

Trade incorporation ceremonial chairs

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines in detail a number of 18th- and early 19th-century ceremonial chairs in the context of the material culture and social position of the trade incorporation in the Scottish town.

The golden age for Scotland's trade incorporations was the period before 1700 yet the trades, or craft guilds, continued to regulate trade matters well into the 18th century and even when they lost these privileges under an Act of 1846 and ceased to exercise meaningful authority in either civic life or trade, they remained important landowners and charitable institutions. It was common for each trade in a large burgh to have, among other movable property, a Deacon's chair which was a physical symbol of the authority, permanency and, by the 18th century, gentility of the organization.

Groups of tradesmen analogous to the existing merchant guilds began to obtain charters in the 15th century and became junior partners in the system of urban government. The councillors who elected a town's bailies were drawn in most cases by 1600 from the merchant guild and the several trade incorporations. The main purpose of these organizations, however, was to regulate trade and provide support for members at times of need. The restrictive practices indulged in by the masters of a trade through its incorporation included the fixing of wage rates and prices and the regulation of entry into the workforce. Those who attempted to undercut a fixed price were fined, as were those who took on more apprentices than was allowed. The incorporations also examined apprentices in their work. Outsiders who attempted to trade or manufacture within the incorporations' jurisdiction were prosecuted. Fines were also paid on starting and finishing an apprenticeship, on marriage and death, and for producing poor-quality goods or mistreating an apprentice. The few journeymen who became masters paid large freedom fines. Of course, evasion and outright disregard were common and the system failed to cope with market movements even before the acceleration of industrial production and the building of factories outwith the burghs in the late 18th century (Smout 1969, 160–6; Smith 1995, 26–38).

As Smout (1969, 163) notes, however, the trades were ultimately most concerned with defence 'against the horrors of pauperism'. Common funds were available for the sick, the aged and those who lost tools, wares and workshop in a fire. A decent funeral was assured, for masters at least, and orphans might be educated and taken into apprenticeship. Benefits did not necessarily flow freely but a degree of collective security was pursued. Journeymen, at least nominally, were members of the incorporations, but did not participate in decision-making, and their claim on charitable benefits might vary. The trade incorporations' prime 'enemy' in the later Middle Ages had been the merchant class. During the Early Modern period the enemy became

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the outsider who attempted to infringe on the freedom of the craft, but throughout the 18th century the journeyman gradually took his place. Relations between the two groups worsened and journeymen formed organizations of their own, at first to provide benefits in time of need and ultimately to organize strikes and political action (Logue 1979, 155–64).

Civic ritual and display were once important elements of urban life and the trades often took part. Publicly visible artefacts included the heraldic devices which decorated trades' pews and lofts in churches, or the banners which trade incorporations carried through the streets during civic processions. Several fine examples of the latter can be seen in St Andrew's church, Dundee, while an example of the former, from the collegiate church of St Nicholas, Dalkeith, is shown in *illus 1*. When the church was remodelled in 1851, nine such lofts were taken down (Ferguson 1992, 24–5). The chairs which are discussed here were confined to trades' halls and formed part of the internal ceremonial life of each craft. Not every incorporation had its own hall but it might rent that of another trade or meet in a hall built by the convenery of all trades. The Deacon's chair was the focal point of any hall, perhaps surrounded by other monuments to the authority and wealth of the incorporation. Among these the most important item would have been the trades' boxes in which their funds were kept. These were potentially the most important items of all and would be given two or more locks with each key held by a different keykeeper to ensure that the box could be opened only in the presence of witnesses. Most were also decorated with mottoes or emblems as in *illus 2*, a typical early 18th-century example, and the term Boxmaster became a common alternative title for the Treasurer.

Few of the interiors in which Deacons' chairs were used can still be seen or were recorded graphically. They certainly varied with the wealth of the community. The Glasgow Trades House occupied an entirely different social and cultural world from the cramped conditions of the Old Aberdeen Town House, meeting place of the Old Aberdeen incorporations. The trades of small burghs such as Burntisland have left behind only church furniture while the journeymen's societies which sprung up during the 18th century have left almost no trace of their existence (Hay 1956, 52; King 1987, 13).

Any discussion of the Scottish trade incorporation Deacon's chair will inevitably begin with the 20 examples at Trinity Hall, Aberdeen. These have been published previously (Learmont 1978) and, therefore, I shall not dwell on them. The earliest dates from the mid-16th century but the majority, with carved inscriptions commemorating their donation by Deacon Conveners, were made between 1620 and 1690. The commemorative nature of the chairs is further evidenced by the appearance of family coats of arms upon 11 of them. This pattern of donation was probably unusual, however. Most are also decorated with appropriate tools (although only three bear the arms or pseudo-arms of a trade) and are of *caqueteuse* form, that is, tall backed with an exaggerated trapezoidal seat and arms which curve round to enclose the sitter. The *caqueteuse* form was the choice in many parts of eastern Scotland for ceremonial chairs before the advent of the furniture pattern book in the 1740s: examples include a chair from St Monans Council Chamber dated 1618 and the Falkirk Stentmaster's chair of 1687 (Macbeth 1991, 71; Jones 1987, cat 3).

The Incorporated Trades of Aberdeen appear not to have added to this group thereafter but those of Old Aberdeen, which met in the Old Town House there, acquired a number of chairs during the 18th century, seven of which survive, including three pairs. One pair, extremely plain with the exception of the carved cartouche, bear the arms of the Convener Court: two hands, one clutching a single broken arrow and the other a bundle of arrows, representing the phrase 'unity is strength' (*illus 3*; all width and depth measurements are taken at seat rail level). Several stylistic elements are juxtaposed: the shape of the top rail strikes a claim for gentility while the curving



ILLUS 1 Incorporation of Hammermen's church loft panel, Dalkeith, second half of 18th century. ?Oak; H: 770 mm, W: 830 mm. (Trustees of the National Museums of Scotland (Accession KL5))



ILLUS 2 Box, Incorporation of Bonnetmakers of Glasgow, first half of 18th century. ?Mahogany with painted decoration; H: 462 mm, W: 746 mm, D: 467 mm. Inscription: *CONCORDIA CORROBORAT* [Unity Strengthens]. (Incorporation of Bonnetmakers & Dyers of Glasgow)

arms appear to hark back to the *caqueteuse* style. The rococo cartouche, however, would seem to date the chair firmly to the 1750s or 1760s. Four of the remaining chairs are inlaid with trade emblems: those of the Wrights and Coopers (compasses, square and adze) and those of the Tailors (illus 4, scissors and smoothing iron). In 1899 the Boxmaster of the Hammermen removed from the Old Town House two chairs similar to the Tailors' chair but with an inlaid hammer and the date 1740 (Anon 1899). The remaining chair, still in the Old Town House, is similar to those of the Convener Court and bears the initials *GSP* and the date 1772, presumably a commemorative inscription. It is immediately noticeable that, as at New Aberdeen, a similar style was adhered to over a prolonged period. This was a period in which Old Aberdeen was declining in relation to its larger neighbour to the south. The economy of the cathedral city, actually a burgh of barony, was dominated by the incorporations, however. There was no international merchant class and no unregulated textile industry, as in New Aberdeen, and the trades played a significant role in local politics (Tyson 1991, 52).

Perth was another city in which wealthy trade incorporations exerted an influence well into the 18th century. In contrast to the situation in Aberdeen, the trades did not all meet in one place and consequently each of the three surviving Deacons' chairs differs in appearance. One, thought to be that of the Tailors' Deacon, is a late 17th-century walnut, high, cane-backed armchair with boldly carved scrolls and crowns but no trade emblems of any kind. The Shoemakers' Deacon's chair (illus 5), is an example of a vernacular form known as 'brander-back'. The arms of the Shoemakers — a crown and shoemaker's knife upon a saltire cross — are carved in the centre of the back. It would appear to date from the late 18th century or very early 19th century. Finally, the Deacon's chair of the Wrights' Incorporation (illus 6), commissioned in 1748 from William Lindsay,¹ a former Deacon, is exceptional in having been made by a chairmaker, trained in carving the basic components of his work, rather than by a wright, working in the Scottish tradition of jointed construction. Veneered in mahogany, the Wrights' Deacon's chair displays no vernacular characteristics although it would have been rather conservative in style by 1748. This may be accounted for, however, by its resemblance to an earlier chair made for the Freemasons of Perth. The stonemasons were junior partners in the Wrights' Incorporation and Lodge Scoon & Perth No 3 met at the Wrights' Hall in the Watergate. In 1739 the Master of the Lodge became Deacon of the Incorporation and the Lodge commissioned a chair to be placed in the Wrights' Hall (Smith 1898, 96). It still survives and both chairs incorporate a peculiar superstructure above the splat. Clearly the one was modelled on the other and the two sat side by side until the Lodge acquired premises of its own in 1831. This is an example of the close relationship which existed between the material culture of the trades and early freemasonry (Stevenson 1988a, 76–7).

The Wrights also appear to have used a tall stool (illus 7) for head-washing apprentices. Head-washing was a brothering ritual, usually administered informally by the peer group. It involved the humiliation and assimilation of the newcomer in a pastiche of baptism together with general drinking. The beer or whisky was paid for by the employer, as a perquisite to his workmen, and the ritual usually took place at the start of an apprenticeship. By the early 19th century such rituals still took place, but occurred at the completion of apprenticeship and the apprentice bought the drink as a form of payment for the tuition he had been given by the journeymen (Stevenson 1988b, 158–9; Sparkes 1995, 45). Most crafts had such rituals and some lived on into the 20th century.

Turning to Edinburgh, there still exist three early 18th-century trades' chairs, very similar in style, made for the Hammermen (illus 8), Fleshers (illus 9) and Bonnetmakers. The first two bear the date 1708 and each has a carved crest representative of its craft: a crown and hammer supported by two cherubs (Hammermen); bulls' heads and axes supported by two oxen

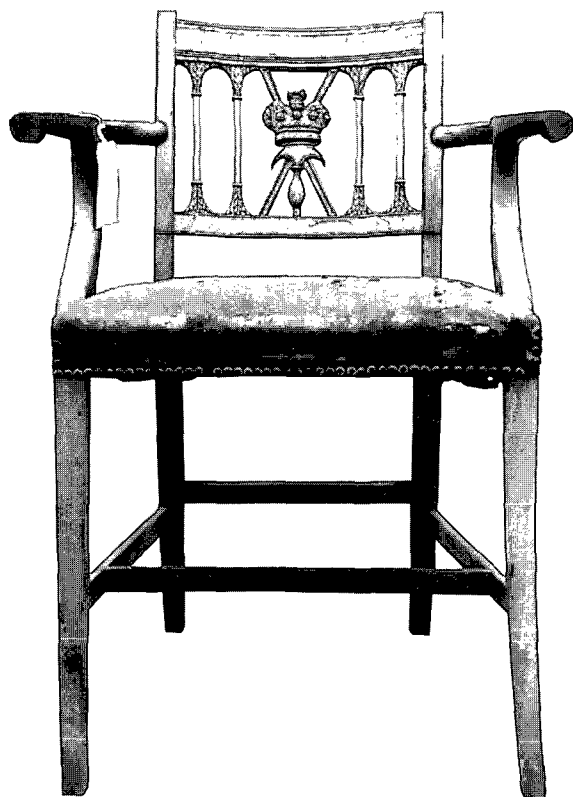


ILLUS 3 Deacon Convener's chair, Incorporated Trades of Old Aberdeen, c 1760. One of a pair. Oak; H: 1040 mm, W: 580 mm, D: 480 mm. (City of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Collections; photo by Peter Adamson)



ILLUS 4 Deacon's chair, Incorporation of Tailors of Old Aberdeen, mid-18th century. One of a pair. Oak; H: 1055 mm, W: 475 mm, D: 390 mm. (City of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Collections; photo by Peter Adamson)

(Fleshers); and a hat and scissors (Bonnetmakers). The text carved on the Fleshers' chair, *OMNIA SUBIECISTI SUB PEDIBUS OVES & BOVES*, comes from Psalm 8: 'you have put all things in subjection under his feet: [all] flocks and herds'. The rococo scrollwork at the very top of the Hammermen's chair is an addition, but for the remainder there is documentary evidence of its manufacture by the wright Thomas Heron. Aggregated accounts for the period September 1707 to September 1708 include Scots £108 for work done by Heron, and the minutes of the Incorporation also record the decision to commission the new chair.² A 20th-century copy of a bill from Heron dated 3 May 1708 and itemizing the expenses involved in making the chair exists at the Magdalen Chapel, Cowgate, but the original, unfortunately, is not among the records of the Incorporation kept at the Edinburgh City Archive. The copy reads as in Table 1.



ILLUS 5 Deacon's chair, Incorporation of Shoemakers of Perth late 18th or early 19th century. Elm or sycamore; H: 1090 mm, W: 640 mm, D: 500 mm. (*Perth Museum & Art Gallery*)



ILLUS 6 Deacon's chair, Incorporation of Wrights of Perth, 1748. Beech & mahogany; H: 1295, W: 675 mm, D: 545 mm. (*Perth Museum & Art Gallery*)

TABLE 1

Bill itemizing expenses for making Deacon's chair,
Incorporation of Hammermen of Edinburgh

Item	Scots £24
for the Deacon's Chair	
for a footstool for do.	12
for Russian leather for do.	5 8
for 6 ells of dippor web	15
for an ell of tyking	8
for 200 takets	16
for a pasband and skin to the outside back	10
for hay and workmanship	1 4

Scots £33 13

No footstool survives and no mention is made of painting, although test-patch cleaning has uncovered paint on various parts of the carving under the thick black varnish layer which presently covers the chair. It is unclear as yet whether this paint is original, was added in the 1720s when other parts of the chapel were repainted, or dates from the 1750s or 1760s when the

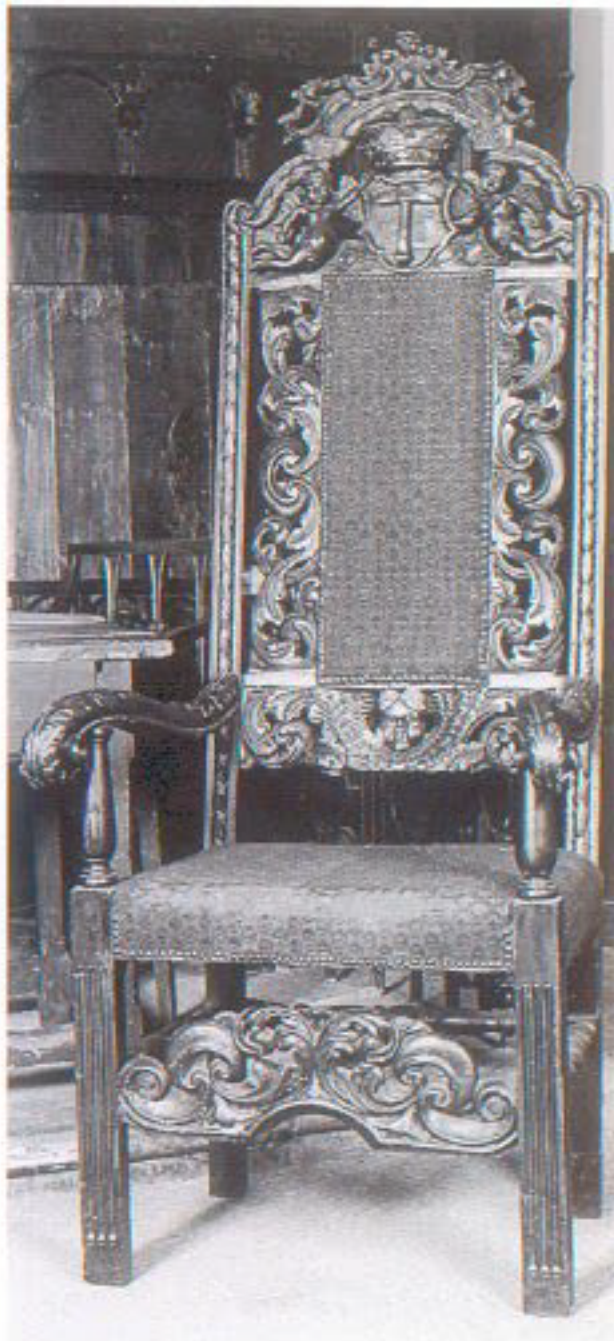


ILLUS 7 Stool, Incorporation of Wrights, Perth, 18th century. Elm; H: 690 mm, W: 560 mm, D: 560 mm. (Perth Museum and Art Gallery)

scrollwork was most probably added to the top.³ Other parts of the bill can be explained as follows. The Scots ell was 37 in (945 mm) in length; six ells, therefore, represent 5.67 m. *Dippor web* was probably linen webbing to go under the seat and *tyking* a tightly woven cotton or linen fabric. *Takets* are simply tacks and the *pasband* probably a flax or jute material used underneath the outer layer of leather. The 'Russian' leather used at the front was a plain-surfaced, high-quality leather. Workmanship on the frame, including the carving, would be included in the basic item of £24.

The Magdalen Chapel in which the Hammermen's chair still stands is a rare survival. The chapel and adjoining almshouse were built in the early 16th century by Michael Macquhen and placed under the patronage of the Hammermen on his widow's death in 1553. Most of the interior dates from the period 1614–17 (Ross & Brown 1916, 2). The Deacon's chair is placed on a raised platform behind a semicircular screen painted with the arms of the eight metalworking trades which made up the Incorporation. The walls are lined with panels recording benefactions, the windows contain pre-Reformation heraldic stained glass and the original ceiling was also painted. Not least, there is wrought ironwork employing the hammer and crown motif. This would clearly have been a very ceremonious setting for any business which required the presence of ordinary journeymen and apprentices. Such display also reinforced the masters' claim to be among the better sort of people in the city.

A further example of a Deacon's chair with a carved crest is that of the Easter Portsburgh Tailors' Incorporation (illus 10). A pair of scissors is supported by cherubs. Very little of this chair dates from the 18th century, however, just the crest and back. The rest, comprising the seat, front legs, three of the four rails and the acanthus wings attached to the back, were probably made between 1830 and 1860. Easter Portsburgh, also known as Potterrow, was situated on the south-eastern outskirts of Edinburgh. It was one half of a burgh of barony, the other part of



ILLUS 8 (left) Deacon's chair, Incorporation of Hammermen of Edinburgh, 1708. ?Walnut with traces of painted decoration; H: 1875 mm, W: 705 mm, D: 515 mm. (*The Scottish Reformation Society; photo by Peter Adamson*)

ILLUS 9 (above) Deacon's chair, Incorporation of Fleshers of Edinburgh, 1708. Oak with modern painted decoration; Detail of carved crest; W: 710 mm. (*Incorporated Trades of Edinburgh*)

which, Wester Portsburgh, lay to the south-west of the city. There were only two incorporations in Easter Portsburgh, the tailors and the cordiners, each with its own convening hall. The Tailors' hall was built in 1673 and demolished in the late 19th century (Smith 1938, 64). One antiquarian source asserts that the Tailor's chair was used by the Easter Portsburgh bailies during the day and by the Incorporation during the evening (Dunlop 1890, 113). This is plausible since the Court House of Wester Portsburgh was also home to the incorporated trades there as was the Old Aberdeen Town House to the Trades of Old Aberdeen (Geddie 1909, 124).

A markedly different treatment was given to the chair belonging to the Deacon of Edinburgh's United Incorporation of Wrights & Masons (illus 11). This is a difficult item to date and the laconic minutes and aggregated accounts of the Incorporation offer no clues. The only references to a Deacon's chair occur in connection with renovation work on the United Incorporation's hall, Mary's Chapel, in Niddry Wynd, during 1794–5. Four separate firms or craftsmen were involved but the accounts appear to relate to either joinery work surrounding the Deacon's chair or simple bench seating.⁴ The earliest surviving minute book begins in 1755, however, and it is possible that the chair was made sometime in the two preceding decades. An



ILLUS 10 Deacon's chair, Incorporation of Tailors of Easter Portsburgh, 18th century with extensive 19th-century repairs. Pine, mahogany & gesso with traces of painted decoration, H: 1620 mm, W: 800 mm, D: 495 mm. (*Edinburgh City Museums & Art Galleries*)



ILLUS 11 Deacon's chair, United Incorporation of Wrights & Masons of Edinburgh, 18th century. Beech with painted decoration; H: 1675 mm, W: 635 mm, D: 500 mm. (*Incorporated Trades of Edinburgh*)

immediate comparison is suggested with certain English masonic chairs (Hewitt 1967, 137). It is tempting to think that the same chair was used by Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary's Chapel) No 1, which also met there. Yet the painted decoration, which includes the arms of both wrights and masons, suggests that the chair was used primarily for ordinary Incorporation business.

The changing nature of trade incorporations by the early 19th century is reflected in two sets of seat furniture made for the committee rooms of the Goldsmiths and the Wrights & Masons in Edinburgh. Incorporations which were not moribund were, by 1800, largely concerned with the administration of property together with local politics. This necessitated a small yet formal

boardroom in place of a large ceremonial hall. In 1809 the Incorporation of Goldsmiths of Edinburgh moved to new premises on the South Bridge. A Mr Braidwood was paid £201 10s for furniture which probably included a new Deacon's chair, a smaller but otherwise identical chair for the Clerk, and 20 tablet-back side chairs.⁵ 'Mr Braidwood' was probably Francis Braidwood of Adam Square rather than his father, a partner in the firm of Braidwood & Bruce which is not heard of after 1805 (Bamford 1983, 45). The chairs depart radically from most previous designs in not featuring any trade emblems; they simply follow the prevailing fashionable style, derived from the pattern books of Thomas Sheraton and George Smith. The Deacon's chair is depicted in a contemporary portrait (1817) of Deacon Francis Howden, now displayed in Goldsmiths' Hall.

The Goldsmiths never had a large membership, however, and the changes at Mary's Chapel would have been more noticeable. In 1815 the Wrights & Masons commissioned equally fashionable chairs for each of their Deacons from Deacon James Brown, paying £29 2s 3d; Francis Allen was paid £28 14s 3d for chairs and a table; Archibald Bain £3 14s for six chairs.⁶

Imposing ceremonial grandeur could still be employed early in the 19th century. The Glasgow Trades had an impressive new hall designed by Robert Adam and built between 1791 and 1794 at a cost of over £8000. The Deacon Convener's chair in the Glasgow Trades House bears an inscription to the effect that it was made by Robertson Reid & Brother in 1819 after designs by the architect, and member of the Masons' Incorporation, David Hamilton (Colvin 1978, 449). The sheer scale and the uniquely ostentatious display of solid silver (even at the rear) are exceptional among ceremonial chairs in general; the inlaid plates of Glasgow University's Blackstone chair (1775) are brass, for example (Jackson 1995). Yet even though the trades, as a single body, maintained a strong presence in Glasgow, their character had changed as elsewhere.

In looking back over this selection of material the distinctions which are most apparent are those which reflect the regional status of each city. The large upholstered Edinburgh chairs contrast greatly with the smaller oak examples from Old Aberdeen. The latter were not unfashionable, but they were plain and retained vernacular elements, as did the Perth Shoemakers' chair. My choice of material has, of course, been determined largely by accidents of survival. The powerful trade incorporations of Glasgow and Dundee have left no Deacons' chairs from the 18th century and it is impossible today to know what form they took. These artefacts are of interest not only to the furniture historian, however: they remind us of the close cultural relationship between the trades and burgh government, as well as between the trades and freemasonry. The changing fortunes of the incorporations are evidenced through them and we are made aware of a conjunction of traditional ceremonial behaviour with the expression of gentility through 'genteel' furniture.

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NOTES

- 1 Incorporation of Wrights' minute book, entry for 30 Sept. 1748, Perth Museum & Art Gallery. I am grateful to Ware Petznick, University of St Andrews, for this information.
- 2 Incorporation of Hammermen's minute book 1701–33, 61v & 71r, Edinburgh City Archives, ED008/1/5. Documents relating to the Incorporation of Fleshers at Edinburgh City Archives unfortunately do not cover this period while I am unaware of any surviving records created by the Bonnetmakers.
- 3 Test cleans undertaken by John Currie, Historic Scotland, 1992. I am grateful to Nicola Christie, National Galleries of Scotland, for this information.
- 4 United Incorporation account book 1793–1808, 3 Dec. 1794 & 12 Sept. 1795, National Library of Scotland, Deposit 302/22; Loose vouchers, 1794, National Library of Scotland, Accession 8617, bundle 17.
- 5 Incorporation of Goldsmiths' account book, aggregated accounts for the period Martinmas 1809 to Martinmas 1810, Scottish Record Office, GD1/482/24.
- 6 United Incorporation account book 1808–19, 3 Jan., 16 Feb. & 15 March 1815, National Library of Scotland, Deposit 302/23.

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