

JOHN WITTET (1868–1952)

The Wittets and Early 20th Century Elgin

Like many towns in Scotland, Elgin has seen fluctuations in prosperity. Its recorded history begins in 1150 when David I called it ‘my burgh of Elgin’. In the 17th century a gradual redevelopment of the town began, though Samuel Johnson dismissed it as ‘a place of little trade, thinly inhabited’. This had all changed by 1820: Elgin became a neoclassical town with fine public buildings and good suburban villas, attracting wealthy landowners from the Highlands and from abroad for the winter months. The advent of the railways to Elgin and Lossiemouth in 1852 facilitated access to the area.

The Wittet firm had its origins in that of William Robertson who established his practice in Elgin in the early 1820s, capitalising on the opportunities that the expanding burgh provided. Much of his work is outwith the town but he designed South Villa (1830) in Moss Street and the fine Greek Revival courthouse (1837; later demolished) in High Street. Robertson’s practice was inherited on his death in 1841 by his nephews and pupils Alexander and William Reid. They practised as A & W Reid for much of the 19th century, interrupted only by various short-lived partnerships and a move to Inverness in the middle of the century, but were re-established in Elgin by 1880. In 1892 John Wittet joined the firm (Fig.1).



Fig. 1 John Wittet, standing centre row, extreme right in 1929 at last meeting of Elgin Parish Council. © Jenny Martin

Wittet was born at Bridge of Earn in Perthshire in 1868. He trained at Edinburgh College of Art and Heriot-Watt College and gained experience in offices in Perth, Edinburgh and Glasgow. He moved north to take the position of chief assistant in the Reid office in Elgin, becoming a partner on the death of William Reid in 1893. Wittet continued the practice with Alexander Reid until 1897 when Alexander died leaving his son William Charles Reid and Wittet as partners. In 1903 this partnership was dissolved.

Wittet moved to practise in High Street, Elgin, taking much of the business with him. Commissions were undertaken all over Morayshire. However, for the purposes of this article, work in Elgin and the immediate vicinity will be the focus. The Grand Hotel (Figs. 2 and 3) on the corner of South Street and Academy Street dates from 1898, before the practice split, but we can assume it came largely from Wittet's hand. It is a large building in Scots Baronial style with a bold conical-roofed corner turret. It stands out from other buildings in South Street because of its bull-faced stonework, which in turn contrasts with the smooth ashlar dressings and finely carved decoration around the corner doorway. About the same time, a short distance away in Greyfriars Street, Wittet designed the Parish Church Hall (Fig. 4), also Scots Baronial style and in bull-faced rubble. Perhaps the style and masonry were chosen to relate these buildings to the historic structures in the burgh.



Fig. 2 Grand Hotel. © Crown copyright www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk



Fig. 3 Detail of Grand Hotel. © Crown copyright www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk



Fig. 4 Parish Church Hall. © Crown copyright www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk

Rubble masonry is also used in what is arguably the practice's finest church commission, Pluscarden Free Church (now Pluscarden Church) (Fig. 5), which dates from 1898. The church is inspired by its near neighbour, Pluscarden Priory, in particular in the use of decorated tracery in the windows. The composition is dominated by the fine square south-western tower with plain corbelled parapet and gargoyles.

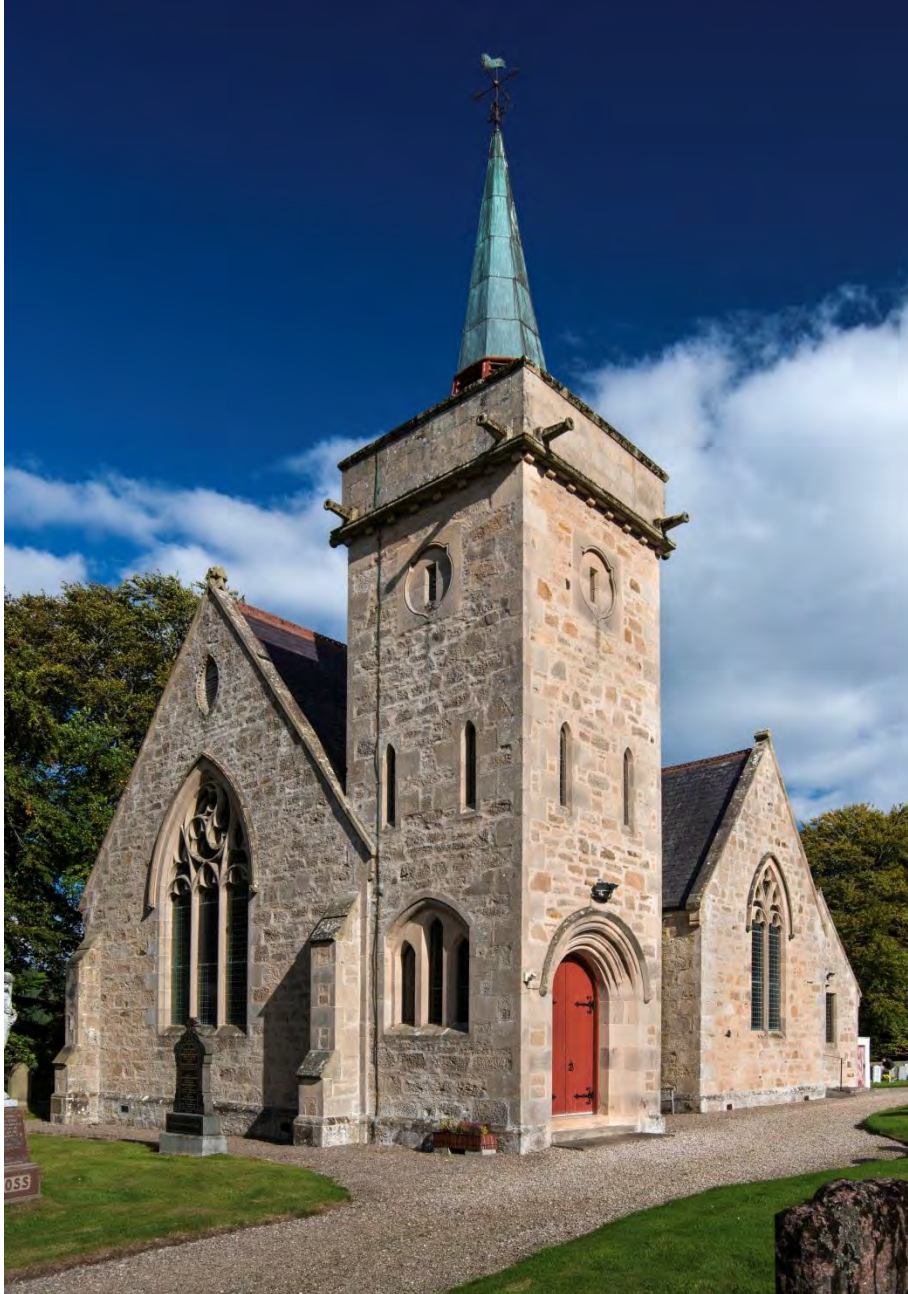


Fig. 5 Pluscarden Church. © Crown copyright www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk

Moray and Nairn Infectious Diseases Hospital dates from 1900 and shows Wittet designing in a completely different style. Initially it consisted of an administration block and three 8-bed pavilions. Though they have now disappeared, these buildings were distinctive. They were generally single storey and had very shallow wide sweeping roofs with deep overhanging eaves and dormers. In 1935 new blocks were added some distance away to form the new Spynie Hospital, also designed by the practice and extended over the following forty years. These are simple single-storey blocks rendered and painted white.

Besides these initial public buildings, much of the work in Elgin by John Wittet and his son William, who joined the practice as assistant in 1923, was domestic, for both private and public clients. The Lodge in Duff Avenue (Fig. 6) was built for Hugh McLean and dates from 1898. Its refined design has its roots in the classical style villas which were so popular in Elgin in the early 19th century, but it has been given a modern twist: the frieze at eaves level is extended to wrap around the bay window and the circular corner tower, a feature Wittet may have derived from contemporary American architecture.

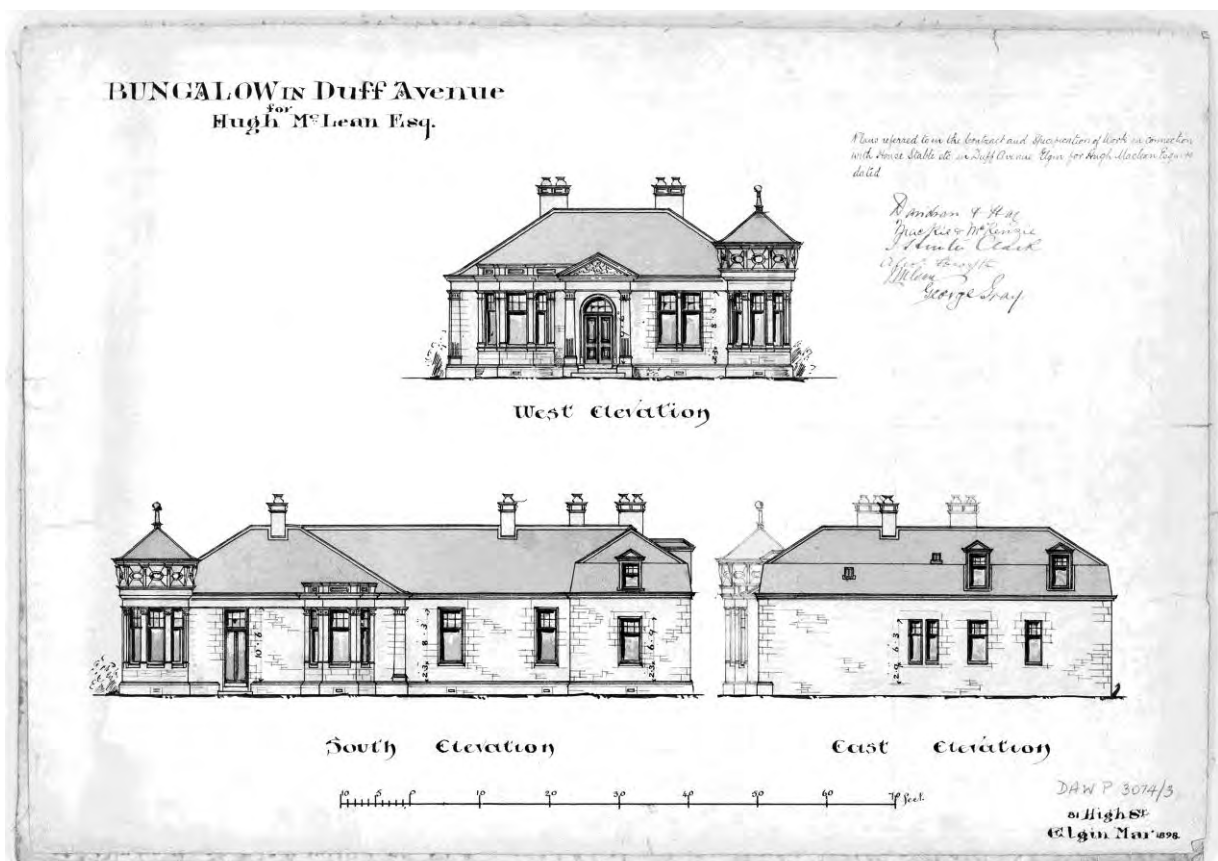


Fig. 6 The Lodge © Courtesy of RCAHMS (Wittet Collection, Elgin Library). Licensor www.rcahms.gov.uk

The Jubilee Homes (1901, Fig. 7) in Victoria Road are a good example of the sort of low-key housing which the Wittet practice produced in the period up to 1930: a small range of single-storey houses with simple Tudor details in the gabled porches. The cottages at Maisondieu Place (1909) carry on this pattern of simple housing, their only ornamentation being the Tudor hoodmoulds over the windows and the chamfered architraves of doors and windows.



Fig. 7 Jubilee Homes. © Crown copyright www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk

The veterans' houses on Ladyhill, 1919 (Fig. 8) continue the cottage theme. These are a symmetrical pair of cottages flanking the steps to Ladyhill, where Wittet later designed the war memorial. Like the parish halls, they are designed in rough bull-faced masonry. Towards the centre of the composition, each cottage has a hexagonal tower with pointed roof and open loggias. The inspiration for the loggias may have come from the characteristic open arcades which appear in some of the historic houses in Elgin's High Street.



Fig. 8 Veterans' Houses, Ladyhill. © Crown copyright www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk

In the 1930s the Wittet practice successfully designed two small speculative housing schemes for the Elgin builder William Hugh McKilligan at Wards Road and in the vicinity of Petrie Crescent and Wittet Drive (named after the Wittets, indicating their status in the town). Though there is some variation, the characteristic houses of the latter scheme are semi-detached, simple Arts and Crafts in style with slated half-piended roofs, the long sweep at the front extended to cover the shallow single-storey canted bays. Numbers 6 and 8 Petrie Crescent are good examples. Their style is conservative but they are well detailed and are of carefully chosen materials.

Elsewhere in Wittet Drive, further up the hill, the practice was more experimental. Not all the houses were designed by the Wittets but several can be identified as coming from their hand. They designed a striking house (Fig. 9) in a flat-roofed Art Deco-style, dating from 1947, although perhaps conceived earlier. Typical Deco features include the metal-framed windows with strong horizontal emphasis and the canopy stretching from the projecting window at the left over the front door.



Fig. 9 House in Wittet Drive. © Crown copyright www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk

Another essay by the Wittets in the Modern Movement idiom can be seen at the flats in Hay Street now called St John's Court, 1938 (Fig. 10). Like the villa they have a very cube-like volume emphasised by the three sections of the building, the centre part with entrance and stair tower being in ashlar while the outer blocks are rendered and whitewashed. The forms of the windows and the stone band running below those on the top floor emphasise the horizontality.



Fig. 10 St John's Court. © Crown copyright www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk

The Kingsmills area in Elgin was developed with local-authority housing in the 1930s,(Fig. 11) designed by the Wittets at much the same time as the private developments funded by William McKilligan. Well detailed and built of squared rubble with ashlar dressings and a slate roof, each block accommodated four families. It is a large area of housing but the simplicity of the designs and the good materials have stood the test of time.



Fig. 11 Local authority housing, Kingsmills. © Crown copyright www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk

The Wittet practice has continued to make a significant contribution to townscapes and landscapes over the north of Scotland right through to the present day. Their continued legacy can be seen at The Haugh (now the Mansion House Hotel), a building to which they have made additions and alterations for more than 100 years. The private house Woodside (2009) at Aberlour in many ways sums up and continues what the earlier practice began: buildings that are simple and well detailed, make reference to the context in which they are placed and draw inspiration from the historic past.

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