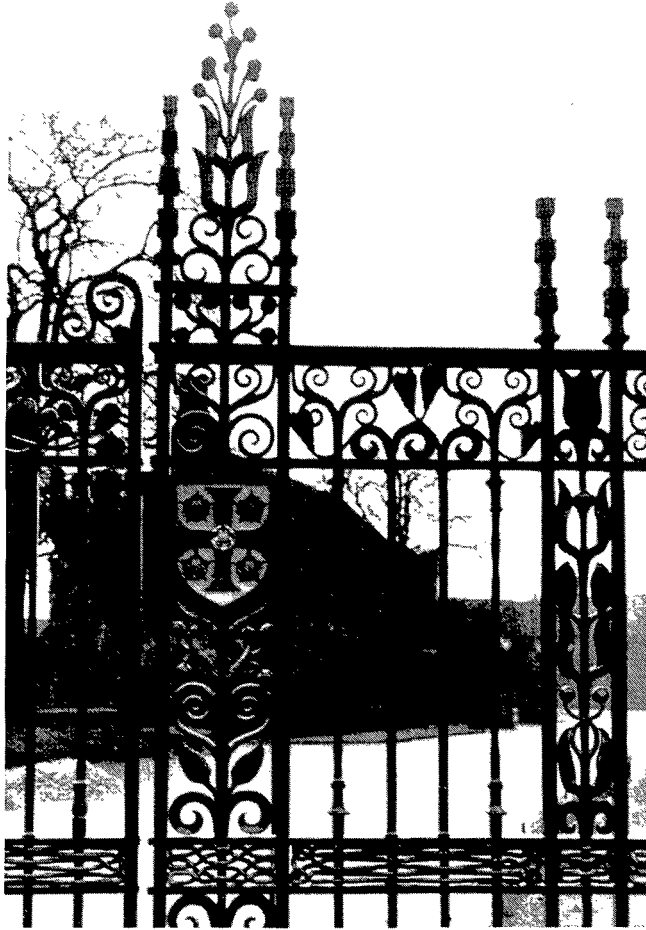
ILLUS 2 Steel Casket, Scottish National War Memorial, Edinburgh Castle, c 1926 (Copyright National Museums of Scotland)

(illus 1). The completion of the chapel in 1911 not only established Robert Lorimer as one of the foremost architects in Scotland but resulted also in the conferment of a knighthood in recognition of his work.

The proposal for a Scottish National War Memorial in Edinburgh was considered as early as 1917, when it was agreed, after rejecting sites at both Chambers Street and at Calton Hill, later to become St Andrew's House, that the only suitable location was on the Castle Rock itself. The scheme was not without its problems and Sir Robert Lorimer, who had been appointed architect, eventually submitted three separate proposals before the final outline was accepted and work started. When the Memorial was finally completed in 1927, it was widely praised. The centre-piece is a steel casket containing rolls of honour inscribed with the names of all the Scottish servicemen who died in the First World War. The casket was executed by Thomas Hadden, while the detailed figures of the angels bearing shields and St Margaret and St Andrew were modelled by Alice Meredith Williams (illus 2). In correspondence cited by Christopher Hussey, Lorimer illustrates the great attention taken in the construction of the casket:

Altogether I must have made 20 or 30 visits to Hadden's workshop in all. It was trial and error all the time, but the result is that I think you get a thing that looks 'smith made' in the end. Of course you can only work in this way with men you have worked with for years (Hussey 1931, 108).

Sir Robert Lorimer's death, some two years after the completion of the Scottish National War Memorial project, brought to an end this fruitful collaboration, a partnership which had spanned nearly 30 years.



ILLUS 3 Railings at Carlisle Cathedral, showing 'Traquair' lily, c 1930 (Copyright National Museums of Scotland)

Although Hadden's skills as a craftsman undeniably benefited from and were encouraged by his association with Lorimer, he also worked extensively with other architects and clients who were attracted to the firm by its workmanship and continuing development of traditional Scottish forms (illus 3).

In 1910, Hadden's exhibited in the Arts & Crafts Society Exhibition in London, receiving a favourable reception. A newspaper cutting in the Hadden papers, unfortunately unascrbed, illustrates the point:

Three exhibits by Thomas Hadden, Edinburgh, whose work is a prominent feature of the Thistle Chapel, are not only highly recommended for their originality and design, but for the clever craftsmanship they display in their execution (Hadden Papers, cuttings, box 1).

Such favourable reviews attracted commissions from men such as Lord Carmichael and Hadden's undertook extensive work at his home at Skirling in Peeblesshire. Lord Carmichael was greatly inspired by the ironwork at Traquair House near Innerleithen, and he commissioned Hadden to virtually plant a wrought-iron garden round his house. What began as an interest in ironwork, however, soon became a passion and the garden at Skirling overflowed

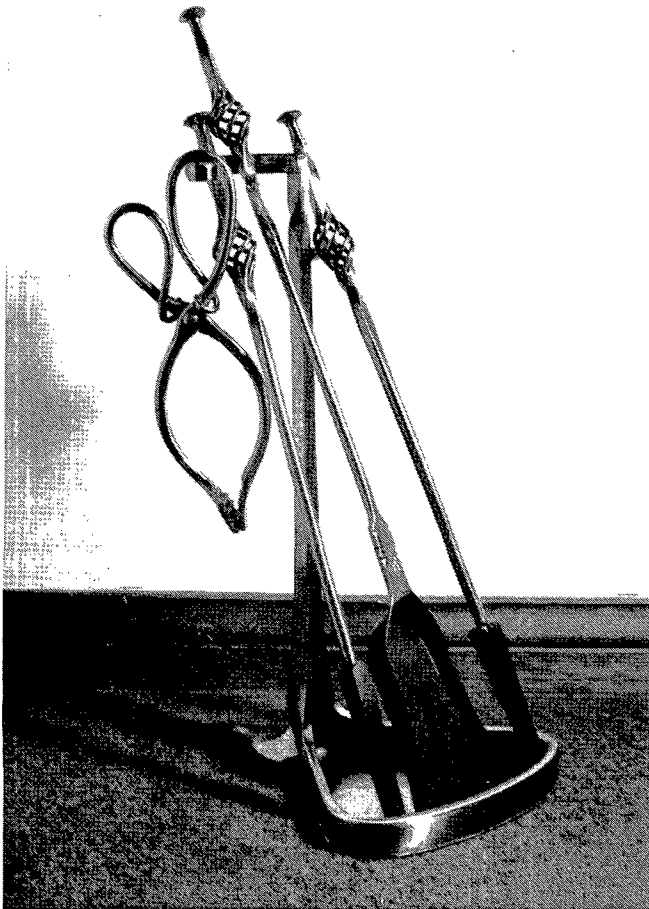


ILLUS 4 'Devil atop the World' weathervane. Skirling, Peeblesshire. (Copyright National Museums of Scotland)

with decorative ironwork. Rabbit, pig and dog-shaped footscrapers were put in place and stands for rambler roses and sweet pea trainers were topped with wrought-iron irises, lilies and tulips. The most intricate piece, however, was the 'Devil atop the World' weathervane (illus 4).

In the years leading up to the Second World War, Hadden's continued to secure important commissions, working on cathedrals, castles, mansions and public buildings throughout Britain. They worked under the direction of many of the leading architects and artists of the day, including H Jefferson Barnes, Pilkington Jackson and Leslie Grahame Thomson. In addition to these larger, 'prestigious' commissions the firm also undertook a variety of smaller orders, the 'bread and butter' of the business, producing fire-irons, well-head covers, lanterns and light-fittings (illus 5). A ledger which contains entries of work completed from c 1917 to 1930, details the completion of new cages and enclosures for Edinburgh Zoo and itemizes orders from the Glasgow firm of Messrs J & A Morlands for large quantities of horseshoes (Hadden Papers, Ledger no 1, 1917-30).

The 1930s and 1940s was a period of change within the firm. In 1927, Thomas Hadden's nephew, Robert, joined the business which had also moved to larger premises at Roseburn Street, Murrayfield (illus 6). In 1940 Thomas Hadden, who had been in semi-retirement, died and his nephew took over, retaining both the name and the style and quality of work



ILLUS 5 Fire-irons, c 1920 (Copyright National Museums of Scotland)

established by his uncle. During the Second World War many of Hadden's smiths adapted their skills to shipbuilding, working at Henry Robb's yard in Leith. When the War ended, however, commissions again began to be placed for decorative ironwork, including many memorials for those who had been killed. There was a particular emphasis on commemorative gates and a fine example can be seen in the Royal High School playing-field gates at Jock's Lodge, Edinburgh.

Perhaps the best known of Hadden's later commissions are the commemorative gates at Glasgow University. The gates, which celebrated the quincentenary of the University in 1952, were financed by donations from graduates world-wide. The design of the gates symbolizes a tree and its growth over the preceding five centuries. Each panel, or 'fruit of the tree', bears the name of an eminent Professor or graduate of the University (illus 7).

In 1959, a pair of memorial gates were commissioned by George Heriot's School in Edinburgh for their tercentenary celebrations. The designer of the gates, J Eversden Henderson, in a report on their design and execution, commented on the regard in which the firm was held by artists and architects:

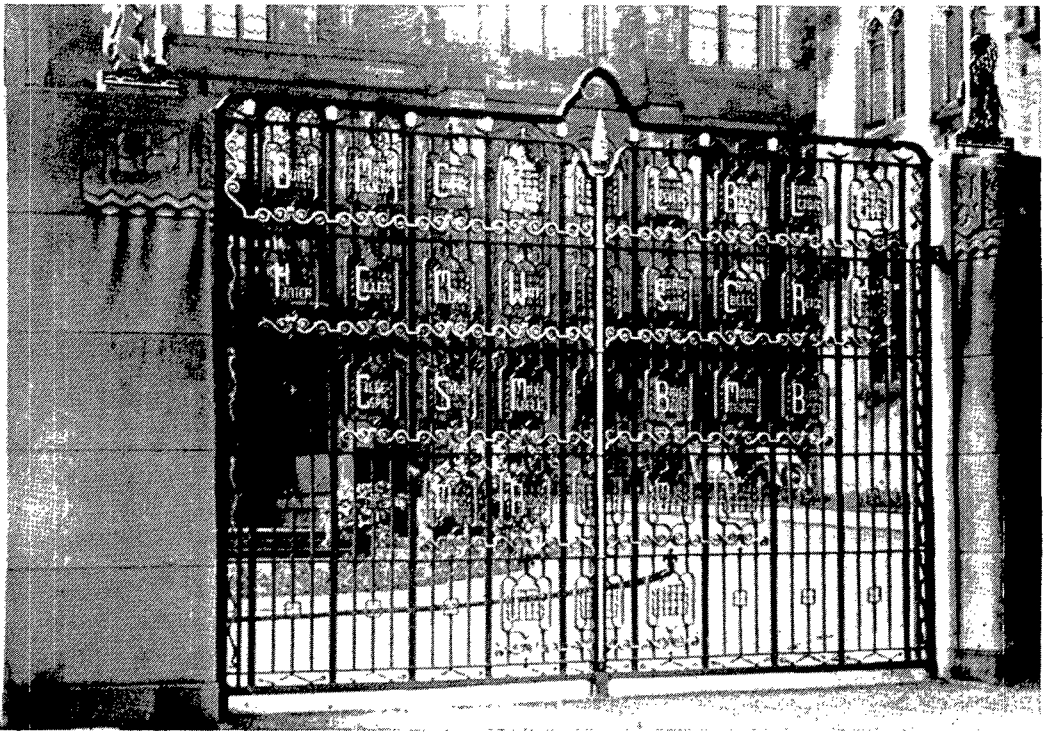


ILLUS 6 Hadden's workshop, Roseburn Street, Edinburgh (Copyright National Museums of Scotland)

With the design adopted it was considered that two or three firms in Scotland could do it justice. Messrs Thomas Hadden of Edinburgh, the firm selected to carry out the work, has a long family tradition for fine craftsmanship. . . . The tradition of fine hand-wrot work is still in force under the present direction of Mr Robert Hadden, the nephew of the founder of the firm. It embraces the staff too, as the three craftsmen principally responsible for the different parts of the gate have been there for more years than they care to remember. . . . I have enjoyed meeting craftsmen who personally identify themselves with their work (Hadden Papers, Lecture notes of J Eversden Henderson).

The variety of work undertaken over the years required a large, skilled and dedicated workforce. The men had to execute the designs required of them both by the architects and designers and by Hadden himself. Often, particularly when working with Sir Robert Lorimer, Hadden was presented only with a sketch which had then to be interpreted and worked up to a scale design. The company employed between 25 and 30 smiths on the Thistle Chapel project in 1911. The men working on a commission were divided into two squads, the fitters who worked at the bench and were good handworkers, known as cold work, and the firesmiths who worked at the forge, understandably known as hot work. Extra hammermen were often also taken on for anvil work which was a semi-skilled job.

Many of the smiths remained with the firm throughout their working lives. For example,



ILLUS 7 Glasgow University Quincentenary Gates, c 1952 (Copyright National Museums of Scotland)

David Weston, who started as an apprentice in 1906 aged 14, remained with Hadden's until his retirement some 50 years later (illus 8). Likewise others who trained with the firm left to take up jobs not only throughout Britain but also overseas. The variety of skills demanded of the men required them to be very adaptable. Ironically, their ability to adapt to changing circumstances contributed in part to the gradual decline of the craft. After the Second World War, many decorative ironworkers increasingly found better-paid metalworking jobs in industry. Coupled with this was the increasing unavailability of such a basic requirement as the correct type of coal – a coal producing intense inward heat, known as smithy nuts. Changing architectural styles also had their effect with the move towards functionalism in form. A combination of factors therefore hastened the decline of the specialist metalworker and the firm of Thomas Hadden ceased production in 1975.

Looking in general at the wrought ironwork produced by the men at Hadden's over the 70 years of the firm's existence, the lasting impression is of a lightness of design coupled with great technical ability, linked to a strong dependence on natural forms. The botanical motifs – lilies, thistles, vines and berries – and the sturdiness of structure closely link Hadden's to the old Scottish traditions of wrought ironwork which can still be seen *in situ* at Traquair House, Innerleithen, and Gogar House near Edinburgh. Commissions undertaken by the firm encompassed a variety of projects, from the restoration of castles and country houses to the smaller-scale domestic commissions of garden gates and window grilles. Indeed, examples of the skills and ingenuity of Thomas and his nephew Robert Hadden, and the men they employed, can be seen today throughout Britain, from Lympe Castle, Kent, to Dunrobin Castle, Sutherland.



ILLUS 8 David Weston at the anvil (Copyright National Museums of Scotland)

POSTSCRIPT

Since this paper was first conceived and written Mr Robert Hadden has died. I would like to take the opportunity of thanking Mrs Hadden for the help and kindness both she and her husband showed to me during my research into the firm and for the hospitality which they extended both to myself and to my colleagues at the National Museums of Scotland. I hope this paper goes some way towards encouraging renewed interest in wrought ironworking and perhaps, to some extent, redresses the balance on behalf of the craftsman.

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