



THE SUNDIAL PAGE

McGregor's leap

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Some 33 miles north-west of Perth, as the crow flies, the River Tummel flows eastwards out of Dunalastair Water in Rannoch towards Loch Tummel, bounded by the Tay Forest Park, within a few miles of Blair Atholl, Killiecrankie and Pitlochry. On the north bank, just as the river winds its way past the wooded hills and rugged crags of Creag Dhubh and Creag an Tuathanaich, there is a prominence known as 'McGregor's Leap', whilst on the south bank there is a cave that is called after the same man.

McGregor, of course, was the famous hero of the Scottish Highlands, better known as Rob Roy McGregor (1671-1734), whose clan, the Clan McGregor, was outlawed. They were hunted down by the royalist military, who owed their allegiance to the Crown. Many fled abroad to Jamaica and elsewhere, many of whom changed their name to Skinner. (As it happens, I can trace my own ancestry through seven generations to Donald McGregor of Roro, alias the Rev William Skinner of Perth Amboy, New Jersey [d1758] who fought for the Jacobite cause in 1718.)

Just a little upstream, on the same side of the river as 'McGregor's Leap', there is a fine 19th century building, in front of which there are the foundations of an earlier building. These are the remains of the house at Dunalastair that was once the ancestral home of Alexander Robertson, the 16th Baron of Struan and the 12th Chief of the Clan Robertson. Known as 'Mount Alexander', this house was also the much-loved home of Alexander Robertson's son, also called Alexander (1668-1749), the 17th Baron of Struan and the 13th Chief of the Clan. He was noted as being something of a genius and a poet; but he was also considered to be a brave patriot and it was during the 1745 Jacobite Rising that his house and home were severely damaged by fire.

The Jacobite cause was one that arose after 'the Glorious Revolution' of 1688-9, when James II was deposed in favour of William of Orange and when Parliament passed the Act of Settlement in 1701, that vested the succession to the throne, after William (d1702) and Queen Anne (1702-1714), in the Protestant House of Hanover. The Jacobites were loyal to James II and supported James Stuart, his

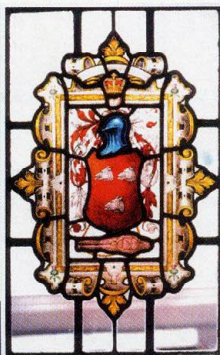


Figure 1. The Arms of Alexander Robertson, 16th Baron of Struan and 12th Chief of the Clan.

Figure 2. The stained-glass sundial, attributed to John Oliver.



staunchly Roman Catholic son, known as 'the Old Pretender'. However, on the accession of George I, the rising of the Scottish Jacobites in 1715 was anticipated (unlike that of 1745 in support of Charles Edward Stuart, 'the Young Pretender', which was not) and was brutally put down by John Campbell, the Duke of Argyll, who was an able general and who commanded the royal forces in Scotland.

How Alexander Robertson, the 12th Chief of the Clan, fared during these turbulent times I do not know; but it seems that he was able to live in relative peace and prosperity, for he received a Grant of Arms in 1672, in recognition of his family's part in tracking down the murderer of King James I of Scotland, who had been assassinated in Perth in 1437. Supposedly about 1672, but probably later, he embellished his house with windows that contained the stained-glass Heraldic Arms of Robertson of Struan and a fine stained-glass sundial.

These panels are evidently unsigned; but are attributed to John Oliver (1616-1701), well-known as a member of the London Company of Glaziers and Glass-Painters.

The panel depicting the Arms has a red shield, bearing three silver wolves' heads, supporting a knight's helmet, surmounted by the crest of a hand holding a regal crown. Above the crest there is the motto 'Virtutis Gloria Merces'. Beneath the shield there is the image of a wild naked man, lying prostrate and chained to the shield, presumably representing the captured murderer.

The panel containing the sundial is almost identical to and as ornate as that depicting the Arms of Alexander Robertson; but takes the form of a plain rectangular dial-plate with a broad yellow-stained border, wherein are placed the Roman numerals denoting the hours of the day. The small cross identifies the 12 o'clock hour line. Along the top of the border there is inscribed the motto 'Sic Aetas fugit', whilst the border itself frames a panel delineated with the hour-lines and half-hours. Within this panel there is a small rectangular area in which may be found a decorative 'daddy-longlegs' spider and a fly. These are remarkably similar to the spider and fly depicted in the Weavers' Company stained-glass sundial, which is almost certainly the work of John Oliver, since he was one of the surveyors associated with the Company, working with Sir Christopher Wren on the restoration of the city after the Great Fire of London in 1666.

Likewise, the heraldic panel has much in common with Oliver's work in Northill Church in Bedford. The dial itself has been described as a 'south-west declining sundial'; but, in fact, since it is viewed from inside the building, it is a mirror image of what is actually a south-east declining dial, which, by measurement, has a determined value of 18° 50'.

Rob Roy McGregor's exploits are mainly centred on Aberfoyle, indeed he was born near the head of Loch Katrine and is buried in the churchyard of Balquhider; but he must have known the Highlands well. One wonders whether he had been secretly given shelter by Alexander Robertson at Dunalastair, when, perhaps, the approach of Argyll's soldiery caused him to flee and to take the desperate leap from the place that bears his name. And, one wonders, if he had stayed a few days, as the guest of the Chief of the Clan Robertson, would he, perhaps, have admired the sundial and read the time by it? ●

Author's note: Whilst the glass panels described in this article were evidently rescued from the Dunalastair fire, their present whereabouts are unknown.