

Annual Conference: Glasgow 28 June – 1 July 2018 *Charles Rennie Mackintosh: Inspired by the past, looking to the future*

Owing to the fire at Glasgow School of Art, venues for lectures and the civic reception had to be changed. We are grateful to Glasgow Museums, the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and Glasgow City Council for their help and generosity, and particularly to Crissie White for organising the necessary changes.

Baillie Norman Macleod and RFS President, David Dewing, in the gallery of portraits of former Provosts of Glasgow, City Chambers (Photo Peter Jefferies)



Thursday 28 June

Alexander 'Greek' Thomson: 1 Moray Place, Holmwood and St Vincent's Church

Our conference began with three visits to the buildings of Alexander 'Greek' Thomson (1817–75), the other great architect of international stature produced by Victorian Glasgow. Ironically, he was by far the more commercially successful, while remaining little known

outside Scotland despite the survival of many of his buildings. Thomson's originality as an architect and interior designer lay in his adoption of the antique Greek style, incorporating elements of Egyptian, Levantine, Assyrian, and Hindu design. He applied this to woodwork, joinery, and décor with imaginative use of stencils and colour, while utilising modern materials like cast iron and plate glass.



Holmwood House, built for James Couper, the owner of Millholm Paper Mills on the banks of the River Cart. (Photo Peter Jefferies)



St Vincent Street Church, showing the pews in American yellow pine decorated with strips of mahogany veneer. (Photo Peter Jefferies)

Our first Thomson building was 1 Moray Place where our guide was its very knowledgeable owner, art historian Andrew Greg. Thomson designed the terrace of ten houses and lived there between 1861-75. The terrace is classically styled and features a unifying first floor colonnade. The architectural historian Henry Russell Hitchcock described it 'as ... the finest of all nineteenth century terraces ... and one of the world's most superb pieces of design based on Greek precedent.' No furniture has survived but there was the compensation of viewing Thomson's solid ceramic bath. The previous owner of 1 Moray Place, the late architectural historian Gavin Stamp, was influential in the acquisition by the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) of the next house we visited, Holmwood.

'Grecian' villas were generally symmetrical but Thomson, showing great originality, designed Holmwood in 1858-59 as a small asymmetrical mansion. In 1868 it was both described and illustrated in *Villa and Cottage Architecture* (Blackie & Son). Modern features included the provision of gas lighting, hot and cold running water and a flush toilet. Many of the features found at Moray Place were repeated at Holmwood, with a black marble fireplace in the dining room and white in the drawing room. The ceilings of both drawing rooms were studded with moulded stars. While at Moray Place additional light to the stairwell was provided by a skylight decorated in the manner of the atria of Roman houses, at Holmwood there is a magnificent cupola guarded and supported by savage chimerae and fitted with curved glass panes etched with stars. An innovation in both houses are the sash windows with large sheets of plate glass that slide down as well as up. The woodwork of varnished American yellow pine used in both buildings provides light.

Our final visit was to St Vincent Street Church, now Glasgow City Free Church, the survivor of three churches built by Thomson for the United Presbyterian

Church, of which he was an elder. The building takes the form of an Ionian columned acropolis set on its own podium with a clock tower topped by an Indian inspired dome. The design is notable for the clever use of space and light.

As Christopher Claxton Stevens suggested, Thomas Hope, the author of *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration*, published in 1807 after his travels in the Ottoman Empire, and the French architects Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine, who accompanied Napoleon in Egypt, were Thomson's forerunners.

Jim Barnes