

## Loudoun Hall and its Owners.

*By James Fergusson.*

Loudoun Hall is the oldest house in Ayr, one of the very few examples surviving in Scotland to-day of domestic burgh architecture dating from the period of Flodden. It was built very early in the sixteenth century, if not in the late fifteenth. This is certain from some details of its architecture, and especially from the very fine large fireplace with moulded jambs that survives in the main hall on the first floor of the building. The first owner of the house, and presumably its builder, was one James Tait, a merchant and burgess of Ayr. Judging by the size and style of his dwelling, he must have been a man of considerable substance.

To begin with, it was an oblong house of three storeys, rather like the fortified laird's house of the period. It stood close to the "port" or gate which opened on the harbour, a convenient position for a man whose business was largely with skippers trading with other countries. The lower storey consisted of strongly vaulted cellars where goods could be stored. One of them was a wine cellar, from which a narrow stair led up to the main hall on the first floor. A broader stair which must have been the main access to this hall has disappeared in subsequent alterations. The hall was, and is, a singularly handsome and well-proportioned apartment, embellished by its great fire place at one end and, near the other, by an ogee-shaped aumbrie in one of the long walls. The top floor, above this, contained the bedrooms.

James Tait sold the house to Sir Hugh Campbell, of Loudoun, a young man who was the hereditary sheriff of Ayr. The name Loudoun Hall or Loudoun House commemorates this connection; but while the Campbells actually owned the house it was always known as "the Sheriff's tenement" or "the Sheriff's lodging." It is mentioned as "the schireffis tenement" in the Ayr Burgh Accounts as early as 1539.<sup>1</sup>

The first problem in Loudoun Hall's history is the date when Sir Hugh Campbell acquired it from James Tait. We know it was before 1539, for it was in that year that Sir Hugh Campbell bought some ground adjoining the house from Charles Tait, a baillie of Ayr, who was presumably the heir of James Tait, and the deed recording this transaction mentions the house as having been previously bought from James. This is the earliest extant document mentioning the house; it was discovered among the family papers at Loudoun Castle by the late Marquess of Bute shortly before the last war.

(1) *Ayr Burgh Accounts*, ed. Pryde, Scottish History Society, 1937, p. 81.

Now Sir Hugh Campbell cannot have acquired the property earlier than 1523, in which year he came of age and had sasine of the property he had inherited from his father, who had died in 1508.<sup>2</sup> But we can narrow down the period within which he could have bought it. For nine months between 1527 and 1528 Sir Hugh was an outlaw—a scandalous position for the Sheriff of Ayr. He seems to have been a turbulent young man. He had been in trouble in the autumn of 1526 for treasonably coming against the King “in arrayit battell” near Linlithgow. A year later he ordered the assassination of Gilbert, second Earl of Cassillis. On the 5th of October, 1527, accordingly, he was outlawed and all his movables ordained to be escheated. The sentence of outlawry was not lifted till the 1st of July, 1528.<sup>3</sup> Within that period Sir Hugh could not have acquired property. So if it was not till after these youthful frolics were over that Sir Hugh settled down as a respectable householder, his acquisition of Loudoun Hall can be put between 1528 and 1539. It could have been as late as 1534, when James Tait was still alive.

The house had an adjoining garden, or “yaird,” and a brewhouse, which, in later years, was let.<sup>4</sup> Sir Hugh Campbell enlarged the house soon after he bought it, building out a wing on the north side towards the harbour. Past this wing ran the Boat Vennel or Sea Vennel—both names occur in the burgh records—to the port or gate near-by, which opened on the harbour. A great deal of important traffic into and out of the town must have passed the Sheriff’s windows. The port at the end of the Sea Vennel was built up in 1603.<sup>5</sup> In that year there was a very serious outbreak of the plague, of which, according to a later tradition, 2,000 people died in Ayr,<sup>6</sup> and the Town Council was much concerned with the isolation of the sick and the exclusion of infected persons from the town. In 1610 the port was pulled down, “being ruynous.”<sup>7</sup>

Sir Hugh Campbell seems to have settled down to do his duty as a respectable Sheriff from the year 1530 onwards, since he is recorded in various State papers to have remitted certain sums to the Lord High Treasurer like other Sheriffs, and also to have received various messages and orders as though he was regularly fulfilling his proper functions.<sup>8</sup> For three generations the house in the Boat Vennel remained “the Sheriff’s tenement,” being occupied first by Sir Hugh, who died in 1561, then by his son, Sir Matthew, who lived till 1593 or later, and then by the latter’s son, another Sir Hugh, each of whom in turn was Sheriff of Ayr.

(2) *Scots Peerage*, V., p. 495.

(3) Robert Pitcairn: *Criminal Trials in Scotland*, 1833, pp. 136-7, 242.

(4) *Ayr Burgh Accounts*, pp. 31, 37.

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 211.

(6) *Old Statistical Account of Scotland*, I., p. 92.

(7) *Ayr Burgh Accounts*, p. 248.

(8) *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer*, V. p. 333, VI. pp. 55, 113, &c.



One of the last Royal commands received by the first Sir Hugh, in February, 1559, was when he was ordered, along with the Sheriffs of Wigtown and Kirkcudbright, "to be in Edinburgh with xx dais victualis upoun xxiiij houris warnyng for resisting of the Inglis army."<sup>9</sup> A few years earlier he no doubt helped to receive the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise, when she visited Ayr.<sup>10</sup> We should like to think that his son, Sir Matthew, received her daughter, Mary Queen of Scots, when she in turn came to Ayr in August, 1563. All we know for certain, unfortunately, is that Queen Mary did not stay in Loudoun Hall. She was in Ayr for two nights, the 2nd and 3rd of August, the next three nights at Dunure Castle, then one at Ardmillan, near Girvan, and another at Ardstinchar, and so went on into Galloway.<sup>11</sup> When she was in Ayr she stayed "at St. John's," presumably the rectory of the old Parish Church. One would like to think that Sir Matthew Campbell paid his duty to her and kissed her hand. But he may have been in disgrace at the time, for only seven months before he had been denounced "our Soverane Ladeis rebell, for none payment" of a debt amounting to £79.<sup>12</sup> But he must at least have seen the Queen, the tall and striking woman with the red hair and amber-coloured eyes, and he at least did not have his loyalty shaken as others in Ayr did, by the fact that she had her own chaplain with her who celebrated Mass each day.<sup>13</sup> For four years later, when she escaped from Lochleven Castle and made her final hopeless bid to regain her authority, Sir Matthew was one of those who signed the bond of Hamilton, fought for his Queen at Langside, and was there taken prisoner. His later life is obscure but he was still alive in 1593.

To turn now to the relations of the Campbells of Loudoun with the Burgh of Ayr. For something like eleven years, from 1546 to 1557, the town was pursuing a lawsuit against the first Sir Hugh over the matter of the Sheriff's authority within the burgh boundaries.<sup>14</sup> But in 1557 peace was made. Sir Hugh and his son, Matthew, entered into an agreement with the burgh renouncing their jurisdiction within its boundaries.<sup>15</sup> After that it appears that the Loudoun family were on excellent terms with the people of Ayr and were regarded with some affection. The Sheriffs enjoyed gifts of wine at the town's charge whenever they came to Ayr on their official duties; and in the last few years of Sir Matthew Campbell's life the burgh accounts show that his son, the second Sir Hugh, was treated with the same hospitality, and there are entries not only for "wine to the old Sheriff" but

(9) *Ibid.*, XI. p. 13.

(10) *Ayr Burgh Accounts*, pp. 117, 119.

(11) D. Hay Fleming: *Mary Queen of Scots*, 1897, p. 524.

(12) *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer*, XI. p. 244.

(13) Knox's *History of the Reformation*, ed. Laing, II. p. 391; Tytler's *History of Scotland*, VI. p. 286.

(14) *Ayr Burgh Accounts*, p. lxxvii.

(15) James Paterson: *History of the County of Ayr*, 1847, I. p. 180.



also for "wine to the young Sheriff."<sup>16</sup> A typical entry in Sir Hugh's time, after his father's death, is that for May, 1597—"For six quarts of wine given to the Sheriff when in Ayr for his April head-court, £4 16/-."<sup>17</sup> These entries continue regularly year by year up to 1617, specifying sometimes wine alone and sometimes not only wine but boxes of "confeittis"—that is, cakes or sweets; and the Sheriff is specially mentioned as being among those "gude freindis" to whom the people of Ayr are "addettit in favour for thair gude will manifestit to the toun."<sup>18</sup>

Much of these wines and sweetmeats must have been enjoyed in that very hall on the first floor of the old house in which one can stand to-day. The price of wine was 1s 8d a quart before the Reformation, but in the early 17th century it was usually £1.<sup>19</sup> The price of "confeittis" rose from 8s a box in 1591 to 13s 4d a box in 1605.<sup>20</sup>

There is another little detail on record about the position of this house in the life of old Ayr. In 1596 the Provost, David Fergushill, executed a deed concerning a debt which was owing to a kinsman of his, and the document bears the note—"This was done within the yard of the lugeing of Hew Campbell of Loudoun, Sheref of Air, at thre houris eftirnone or thairby."<sup>21</sup> In other words, the parties met to discuss their business in the garden of Loudoun Hall, and as the occasion was a February afternoon, it is pretty certain that they read the documents and signed their names inside the "garden chamber," presumably a kind of summer house, which is mentioned in the old title-deeds.

There were at least four members of the old Scots Parliament who, at various times, lived in Loudoun Hall, of whom this Sir Hugh Campbell was the first of whom we can be certain. He was Provost of Irvine and M.P. for that burgh in 1579, and again in 1587.<sup>22</sup> He is also on record as one of the "small barons" who sat in the Convention of Estates held at Edinburgh in January, 1597, and again in that held at Holyrood in December, 1599.<sup>23</sup> In the record of these last occasions he is listed simply as "the Sheriff of Ayr," and so presumably represented the county. In 1601 he was created Lord Campbell of Loudoun, and a few days later admitted a member of the Privy Council. He lived till 1622, but his only son, George, Master of Loudoun, predeceased him. His co-heiresses were two grand-daughters.<sup>24</sup>

(16) *Ayr Burgh Accounts*, pp. 153, 159.

(17) *Ibid.*, p. 189.

(18) *Ibid.*, pp. 240, 258.

(19) *Ibid.*, p. lxxix.

(20) *Ibid.*, pp. 171, 240.

(21) *Archaeological and Historical Collections relating to Ayrshire and Galloway*, Vol. VI., 1889, p. 261.

(22) *Scots Peerage*, V. 497.

(23) *Returns of Members of Parliament*.

(24) *Scots Peerage*, V. pp. 498-9.

The elder of these two granddaughters of Lord Campbell's, Margaret, Baroness of Loudoun in her own right, had married, in 1620, Sir John Campbell of Lawers. It appears that although she could not be Sheriff of Ayr herself, the hereditary principle was recognised and she transmitted the office to her husband; for he, by a contract, dated 10th March, 1634, sold the Sheriffship to King Charles I. for 14,000 merks. But before that time the office must have been taken into the King's hands and regranted, for in 1632, two years before the sale, the appointment of Sheriff-Principal of Ayr was bestowed on James Chalmer of Gadgirth.<sup>25</sup>

Appropriately enough it was James Chalmer who became the next owner of Loudoun Hall. That is clear from a document cited in Paterson's "History of Ayrshire," dated 1666, which describes the house as having "belonged to the Earle of Loudone, afterwards the Laird of Gadgirth."<sup>26</sup> But so far, despite a diligent search in the Register House in Edinburgh, I have not been able to discover just when it changed hands. If the statement that the house "belonged to the Earle of Loudone" is taken literally—and it is repeated in the oldest of the extant title-deeds of Loudoun Hall, dated 1770—then the transfer must have been after 12th May, 1633. For it was on that date that Sir John Campbell of Lawers, the husband of Lord Campbell's granddaughter, was created Earl of Loudoun.<sup>27</sup> He played a notable part in the religious wars, being perhaps the greatest of all the Earls of Loudoun; and he deserves remembrance for the way in which he strove to combine fidelity to the Covenant with loyalty to the Crown.

James Chalmer of Gadgirth, was retoured heir to his grandfather in 1608 and admitted a burgess of Ayr in 1618. He was the head of an old family holding lands in Kyle in the parish of Stair. He was the second M.P. to live in Loudoun Hall, being a commissioner for the shire of Ayr in the Scots Parliament which met in 1628 and, after being frequently prorogued, met at last "for business" in 1633.<sup>28</sup> Both James Chalmer and Lord Loudoun were among the commissioners who represented the Scots Parliament in the negotiations for the Treaty of Ripon in 1641.<sup>29</sup> Gadgirth married Isobel Blair, daughter of John Blair of Blair, and had a large family; he was dead by 1646 when his son, John, was retoured heir to him.

Twenty years later the house changed hands again. This time it passed to a family in whose possession it remained for

(25) George Chalmers: *Caledonia*, 1890, ed. VI. p. 453.

(26) Paterson, *op. cit.*, 1863 ed., Carrick, p. 414.

(27) *Scots Peerage*, V. p. 506.

(28) *Returns of Members of Parliament*.

(29) *Scots Peerage*, V. 506; Paterson, *op. cit.*, 1863 ed., Kyle, p. 234.



over a hundred years. It may well have lost some of its attraction for the Chalmer family after 1652; for in that year, by the order of Cromwell, there was built, with great trouble and expense, the huge fort of Ayr, whose north-eastern bastion, the highest part of all the works, was close on the harbour<sup>30</sup> and must quite have overshadowed Loudoun Hall—barely 100 yards away. Anyhow, John Chalmer of Gadgirth, sold the house in 1666 to James Muir of Park, a merchant in Ayr who came of a Tarbolton family descended from the Mures of Rowallan.<sup>31</sup> Muir was a magistrate of Ayr as early as 1672 and had been Provost, and a very popular one, by 1689. In the following year he was chosen Provost again and also a commissioner from the burgh to the Scots Parliament. He was thus the third M.P. to live in Loudoun Hall.

Paterson, the historian of Ayrshire, records having seen the title-deeds of the Loudoun Hall property which Provost Muir acquired in 1666. The list was headed "Ane Inventar of the Writs and Evidents of the Houses, Yeard, and Garden Chamber and Pertinents which belonged to the Earle of Loudone, afterwards to the Laird of Gadgirth, and was acquired by Provost John Moore."<sup>32</sup> This is interesting as confirming both the existence of the garden and "garden chamber" and the successive ownership of the property.

Provost Muir, or Moore, represented Ayr in Parliament up to 1707, when he supported the Union with England. He was a great benefactor to the town, and seems, as Paterson says, "to have been a person of high credit and reputation . . . engaged in the trade and public business of Ayr during a period of nearly sixty years, remarkable for civil commotions and great events."<sup>33</sup> He was one of the first merchants in the town to build a shop.<sup>34</sup>

The Provost lived to a good old age, and died about 1710. But for the last 25 years of his life he did not inhabit Loudoun Hall, for in 1684 he had handed it over to his eldest son, Robert, when Robert married the daughter of Alexander Simpson, merchant in Ayr. The instrument of sasine was dated 2nd April, 1684, and is referred to in the oldest of the extant title-deeds.

Robert Muir followed in his father's footsteps. He, too, was several times Provost of Ayr, and he, too, was in Parliament, the fourth M.P. to inhabit Loudoun Hall. In 1706, in the Union Parliament, Robert was one of the two commissioners for the County

(30) *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, V. p. 42.

(31) Paterson, 1863 ed., Carrick, p. 413.

(32) *Ibid.*, p. 414.

(33) *Ibid.*, pp. 416-7.

(34) *Ibid.*, Kyle, p. 57.

of Ayr, while his venerable father represented the burgh. His brother, Samuel, also served as Provost during their father's lifetime. One way and another the Muirs, for a whole generation, had what Galt's Provost Pawkie called "the whole sway and mastery of the town." According to Paterson, "it may almost be said that the welfare of the town of Ayr was wholly in their hands from the Revolution in 1688 till 1722, a period of thirty-three years."<sup>35</sup>

Provost Robert Muir traded with Virginia for tobacco, and with France for wine, and became a rich man. In 1698 he bought an estate in the parish of Maybole, lying on the banks of the River Doon. Its old name was Middle Auchendrane, but it was by this time known as Blairstoun, having been owned by a family called Blair for two centuries. The last of this line, James Blair of Blairstoun, had succeeded his father in the property in 1695, but the civil war had ruined the family and with the consent of his son he sold the house and estate to Robert Muir, who had sasine of it in 1701.<sup>36</sup>

Robert Muir lived till 1734, having had ten children by his first wife, besides a daughter by his second, whom he had married in 1714. Two of his daughters and one of his grand-daughters married subsequent Provosts of Ayr.<sup>37</sup> Loudoun Hall passed to his eldest son, John, who died in 1744, and then to his grandson, another Robert, who became a doctor and lived till 1801. From Dr. Muir's time begins the decline of Loudoun Hall.

Readers of John Galt's "Annals of the Parish" and "The Provost" will recall that during the reign of George III. the standard of living in Ayrshire rose considerably and that there was much new building and expansion. At the beginning of the reign Ayr must have been a cramped and insanitary town. An English Colonel of Dragoons who was stationed there four months after the battle of Culloden had summed up his first impressions of it in the words—"A poor miserable dog hole."<sup>38</sup> During the first thirty years of George III's reign most of the former common lands around the town were enclosed and planted.<sup>39</sup> The more prosperous inhabitants began either to buy houses in the neighbouring countryside, like Provost Robert Muir, or to build new ones in the suburbs, so that early in the next century a handsome new residential quarter had grown up, culminating in what is now Wellington Square, built on what was in 1775 the town's washing green.<sup>40</sup> These Regency houses were, of course,

(35) Paterson, *op. cit.*, p. 418.

(36) *Op. cit.*, pp. 412, 418.

(37) Isobell and Mary married Joseph Wilson of Barmuir and David Fergusson; Marlon, the granddaughter, married David Ballantine.

(38) *The Albemarle Papers*, 1902, I., pp. 91-2.

(39) *Old Statistical Account*, I., pp. 91-2.

(40) Armstrong's *Map of Ayrshire*.



larger, more spacious inside, and with bigger windows, and compared with them Loudoun Hall, in the close-built quarter by the Boat Vennel, must have seemed very uncomfortable. So it was quite natural that Dr. Robert Muir or Moore—for the spelling of the name had become anglicised by this time—should want to dispose of it. Moreover, he himself did not live in Ayrshire much, for he studied medicine in Edinburgh, London, and France. He was living in London in 1770, when he found a purchaser for the old house, and before that it had evidently been let; for the disposition which he signed in London describes it as “a dwelling-house high and laigh and a cellar below the same with the pertinents presently possess by William Fleck, shipmaster.”

Captain Fleck was still tenant of the house when his new landlord had sasine of the property nearly seven years later. This new owner was no rich laird or merchant, but one Daniel Bruce, described in the disposition of 1770 as a fisher and in the sasine of 1777 as a boatman. The price he paid for Loudoun Hall was £61 1/-. As the average rent of houses in Ayr twenty years later<sup>41</sup> was between £10 and £20, it is clear that the value of this one had sunk low.

About this time a large staircase tower was built into the angle between the main house and the wing, rising much higher than the rest of the building and quite spoiling its proportions. The addition may mean that at about the end of the eighteenth century Loudoun Hall was already divided into several dwellings and had become a tenement in the modern sense. That was certainly its condition in recent times. But it is quite clear that before the end of the eighteenth century it ceased to be a “desirable property.” Its age and its distinguished history were quite forgotten. It is not marked on Armstrong’s map of Ayr published in 1775. It is not mentioned in either the old “Statistical Account” of Ayr published in 1791, nor in the “New Statistical Account” published in 1845, nor in MacGibbon & Ross’s “Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland” (1887-92). And the title-deeds show that it changed hands so often that evidently none of its owners thought it worth care and maintenance.

The list of owners and occupiers during the late Hanoverian period sounds very like a group of characters in Galt’s novels. Daniel Bruce let the house to John Greenlees, innkeeper. In 1796 Daniel’s son, Robert Bruce, stocking-maker, disposed of it to Adam Bowie, a ship carpenter. He sold it in 1809 to Mary Hamilton, relict of Peter Nickle, “late shipmaster,” and she left it, in 1820, to her children. It changed hands again in 1828 and

again in 1853, and so on. But the name of Loudoun still clung to it, and was recorded by the industrious Paterson when he published his “History of the County of Ayr” in 1847.

“Another old tenement still exists in the Boat Vennel, which bears the name of ‘Loudoun House’—having been, no doubt, the town residence of the Loudoun family, who were hereditary sheriffs of the county for many generations.”<sup>42</sup>

Some 90 years later the Town Council of Ayr decided to demolish Loudoun Hall, which was by this time a mere slum tenement, as part of a clearance scheme in the Boat Vennel. Among the very few people who realised the historical and architectural interest of the place was the Rev. Archibald Mackenzie, minister of Ayr Old Church. He persuaded the then owner, a Mr. Smith, to give him the building on certain conditions. For two days Mr Mackenzie enjoyed the sensation of being the owner of Loudoun Hall, and then he conveyed it to the late Marquess of Bute, who was already interested in it.<sup>43</sup> Lord Bute began the restoration of the building at his own expense, and preserved it from the immediate risk of further deterioration. But the outbreak of war in 1939 stopped the work, which was not resumed before his death.

After the war there was again a movement for demolition, which was recommended by the narrow margin of a single vote to the Town Council of Ayr by its Housing Committee. The Council, however, hearing that the Saltire Society was prepared to proceed with the restoration, reversed by a substantial majority its previous decision to demolish Loudoun Hall. That was in October, 1947. Lord David Stuart, who had inherited Loudoun Hall from his father, Lord Bute, presented the building to a board of three trustees nominated by the Saltire Society. The Pilgrim Trust made a grant of money, a building licence was obtained from the Ministry of Works, and at last, in the autumn of 1948, the work of restoration was renewed, Mr. Robert Hurd, the architect who was responsible for the restoration of Acheson House in the Royal Mile in Edinburgh, giving his services as architect free of charge.

Mr. Hurd’s plans, approved by the Trustees, include the removal of the ugly 18th century staircase tower and the erection of a new staircase in the wing, for which purpose the Trustees have been fortunate in securing from the National Trust for Scotland the materials of an oak stair recently removed from Culzean Castle and originally made from the timbers of the third Marquess of Ailsa’s yacht *Marquesa*. The main hall will be used by the Saltire

(41) *Old Statistical Account*, p. 95.

(42) *Paterson*, 1847 ed., I., p. 177.

(43) Letter to the author from the Rev. Archibald Mackenzie, 27th October, 1947.



Society's Ayr branch for lectures, recitals and small exhibitions. The top floor will be adapted as a caretaker's flat and a kitchen, cloakroom, etc., will be accommodated in the wing.

About £2,500 will be needed to complete the work of restoration, and an appeal to the public for subscriptions was launched by the Saltire Society in December, 1948. Nothing but the subscription of a sufficient sum now stands in the way of the restoration of this interesting building to a place in the life of Ayr and a condition worthy of its 400 years of history.

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#### **ADDITIONS to the BIBLIOGRAPHY of AYRSHIRE DURING 1949.**

FERGUSON (JAMES). "*Lowland Lairds.*" FABER & FABER, 16/-.

Much of Scotland's history has been made, and many of her greatest national leaders bred, by a class which modern governments are gradually pressing out of existence—that of the lairds or country gentry, corresponding but not quite similar to the squires of England. In "*Lowland Lairds*" Mr. James Fergusson, the well-known biographer and historian, who has explored the muniments of several old Scottish houses, gives a cursory survey of the history of this class, and close-up studies of a few representatives from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth. These portraits include Alexander Forrester, a rascally Stirlingshire baron; Alexander Nisbet, the great historian of heraldry; "Fish" Craufurd, the friend of Fox; Boswell's friend, "worthy Nairne," who became the judge Lord Dunsinnan, and the group of Ayrshire "improvers" from whom Mr. Fergusson himself is descended.

Good or bad men, eminent figures or obscure, they all share a remarkable richness and raciness of character, and their brief biographies illuminate some little-known corners of Scottish social history.