



Caring for Scotland's heritage - Holmwood House



Holmwood House is situated in the parish of Cathcart, approximately 7.2 kilometres (4.5 miles) south of Glasgow City Centre. It was designed by one of Scotland's greatest Classical architects, Alexander 'Greek' Thomson (1817-1875). It is one of Thomson's most important works and is a building of international significance, listed Holmwood House Category A by the Secretary of State for Scotland on 17 October 1967.

It was built in 1857-58 for James Couper (1818-77), a paper maker at nearby Millholm Mill, and his first wife Marion Harvey (1824-69). It is situated on a gradually sloping hillside above the steep west bank of the White Cart River Valley and was built on a site adjacent to James Couper's brother's existing house Sunnyside (which was demolished in 1966). Holmwood is a large suburban villa designed in Thomson's unique interpretation of the Greek style. The asymmetric composition consists of picturesquely massed single and two story elements with deep-eaved, shallow pitched roofs and a solid masonry tower, topped by a delicate cupola. A link wall connected the house to a Stable Lodge. Both are decorated with Thomson's characteristic incised and sculpted detail. Superb Thomson decorative schemes also survive internally. Apart from some cartoons for the Dining Room frieze, no other plans or correspondence concerning the building of Holmwood appear to survive.

Holmwood House remained in the possession of James Couper's Trustees until 1909 when it was sold to Anne Simpson for £2,250. It was then sold again in 1916 to Hughina Stenhouse for £1,900 but in 1919 the Stenhouses sold Holmwood to James Gray for £2,300. James Gray sold the house in 1931 to Thomas Redden Patterson for £1,500 and Patterson also bought the road leading to Holmwood and to Sunnyside for £410. The Pattersons sold Holmwood House to James Stephen McElhone (a vet) for £5,000 in 1953. The McElhones then sold the house to the Trustees of the Roman Catholic Congregation of our Lady of the Missions for £9,000 in 1958. The Trustees of Thomas Redden Patterson and Elizabeth MacBride sold their respective half shares of Sunnyside to the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions. The Sisters leased Holmwood to Renfrew County Council for use as a Roman Catholic Primary School and new school buildings were added to the rear of the house, altering some of the Kitchen-Court ancillary stores. A separate dormitory building was constructed to the south east of Holmwood in 1968-69. In April 1968 Holmwood was the subject of a repairs grant of £3,000 towards eligible costs of £26,000 from the Secretary of State for Scotland. Repairs to be undertaken included complete reconstruction of the staircase lantern, external stonework repairs, sundry roof works, dry rot works to the Staircase Hall and Drawing Room and rectifying sagging timber floors in the ground floor bedrooms, totalling £22,600.



The primary school closed in June 1992 by which time the site was under threat from housing development. The 6th Marquess of Bute (who was a Vice-President of the National Trust for Scotland at the time) wrote to the Director in June 1991 expressing his hope that the Trust might take an interest in Holmwood's future, given its importance and the threat posed to the beauty of the house and its setting by development. The Sisters who owned the house had already granted an option to a development company to purchase Holmwood subject to their obtaining planning permission. The Scottish Civic Trust and the Alexander Thomson Society had already lodged their objections to this potential development. Professor David Walker (who was at that time Chief Inspector of Historic Buildings for Historic Scotland) underlined the significance of the house and the importance of its preservation not only for Glasgow or Scotland but for the rest of the world. The National Trust for Scotland's Glasgow Advisory Panel visited Holmwood on 29 July 1991 and agreed that it was a Trustworthy property. Executive Committee members subsequently visited Holmwood concluding that it appeared to be at risk and that the Trust should do all in its power to ensure its preservation, including acquisition if necessary. The Trust secured a National Heritage Memorial grant of £1.5 million over 3 years towards acquisition, restoration and endowment of Holmwood House, on the condition that no housing development was allowed on the Sunnyside site. Plans for development in the area were shelved and Holmwood was officially transferred into the Trust's ownership on 28 March 1994. It was acquired without a formal decision as to its future role but the Executive Committee subsequently agreed to conserve and present Holmwood as an exhibition house and garden.

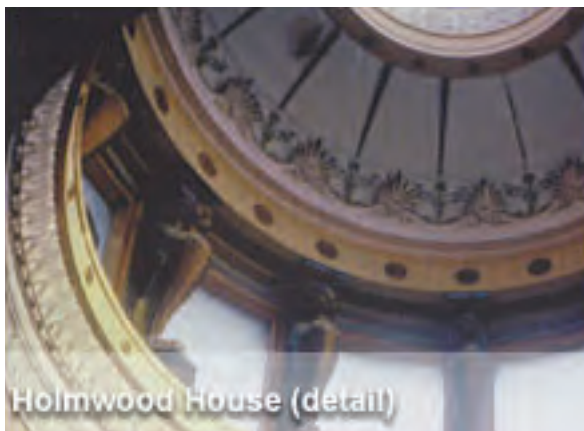
Previous owners of Holmwood have made various alterations and repairs to the buildings. The Trust's immediate priority was to ensure that the house and Stable Lodge were secure and wind and water tight. Consequently roof leaks were patched and the entire rainwater drainage system was inspected and cleared. Basic accommodation was also provided within the house for a resident custodian. A temporary security system was also installed and the redundant school buildings were demolished although the wooden dormitory building was temporarily retained for use as a site hut.

Shortly after acquisition an ongoing programme of research, recording and investigation began. In November 1994 the Trust commissioned Page & Park architects to produce a measured architectural survey of Holmwood to provide an accurate record of the House prior to and during proposed building works. Also the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historic Monuments carried out an extensive photographic survey of the property prior to acquisition by the Trust in July 1992. Two volunteers and a paid researcher carried out historical research relating to the Coupers, subsequent owners and Alexander Thomson. Strathclyde County Council started investigating the survival of Thomson's interior decorative schemes in summer 1994 and produced a report. Anti-sol was fitted to the Dining Room, Parlour and Drawing Room windows to protect the newly uncovered stencilled decoration. Other surveys including structural and geological surveys were also carried out.

Holmwood contains one of the most important of all nineteenth century Scottish interiors. Thomson was

traditionally given a free hand to design every detail of Holmwood's Grecian interior, including the furniture and the textiles. Conventionally, Holmwood's contemporaries would have been designed thus - the Drawing Room would have had the largest budget for the most opulent and expensive contents while the Dining Room would be nowhere near as elaborate. The Parlour would be midway between the two while circulation spaces i.e. hallways, corridors and stairways would be plain and robust. Holmwood does not altogether conform to this pattern however, although there are colour differentials, but the expanse of painted decoration suggests that the rooms shared an equality of decorative pitch. Unfortunately all of the original furniture designed by Thomson for Holmwood has been lost. Thomson's original decorative schemes have survived, although not unscathed, under later decorative coverings. These schemes include friezes, dado borders and other stencils.

The Executive Committee of the National Trust for Scotland formally agreed to conserve and present Holmwood Holmwood House, details an exhibition house and garden on 26 May 1994. There was no mention of a possible interim use of the house. In 1996 the Trust launched a three year public appeal with a target figure of £400,000. Holmwood House was officially opened in 1999 to coincide with Glasgow UK City of Architecture and Design.



Holmwood House (detail)

Holmwood House was the finest and most elaborate villa designed and executed by Alexander Thomson. His client, James Couper, was comparatively wealthy and allowed his architect a free hand in the design and interior treatment. Holmwood would therefore seem to represent Thomson's ideal in modern domestic architecture.

The house exhibits several architectural features unique to the designer, such as the separation of masonry structural columns from the fenestration behind and the design of the windows themselves with large hanging sashes of plate glass sliding both up and down. Holmwood also exhibits Thomson's use of his favourite square column, often developing out of the mass of the walls in a very unusual manner. Throughout the building, both outside and in, the details have a distinct character which is associated with Thomson's personal 'adaptation of the Greek'. For Thomson was far from being a conventional Greek revivalist but was rather a creative designer who regarded the Greek trabeated manner as the rational basis for a modern architecture.

In its deliberate and carefully balanced asymmetry Holmwood belongs to the Picturesque tradition in detached house design which flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century. Most examples in Britain Holmwood House, exterior however were Italianate or Gothic in style; Greek revival villas



tended to be more formal and symmetrical. By being designed in Thomson's own personal and abstracted Greek manner, Holmwood is very unusual and there are few, if any, comparable examples in Britain.

A remarkable feature of the design is the (original) wall running from the garden steps next to the Dining Room to the detached Stable Lodge, whose north wall is formed by the same wall plane. A wall extending into the landscape from a house is a feature usually associated with sophisticated domestic architects of the last

decade of the nineteenth century, notably Edwin Lutyens in England and Frank Lloyd Wright in the USA; it would seem to be a unique feature of Scotland's mid-Victorian architecture.



What is also remarkable about Holmwood is the quality of the interior treatment. Plaster and joinery details all have a distinct personal character and are more elaborate developments of the types Thomson conventionally employed. The designs of doors and skirting boards are particularly unusual and successful. Holmwood House, interior Also remarkable is the quality of the painted decoration and the survival of so complete and sophisticated a scheme of mid-Victorian polychromy must be rare in Scotland. The decoration in the Dining Room is of particular interest as it would seem to anticipate the London work of such designers as

Christopher Dresser, Bruce Talbert and James Moyr Smith of a decade later. All these men, perhaps significantly, were of Scots descent and further research may well establish that the interior painted decoration of Holmwood may be of considerable historical significance.

Thomson wanted to make his rooms satisfying and perfect works of art. The notion of a room as a complete work of art under one designer's control would seem to have originated with Robert Adam but it is usually associated with Charles Rennie Mackintosh several decades after Thomson's death. This realised intention adds greatly to the importance of Holmwood as a complete work of architectural art of its time. Unfortunately none of the Thomson's original furniture has survived at Holmwood, but painstaking research has helped the Trust to recreate the rooms as they would have been in Thomson's time with other period pieces and props.

In its patronage and style Holmwood is characteristic of Victorian Glasgow and it is a villa without obvious parallel anywhere else in Britain. If it is accepted that Alexander Thomson was one of the greatest Scottish architects of the nineteenth century and that he was one of the two designers of conspicuous originality and European stature produced by the city of Glasgow, then Holmwood - his finest and most thoughtful example of domestic design, which may be profitably compared with the work of such important foreign architects as Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Frank Lloyd Wright - must be regarded as a precious survival and an architectural monument of international significance and interest.



The Trust's Building's Committee requested that Holmwood be used as a trial for the implementation of Burra Charter methodology. Consequently the proposed conservation programme was carried out in accordance with the principles and definitions of the Burra Charter, produced by ICOMOS Australia in 1979 and amended in Holmwood House, floor detail 1981 and in 1988. The methodology contained within 'The Illustrated Burra Charter' produced in Australia in 1992 and reprinted in 1994 and 1996 was also applied to all aspects of the conservation of Holmwood House and its setting.

The conservation philosophy followed at Holmwood is outlined in the Statement of Cultural Significance and Statement of Conservation Policy, written by the Regional Surveyor. A great deal of research and conservation work was undertaken to establish Holmwood as an exhibition house and to restore it to its original glory. An audio

wand system has been implemented as an unobtrusive guide to the house.

The National Trust for Scotland already has a good relationship with the neighbouring Residents Association and it is a member of the local Neighbourhood Watch. The relationship with the wider community is developed through contact with cultural organisations such as local history societies and Trust Members' Centres. International interest in the work of Alexander Thomson is considerable, with visits to Holmwood being arranged for architects and art historians from Europe, the United States and the Commonwealth. This relationship is being developed in reaction to requests and by developing established relationships with Schools of Architecture, Design and Conservation in the UK and establishing relationships with schools further afield. The Trust continues to liaise both formally and informally with Historic Scotland regarding conservation issues. Close contact with other local authority organisations is also being maintained by Regional Office staff and by the Property Manager.

The day to day management of Holmwood House is undertaken by the resident Property Manager, with support from Regional Office staff. They work to ensure that the overall aim of the Trust for Holmwood is achieved, namely that the Trust will promote the permanent preservation of Holmwood for the benefit of



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Case study - Holmwood House

the nation, bearing in mind its international architectural importance. The Trust also seeks to present the property in such a way as to provide appropriate and effective public access and enjoyment. For further information about Holmwood House please contact the Property Manager at:

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