STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SKELMORLIE AISLE

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HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND
STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SKELMORLIE AISLE

Contents

Historic Environment Scotland – Scottish Charity No. SC045925
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1. SUMMARY

1.1 Introduction

Set within the medieval nucleus of the town of Largs, North Ayrshire, the Skelmorlie Aisle comprises the 1630s burial aisle of the Montgomerie family of Skelmorlie.

The aisle was added to the existing Largs Parish Church as a burial vault and private place of worship. It was retained free-standing when the rest of the church was demolished in 1812.[1] It now comprises three principal elements: the aisle itself which is dated 1636, a symbolic and emblematic painted ceiling dated 1638, and a richly-sculptured stone monument – or triumphal arch – of 1639.

Enclosed within an old graveyard (last used for burials in the later 19th century), the property's current use is purely as a heritage site, and it came into State care as a PIC[2] in 1931 under a minute of Agreement. In 1971 it was Category A listed as Skelmorlie Aisle and Cemetery Wall and Gate Piers (LB37198).[3] It is free to access during seasonal opening hours, or by prior arrangement with the Largs Museum.[4] While annual visitor numbers are not recorded, it is estimated that 2,000 people visited Skelmorlie Aisle between 2018/2019.

1.2 Statement of Significance

The aisle is easily the most impressive structure of its type and period in Scotland.

Its primary nominal function was to serve as a family aisle with laird's loft;[5] but more than that, it was created as a memorial and crypt for Dame Margaret Douglas (d.1624) and to serve likewise, in time, for her husband, Sir Robert Montgomerie (d.1651), who was the aisle's patron. Its creation involved top specialists from the Edinburgh area, and it is an exemplar of the court / absentee court architecture of its time.

It comprises three discrete principal elements: the architecture of the aisle itself, and inside this, the triumphal arch / monument, and the painted ceiling. Each of these survives in relatively intact condition (unusually so for Scotland); each has its own specific values, and each is of national significance in its own right. Consequently, taken in total, it is clear that the PIC is a superlative of its time.

Its architectural quality, extensive artistic symbolism, and relative completeness make Skelmorlie Aisle the most architecturally distinguished 'monument' of its type for the period in the country. Key elements of its significance are:

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[1] Some writers have given the date as 1802, but local historian W. Dobie states 1812 and seems well-placed and sufficiently well-informed to have known the fact (Anon. [Dobie] 1845, 9).

[2] The term 'PIC' [=Property in Care of the government] is used here, rather than the more familiar term 'monument' to obviate confusion, because the building contains a physical monument.

[3] Listing description accessible at: http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/LB37198

[4] For opening hours and access information, see: www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/skelmorlie-aisle/

[5] The 'laird's loft' was the private gallery in a church, reserved for the use of the laird and his family.

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- The painted ceiling is one of Scotland's very few pre-19th century painted schemes with an ecclesiastical connection to survive. This is due primarily to the thoroughness of Scotland's Reformation, its accompanying iconoclasm and ongoing literal academic ideology. It is also one of extremely few to date from the post-Reformation period, when painted ceilings were almost exclusive to domestic structures. It evidences the use of selected emblems and prints produced on mainland Europe and thereby connects the work, the client and artist(s) to the European mainstream. In Scottish terms, it is unique because it is the only known 'early' painted ceiling existing which has an artist's signature.

- The triumphal arch / monument is one of the very few superlatives to survive belonging to the 'school' of Scottish sculpture that flourished between the 1610–30s. Other notable examples include Wallace and Ayton monuments in Edinburgh's Greyfriars kirkyard, and some sundials, particularly that at Dundas of 1623. Although perhaps underappreciated as such today, this class of sculpture represents one of Scotland's greatest contributions to Renaissance art: arguably, the greatest, save for the royal palaces or the profoundly sculptural George Heriot's Hospital in Edinburgh (begun 1628).

- The fact that all these components of the aisle cohere exactly, illustrates very clearly the thinking of the period; that architecture, sculpture and artwork should all be considered as complementary, harmonious, and in unity. This wider perspective today is less evident due to the losses elsewhere: intentional destructions through iconoclasm and war, and the abandonment of aisles whose creator families either died out, moved on, or lost interest in the Presbyterian church and in maintaining these aspects of their family legacy. In turn, all of these factors serve to heighten the rarity value of the largely-intact Skelmorlie Aisle.

- Furthermore, the aisle's significance is the greater due to the absence of royal competitor funereal works within a broader Scottish context. Emigration of the monarchy in 1603 and the ending of royal burials in the country resulted in there being no royal counterpart structure having been considered necessary since the intended royal mausoleum at 1590s Dunfermline. So, in this, Scotland compares unfavourably with numerous of its neighbours. However, Skelmorlie Aisle stands comparison with the mainstream of contemporary European architecture, particularly when viewed in the context of the smaller nations of Early Modern Europe.

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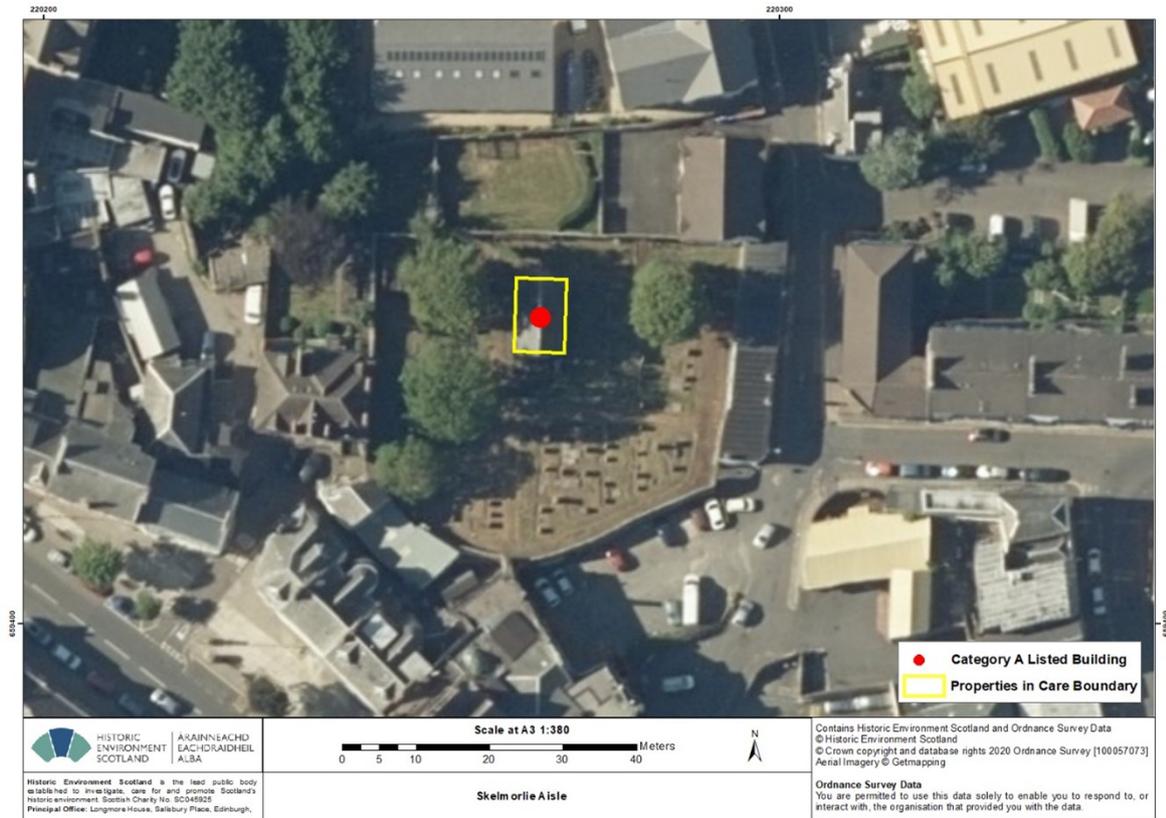
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Figure 1: Skelmorlie Aisle, Property in Care (PIC) boundary. For illustrative purposes only.

Figure 2 (not pictured here): The plan of the Aisle included within Macgibbon and Ross, Volume 5, p197, is accessible from the Internet Archive: [The castellated and domestic architecture of Scotland from the twelfth to the eighteenth century (archive.org)](#) (accessed: 09 January 2024).

The above paragraphs highlight the key aspects of Skelmorlie Aisle's importance, and the following sections give more detail and address a broader range of values for the site.

2. ASSESSMENT OF VALUES

2.1 Background

Skelmorlie Aisle was built in 1636 by Sir Robert Montgomerie (d.1651). Its purpose was threefold: a memorial to his wife, Dame Margaret Douglas (d.1624); a Laird's Loft (private seating space) for the Montgomerie family attending service; and the eventual resting place of Sir Robert, in the vault below, alongside his wife. The monument can be understood on many levels and carries a series of symbolic meanings. The form of the monument as a triumphal arch may indeed represent the underlying conception of this work of art - triumph over death by salvation. Because of this complexity, an extended appendix (Appendix 1) describes and discusses the monument in detail, addressing both its symbolic and physical manifestations. This background section therefore contains only a brief overview.

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The town of Largs is set between the River Gogo and the Noddesdale Water and lies opposite the isle of Great Cumbrae. The Aisle was constructed abutting the medieval parish church of St Columba (demolished 1812). The relationship between the Church and the development of the town and its street pattern is significant and is described at Appendix 1 section A1.1. The old parish church graveyard has been out of use since the later 19th century and is surrounded by a rubble walled graveyard (not in State care). The graveyard's main gateway aligns on the Aisle and the lower portions of it are likely to have been part of Montgomerie's scheme for the Aisle.

Outwardly the Aisle is a simple rectangular ashlar-walled structure with symmetrically placed door and windows and a high, pitched roof. Originally, its southern gable adjoined and opened into the medieval church. The exterior is restrained though finely finished with decorative carving consistent with the best contemporary work.

The Aisle would have lain opposite the pulpit of the now demolished church and internally it divides into three main elements:

- The ground floor of the aisle, on the same level as the church floor and which would presumably be seating area for lesser family members and retainers. The back third of this space is taken up by the triumphal arch above and the vault below. Above the whole area of the aisle is the elaborately painted barrel-vaulted ceiling.

- the upper level where the elaborate triumphal arch monument acts also as a laird's gallery.

- The vault which lies below the triumphal arch and below ground level and which contains the lead caskets of Sir Robert and Dame Margaret.

- A fourth element is the access between the levels by stairs. The vault could also be accessed by a hatch in the aisle floor. The hatch is positioned at the junction of the journey from the upper level down to the vault (or vice versa) and this central location seems highly symbolic and is discussed further at Appendix 1 section A1.9.

The whole composition is therefore shot-through with symbolic meanings and emblems further discussed in Appendix 1.

Little is known of Sir Robert Montgomerie, aside from the fact that he inherited a modest-sized estate in north Ayrshire,[6] was knighted by James VI and created a baronet by Charles I.[7] Dame Margaret is similarly elusive; the daughter of Sir William Douglas of Hawick, her mother, also named Margaret, was the daughter of James Gordon of Lochinvar.[8]

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[6] Callaghan 2013, 19.
[7] Brown 2003, 207.
[8] Paul 1910, 129.

2.2 Evidential values

While research into the Skelmorlie Aisle is far from exhaustive, a number of studies have allowed the revelation of some of the meanings of the place. The key evidential values of the site are embodied in the structures and relationships of the monument and its context, both tangible and intangible.

There is very high potential for further research work to increase understanding. Some key themes noted in this Statement include:

- The complex, multi-layered symbolism combining family, religious and political themes and including masonic iconography which underlies the design conception.

- The use of mathematical proportion in the design of the whole work.

- The way the architectural and decorative schemes demonstrate artistic currents, placing Scotland in wider European and 'British' contexts.

- The potential identification of Montgomery of Lochranza as the designer and the more certain identification of J Stalker, painter, allowing enhanced understanding of relationships with other contemporary sites.

The wider setting and relationships of the aisle to its physical context, offering a better understanding of how the site was perceived over time.

2.3 Historical values

- The aisle is an extreme rarity, so many comparators having been lost or spoiled. It displays the cultural excellence, sophistication, cosmopolitanism and scholarship of early 17th century Scotland's social elite.

- The aisle illustrates how in early 17th century Scotland's architecture was utilised as a vehicle for conveying meanings and signals through use of emblems and symbols.

- The particular association with Montgomerie and Margaret Douglas as historical figures is important and it is frustrating that currently we know so little about them or their context

- The aisle is an illustration of the importance of religion in Scotland, illuminating private and public worship and attitudes to death and indeed to marriage and personal relationships.

2.4 Architectural and artistic values

- The Skelmorlie Aisle is the superlative representative of its building type and period in Scotland. Its creation clearly involved the country's top craftsmen, designers and specialists, and it bears comparison in its sophistication and quality with work elsewhere in Early Modern Europe.

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- Locally: the aisle – the only element both to survive and to be highlighted of pre-Improvement Period Largs – is generally regarded as Largs's greatest historic building (should we, for avoidance of debate, exclude Kelburn Castle from comparison, it being significantly outwith the town).

2.5 Landscape and aesthetic values

- The aisle, particularly on the basis of the proposed urban analysis, (see Appendix 1 section A1.1) can be regarded as representing the heart of an early, possibly early medieval, urbanising complex, river crossing and road junction; denoting the choice of site considered appropriate as a centre of religious and secular authority and of justice.

- Largs's early town plan appears to have been dictated to a significant extent by the location chosen for the church (and mound alongside), which in turn is that of the aisle.

2.6 Natural heritage values

The bedrock geology belongs to the Kelly Burn Sandstone Formation, with Raised Marine Deposits of Holocene Age.[9]

The property in care is surrounded by amenity grassland, of little value to wildlife, and at the time of writing (February 2020) is not protected by any natural heritage designations. The aisle does, however, contain features suitable for roosting bats, and there are a number of lichen species, growing on the neighbouring gravestones and drystone wall, which are of local significance.

2.7 Contemporary/use values

Skelmorlie Aisle makes a significant contribution to the heritage of Largs as arguably the most important historic building in the town and has a close relationship with Largs Museum. Volunteers from the Museum help operate the site and open it to visitors: they estimate about 50% of the Museum's visitors will also visit the Aisle.

Occasional visits for school parties and special interest groups. St Columba's parish Church opens its Heritage Centre over the summer and displays memorabilia including material of relevance to the Aisle.

Online reviews of the site are generally very positive and often comment on being 'blown away' by the magnificence of the interior. This is particularly true of local visitors who have not visited before and had not previously realised the importance of the site.

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[9] BGS 2020.

A further connection is with US visitors, particularly those associated with Clan Montgomery(ie) who are particularly appreciative of the site and are a particular component of the visitor traffic.

3. MAJOR GAPS IN UNDERSTANDING

- The client is known, but save for having the name of artist J. Stalker, whoever else was involved is unknown. The coherence of the whole structure indicates that there was an overall designer or design team; and the likelihood is that such a person or team knew the court school of the east extremely well, and that potentially numerous specialists were drawn from there, in particular for the monument's design and execution–. But who?

- Can more be learned of Margaret Douglas, to whom the monument is dedicated, or her husband, Sir Robert Montgomerie?

- Little is known of artist J. Stalker or of the sculptor/s and Sawers artists who might have been engaged here too.

- The monument's symbolism awaits interpretation by an emblem specialist.

- What was Montgomerie of Lochranza's ability as an architect?

- More work is needed on determining the way geometric proportion has informed the design. This means producing reliably-accurate survey drawings (not yet existing, though in hand).

- The relationship of the aisle and kirkyard to the nearby 'mound' and to the medieval town plan needs closer investigation than that provided here.

- Little is known of the former parish church against which the aisle was built. It was not possible to determine its footprint via the geophysical survey completed in 2014,[10] however, with further work it may be possible to determine its extent and date of construction. The site and the graveyard are of considerable archaeological sensitivity, particularly the likely area of the old parish church immediately south of the Aisle.

- Continental sources/parallels for the arrangements discussed above concerning uses applied to upper/lower levels and triumphal-arch processional routes for the dead should be investigated.

- Is it possible to determine whether the monument itself was once richly coloured?

4. ASSOCIATED PROPERTIES

Other related properties in State care: **Grandtully Church,** for its painted ceilings**.**

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[10] Rose Geophysical Consultants LLP, 2014.

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Related properties outwith State care: Skelmorlie Castle, the patron's main residence, is at the parish's northwest end, but is in private ownership. Similarities of certain details are noted with Rowallan Castle; Forbes of Pitsligo Laird's Loft.

5. KEYWORDS

Aisle; Skelmorlie; Montgomerie; monument; Stalker; painted ceiling; symbolism; the seasons; religious texts; vault; gothic; court style; geometry; proportion; sculpture; Master of Work.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: DETAILED DESCRIPTION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF SKELMORLIE AISLE

A1.1 Locational context and setting within the urban plan

The present town of Largs has developed from an ancient coastal settlement, set between two rivers (the Gogo Water and Noddsdale Water), and at the crossing of the Gogo Water, opposite the isle of Great Cumbrae. Here was a medieval church dedicated to St Columba, suggesting a possibly Early Christian period origin for this being a Christian site. It was to the medieval structure that the Skelmorlie Aisle would be appended in 1636. Poorly documented, the church was demolished and superseded by a new church nearby in 1812,[11] leaving the Skelmorlie Aisle free-standing. The high-level moulding on the exterior of the Aisle's south gable, indicates where the eaves level of the church was, but otherwise, its construction date, style or form – save that latterly it was a rectangle – are all unknown (see below for OS evidence and discussion of painting

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[11] Anon [Dobie] 1845, 9.

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within the aisle itself). To the anonymous (but well-informed) author of the *Statistical Account* supplementary report in the 1790s, the church was 'an old building, erected before the Reformation, but at what period is uncertain'.[12] Its outline is indicated on the 1855 OS survey; an orthodox rectangle orientated east-west (such orientation normally being evidence of a pre-Reformation origin or structure), but by then, apparently fragmentary footings alone.[13] Only this one aisle is known to have been added; puzzlingly, there was seemingly no Kelburn aisle. It was built onto the church's north long-wall, in conformity with the standard arrangement of the wider period (compare to Durisdeer begun c.1695).[14] The preference for Scotland's Reformed worship was that the south wall of a church should be well-lit, and the pulpit placed centrally between two large south-facing windows. Here, however, the aisle was set slightly east of centre. This perhaps suggests that the pre-Reformation structure had not been modified sufficiently to accommodate the pulpit centrally, as the aisle would most probably have faced the pulpit directly.

Close by the kirkyard, to its northwest, are the remains of a substantial earthen mound, now enclosed and difficult to access. Today it is known as 'The Gallows Hill', but it was given no name when described in 1847, as follows: 'a large tumulus or mound of earth …of an elliptical form, measures in length about 25 yards, is 9 in breadth, and between 4 and 5 in height.'[15]

19th century local popular tradition claimed that this mound was the burial place of Norsemen killed at the Battle of Largs in 1263, but that theory was probably disproved by 19th-century excavators.[16] In 1997, I. B. Kerr concluded it was a motte.[17] This is plausible and would mean its neighbouring relationship to the church would have compared with, say Petty, Inverness.[18] Another option, which Kerr suggested as a potentially subsequent use, is that this mound, like comparators at nearby Beith[19] and Dalry[20] (each known as 'Court Hill'), was formerly a medieval moot hill. Such places of assembly, and of law-giving and justice (a version of the famous royal example at Scone)[21] – were optionally near a religious centre or church (in this instance, Dalry compares; Beith does not). In such arrangements, the two structures further each other's status as defining an accepted place of authority, power, legislation and justice. Consequently, the prestige and importance of this wider site was most probably significant, while the still-extant placename 'Gallowgate' to the north, further indicates the significance and governmental function of this tight area. The medieval 'town centre' lay diagonally opposite from the mound to the south-east, where the Main Street still today widens at the former market place at Hyndman's Green/ Tron Place (the latter name identifying where the tron, or public weigh-beam for market produce, was placed).

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[12] *The Statistical Account of Scotland,* vol. vi, 427.
[13] National Library of Scotland, OS map 25 inch (1st edition), 1855, Ayrshire III.12 (Largs) (maps.nls.uk).
[14] Canmore ID 46336 - Durisdeer Parish Church (canmore.org.uk).
[15] Anon [Dobie] 1845, 10.
[16] Canmore ID 41185 - Largs (Mound) (canmore.org.uk).
[17] Kerr 1997, 4.
[18] Canmore ID 14218 - Old Petty (Motte) (canmore.org.uk)
[19] Canmore ID 42181 - Beith, Court Hill (Moot Hill) (canmore.org.uk)
[20] Canmore ID 40989 - Courthill, Dalry (Cairn) (canmore.org.uk)
[21] Canmore ID 28191 - Scone Palace, Moot Hill (canmore.org.uk)

North of the market place area, Gateside Street appears also to be medieval, or at least predates the Age of Improvement. Its building lines are irregular, and its width varies along its length, all indicating some antiquity. It is orientated approximately east-west, and its west end flares out slightly before its terminus. This flaring was previously more evident, as shown by the 1855 OS survey,[22] but is still apparent today. The same survey shows that, prior to the development now terminating the street's west end (currently a funeral director's), its actual terminus was simply the kirkyard; that is it reached directly towards the church and kirkyard; where a gate remains. The lower ashlars and courses of the gateway structure itself may be 17–18th century (or earlier); it has been rebuilt or heightened.

Street names with the word 'gate' typically describe function, or where a roadway leads (compare nearby Gallowgate [='the road to the gallows']). But it is possible that in this instance the word bore the modern sense; indicating that parishioners from the inland areas to the east, entered the town on this road. That is, possibly Gateside Street represents the old road into the town from the eastern/north-eastern uplands; its line and orientation dictated by the pre-existence of the religious site. The existence of the present (dated) gate at Manse Place proves that the kirkyard was both walled and gated in the 17th century; this gate's location was convenient primarily for those arriving from the coast road or by boat rather than for those arriving from either the 'town centre' or the east. The aisle's east face (today, it's 'rear') was possibly executed in ashlar because it was therefore an elevation that would be seen by many. The aisle's front was to the west – convenient for the gate that the Skelmorlie family would have used, as already noted.

The kirkyard has a curved/near-semi-circular plan, being squared abruptly at its north. It is hence conceivable that there had once been a formal circular layout enclosing the church. The placing and orientation of the kirkyard's main gateway, at the head of a flight of steps, arguably responds to the kirkyard's curved perimeter lay-out rather than to the lost church's orientation or a porch. The steps underline the (today less obvious) fact that the site chosen for the church was elevated abruptly on its west/south-west side. To this gateway's immediate west, on the lower level at Manse Court, stood what in 1855 was denoted the 'Old Manse'.[23] Hence further indicating the focus of the early town planners on emphasising this part of the settlement as pre-eminent. (That building was demolished in the early 20th century.)

From the former market area, Main Street heads directly towards the pier. Its north side, however (at numbers 21–47), tilts slightly towards the north before its more westerly neighbour (numbers 7–17) reverses that tilt. This suggests that the street's present line responds to where the pier is, and that formerly, this road northwards out of town had curved to pass more closely by the kirkyard gate, continuing its course north by hugging the base of Gallows Hill (that is, taking a route behind the existing frontal buildings). This theory is supported by the alignment of some walling near the south-west side of the Gallows Hill's and represented on the 1855 OS map. The location of Gallowgate Square further to the north, with obliquely-set buildings (Numbers 36–56 Gallowgate), indicates another punctuation mark within this early town plan to have

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[22] National Library of Scotland, OS map 25 inch (1st edition), 1855, Ayrshire III.12 (Largs) (maps.nls.uk)
[23] National Library of Scotland, OS map 25 inch (1st edition), 1855, Ayrshire III.12 (Largs) (maps.nls.uk)

survived Largs's otherwise very extensive reconstructions. It is possible that this was in fact the original gallows area, as the name of today's 'Gallowgate Lane' potentially further indicates.

Ultimately, it seems fair to conclude that the kirk or kirkyard and the nearby mound, today known as the Gallows Hill, represented a still-evident consolidated centre of religious and secular power. This was also a convergence of three ancient roads into/exiting the town, albeit hardly a clear trinity as was designed for St Andrews.[24]

The gateway at Manse Place is discussed below.

A1.2 The Property in Care (PIC)

Following the Reformation in 1560, patrons could no longer endow chapels or altars in the Roman Catholic tradition. Instead, elite families constructed private areas for themselves and their families and households, which opened into the church. Sometimes a liturgically obsolete or superfluous chancel area, or simply the east end, might be taken over for the purpose or for a family mausoleum (for example, Oldhamstocks),[25] thereby transferring the supremacy of the location to the laird. More frequently, a purpose-built aisle was constructed to contain a loft, possibly a burial vault, and usually, a piecemeal addition of mural monuments.

It is clear that the Skelmorlie Aisle was conceived as an entity, because its various elements all cohere. The narrative below argues that it can be firmly connected to the Edinburgh-based fashion and group of architectural specialists connected with the royal works, government and courtier projects. This defines a period of architectural and sculptural (and, not irrelevantly, scientific and academic) excellence, which extended over the several decades up to the late 1630s when civil unrest was followed by war. From at least 1607 until 1633 or 1634 (the year of his death) the leading figure in developing and promulgating the new fashion of the period was James Murray of Kilbaberton. Murray was King's Master of Work or royal architect and was knighted in 1633. Since 1626, Murray had been conjoined in post with Anthony Alexander (d. 1637), son of the courtier Earl of Stirling, and who had in turn been knighted in 1635.[26] This new architecture has been denoted the 'court style' (or 'absentee court style', the monarchy having emigrated in 1603), on the basis that it characterised the distinctive architecture created for James VI & I and Charles I, plus numerous of their courtiers, amongst whom it was generally accepted as the appropriate fashion and style to denote their status.[27]

Sir Robert Montgomerie and Dame Margaret Douglas

The client for the aisle was Sir Robert Montgomerie (1571–1650), who in 1583 succeeded as seventh laird of Skelmorlie. The aisle's initial main 'theme' was to memorialise Skelmorlie's wife, Dame Margaret Douglas. Margaret had been a daughter of Sir William Douglas of Drumlanrig, and according to tradition, had been killed by a

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[24] Refer to I. Campbell paper on processional layout of St Andrews.
[25] Canmore ID 58913 - Oldhamstocks Parish Church (canmore.org.uk)
[26] MacKechnie 2012, 15–49.
[27] Glendinning and MacKechnie 2019, 58.

horse's kick in 1624. The couple had married on 15 November 1593, and she had been a noted beauty, as was celebrated in the poetry of Alexander Montgomerie ('…Jem of Jeuels…'), James VI's court poet and a kinsman of the Skelmorlie family.[28] Montgomerie added to his estates, and in or before 1635 he gained the patronage and tiends [=tithes] of Largs, all of which made him wealthier. Perhaps this latter acquisition – connected, as it was, with the parish – both inspired and facilitated his decision to commission the construction of this new and expensive family aisle.[29] The *Statistical Account* report of the 1790s shows a recognition of the aisle's value, as well as associated local tradition:

> In the north side [of the church] is an aile, containing an elegant monument, belonging to Colonel Montgomery of Skelmurly. It forms an arch and two compartments, supported by 18 pillars, of the Corinthian order, surmounted with cherubims. Above the arch is a small pyramid, finished at the top with a globe. It is very richly carved, and with great taste, considering the time in which it was built, namely, in 1636./ On the roof of the aile are painted the 12 signs of the zodiac, and several views of the house of Skelmurly; with the premature death of a lady of the family, who was killed by the kick of a horse./ It is likewise adorned with several texts of Scripture, and various escutcheons of the different members of that ancient family.[30]

This new-made aisle was alienated from the usual Presbyterian restraint, otherwise demanded in a Post-Reformation Scotland. The creation of a complex painted ceiling which included religious images, and a triumphal arch / monument resembling that in Westminster Abbey (provided by James VI & I for his Catholic mother, Mary I, Queen of Scots) all made for what had once been, and may still have been, a crypto-Catholic family. Whilst the Skelmorlie family presented itself in the 1630s as Covenanting Presbyterians; the issue remains not proven.[31] Maybe significantly, if this aisle's decoration represented a covert family faith, the laird's grandson Sir James Montgomerie of Skelmorlie (c.1654–1694), fourth baronet, was afterwards a 'Jacobite conspirator'.[32]

It may be relevant to highlight here the Forbes of Pitsligo family loft of 1634. In terms of sculptural richness, this is the closest comparator to the Skelmorlie triumphal arch / monument. As at Skelmorlie, the Pitmedden family vault was part-sunk beneath the loft, but there, the sculptured loft decoration was in timber. Its inscriptions include the letters 'BMV' – unambiguous Catholic symbolism, denoting *Beata Maria Virgine*.[33] So if Pitmedden is a viable comparator, then the Skelmorlie Aisle's sumptuousness combined with its hinting at being a private chapel (see below), as opposed to being designed as

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[28] Parkinson 2000, vol. 1, 124; vol 2, 111–2.

[29] 'In Charles I's reign, the patronage and tithes of the church of Largs passed from the Earl of Abercorn to Sir Robert Montgomery of Skelmorlie, who, in 1636, erected, in an aisle on the north side of the church, a handsome burial-place and monument' (*New Statistical Account,* vol. v, 806. Report dated April 1842).

[30] *The Statistical Account of Scotland,* vol. vi, 427–8.

[31] For instance, in 1637, signing himself 'SKELMURLIE', the laird signed the petition from the congregation of Largs against the imposition of the Episcopal service book colloquially known as 'Laud's liturgy' (*Register of the Privy Council of Scotland* (second series) vol vi, 701 [hereafter RPC]) and Angela Callaghan tested the theory that this was simply a front to protect himself/ themselves, noting that Montgomerie of Skelmorlie also signed the National Covenant (Callaghan 2013).

[32] Hopkins 2014, 854–5.

[33] Walker and Woodworth 2015, 334.

an acquiescently subordinate part of the kirk (compare Pencaitland, 1631), was possibly a covert anti-Presbyterian gesture or signal.[34]

A1.3 The kirkyard gate

Although the kirkyard gate lies outwith the PIC, it is discussed here as a structure which is (in part) contemporary with the Aisle and is related to it. The gate is set into a high section of the kirkyard wall. It comprises a wide segmental arch with neatly-moulded rybats and voussoirs. Clearly intended to be impressive, today it compares in width and height with 17th-century castle forecourt gates, such as those of Rowallan[35] or Midhope,[36] or (being segmental- rather than round-arched) pend openings such as that formerly at Glasgow's College. However, the upper part is not original, meaning that the gate's original form is unknown. What is clear, though, is that the lower part dates from 1636 (as it is dated) and that it is uncommonly wide for its time, albeit it can hardly have been accessible by coach. Its neat quality of masonry is such as to connect it comfortably to the aisle. It has been shown that the kirkyard wall was heightened by four feet in c.1830 to deter body-snatchers.[37]

The gate's function was security, but it may also have been intended to demarcate the transition from the secular to the religious worlds. By using far more emphasis to do so than an orthodox narrow gateway could achieve (such as that at the southeast corner, opposite), it also signalled the opulence of the laird. (In England, the transition was frequently marked by lychgates.)

The gateway may represent a rare building type, because few such kirkyard gates survive today with an archway set into a high wall (Edinburgh's Greyfriars' Kirkyard has two). However, as shown, there is no evidence to indicate that it was originally arched. It is nonetheless an interesting illustration of lairdly investment (and also of early 19th century reactions to body snatching), and of the engagement of the highest quality masons in this 'remote' western location. Its primary significance is, however, the fact that it relates to and thereby enhances the value and the integrity of the aisle and thus of the wider site.

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[34] Some aisles added to a church tended to be more externally distinct from the 1660s (for example, Dirleton).
[35] Canmore ID 42975 - Rowallan Castle (canmore.org.uk)
[36] Canmore ID 49168 - Midhope Castle (canmore.org.uk)
[37] Hugh Miller explained: 'after the Burke and Hare crimes in 1828 Largs formed the Burying Watch Society and it took upon itself the burden of adding four feet to the existing wall of the old churchyard —- the stones being taken from the old Kirk. Iron gates were also put on the kirkyard, besides which a watch was kept. (Information from Anne Cowgill, Largs and District Historical Society, 13 November 2019).

Figure 3: Skelmorlie aisle exterior from north-west © Crown Copyright: HES.

A1.4 The aisle

Exterior

The aisle is single storeyed and rectangular in plan, it is slated and gable-roofed, with gable finials. The two finials are said to be a thistle over the south gable (that which connected to the church), and a *fleur-de-lis* on that opposite,[38] the combination referencing union in accord with the formulae of the style (though no English rose exists, nor Irish harp, to complete the sequence).[39] Its walls are of dressed ashlar, inside and outside, denoting it as a building of high distinction. The floors are stone-flagged, and, unusually for such structures, the west flank or long-wall is centre-doored and symmetrical, unlike other burial aisles where the door was typically off-centre on an asymmetrical flank wall, for example Pencaitland (1631); Dirleton (1664). Instead, the aisle resembles a little private chapel such as the also buckle-quoined[40] Ferniehurst Chapel (possibly 1620s),[41] Fordell (dated 1650),[42] or the Michael Kirk at Gordonstoun (1705).[43] This was not a building type advocated by Scottish Presbyterians, but chosen

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[38] *This was uncertain when viewed from the ground during a site visit in the dull weather of 11 November 2019.*

[39] Glendinning and MacKechnie 2019, 27.

[40] Quoins – stones at the corners of the building - carved to resemble buckles was a feature of the court style found also at Skelmorlie Aisle and discussed further in this section

[41] Canmore ID 231534 - Ferniehurst Castle, Chapel (canmore.org.uk)

[42] Canmore ID 50866 - Fordell Chapel (canmore.org.uk)

[43] Canmore ID 16119 - Gordonstoun, Michael Kirk (canmore.org.uk)

by some very few wealthy elites, and tolerated by the kirk. Each structure is similarly rectangular, centre-doored on its long-wall, and windowed and symmetrical on what was presented as its front. So, Montgomerie wanted an aisle which conflicted with the usual formula - something far more ambitious, far richer, far more symbolic. He wanted a structure that would be superior to the Kinnoull Aisle,[44] built in 1635 to contain the monument to no less a figure than Lord Chancellor George Hay, first Earl of Kinnoull (d.1634).[45] At this time, James VI & I's extraordinarily sculptural and rich Episcopal royal chapel of 1617 in Holyroodhouse still existed (it escaped the iconoclasts until the 1640s), and Skelmorlie's aisle, even if inspired by Holyrood's magnificence, would have seemed comparatively inoffensive to Presbyterians, and tame in comparison.
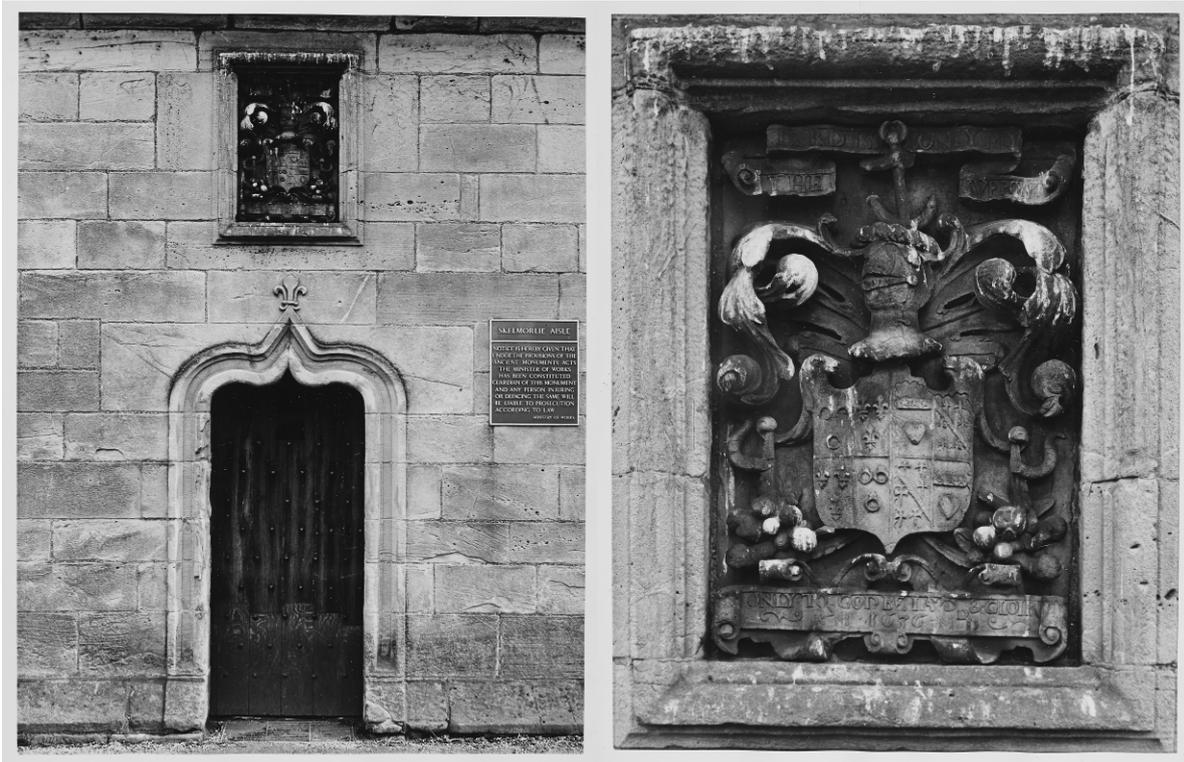
Figures 4a and 4b: Flattened-ogee door surround (4a) and detail of armorial panel above (4b), both © Crown Copyright: HES.

The Skelmorlie door-surround has the characteristic flat-recess moulding of the court style (Figure 4a). Its doorhead is a flattened, if uncommonly vigorous-looking, ogee – a form rather more popular in the decades around 1700 than the 1630s (compare Acheson House gateway, 1679;[46] Craigdarroch House, 1729[47]).[48] The overdoor armorial panel, dated 1636,[49] bears the quartered armorials of Montgomerie and Eglinton impaled with Douglas and Mar, religious messages ('THE LORD IS ONLY MY SUPPORT'; 'TO GOD BE LAVD & GLOIR'), and initials denoting Sir Robert Montgomerie and Dame Margaret Douglas.[50] Of course the armorial need not necessarily date the building into

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[44] Canmore ID 28253 - Kinnoull, Old Parish Church (canmore.org.uk)
[45] Gifford 2007, 648–50.
[46] Canmore ID 52525 - Edinburgh, 140 Canongate, Acheson House (canmore.org.uk)
[47] Canmore ID 64854 - Craigdarroch (Country House) (canmore.org.uk)
[48] NRS GD77/204/1 (estimate for building the new house, 1726).
[49] Dobie pointed to a mistake in the heraldry (Anon (Dobie) 1845, 11).
[50] Anon (Dobie) 1845, 11.

which it is lodged, but the other architectural signals do indicate a date which accords with that; the detailing being of Scotland's absentee-court style of the East/Edinburgh area. For example,

- the windows have curve-ended lintels / 'basket arches' (Figure 3), a characteristic and legacy formula from the national tradition (and shared with France) but which re-emerged as a favoured profile within the group (for instance, the 1620s corridor arch profiles of Winton House;[51] and the low-level vault lintel on the Skelmorlie triumphal arch / monument itself);

- the corners have buckle quoins: a pattern – expensive to sculpt – devised it seems for James Murray's own Kilbaberton House (dated 1622–3),[52] copied most notably at George Heriot's Hospital (begun 1628),[53] and used in variant if simplified form here at Skelmorlie, and today seen also at Rowallan and at Glasgow's Tolbooth Steeple (the Tolbooth itself having gone).[54] The model, an inventive form correspondent with the precedent designs from the Netherlands of Vredeman de Vries (see below), made the building seem almost like a reliquary. It signalled a lavishness, and unrestrained expenditure, a display of wealth. It is here a rarity, being one of only three such examples known to exist in the west of Scotland.[55]

Figure 5: Detail of buckle quoins © Crown Copyright: HES.

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[51] [Canmore ID 54717 - Winton House (canmore.org.uk)](canmore.org.uk)
[52] [Canmore ID 50265 - Baberton House (canmore.org.uk)](canmore.org.uk)
[53] [Canmore ID 52134 - Edinburgh, Lauriston Place, George Heriot's School, Main Building (canmore.org.uk)](canmore.org.uk)
[54] [Canmore ID 44281 - Glasgow, High Street, Tolbooth Steeple (canmore.org.uk)](canmore.org.uk)
[55] MacKechnie 1988, 107–19.

The fact that there are seven 'buckle' faces on the quoins either side of the main front might carry a symbolic meaning (Figure 5). The number appears frequently in the Bible (most obviously in the Book of Genesis, which tells of the earth being created in seven days). The Book of Revelation states at 10:7: 'But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets', which *might* have been considered apt for a burial aisle. Catholic symbolism for this number includes the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit, as set out by St Thomas Aquinas (one of which is Fortitude, portrayed on the ceiling inside – see below); another is the Seven Sacraments, as defined by the Council of Trent (1545–63). The number is significant to Freemasonry too, and it has been argued by James Coghlan that the building has masonic symbolism.[56]

In the north gable is a window comprising essentially identical two-over-two openings (almost resembling Kilbirnie's aisle windows of 1597)[57] save that the upper openings have cusped heads. Its simplified Gothic design accords with the heavy-traceried form (it has what Dobie considered 'a strong mullion')[58] seen most resoundingly at Archbishop Spottiswoode's model episcopal church at Dairsie (1621),[59] where it was used to signal the antiquity of Episcopacy. That is – *possibly* the aisle was intended to covertly signal a preference for Episcopacy over Presbyterianism, but such an interpretation is tenuous.

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[56] Coghlan 2019.
[57] Canmore ID 42216 - Kilbirnie Parish Church and Cemetery (canmore.org.uk)
[58] Anon (Dobie) 1845, 11.
[59] Canmore ID 32904 - Dairsie, Old Church (canmore.org.uk)

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Figure 6: View of triumphal arch or monument, with hatch to the lower stairs open. Looking north-east © Crown Copyright: HES.

Interior

Inside, there are two immediate levels; the entrance door opens at ground level, and to the left, which means most distant from the church, but intended to face the pulpit, is a platformed area upon which is the triumphal arch / monument, and behind which the laird's family would sit. Others of their household would have been placed in the lower area beneath, whose floor level probably met that of the church. Under the platformed area is a half-sunk vault, discussed below.

Directly facing the entrance door is a stair which conducts to a platt on the east side of the monument, and from that platt, the stair continues at right angles to access the loft. This stair has tapered de Vriesian square-section balusters which are entirely a Ministry of Works replacement – some fragments of the originals are in the vault beneath (for de

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Vries, see below).[60] The stone treads are original and are sophisticated by having projecting nosings. At the head of this stair is a doorway, one jamb of which is sculptured stonework integral with the monument; the other being in timber, indicating that the building's shell was complete before the monument was installed. Over this doorway is a stone pediment, dated 1639 on each face. Its timber door looks original, with silhouetted baluster profiles. Opposite, on the corresponding (west) side of the monument, a stone balustrade – only one of whose balusters is original – answers the stairs opposite and completes the enclosure of the loft space. All of which suggests that the monument clearly formed an integral element within the initial and entire conception.

Figure 7: Illustration depicting helmet and iron pennons with coats of arms, on left of image. Included in MacGibbon and Ross, vol 5, p194 © Courtesy of HES.

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[60] An engraving published by Fraser in 1859 shows the bottom two balusters gone, the remainder arranged alternately baluster/ tapered. MacGibbon and Ross's drawing, published 1892, shows the arrangement as now (MacGibbon and Ross 1892, vol. 5, 194, 197). The view in Fraser's book also shows a confusing glazing arrangement in the north window, which includes a latticed panel (Fraser 1859, vol. 1, facing 160).

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In, 1892 it was recorded by MacGibbon and Ross, that:

> Projecting from the top of the cornice hung a series of iron pennons with coats of arms emblazoned on them. Of these decorations only a few with the arms faintly coloured, together with some helmets… now remain.[61]

These are gone. But the authors provided a drawing of the interior (Figure 7; their fig. 1310) showing that the pennons flew from near-upright metal rods; and the arrangement is confirmed in W H Ross's drawing of 1889.[62] Precisely how these related to where the helmets hung is less obvious. Only one helmet survives today, no longer in the building, but available to view digitally as a 3D model.[63] How many there had once been is unknown, but they would have been at risk of removal in 1839 for display at the neo-chivalric Eglinton Tournament of that year. Presumably these escutcheons were the ones noticed by Dobie in 1847, who stated that the oldest dated from 1694, and 'the demise of Sir James Montgomery, the third [sic; recte 4th] baronet of Skelmorlie'. Dobie also highlighted other escutcheons and 'funeral banners of sheet iron… from both sides of which the armorials have been long since obliterated by damp and corrosion'.[64] No escutcheons are within the building today.

The aisle's south side comprises an enormous round arch – its maximum width open, originally, to the church and introduced by a shallow flat band, but of course the opening was blocked off c.1812 and is now most clearly articulated by the original and now-external edge-moulding plus a plain lancet window in the infill walling (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Arch on south side of Aisle, which previously opened to the former parish church, prior to its demolition in 1812 © Crown Copyright: HES.

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[61] MacGibbon and Ross 1892, vol. 5, 195.
[62] Dobie 1899, plate X. See also: DSA Architect Biography Report - William Harvey Ross (scottisharchitects.org.uk)
[63] Accessible at: Sketchfab: Mort helmet, Skelmorlie Aisle 3D model (sketchfab.com)
[64] Anon (Dobie) 1845, 21–2.

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A1.5 Proportion

Elite Scottish architecture of the wider period during which the aisle was built was governed by a particular geometric proportion. This emphasised not simply 45-degree and right angles, but also 30- and 60-degree angles, or triangulation.[65] Here, for example, and most clearly, an inverted equilateral triangle defines and dictates the positioning of the door's threshold centre and the gable finials (Figure 3); the window proportions and (save on the east side) locations appear to be governed in the same way, while in section another equilateral triangle appears to govern the triumphal arch / monument's main cornice positioning in relation the floor's width. A comparison with 1630s Parliament House[66] shows precisely these same 'rules' being followed at precisely this same time in the architecture of this same elite class, albeit accurate drawings of the aisle are required to test the conclusions advanced here.[67]

A1.6 The Triumphal arch or monument: Background, and a putative school of sculpture

The ancient tradition of Scottish sculpture was a casualty of the 'pure' form of the 1560 Reformation; the still-empty niches in medieval churches demonstrate both the destruction of the Reformation and the halting of ecclesiastical patronage. However, in contrast, the 1610s–late 1630s was marked by a new and discrete phase of sculptural excellence, centred in the Edinburgh area, and characterised by a 'Scoto-Netherlandish' strapwork-detailed ornament.[68]

There were – rather confusingly – two immediate drivers for this change, unhelpfully difficult to disentangle. The primary, or artistic, driver was Dutch Mannerism, shaped by the work of Hans Vredeman de Vries (1526–1609); author, architect, artist, designer, engineer and draughtsman. His publications, notably *Architectura,* in 1577, revolutionised the character of Renaissance architecture, not least in Scotland whose direct links with the Low Countries were of course historically, culturally and commercially strong. A second driver for this change came from the similarly de Vriesian 'Anglo-Dutch' fashion in England, where in 1605 by King James VI & I had commissioned the tombs in Westminster Abbey of both his mother, Queen Mary, and of her executioner Queen Elizabeth in the style.

In Scotland, there arrived a second and political element to accompany this fashion's invigoration. Once seated on the throne of England (and Ireland) in 1603, King James VI & I inaugurated a programme of assimilating Scotland to England; a project that was to be continued after his death in 1625.

This assimilating project was seen at the time most clearly in the religious arena, where James and both Charles I and II, pushed for Scotland to become Episcopalian. It also had its impact on architecture (notably, the flat-roofed palace blocks of the 1610s–20s which emulated English profiles); and, it has been argued, also on sculpture.

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[65] MacKechnie 2000, 10–3.
[66] Canmore ID 52512 - Edinburgh, 11 Parliament Square, Parliament Hall (canmore.org.uk)
[67] MacKechnie 2004, 94–134, fig. 2.18.
[68] MacKechnie 2019, 27–35.

The earliest example of the imported English or Anglo-Dutch fashion was a Scottish house in England – the Earl of Dunbar's mansion within Berwick Castle, left incomplete after his death in 1611 and afterwards demolished. The sculptor there was 'the Dutch carver' John Gospoole, some of whose work survives re-sited on Berwick's 1650s Parish Church. Its character is similar to that which was to follow in Scotland from the 1610s, notably amongst monuments at Greyfriars' kirkyard, George Heriot's Hospital, Winton House, Parliament House, and so on. The insistent use in Scotland from the 1610s of thistle and rose decoration (denoting Scottish-English accord or union) underscores how far architecture and sculpture were allotted the duty of propagating and disseminating the royal vision. But where the historian draws the line between viewing patrons selecting de Vriesian themes for reasons of fashion, or instead for politics, is generally debatable territory. Except, however, when used by the most dutiful courtiers such as Dunbar, or by the Earl of Stirling at the Argyll Lodging, in 1632, where the *absence* of any political narrative would seem bizarre. Consequently, it seems likely that the choice of a Scoto-Netherlandish formula would often – but not necessarily always – indicate royal alignment on the part of the client.

A characteristic of the new style was repetitive use of specific sculptural elements – a sort of 'family resemblance' – in a disparate variety of structures, as noticed above. The tented canopies, for instance, on the 1636 Foulis of Ravelston monument (Greyfriars') and the 1639 Katherine Forbes monument at Pencaitland are near-identical, proving a common link.

It has also been argued that for such a refined and definable sculptural grouping to have existed that there must have existed a sculpture 'school' for training sculptors and ensuring consistency and quality, and that such a school was led from the top, most likely by Kilbaberton. Who the sculptors were in specific instances is mostly unknown. Some English sculptors worked at the palaces in the 1610s, but, like Gospoole, they seem to have headed off again. William Wallace (d.1631), 'carver in stone' and afterwards 'principall maister massoun to all his Ma[jest]ties master warkis within this Realme of Scotland'[69] made the monument to John Byres of Coates (d.1629) in Greyfriars' kirkyard; and the above-mentioned Foulis of Ravelstoun monument was sculpted by William Ayton (d.possibly 1643), who as an architect reconstructed Innes House,[70] from around 1640.[71] Another sculptor of the period was Alexander Mylne (1613-43), father of King's Master Mason, Robert Mylne (d.1710). Alexander worked at Parliament House in the 1630s and seems to have carved one or other of the overdoor personifications of Justice and of Mercy. These sculptures are of excellent quality, and the Skelmorlie sculpture bears easy comparison with them.

From 1637, Charles I's politics regarding Scotland led to civil disobedience and civil wars in his three kingdoms, followed by English military conquest and a decade's military occupation, until 1660. The sculptural 'school' and its excellence died with the wars. Consequently, the sculpture from this superlative but narrow episode constitutes an invaluable national resource: this is one of Scotland's greatest contributions to Renaissance art, and the fact that this is generally little-known is deeply unfortunate.

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[69] Mylne 1893, 70.
[70] Canmore ID 16447 - Innes House (canmore.org.uk)
[71] McKean 2003, 315.

A1.7 The Skelmorlie triumphal arch or monument

The visual evidence makes it clear that it is to this group of monuments and structures that the Skelmorlie triumphal arch / monument belongs, and to this same putative sculptural 'school'. The date of 1639 on both sides of the doorhead pediment alongside – (integrated with, and constructed from the same material, and clearly therefore part of the same design) evidently dates the monument itself; meaning that it can probably be regarded as the last serious product of the grouping.

Who the actual carver(s) was/were is unknown. Stone analysis has confirmed the source to be local to this area of Ayrshire, meaning it has to be near-certain that it was executed either in situ or nearby; and the choice of a particularly fine-grained stone (its composition 'mostly very fine-sand-grade') evidences the professional understanding and input taken in choosing the material[72] – a stone that would take a fine polish and thereby imitate marble.

The monument's ornament and form derive ultimately from de Vries's work, best-known of which may be his *Architectura,* mentioned above. The aforementioned early 17th century monuments in Westminster Abbey to both Queen Elizabeth and Queen Mary were clearly influenced by his and by wider Netherlandish work, as also was this Skelmorlie monument. Mary's monument – an a-b-a triumphal arch arrangement, its canopy carried on Corinthian columns – may well have been a model for the Skelmorlie monument; referencing grandeur and high status. But it is also interesting to consider whether the allusion extended to embrace her Catholic faith. After all, symbolism interested the client hugely (as is particularly clear from the ceiling, as discussed below), and governed much of the aisle's design input. Yet there were sufficient differences between Skelmorlie's monument and that of Mary, to make any iconoclast's perceived connection, deniable (for example, the former has coupled columns, circular and square; Mary's has single columns).

Regarding the monument's detail, the de Vriesian pediments evidently closely resemble the formulae of contemporary work at Heriot's, Winton and elsewhere. But the distinguishing treatment of the central main frieze is a less obvious, but perhaps more tellingly singular element, connecting it to the court group of sculptures. It is articulated by narrow, shallow centre and end projections set between clear horizontal mouldings, all similar to the fireplace chimney-piece treatment of both Baberton House and its more elaborate counterpart at Winton. The similarity is unambiguous; and again, the source is Dutch.

The monument's symbolism is not fully understood and is likely to be complex and subtle. The obvious elements include symbols of death, such as the cherubs with spades, denoting the gravediggers. The topmost finial, on the other hand, has detailing which may connect it to the ceiling's messages. Firstly, it has of course four faces (as many as there are seasons). Each face is sculptured with its own theme – seemingly: war (weaponry and armour); mortality (skull and crossbones, etc.); music (that is leisure?);

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[72] Gerdwilker 2011, 6, 9. A similar stone was used at Seagate Castle, Irvine, where a similar need to produce fine detailed sculpture existed in the period 1562x1585 (Gerdwilker 2011, 9; MacKechnie forthcoming 2020).

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fruit (denoting agriculture, harvest abundance). All of which seems to connect with the ceiling's theme, noted and explained below, of *In utrumque paratus* (prepared for both).

The monument is dotted with the twinned initials of Dame Margaret and Sir Robert, while the intimate character of the aisle is shown by an inscription visible only from within the laird's loft, which speaks as if in Dame Margaret's voice. It is in Latin, and has been translated as follows:

> Twice times two and twice times ten years I lived a virgin life:
> Twice times three and thrice times ten, I cohabited with a husband.
> Twice I required the assistance of Lucina.
> My husband was the image of Paris:
> He still survives as the hope of his house.
> I, the female, was alone destined to die.
> My birth was noble, my mind was brilliant,
> My heart was generous, my beauty was splendid.
> I was dear to God when alive, and now God is all to me.

Lastly: numerous observers have speculated over the question of whether the monument was intended to include an effigy on its platformed surface. This may be so, although either an effigy would have had to be made in sections or else the monument would have required to be dismantled to install one, given its design and proximity to the aisle's side walls. An effigy would have had the disadvantage of reducing the minister's visibility from the laird's platform. And as the aisle's theme is essentially that of the couple – a single effigy would conflict with that theme; and there is insufficient space to fit in two effigies.

The conclusion here though is that this sculpture was not intended simply to be a standalone funereal monument but that it had two separate functions. Firstly, it was a sort of lairdly 'furniture' for use by the laird's family at Sunday services. In its opulence, it displayed lairdly magnificence. But as a component of the laird's loft it had also the practical task of being a sort of raised gallery front. Consequently, while the monument's south face suggests the lowest level to comprise the plinth of a tomb-chest (which it is not); the north face has no such feature. The point is that the Skelmorlie monument was not assigned the same duties as an orthodox funereal monument (such as that of Mary), which might be visited, viewed and passed by (again, contrast this with the mural monument to the Earl of Kinnoull, orthodox in placement and function – albeit not in its design). Therefore, it would be a mistake to regard it as such. It combined the functions of a monument with that of being an uncommonly sophisticated and decorative laird's loft frontispiece.

Its second purpose was to dictate, emphasise and embellish through symbolism any funeral procession ritual. A funeral service would involve a service within the church, adjoining. From the church, the deceased would be carried in straight procession from the body of the church and from the pulpit front, under the arch connecting the aisle, and once within the aisle, directly towards the centrally-placed staircase and downstairs to the crypt: precisely as was done, for instance, in the funeral procession for Queen Juliana of the Netherlands in Delft's Nieuwe Kerk / New Church in 2004.

Thus, at the Skelmorlie Aisle, the formula was more likely referencing European norms for elites rather than Scottish forms – there being no suitable royal crypt to emulate.

Here, on the way into the vault, the funeral procession would pass under the monument, on the physical and metaphoric journey beneath the triumphal arch, *en route* to the triumph of the afterlife. Even once inside the vault, stone slabs were laid in a central line so as to continue that symbolic journey.

This analysis emphasises yet further that no effigy can have been intended for the monument. Triumphal arches were a different class of building from funereal monuments, and they were not constructed to contain or to highlight funereal effigies.

Figure 9: Lead coffins within the vault. © Crown Copyright: HES.

A1.8 The vault

The vault, or crypt, is sunk beneath the northern, raised part of the aisle, and its barrel-vaulted ashlar-built roof carries both the triumphal arch / monument and the elevated platformed area of the laird's loft. It is accessed via the (possibly original) timber door, from a staircase entering from beneath the centre of the monument, and whose top few steps had, since the outset, a (presumably timber) hatch or cover (open in Figure 6).

Carefully-constructed twinned recesses are set symmetrically in the gable wall, all in dressed ashlar, as if intended to accommodate Dame Margaret and Sir Robert. The floor has stone flags – those at the centre are set, as already noticed, in a strip so as to emphasise a straight line from the stair to the north wall; another strip of stones leads west from this centre line, but as there is no corresponding strip leading eastwards, this can hardly have been intended to represent a cross.

A third recess is in the vault's southwest corner, horizontal and deep, evidently intended for a third coffin. Its left-hand edge is hacked coarsely as if to accommodate a bigger coffin than planned, but no coffin is within.

It would seem that the open area of the vault was intended to be suitable for devotional use – that is it was, however informally, a private chapel; thereby bringing us back to the comparison with Ferniehurst and its comparators, noticed above. Also, on the aisle's north gable (at the lowest level externally) is a small opening which casts light into the vault below – an unusual feature in burial vaults (if helpful for ventilation). This is rather like the corresponding vault opening on the east gable of Polwarth's Parish Church, but again, suggestive of the vault having an alternative use more frequent than episodes of burial alone.
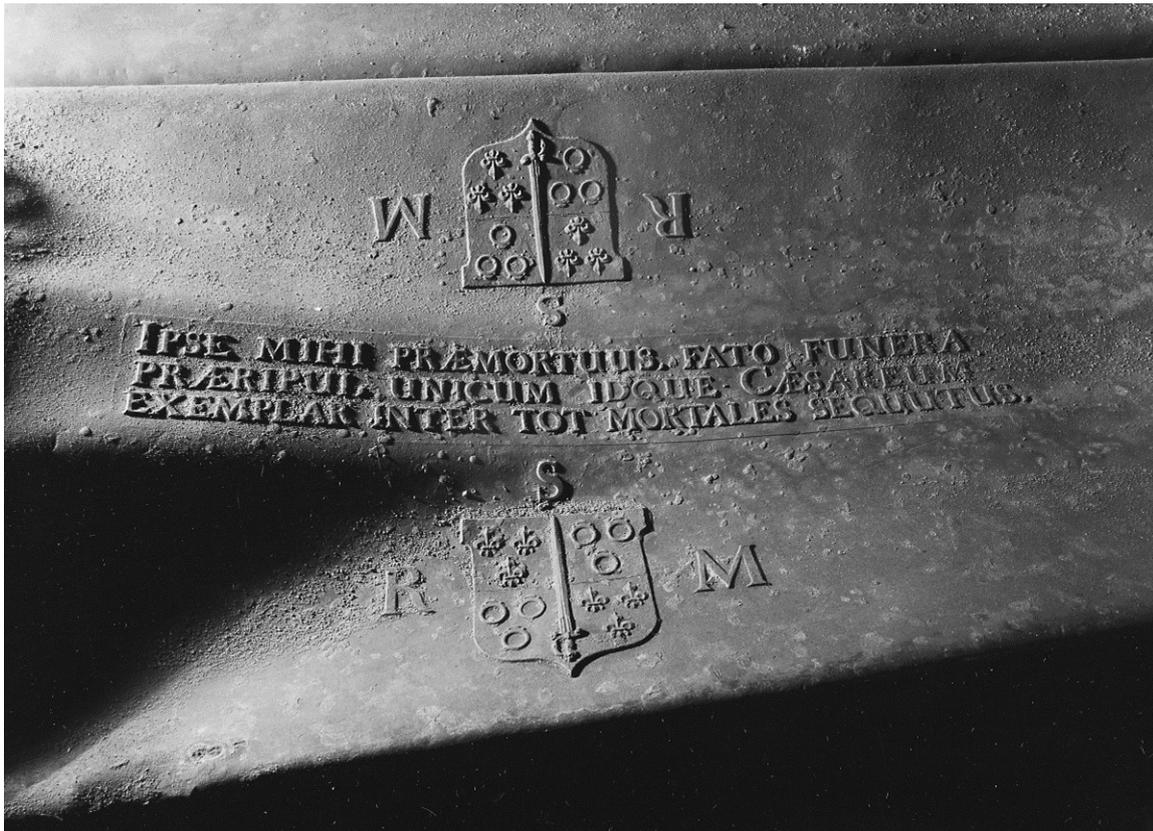
Figure 10: Detail of latin inscription on Montgomerie's lead coffin. © Crown Copyright: HES.

The foregoing analysis is given added weight by the Latin inscription on Montgomerie's coffin:

> IPSE MIHI PRAE MORTUUS FUI, FATO FUNERA
> PRAECIPUI, UNICUM, IDQUE, CAESAREUM,
> EXEMPLAR INTER TOT MORTALES SECUTUS.

MacGibbon and Ross translated this as:

> I was dead before myself; I anticipated my proper funeral: alone, of all mortals, following the example of Caesar.[73]

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[73] MacGibbon and Ross 1892, vol. 5, 198.

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Bath, as:

> I anticipated my death and forestalled my departure as I followed the unique example amongst men of Caesar[74]

A 1790s description is as follows:

> Below is a vault, built by Sir Robert Montgomery, who, becoming serious in the after part of his life, repaired hither at night for devotional exercises; by these means burying himself as it were alive./ There are two niches in the walls for coffins; and Sir Robert himself, with his lady, Margaret Douglas, daughter of Sir James Douglas of Drumlanrig, ancestor to the Duke of Queensberry, lie in two leaden coffins./ She died in 1624. On Sir Robert's is the following inscription:
>
> > *Ipse mitri praemortives fui: Fato funera,*
> > *Praeripui. Unicem, idque Caesarium*
> > *Exemplar inter tot mortals secutus.*
>
> This plainly alludes to the Emperor Charles V. who had his funeral obsequies performed before his death.[75]

The point appears to be twofold. Firstly, as indicated, Skelmorlie does indeed appear to have referenced Emperor Charles V (who, troubled by ill-health and having retired to a monastery, had his obsequies performed shortly before his death in 1558). Secondly, the reference surely signalled Skelmorlie's own ideas concerning mortality, since, traditionally, as shown, he is said to have spent time in the vault, on 'devotional exercises'. (Whether his obsequies were similarly performed during his lifetime seems improbable, as that would horrify Presbyterians; and would have been so remarkable a tradition that it might well have survived.)

A1.9 The stairs

The arrangement concerning the stairs is deeply unusual. Many laird's lofts (for example, Cumbernauld) were accessed via an external forestair, an external door being therefore at the upper level. Here, as already noted, the stair is set directly opposite the ground-level entrance door. What is unusual is that it leads directly to the aisle as readily as it does the platformed area of the laird's loft, each being reached from exactly the same spot at the heart of the building – namely, the aforementioned 'temporary' timber hatch, and each via an unsealed door. On plan, this staircase arrangement resembles a near-square platt separating the two flights – or one continuous scale-and-platt staircase.

The hatch occupies not simply a central place within the structure; it is set precisely at its exact centre. It must be crossed on the direct and straight route from the entrance door to the staircase. All this emphasised the fact of its being a fundamentally central part of the entire building's purposes. The arrangement expresses the fluidity and continuity between the aisle's disparate spaces and functions, and a continuity or unbroken-ness between devotional duties which might be carried out both above

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[74] Bath 2003, 142.
[75] *The Statistical Account of Scotland,* vol. vi, 427–8.

and/or beneath the vault. The impermanence of the timber hatch could symbolise the ephemerality of human life, and the easy passage from life to an afterlife.

This arrangement of a stair being positioned to access either upwards to a glorious space or downwards to possibly a crypt, appears to have at least one Scottish precedent. This was at James III's *Capella Regis*, or royal chapel, at Restalrig.[76] The evidence for this is the wide archway where the *capella* and the present church adjoin, as this, evidently was originally to access the lower element. The structure was specifically identified by the 1560 General Assembly 'as a monument of Idolatry' to be destroyed, but knowledge of its grandeur might well have lived on into Skelmorlie's time. Alternatively, or additionally, continental examples (as indicated above) might have inspired the idea here.[77]

A1.10 The painted ceiling

Background

Ceilings painted with themes, usually instructive, became popular in 16th century Scottish castles, maintaining their popularity into the early 17th century, with famous examples at Crathes[78] (where the ceiling was joisted), or Pinkie[79] (where the ceiling was planked/ boarded, in accord with the newer models), and elsewhere. It was a fashion shared with France but was eclipsed from the 1610s by the introduction from England of ribbed flat plaster ceilings whose range of narrative was vastly reduced to what moulds could provide, but which could on the other hand be more readily produced, with a lesser demand for skilled artistry. The chief ornaments chosen for these new plaster ceilings (for example, Winton) included unionist political signalling, namely a statement of loyalty to the king. Non-domestic painted ceilings were, however, rare after the Reformation in 1560, when religious symbolism was mostly destroyed. Amongst the few examples still to be seen, fragments of that at **Stirling**'s 1594 Chapel Royal exist (repainted 1629, subsequently maltreated, and in the 20th century reinstated); a symbolic program survives at **Grandtully**, c.1636, which *inter alia* celebrates monarchy and presumably Charles I's Episcopal innovations; and another, here, at the Skelmorlie Aisle. There may now be no others surviving, given that so many such aisles (for example, Stow[80]) have long been roofless or abandoned.

[76] Canmore ID 52103 Edinburgh, Restalrig Road South, Restalrig Parish Church (canmore.org.uk)
[77] MacDonald 2014, 246–264.
[78] Canmore ID 36693 - Crathes Castle (canmore.org.uk)
[79] Canmore ID 53873 - Musselburgh, High Street, Pinkie House (canmore.org.uk)
[80] Canmore ID 54523 - Stow, Galashiels Road, Old Stow Kirk and Churchyard (canmore.org.uk)

Figure 11: Detail of painted ceiling, looking west with monument on right of image © Crown Copyright: HES.

Skelmorlie ceiling

In contrast with the remainder of the Skelmorlie Aisle, the ceiling alone has been subject to close modern consideration and interpretation by specialist scholars. The first published in-depth modern account of the Skelmorlie ceiling is that of 2003 by Michael Bath in his *Renaissance Decorative Painting in Scotland*, in which he identified numerous of the emblematic sources informing the composition.[81] Easily the fullest account is the PhD thesis by Angela Callaghan at the University of Glasgow, where she worked hard to identify the numerous meanings which the ceiling's paintings were intended to present.[82] Most recently, Bath supplemented this work in his 2018 *Emblems in Scotland: Motifs and Meanings*.[83] For a fuller appreciation of the ceiling than is possible here, readers are referred to these key works. Within this document, the purpose is to appraise the ceiling's significance, but background and context is of course necessary.

The ceiling comprises a deep, round-arched single vault, faced with planks, painted in its entirety, with trompe l'oeil consoles and ribs. Unlike the Chapel Royal whose roof needed tie-beams (that is, timbers resembling joists but which carried nothing) to prevent lateral wall movement, the aisle roof's creators judged correctly how to avoid these; and consequently both the monument and painted ceiling are seen without encumbrance. Callaghan summarised the ceiling's decoration:

> The ceiling was composed of forty-one individual compartments each one containing different combinations of emblems, designs, human figures, animals, birds and heraldic representations. Of the forty-one compartments, four of these contained landscape paintings, depicting the seasons, and their associated

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[81] Bath 2003, 128–45.
[82] Callaghan 2013.
[83] Bath 2018, 67–78.

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labours. Two unusual paintings were also executed each containing representations of a female figure on the land and by the sea.[84]

The work also includes badges of the twelve tribes of Israel, texts from the Geneva Bible (not the King James Version of 1611), and signs of the zodiac, and armorials. Callaghan showed too that the narrative – beginning with 'Spring' at the south-west and continuing sunwise round the space – was extremely thoughtfully composed, its imagery reflective, ultimately, of the client's religious commitment. The inclusion of the seasons also reflected God's work and the cycle of life, signs of the zodiac similarly representing life and death.

Bath has shown that numerous of the images and emblems derive from continental sources and prints – for example, Adam and Eve, and Esau and Jacob derive from prints of c.1570 by Etienne Delaune (whose work was copied too at Hardwick Hall), an engraver who had served with both Henri II and the Paris mint. Regarding these images, Bath concluded that 'There is no other example of biblical painting in Scotland which transforms Old Testament scenes into such Mannerist decoration',[85] while his general observation on this topic was that:

> The range of sources that have been identified for this painting [that is, of the ceiling] in contemporary prints is quite remarkable, and would stand as paradigmatic of the heavy reliance of the decorative arts more generally on print sources at this period.[86]

At cornice level, there are six Dutch-type landscape/townscape views (the number six facilitates use of the allegorical Christian number 12, which informs much of the composition), those in the four corners signifying the seasons. One includes a representation of a town which can hardly be other than Largs; showing four-masted ships flying saltires, denoting trade and wealth, and an enormous pier on which people are busy. Another view seems also to represent Largs, with a bridge over the Gogo plus a church – presumably that demolished in 1812 – with a handsome steeple and tall pyramidal spire; but whether the crow-stepped centre-doored gabled element alongside the steeple is intended to represent the present aisle is debateable. The image of summer – on the loft's west side – has what does appear to be a representation of the aisle – above a river (the Gogo?) and abutting an improbably small church; a hill beyond; and on the other side, a romantic castle.

The female figure prominent in two of the landscape views – the centre panel on either side, set between 'the seasons' – is traditionally said to be Dame Margaret Douglas, said, as already noted, to have been killed by a horse. One of these views includes the image of a castle – presumably the patron's own Skelmorlie Castle – and on the right, a hill (which, should it be a view from the north, may represent Arran – where the family owned property). On this scene a horse is also represented – however, for Bath, any connection between the tradition and the horse image 'can be dismissed as nonsense'.[87] The image of the 'Wild and Untamed Horse' derives, he shows, from an engraving of

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84 Callaghan 2013, abstract.
85 Bath 2003, 131.
86 Bath 2018, 68–9.
87 Bath 2003, 137.

1578, one of 40 by Hendrik Goltzius of the royal stable of Don Jon of Austria. Bath concluded:

> This panel is exceptionally important since it is the only known example in Scottish decorative painting of this period that its artist has both signed and dated: 'J Stalker fecit 1638'.[88]

Stalker is discussed below.

The Cardinal Virtues are represented, but, unusually, only two (Justice and Fortitude) rather than four; also unusually, their accompanying epigrams (source not known) are voiced in the first person.

Two half-panels – at a glance, seemingly, truncated, but in fact both of the same narrative – are on the south, closest to where the aisle adjoined the church. These take a separate, patriotic theme, and constitute the only details known to derive from an emblem book. They are inscribed: 'THAT TO DEFENDE OUR COUNTRIE DEAR FROM HARME'/ 'FOR WARRE OF WORKE; WE THIS HAND SHOVLD ARME'. This references the motto 'In utrumque paratus' ('prepared for both') meaning the king – or here, the laird – is in readiness both for war, in defence of the country, or for peace, when farmers provide their harvest, as circumstance demands. It signalled too, for Scotland, the need to be ready to defend the Reformed church. The motto had been used on a 1576 James VI coin (shown by Bath to have been the model used for Theodore Beza's well-known 1580 image of the king) on which James is represented with both a sword and an olive branch, thereby illustrating the point, and some other examples of the emblem being used for painted ceilings are known – Rossend, for example.[89]

All this referencing for the ceiling's design of published emblems and images demonstrates Skelmorlie's wish to align with European culture, and to demonstrate his cosmopolitanism and scholarship; and it also underlines the remarkable nature of the ceiling. The absence of Stuart unionist symbolism is noticeable too.

'J Stalker'
This ceiling, as noticed, is the only Scottish example of decorative art of the period to be signed: the inscription being 'J Stalker fecit 1638'. James Stalker – most probably this same person – was registered as an apprentice to John Sawers in 1632.[90] There were two artists or painters at the time named John Sawers, father and son.[91] The elder Sawers was clearly highly regarded, because he was active in the royal works in 1617, with his son in a subordinate role, while a Robert Sawers, a guess would suggest a kinsman, was a hewer in the royal works at Stirling at this same period.[92] Whichever John Sawers was active at both Edinburgh and Linlithgow at the time of the 1633 royal visit to Scotland is uncertain, but on each occasion, such appointments were made by the Master of Works. In 1618, following the 1617 visit it was surely the elder Sawers who received the surprisingly large sum of £66 13s 4d 'for furnesing all maner of

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[88] Bath 2018, 68–9.
[89] Bath 2018, 67–78. Bath traced the source of the symbol to a treatise of 1551.
[90] Bath 2003, 10.
[91] Imrie and Dunbar 1982, 574.
[92] Imrie and Dunbar 1982, 79, 574.

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colloures for painting of his Majesties bed that wes sent up to Londoun';[93] John Sawers (Bath has it that this was the elder Sawers, fl.1617-d.1651; Callaghan has a lengthier discussion) was appointed Snowdon Herald in 1643, signifying that he was skilled in heraldic paintwork; and it would have been he who compiled a manuscript armorial now in the National Library of Scotland.[94] Another son, Henry, was also an artist.[95] Much less can be said regarding Stalker, save that his father was named David. In Bath's analysis – following that of John Houston in 1932 (who, according to the Buildings of Scotland authors, appears also to have restored some of the paintwork),[96] and based on the disparate quality of discrete panels – it seems probable that more than one artist was involved; Bath suggests the second – or main – artist was Sawers himself.[97] After all, as Stalker's signature is on one panel alone, and at that a panel of less accomplished artwork, this could be interpreted as him defining an element for which he alone was primarily responsible.

A1.11 'Afterwards'

In common with most such family aisles, the family interest in the structure was to diminish. Scotland's social elites were quick to emulate English norms, speech, etc., after union with England in 1707, and by the 19th century this had very frequently included abandoning the Kirk and instead attending or promoting Episcopal worship. The story with the Skelmorlie Aisle was, however, different because here, latterly, it was only the aisle that existed; and limited enthusiasm for its maintenance is clear, until it was given to the State in the 20th century to care for and maintain.

The aisle's cultural value was appreciated in the 1840s, with a plea from the kirk (to above all the laird) that it be preserved:

> The Skelmorly aisle of the old church, with the monument erected by Sir Robert Montgomery, and the painted adornments of the ceiling, are still nearly in the same condition as they were in 1793. It is an object which attracts and well merits the attention of the curious in the progress of art in this country. It is entitled to careful preservation, being unquestionably the most magnificent sepulchral design at present extant in the west of Scotland.[98]

Dobie in 1847 highlighted the decay in the ironwork, as seen above, and also 'the blighted adornments of the ceiling, and the mouldering sculptures and broken profiles of the monument'.[99] But sufficient interest was found to have it preserved. Concerning the ceiling, Dobie also observed that:

> The greater portion of... [the ceiling] is still beautiful and bright after an exposure of two hundred years to an atmosphere which has pulverised the surface of the incumbent ashlar walls. The colouring of the ceiling, ... although

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[93] Imrie and Dunbar 1982, 96; NLS ms 31.4.4.
[94] Bath 2003, 10, 128.
[95] Bath 2003, 128.
[96] Close and Riches 2012, 500.
[97] Bath 2003, 128, 139.
[98] *New Statistical Account* vol. v, 801. Report dated April 1842.
[99] Anon. (Dobie) 1845, 22.

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partially faded has in no part altogether given way. While portions of it appear still to retain much of their original brightness. Considering its long exposure to the influence of so fitful an atmosphere, the free admission of which through broken windows and crannied roof, has been for many years unopposed, it says much for the excellence of the materials employed, that they have so long successfully resisted the most active agents of decay[100]

In 1899, the ceiling's paintwork was restored by J. B. Bennett and Sons of Glasgow, who dated their work; but who – as evidenced by ultra-violet photography – also altered elements (obscuring, for instance, the scorpion which denoted Scorpio, a vital part of the zodiac sequence, while adding some other features). Callaghan concluded, regarding this episode, that in some areas

> Although the artist's intentions were respected, what is visible today, was created by the restorers in 1899 rather than enhancement or repair of the Stalker's original. ... [while elsewhere, and more generally] the restoration process applied to these paintings did not, in any significant way, interfere with Stalker's work. Any paint applied was done so following a philosophy of minimalism and the intentions of the artist respected.[101]

For architect W. F. Lyons in 1901, the monument's entitlement to conservation was at least implicit:

> The ceiling, which is most elaborate, well-proportioned, and beautiful in design, may claim to be the best example of early seventeenth century Tempora Decorative painting extant in Scotland.[102]

This allegorical and iconographically complex work is, within a burial aisle, unique for its period in Scotland; and it bears comparison with the work at Pinkie for Alexander Seton for its sophistication, its completeness, and its quality. The clear temptation – not least because it includes a chalice combined with (in fact, containing) a flaming heart (a Douglas heart?) – is to interpret it as a crypto-Catholic celebration, but as stated, the client presented himself as a Covenanter, meaning that the case, whether for or against drawing that conclusion, is not proven. What is clearer, is that this aisle was almost certainly created primarily to commemorate Montgomery's wife, and to contain his own remains when the time came. The artistry and allegorical complexity of the ceiling – and the monument, and the aisle itself – was to be viewed by the church-goers of Largs, enabling them to wonder at the wealth, sophistication, cosmopolitanism, scholarship, religious and family devotion of the laird, and to share in the recall of memories of his prematurely-lost wife. If a Catholic interpretation was in Montgomerie's mind, then he evidently judged it sufficiently ambiguous, debatable or obscure to escape the attention of iconoclasts.

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[100] Anon. (Dobie) 1845, 14.
[101] Callaghan 2013, unpaginated.
[102] Lyons 1900–01, 111.

A1.12 Discussion

It is here proposed that the aisle is a creation of the court circle of architects and specialists which was based in the east and the Edinburgh area. The Mannerist character of the sculpture belongs unquestionably to that grouping; while the painted ceiling, notably the Delaune-based images, share exactly that same Mannerist character with features such as tented canopies and frilly drapes. The Biblical texts are also set within the same type of leathery inscription panels as seen on the Greyfriars monuments and resembling too the frieze detailing within **Stirling's Chapel Royal** of 1594.

The only known documentary element to buttress this claim on the topic of authorship is the artist's own signature; that of a specialist who can be firmly connected to this same group of specialists through his having been apprenticed to an artist whom the master(s) of work clearly rated highly, and who (according to Bath) might have shared painting duties at Skelmorlie.

As shown above, when work began on the aisle, the King's Master of Work was Sir Anthony Alexander, who died 17 September 1637. Of course, there was barest or no palace work after 1633, meaning the hectic period up until and including the royal visit of that year, was followed, for Alexander, by non-royal duties. In 1636, when the aisle was being constructed, Alexander had failed to comply with a task set to him by the Privy Council (at this period Scotland's everyday national government apparatus) concerning East Linton's bridge.[103] The reason for his non-compliance is completely unknown, but it does contrast with Murray's record, he having been supremely diligent at all times. On the basis that Alexander might have been expected to be similarly diligent, one possibility is that Alexander (who, as aforenoted, died the year afterwards) was already ill; another possibility is that he was fully engaged elsewhere on other duties with other clients, possibly far from East Linton.

Alexander appears to have been succeeded by his brother Henry, who afterwards succeeded as 3rd Earl of Stirling in 1640. Into that group of architectural specialists or architects relevant to this discussion can be added the name of the client's son, Sir Robert Montgomery, who on 20 March 1649 was conjoined in the post of Master of Work; proving an interest in architecture, but not proving whether that interest informed the aisle's creation upwards of a decade earlier.[104] This latter appointment – the postholder was normally appointed by the monarch, though in this case could not be – was made seven weeks after the execution of Charles I (ex. 30 January, 1649). The appointment of Montgomerie the younger's son may have been in anticipation of a new

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[103] The Council record for 4 May 1636, at Edinburgh, is abridged as follows: 'Their Lordships recently gave order to the Master of his Majesty's Works to visit the bridge of [East] Lintoune, and ascertain what charges would be required for repairing it; but as yet there is nothing done'. and at the request of the Justices of the Peace,: 'They crave therefore a new order and direction in the matter, and at their suggestion the Lords grant full power and commission to Sir Antonie Alexander, Master of His Majersty's Works…to pass to the said bridge of Lintoune for the purpose aforesaid and report to their Lordships with all convenient diligence so that they may give further direction herein' (RPC, second series, vi, p. 237).
[104] 20 March 1649. 'S[i]r Daniel Carmichael resigned his place of M[aste]r of work in place of Sr [?] [Montomerie] son to ye laird of Skelmorlie y[ounge]r' (NRS E5/2, fo. 164).

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phase of royal works. It is, though, difficult to consider the superlative and complex character of Skelmorlie Aisle as being unconnected with an adult son of the patron, who became royal architect a decade afterwards. The low wings on Skelmorlie Castle's north side, albeit 17th century in appearance, seem to be undated, and cannot therefore be connected with any specific member of the family.

This same younger Sir Robert (d.1654) – denominated of Lochranza – was clearly energetic and ambitious, to the extent that he attempted, contravening the rules, to be a commissioner to parliament in 1633 when the king was to attend. His plan was frustrated – on 5 March 1633 the Privy Council 'heard a complaint against the decision by the 'barons and freehalders of the shirefdome of Bute' to have nominated 'Sir Robert Montgomerie, younger of Skelmurelie' to be a commissioner for the ensuing parliament.[105] He was knighted in 1617[106] and appointed Justice of the Peace for Bute in 1634.[107] He married Lady Mary Campbell, youngest daughter of Archibald, Earl of Argyll.

A1.13 Why was the aisle built?

The aisle was built:

- to commemorate, and also to celebrate, the memory of Dame Margaret Douglas, who died prematurely in 1624.

- It was also built as the intended burial place of its builder, Sir Robert Montgomerie. The plethora of panels bearing their sculptured or painted initials shows that it was primarily for the married couple.

- It was possibly intended to facilitate Skelmorlie's private devotions. The vault is unusual – unique? – in that it leads directly from the aisle as readily as the platformed laird's loft area, each being reached by a flight of steps from the same axial spot and via a locked but unsealed door. Also, the vault is an open area, suitable for devotional use: which is to say, in its own right a private chapel: which brings us back to the comparison with Fernihurst, etc., noted above.

- It was built to impress all comers; foreign visitors would recognise a cosmopolitan structure and client.

- The triumphal arch / monument was provided to facilitate maximum symbolism for the deceased of the family.

APPENDIX 2: TIMELINE

Date	Event
Unknown	Medieval parish church of St Columba constructed.

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[105] *RPC* (second series), vol. 5, 45.
[106] Fraser 1859, vol 1, 160.
[107] *RPC* (second series), vol. 5, 427.

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1636	Burial aisle constructed, abutting parish church.
1636	Burial aisle constructed, abutting parish church.
1638	Date of painted ceiling.
1639	Creation of triumphal arch.
1812	Parish church demolished, leaving Skelmorlie Aisle freestanding.
1931	Aisle enters State care through Guardianship agreement.
1971	Category A listed as Skelmorlie Aisle and Cemetery Wall and Gate Piers (LB37198)
2018	Interior and Exterior of structure laser scanned as part of HES Rae Project

APPENDIX 3: ORIGINS OF THE MORT HELM OF SKELMORLIE AISLE

This article was written by Colin Muir and Dr Maureen Young for the HES Focus Magazine.[108]

Skelmorlie Aisle in Largs on the West coast of Scotland is a mid-17th century burial aisle containing the Renaissance-style monument (Figure 12) that Sir Robert Montgomerie built in 1636 in memory of his wife, Dame Margaret Douglas. A mort helm (Figure 13) associated with Skelmorlie Aisle, presently in the care of Historic Environment Scotland (HES) Collections Team, was 3D imaged as part of the ongoing Rae Project which aims to three-dimensionally record all HES sites along with objects within the collections.[109] To record the helm's current condition and aid analysis of its structure, the helm was scanned with a 'structured light scanner', providing a true colour 3D model with a resolution of approximately 0.5mm.[110]

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[108] Muir and Young 2018, 38–9. The full magazine can be downloaded from the HES website: Focus Magazine 2018 (historicenvironment.scot)
[109] Find out more on our website about The Rae Project (engineshed.scot). The model is accessible at: Sketchfab: Mort helmet, Skelmorlie Aisle 3D model (sketchfab.com)
[110] Muir 2017.

Figure 12: View of triumphal arch or monument in Skelmorlie Aisle. The mort helm has been placed on the tomb surface. © Crown Copyright HES.

'Mort' or 'mortuary helms' have a lengthy history. One of the earliest surviving examples (1376) is that of the 'Black Prince' in Canterbury Cathedral. Few examples have survived from that period probably due to the destructive excesses of the Reformation. However, the tradition of suspending or wall mounting a helm above a carved knightly effigy continued through to the late 17th century. The helmet could either be an actual relic or a decorative object. Some later examples from the 17th century used a contemporary helmet modified to look more 'medieval'. Funerary helms were sometimes painted for additional sombre effect (black and red being particularly favoured, as we see on the Skelmorlie helm). Another more practical reason for them being painted was to minimise the regular maintenance that armour required to stave off corrosion. Funerary helmets can be seen in-situ in a number of rural churches in England, particularly in the south-west and Cornwall, but they are a rarity in Scotland.

Figure 13: Skelmorlie Aisle mort helm. © Crown Copyright HES.

The history of the Skelmorlie mort helm is unclear. There is a reference in a 1879 guide book by Rev. John Boyd that reads '....two old escutcheons may be seen hanging on the wall, with a rusty old helmet and sword.'[111] An 1886 illustration (Figure 7) from MacGibbon and Ross, *Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland, Vol III* shows a helmet hanging high on the left wall, though it does not exactly resemble the current helm. A Ministry of Works photograph taken in 1954 does show the present helmet placed on the Montgomerie tomb (Figure 12).

The Skelmorlie Aisle mort helm is quite an unusual artefact. On closer inspection it is evidently a decorative rather than functional object; the apparently hinged visor does not open, there are no apertures for sight or ventilation, and it would be impossible to wear due to the small diameter of the neck. It lacks the overlapping plates and riveting typical of traditional European armour. It is constructed of 18 parts, some held together at rolled edges, others soldered. The metal is only about 0.8 mm thick – much flimsier than typical armour. There are four holes through the top of the helmet which may have been used to hang it for display or to attach a crest.

The helm underwent extensive restoration in 1985 involving removal of corrosion, filling of areas of damage with polyester resin, chemical surface protection, coating and

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[111] Boyd 1879, 10.

repainting. This degree of restoration and the materials used may not be considered best practise now. However, they were carried out with the best intentions and with the technology available at the time.

X-ray fluorescence analysis was carried out by HES Science Team to investigate the composition of the metal, solder and paint, as the chemical elements present can provide dating evidence. The helm is iron with remnants of a tin coating. It may have been tinned to protect it or to give a 'silver' appearance. The presence of a small amount of molybdenum in the metal indicates that the helm is made of steel no older than the late 19th century. Lead and tin in the joints show that a lead solder was used to join the metal plates. The red 'nose' of the helm is known to have been restored in 1985. Two different red paint compositions were detected. The (presumed) original paint was coloured bright red with mercury sulphide (cinnabar); the second paint type contains cadmium and selenium ('cadmium red'). This pigment was not commercially available until 1910.[112]

Earlier records had presumed the helm to date from the 17th century, but current investigations imply a late 19th or early 20th century origin. Whether the helmet portrayed in the 1886 drawing is the same one is difficult to say, however the 1879 reference to a rusting helmet and sword hints at a potential reason for creating a 'replica'. It also raises questions regarding the removal of the earlier (?) helmet. Was this done to altruistically conserve the original or was it removed to exploit its newly acquired value as 19th century collectors sought out such rarities? In either case where did it end up, or was it simply removed and discarded as being too corroded?

Despite its shortcomings in terms of historical authenticity, the Skelmorlie helm has survived more or less intact for some hundred years or more. Its original painted surface has now been lost or obscured and it has 20th century repairs, but it retains an associative significance to the site both aesthetic and historic.

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[112] Young 2017.