

THE WHEELERS OF ARNCROACH: A FAMILY OF FURNITURE MAKERS IN FIFE

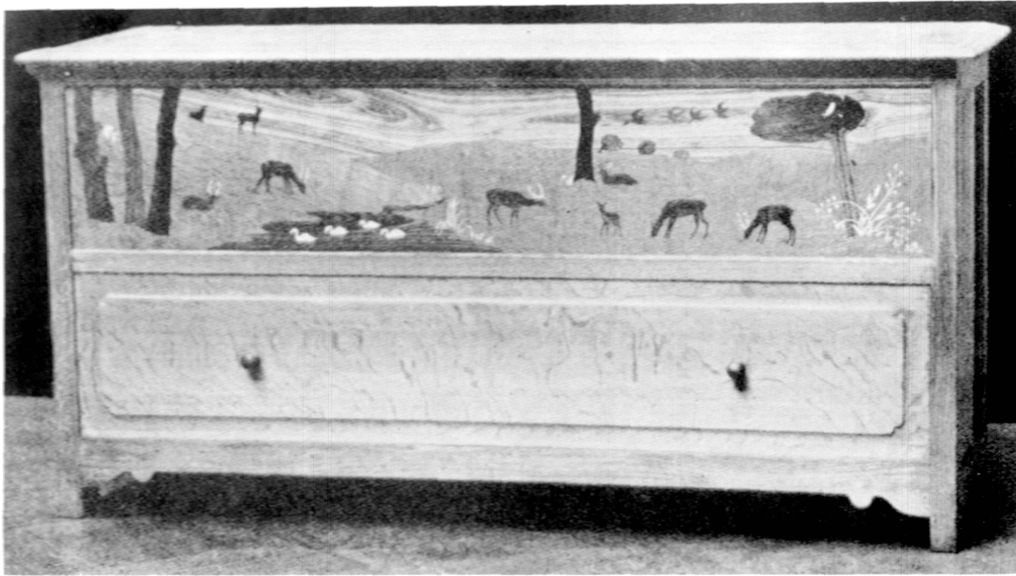
Lindsay Macbeth

In north-east Fife today, the name of William Wheeler is relatively familiar; there are examples of Wheeler furniture in churches, public buildings and private homes throughout the region, and there are still craftsmen living who worked with the Wheelers. Despite local lore, however, there has been little substantiated information on the three generations of Wheelers and their furniture-making trade in Arncroach, a small village in the East Neuk of Fife.

Research on the Wheelers is confused by the fact that father, son and grandson shared the same Christian name, William. Contemporary newspaper references tend to be tantalisingly oblique, and at times, not surprisingly, inaccurate. Yet a study of their activities is rewarding in that it yields an insight into the repertoire of a small, rural firm of furniture makers in Scotland, from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. Within this period continuity of styles can be identified, as well as regional characteristics. Like much nineteenth-century regional furniture in Scotland, the Wheelers' furniture was born out of the cabinet-making tradition. An interesting contrast thus could be drawn between their work, and that of regional furniture makers in England, working within craft traditions.

William Wheeler the elder was born in Kinghorn, Fife, in 1845 or 1846.¹ After serving an apprenticeship in Kirkford, Cowdenbeath, he went to Glasgow to work as a foreman. He returned to Fife, to Kirkcaldy, but within a year moved to Arncroach, around 1877.² He established himself first as a wheelwright and joiner. The 1881 Census Return for Arncroach, in the Parish of Carnbee, lists William Wheeler as a carpenter and master of two boys, married, with four children. He later branched into furniture making, and was by all accounts very successful, earning a reputation for well-made furniture, 'appreciated, and to the public taste',³ and establishing what his obituarist described as 'a world-wide connection'.⁴

Eulogistic, perhaps, but William Wheeler the elder did establish a very propitious connection with the architect and furniture designer Robert S. Lorimer (1864–1929). This association offers another source of information on Wheeler. The Lorimer family took up a lease of Kellie Castle near Arncroach, shortly after Wheeler settled in the village. Robert Lorimer's early furniture design was much informed by the Arts and Crafts Movement; it was appropriate then that he should have engaged local craftsmen such as Wheeler to execute his designs. During the 1890s in particular, Wheeler worked closely with Lorimer, making some of the furniture Lorimer submitted to the triennial Arts and Crafts Exhibitions in London.⁵ Typical was an oak chest with marquetry panel, exhibited at the New Gallery in 1896 (Fig. 1). Wheeler was named as the maker in the exhibition catalogue, though was not responsible for the landscape panel, which was probably the work of the Edinburgh firm, Whytock and Reid. The chest was illustrated in the *Studio* magazine, and Wheeler credited with the execution of 'a restrained and excellent piece of domestic furniture'.⁶



1. Linen chest, designed by Robert S. Lorimer, made by William Wheeler. Exhibited 1896, London. Illustrated in the *Studio*, 1896

The furniture made for exhibition was rather self-consciously vernacular. Other pieces for Lorimer were less deliberately naïve, and drew on Scottish sources. From 1900 Lorimer kept an album of photographs of selected sources and examples of his own designs.⁷ A 'brander-back chair' is illustrated (Fig. 2), and Wheeler's name pencilled beside it.⁸ According to Mr Alexander Mair, who was apprenticed in 1919 and worked as a craftsman for the second and third William Wheelers in Arncroach, this was a pattern frequently made in the workshop, and sold as a dining-room chair.

In a more historicist mode, William Wheeler made reproductions of a local so-called *caqueteuse* chair for the Balcarres Estate Office near Colinsburgh, Fife, a building designed by Lorimer in 1903 for the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres (Figs 3 and 4). The original chair dates from 1618 and is now owned by the East Neuk of Fife Preservation Society. It appears to have an uninterrupted provenance from St Monans, a small town on the East Neuk.

The prevalence of the *caqueteuse* type along the east coast of Scotland during the seventeenth century has been well documented.⁹ In keeping with turn-of-the-century revivalist sympathies, the *caqueteuse* seems to have provided a novel form for reproduction in Scotland. The Glasgow firm of Wylie and Lochhead illustrated their reproduction of a *caqueteuse* from Dunnottar Castle, in their 1900 catalogue (Scott Morton & Co. of Edinburgh also reproduced the type). Lorimer obviously thought the *caqueteuse* form appropriate for his estate office at Balcarres, which itself draws on elements of Scottish vernacular architecture.

The St Monans' *caqueteuse* was an enduring model for the Wheelers. After the elder William Wheeler died in 1913, his son carried on the business, essentially producing the same types and patterns. In turn, the second William Wheeler's son, William, joined the



2. Chair of 'brander-back' pattern, made by William Wheeler. Illustrated in album compiled by Sir Robert Lorimer, now belonging to Mr Stuart Matthew

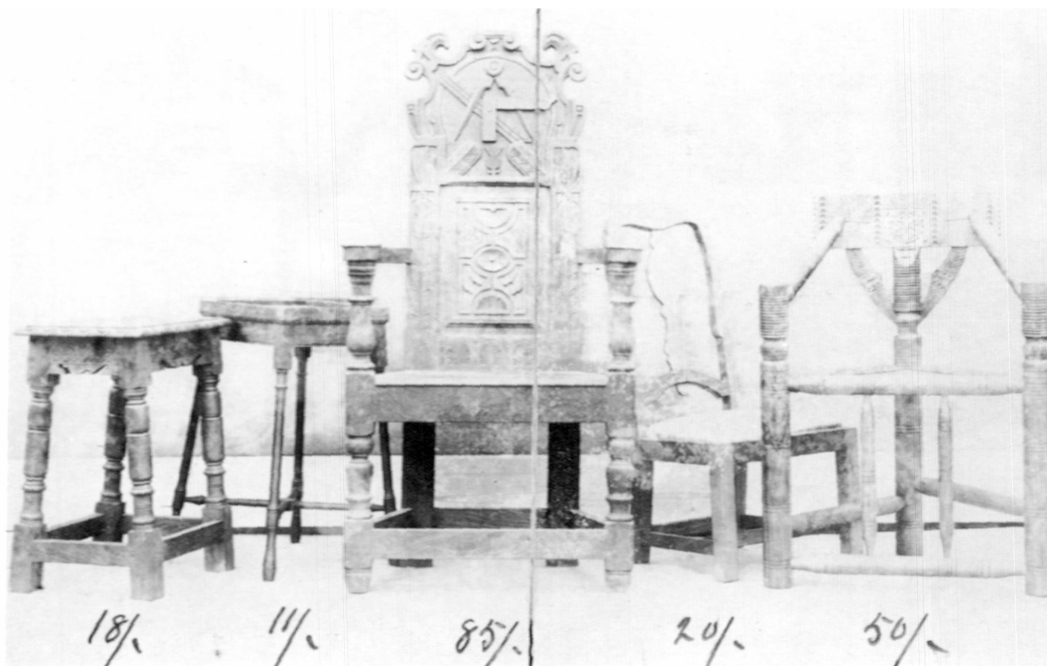
3. Chair of *caqueteuse* type, made by Wheeler workshop, 1904

Property of the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres

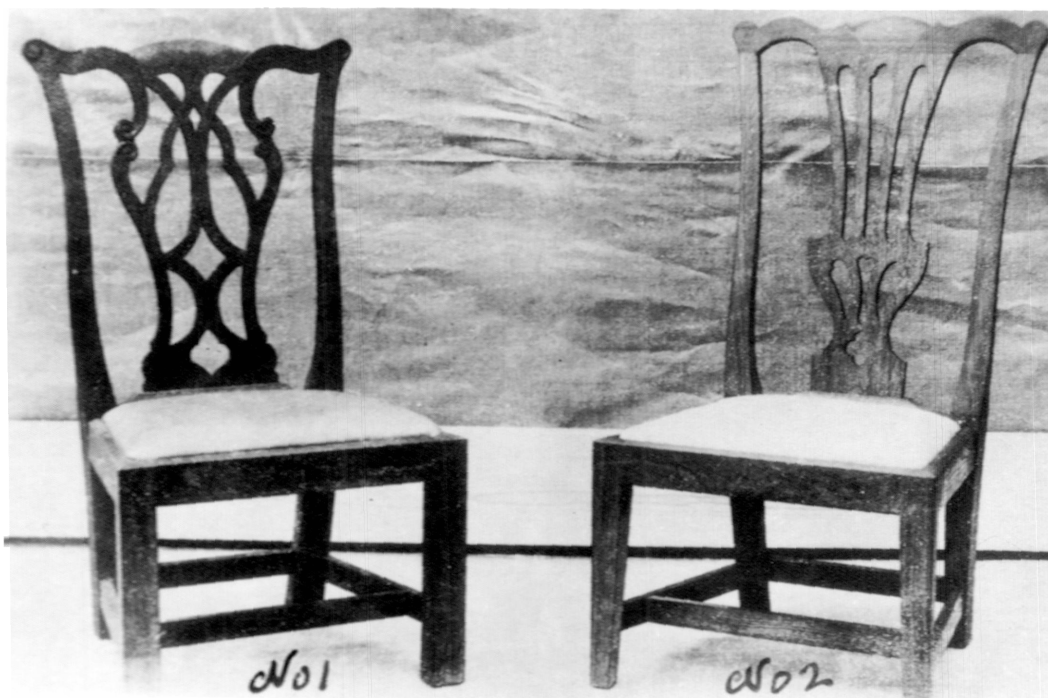
4. Chair of *caqueteuse* type, 1618

Property of the East Neuk of Fife Preservation Society. (Photograph: Peter Adamson)

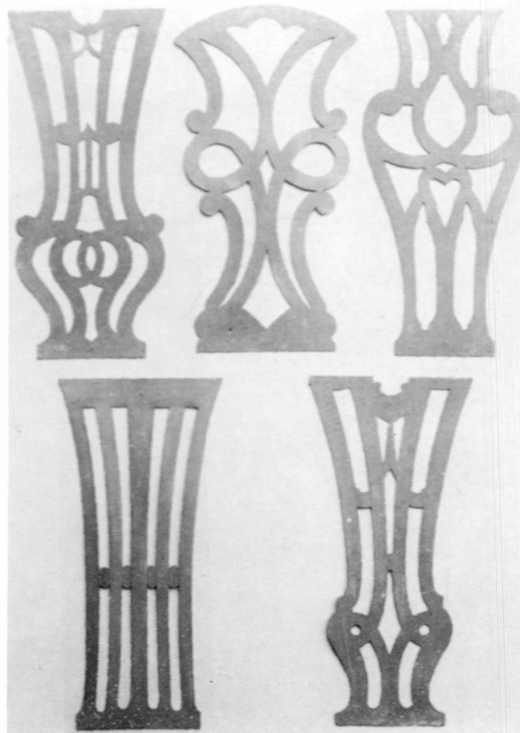




5. Composite photograph of Wheeler furniture
Dundee City Archives, East Brothers of Lochee Papers



6. 'Gossip chairs' made by Wheeler workshop
Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections



7. 'Warwick chair', made by Wheeler workshop
Kellie Castle, family collection. (Photograph: Peter Adamson)

8. Selection of back splats used by Wheeler workshop
Dundee City Archives, East Brothers of Lochee Papers

9. 'Clam-shell chair' made by Wheeler workshop
Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections



10. 'Bryson chair' made by Wheeler workshop
Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections



11. 'T chair' made by Wheeler workshop
Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections

business, carrying it on for a short time after his father died on 24 January 1960, aged 89.¹⁰ Alexander Mair has in his possession photographs of the workshop's reproductions of the St Monans' chair, dating from 1936.

An article in the *East of Fife Record* in 1897 on crafts in Arncroach seems to indicate the early popularity of these reproductions. Describing the breadth of Wheeler the elder's repertoire, the writer mentions:

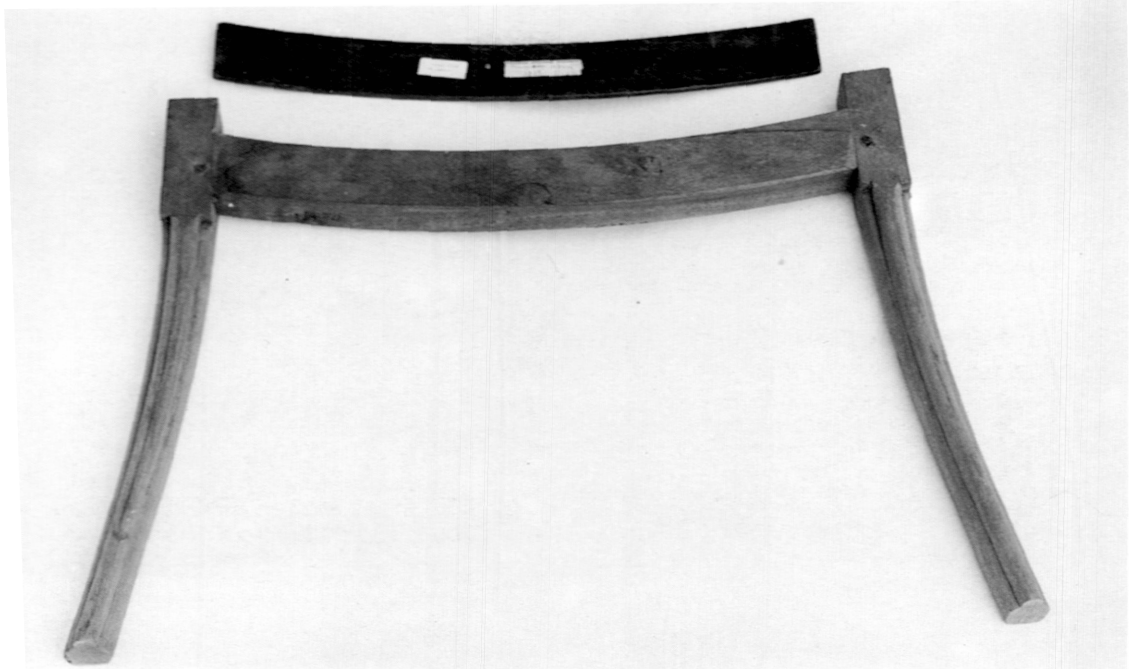
The pattern of the well-known St. Monans chair is in as great demand as ever. The original date of the chair was 1681, but Mr. Wheeler began to make it in 1891, which date he carves on the back panel. If turned upside down the original date appears, a rather curious coincidence.¹¹

The St Monans' chair the Wheelers were known to reproduce is dated 1618; it would seem rather too much of a curious coincidence to believe there were two different St Monans' chairs, since neither the 1681 chair nor its reproductions have been identified. The writer may simply have entangled himself in his own manipulations of figures.

In the same article a triangular seated three-legged chair made by the Wheelers is described:

The Warwick chair is perhaps greatest in demand, the design is supposed to be more than a thousand years old. The chair has three legs and has neatly carved mountings on the back.

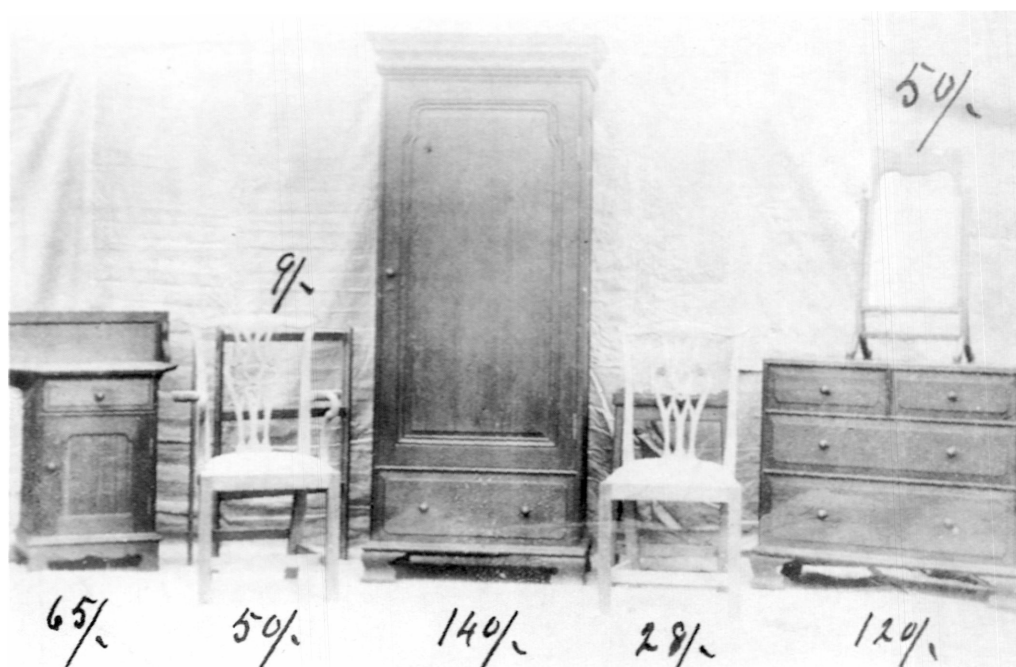
In his *Oak Furniture the British Tradition*, Victor Chinnery included a drawing of a three-legged armchair, of a type that was perhaps based on one at Leicester's Hospital,



12. Patterns for front legs and front seat rail of 'T chair'
Magnus Dunsire and Sons, Colinsburgh, Fife. (Photograph: Peter Adamson)



13. Patterns for back legs, top rail, seat rail, and arms, for 'T chair'
Magnus Dunsire and Sons, Colinsburgh, Fife. (Photograph: Peter Adamson)



14. Composite photograph of Wheeler furniture
Dundee City Archives, East Brothers of Lochee Papers

Warwick.¹² A photograph of a selection of the Wheelers' chairs and stools illustrates an armchair very similar to Chinnery's sketch (Fig. 5, right).¹³ It would seem that this, then, is the Warwick chair described in the 1897 article. Presently at Kellie Castle, which is now a property of the National Trust for Scotland, is an armchair to this pattern, almost certainly from the Wheeler workshop, perhaps commissioned by a member of the Lorimer family (Fig. 7).

Miscellaneous photographs of the Wheelers' work provide an invaluable source of information on their repertoire. Alexander Mair has his own collection of photographs and there are a number in Edinburgh University Library, Special Collections, amongst the Lorimer Office Papers (GEN 1963/32/151-8), and in Dundee City Archives, in the East Brothers of Lochee Papers (GD/MUS 112/3/1). On the backs are listed prices and the woods used. The photographs are undated, but probably are of pieces from the workshop of the second William Wheeler.¹⁴ Many of these photographs illustrate the Wheelers' vernacular interpretations of classical eighteenth-century designs. The chairs illustrated in Figure 6 were referred to as 'gossip chairs', available in oak, with canvas or cream-coloured hide seat. Often, sheepskin was specified for the seat covers. A selection of pierced splats is illustrated in Figure 8. These Chippendale-inspired chairs have become closely synonymous in the region with the name of Wheeler, and it is often chairs of this type that come up for sale at local auctions. Related is the chair with stylised crest (Fig. 9), known by the craftsmen as the 'clam-shell chair'. This was available in oak or polished mahogany.

A variant on a Sheraton type was known in the Wheeler workshop as a 'Bryson chair' (Fig. 10), after a Dr Bryson who owned chairs to this pattern. Another eighteenth-century model was the cockpen chair, referred to as the 'T chair' because of the construction of the latticed back (Fig. 11). The Wheelers' working patterns for the 'T chair' still exist at Magnus Dunsire and Sons, a company of builders in Colinsburgh, Fife (Figs 12 and 13).¹⁵

By no means was the Wheelers' output restricted to seating furniture. This workshop served to meet many and varied needs of the rural community around Arncroach. In 1886 William Wheeler the elder was registered as a cartwright in *Slater's Directory, Scotland*, in 1889 a joiner, and 1893 a joiner and wheelwright. The workshop continued to make wheels and farm carts even after the furniture-making business became established. The Wheelers also functioned in an important capacity as funeral directors.¹⁶

Some of the earliest pieces William Wheeler the elder made for Robert Lorimer were writing bureaus and a chest.¹⁷ A composite photograph in the collection amongst the East Brothers of Lochee Papers illustrates typical examples of the Wheelers' cabinet-work (Fig. 14). According to Mr Mair, these were made throughout the workshop's existence. The Wheelers also made smaller items such as mirrors and trays; a tradition of gifting these continued in Fife into the 1970s.¹⁸

The Wheelers operated for approximately ninety years in Arncroach. The trades of cabinet maker, chairmaker, wheelwright and funeral director were consolidated in this small, rural firm. Its history is one of continuity; the vernacular versions of eighteenth-century designs, and the reproductions of traditional Scottish types such as the *caqueteuse* remained 'appreciated, and to the public taste'.

REFERENCES

1. The 1881 Census Return for Arncroach, in the Parish of Carnbee, indicated that William Wheeler was aged 36 last birthday.
2. Biographical information from William Wheeler the elder's obituary in the *East of Fife Record*, 4 December 1913, p. 4.
3. Short reference to William Wheeler the elder's work as a furniture maker, in the *East of Fife Record*, 21 August 1891, p. 2:
That it is appreciated and to the public taste is testified by the fact that ever since he began seven or eight years ago he has never lacked orders, a good many of them coming from different parts of the country, and some even from abroad.
4. Obituary, op. cit.
5. In the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society's catalogues, held by the National Arts Library, William Wheeler is named as the maker of an oak bureau in 1893 (cat. 35), an oak writing bureau and an oak chest in 1896 (cats 91 and 328).
6. *The Studio*, Vol. 9, No. 45 (December 1896), p. 196.
7. Album in the possession of Mr Stuart Matthew, son of John F. Matthew, Robert Lorimer's partner.
8. David Jones points to the 'brander-back chair' as a common pattern in Scotland, in *Looking at Scottish Furniture* (St Andrews, 1987).
9. For example, David Learmont, 'The Trinity Hall Chairs', *Furniture History* xiv (1978); Victor Chinnery, *Oak Furniture: The British Tradition* (London, 1979).
10. Biographical details in the second William Wheeler's obituary in the *East Fife Observer*, 28 January 1960.
11. *East of Fife Record*, 19 March 1897, p. 5.
12. Chinnery, op. cit., p. 94.
13. This photograph is one of a number amongst the East Brothers of Lochee Papers, held by the Dundee City Archives. East Brothers of Lochee was a contemporary furniture-making company in Dundee. I am grateful to Mr Laurance Black, of Antiques of Scotland Ltd, Edinburgh, for drawing my attention to these photographs. The chair in Fig. 7 is identical to copies of the Leicester's Hospital chair made and marketed by John Starkey, 'cabinet maker

and dealer in antiques' of Warwick as 'The Old Saxon Chair', c. 1892–1904. A labelled example is on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum.

14. Alexander Mair confirms that the furniture which appears on the photographs was frequently made during his time with the second and third William Wheelers.

15. The Dunsires and the Wheelers were related through marriage. The present managing director of Magnus Dunsire and Sons, Mr George Dunsire, served his apprenticeship with the Wheeler workshop, and employed the craftsmen from the workshop after the death of William Wheeler the third.

16. Information about the workshop from Alexander Mair.

17. Catalogues of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, *op. cit.*

18. I am grateful to David Jones for this information, and other leads on the Wheeler workshop, also Harriet Richardson for her work on Kellie Castle and Arncroach craftsmen.