

Background

THE ORIGIN OF THE HEADS

King James V wanted to impress – and there was little that the rich and powerful of his day admired more than sumptuous displays of the most modern art.

This was probably the motivation behind having ceilings in his palace lodgings decorated with carved wooden roundels.

In the mid-16th century there was a vogue for using Classical references, such as medallions, in the decorative arts.

But research for Historic Scotland shows that creating a ceiling in this way was very new.

There are a couple of places in Europe from which inspiration might have been drawn, but in each case it would take a significant artistic leap to get to the Stirling heads.

One is the stone carvings up the stairway of the Loire chateau of Azay-le-Rideau.

James V spent nine months in France, while looking for a wife, and would have visited many palaces.

The other is the Wawel Palace in Cracow, Poland, where there is a ceiling which King Sigismund had made to celebrate his marriage to the Italian Bona Sforza. These have carved figures but they are not set in roundels.

Lost and found

After Stirling Castle fell from favour as a royal residence it eventually found a new role as an army garrison.

The change of priorities meant that the royal lodgings were not maintained as before. The heads remained lying around and some were doubtless lost.

But even during the darkest moment of their history there were those who recognised their importance. This led to some being saved as curiosities, some ending up in private homes across Scotland.

It was only in the 1970s that all the remaining heads were all back in public hands.

Many were put on display at the Smith Gallery in Stirling

(www.smithartgallery.demon.co.uk) and three are owned by National Museums, Scotland (www.nms.ac.uk).

A matter of modesty

The modest Jane Graham was among the most important figures in the story of the Stirling Heads.

A talented amateur artist of the early 19th century, she took it upon herself to find out where the surviving heads were, then travelled the country to sketch them.

Her task was greatly helped by the fact that her husband was General Graham, the deputy governor of Stirling Castle.

The general possessed two of the roundels himself and the magistrates, advocates, officers and others who owned the rest were happy to welcome the wife of such a senior military figure into their homes.

In 1817 William Blackwood published a book containing the sketches called the *Lacunar Strevelinense*.

However, ideas about decency had changed greatly since the Renaissance, and the artist felt it necessary to practice considerable self-censorship.

For example, one of the roundels shows a naked dancing imp.

Mrs Graham's version has a veil drawn discretely across his nether regions.

And when it came to the figure of a bare breasted woman, poor Mrs Graham could not bring herself to draw anything at all.

It wasn't only Mrs Graham's sense of propriety which came into play.

At the time it wasn't quite seemly for women to appear in print.

Her sister was the novelist Susan Ferrier whose first two novels, *The Marriage* and *Inheritance*, were published anonymously by Mr Blackwood because it would be unseemly to have a woman's name in print.

Likewise Mrs Graham's name is not mentioned in the *Lacunar Strevelinense*.

It does, though, attribute the drawings to the hand of "a lady well qualified by her knowledge of art to appreciate the true value of these neglected relics."

Mr Blackwood wrote text to accompany the pictures and this too took on a moral tone.

In it he calls on readers to study the sketches closely in the hope that they would be inspired to abandon the fashion for "Chinese frippery" which had swept the world of decorative art.

Thanks to Mrs Graham's efforts we even have records of two heads which were destroyed by a fire at Dunstaffnage in 1940.

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