

# The Landmark Trust

## AUCHINLECK HOUSE, OCHILTREE, AYRSHIRE

Auchinleck House was built between 1755 and 1760 by Alexander Boswell, 8<sup>th</sup> Laird of Auchinleck (1707-1782) and the father of James Boswell (1740-1795), the celebrated diarist and biographer of Samuel Johnson. It was the third house to be built on an estate granted to Boswell's forebears in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Like his father before him, Alexander was a lawyer. In 1754 he was created Lord Auchinleck, a non-hereditary title in recognition of his appointment as a Judge of the Court of Session, Scotland's supreme civil court. Perhaps it was to celebrate this elevation that he decided to build a country villa, to which he could retreat when the Edinburgh courts were out of session.

For a long time the design was thought to be by the Adam brothers and it can be compared with nearby Dumfries House, which is known to be their work. This house was built in the same period as Auchinleck House and Lord Auchinleck records a visit to the Earl of Dumfries at Leifnorris in a letter in 1753 'where politicks and House building made the subject of conversation at a plentiful dinner.' In fact, Auchinleck is more likely to be an artisan house, designed by Lord Auchinleck himself in consultation with his master craftsmen.

To help our restoration of Auchinleck House, Landmark investigated the Boswell Papers at the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Yale. Although many of the records relating to the construction of the house have been lost, those papers and receipts which do survive provide tantalising glimpses of the building process. A discharge of wages slip dated 1<sup>st</sup> November 1760 shows us that Edinburgh squarewright John Johnston worked on the house, and his seems the mind most likely to lie behind its design.

We can follow the expenditure on materials such as tar, rozen, tallow, hemp, linseed oil, butter, black soap and cord as well more predictable items like nails, lime, steel, red and white lead and so on. Expenditure on the estate peaked between 1758 and 1760 and window tax was first paid on the house in 1760, for thirty one windows. At the end of May 1762 Lord Auchinleck finally paid 'James Bowie Slater in Air' for 18,000 Easdale slates at £1-9/- per thousand.

The estate journals confirm that the four wings that flank the house were not added until 1773-4, topped with the pavilions whose baroque design evokes Vanburgh. Lord Auchinleck had tried to interest his son in their design as early as 1765 when he wrote to James (then on the Grand Tour). There is however no evidence that James Boswell had a hand in their eventual design. He refers to them in his journal in August 1775 as 'new whitened', which would certainly have toned down the now rather startling contrast between their ruddy sandstone and the gentler hues of the main house.

Lord Auchinleck lived to the ripe old age of 75, increasingly cantankerous and garrulous. James Boswell was 41 when he inherited Auchinleck Estate in 1782. He made no changes to the house, although he continued his father's tree planting schemes. After his death in 1795, the estate descended through the family until it passed by marriage to the Talbot family, who moved to Malahide in Ireland in 1905. They dispersed the contents of the house and took Boswell's papers (which the family had suppressed) with them. Auchinleck was sold to another distant branch of the family the Boswells of Garallan. After the war the house began a long period of decline. It was uninhabited from the early 1960s. For twelve years in the 1970s and 1980s there was no lead in the parapet gutters and water poured down behind the linings of the outside walls, accumulating in the basement and its vault. Rot set in, and the building deteriorated rapidly. In 1986, it was acquired with 35 acres of land by the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust (SHBT). The Trust made the house watertight, but then struggled to find a role for it in the face of development proposals for the rest of the site. In 1999, the SHBT turned to the Landmark Trust.

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## RESTORATION

At the outset Landmark appointed Simpson & Brown of Edinburgh as architects. James Simpson had been involved with the house since its acquisition by the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust and is an acknowledged expert on eighteenth-century Scottish architecture. Generous donations from the Royal Oak Foundation in America were augmented by grants from Historic Scotland and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

The Landmark Trust's approach to the restoration of historic buildings is conservative, treating all surviving fabric with respect and retaining it wherever feasible. Although the use of new materials and techniques is not ruled out under appropriate circumstances, unavoidable repairs or replacement are mostly done on a like-for-like basis using traditional methods and practices. For example, lime mortar and plaster bound by animal hair has been an essential material at Auchinleck, mixed and left to cure in huge wooden troughs in the middle of rooms - just as it would have been in the 1750s. It was clear from the outset that the quality of the original workmanship was outstanding – masonry and carving, joinery and plasterwork.

The original accommodation was on four floors. The service quarters – kitchen, wine cellar, housekeeper's room, laundry etc. – were all at basement level. The elevated ground floor contained the formal reception rooms (dining room and parlour), the master bedroom and a study or morning room. On the first floor were the library and best bedrooms, used by family members unless guests were staying when they moved up to the attic floor, which housed humbler bedrooms usually used by servants. The house is fairly compact for its size, the single staircase for use by family and servants alike reflecting the more relaxed conventions of a bucolic life.

The Landmark accommodation is now on the ground and first floors. There is a laundry in the basement, but otherwise the basement and attic areas have been carefully mothballed to keep size within practical limits for the house's new use.

## TOUR OF THE HOUSE

### *The Outside*

The house is perhaps the more interesting for its deviation from the strict rules of classicism. The severe west (rear) elevation is certainly neo-classical, yet the eclectic collection of urns along the skyline and the elaborate design of the pediment on the east elevation express a less restricted exuberance. The emblems on the pediment display various aspects of the cultivated mind: music, the martial arts, scales for justice, a sceptre for authority and the serpent-entwined staff of Aesculapius the healer are all represented, grouped around the central motif, a hooded falcon, from the Boswell family crest.

These symbols illustrate the motto Lord Auchinleck chose for his villa and had carved above the main entrance. The epigram is from Horace (Epistle xi, 29-30) and reads '*Quod petis hic est; Est Ulubris, animus si te non deficit aequus*' – 'What you seek is here in this remote place, if you can only keep a balanced disposition.'

The house was swathed in scaffolding for most of 2000 and early 2001 while the fabric was comprehensively repaired. The decorative urns were repaired wherever possible and only replaced as a last resort. The carved pediment and the foliated Ionic capitals on the pilasters had decayed from air pollution as well as weathering. It was decided they should be gently cleaned and consolidated with minimal restoration, to preserve both the delicacy of the original craftsmanship and the patina of time.

The four baroque pavilions and the obelisks on the rear terrace were re-pointed and repaired.

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## ***The Inside***

The plan of the entrance floor at Auchinleck is a very late example of the Grand Apartment in which 'parade planning' leads circulation from one room to another, passing from public through to private rooms. In the eighteenth century this *enfilade* enabled a complete circuit of the ground floor. The door from parlour to bedroom has since been blocked probably when the dining room and parlour swapped functions in the nineteenth century. During restoration, a number of blind doorways were discovered in the formal rooms. These have been retained.

Internally, much of the joinery is original, but the fine plasterwork had suffered badly from the rainwater that had poured down the walls for so long. Large pieces of plaster which had fallen from the ceilings and cornices were carefully stored for reinstatement, but extensive sections, especially in the library and stairwell, had to be completely replaced by special hand-made mouldings. Most of these, including each bead around the cornice, were individually fixed by hand.

Passing through the small antechamber immediately to the right of the entrance, you enter the dining room. The elaborate alcove, known as a buffet, is a rare survival of a typical eighteenth-century feature and there is a simpler version in the antechamber. They were used to display fine china on shelves (later lost but now replaced) and to serve food from the drop-leg table leaf. The plasterwork around the buffet, including the oak wreath, has been completely restored using contemporary references and early photographs. The shield design above the alcove is based on the first quarter of the Arms of the Boswells of Auchinleck, 'Argent on a fess sable three cinquefoils Argent'. The mailed fist holding a sword on the ceiling in front of the buffet, with its enigmatic motto 'Je pense plus' comes from an earlier Boswell family crest.

Across the room, the crest used by the eighteenth-century Boswells (the hooded falcon with the motto 'Vraye Foy' – true faith) presides on the ceiling in front of the fireplace. As on the pediment outside, emblems of the civilised mind are scattered across the ceiling. Unfortunately, the original fireplace was lost and the current one is a replacement based on a design from Hawkhill House, a building of similar age and design.

Between the doors leading from the dining room to the former parlour at the rear is one of several small stone basins in the house. There is another in the south west corner of the study, beside the window. These are part of the plumbing arrangements, which are particularly progressive: tile-lined soil drains are hidden in the walls of the house and separate pipes are flushed with rainwater from tanks on the roof. These terminate in the small stone basins cunningly concealed behind panels between rooms. (The most obvious use for these basins would seem to be as *pissoirs*: while this is unproven it is an intriguing image!)

The parlour has now become the Landmark kitchen. The door completing the eighteenth-century parade circulation used to be opposite the door from the dining room. To the right of the fireplace are a deep cupboard and then a (restored) blind door, evidence from which was found during restoration. The elaborate cornice and fireplace plasterwork hint at this room's original function as the parlour.

Across the stairwell to the left of the entrance hall lies the morning room, used as a study by both James Boswell and his father. The more masculine panelling and restrained plasterwork reflect this use. The deep wall cupboards, now used as display cabinets, were probably used to store estate documents. Today they house items from the Boswell Museum, formerly housed in the Chapel in Auchinleck village. These and various paintings have been generously loaned by the Auchinleck Boswell Society for display in the house.

Leading from the morning room is a dressing room with closet, where a small opening has been made in the wall to show the old soil drain, lined with Delft tiles and flushed by the rainwater cistern on the roof above. Off the dressing room (and hallway) is the master bedroom. In the inventory taken at Boswell's death in 1795 this bedroom is described as the 'Principal Bedroom' and was almost certainly where he slept.

The first floor is reached by the only staircase. The falcon with outstretched wings above the pendant light is a restoration of a papier-mache original.

The library, as was typical in Scotland in the eighteenth century, is placed on the first floor, facing west across the policy grounds, and on a very clear day you can see Arran. It was in this room that Samuel Johnson and Lord Auchinleck quarrelled over Civil War politics. In Lord Auchinleck's and James Boswell's times, the library seems to have been fairly sparsely furnished, though the books it contained were undeniably intellectual in content.

We know from letters that Sir Alexander Boswell, James's son, carried out an extensive refurbishment of the library in the early nineteenth century. Landmark has evoked the style of an eighteenth-century library rather than attempted an exact recreation, as we do not know how it was originally organised. On a more ambitious scale than is usual even for Landmark properties, the shelves have been stocked with appropriate volumes which include complete runs of Boswell's diaries, journals and correspondence, generously donated by the Yale Editions of the Boswell Papers. Sale catalogues from the dispersal of the contents of Auchinleck in the early twentieth century have been consulted for titles from Victorian authors, more familiar to us than Lord Auchinleck's original erudite collection of the classics.

Sadly, all the original furniture both here and throughout the house has long been dispersed. The furniture we see today has, wherever possible, been carefully chosen by Landmark to evoke eighteenth-century Auchinleck. It is not generally Landmark's philosophy to arrange, decorate or furnish their properties as an exact recreation of a particular period – our buildings must be practical, convenient and comfortable for those staying there. However, various inventories for the house survive at Yale and these were consulted as the furnishing and decorative schemes were developed. Wherever possible, reproductions of prints and pictures known to have an association with the house have been hung.

## **The Estate**

The estate has several interesting features that are mentioned in Boswell's correspondence, and from them we can re-trace many of the walks he describes with Dr. Johnson, James Bruce his faithful overseer, and other friends. Even today the surrounding landscape bears the imprint of the tree-planting campaigns of Boswell and his father. On the banks of the Lugar Water, west of the house, lie the ruins of the former family seat, the Old Place, built in 1612 to replace the Old Castle (whose ruins have now all but disappeared). This was a favourite stroll for Boswell, where he and his brother David reaffirmed allegiance to the family and where he took Dr. Johnson during the latter's famous visit in 1773. Johnson preferred the 'sullen dignity' of this spot to the newly completed Auchinleck House.

Closer to the main house, the bridge across the Dippol Burn has been extensively repaired by Landmark. On the picturesque banks below the bridge is an ovoid ice-house, hewn out of rock. Here ice cut in the winter was stored for summer use, or alternatively salted meat was stored. Further along is a little grotto, again carved out of the living rock, known as Boswell's Summer House and said to have cost no more to create than a normal room. Landmark also intends to restore these and open up public access if funds can be found.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Auchinleck House sleeps up to 13 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*