

Mr Haldane's Hermitage: Re-discovering a Late 18th Century Immersive Poetry Tableau at Airthrey Estate, Bridge of Allan, Stirling, a Case of Disguising East India Company Profits

Murray Cook and Jennifer Strachan

INTRODUCTION

To the immediate north of Stirling's University's campus lies a post-glacial sea cliff made of volcanoclastic conglomerate. This cliff face is crossed by a network of graded paths that link two structures: The Summerhouse and The Hermitage. These buildings are typical of late 18th century designed landscapes (Buxbaum 1989) and provided places for the owners to visit on a walk of their grounds as well as a variety of other purposes including shelter, monuments to look to and from and an opportunity for a theatrical reveal, to entertain and surprise guests. They are a form of conspicuous consumption whereby the elite demonstrated their good taste to the neighbours and visitors.

Airthrey Castle and Estate were built and developed by the Haldane family with wealth derived from the East India Company (Haldane 1853; HES GDL00010; Mair 2018: 142-3). Robert Haldane commissioned the bulk of the design and structural work including The Hermitage in a very short period from 1786 when he moved to the estate at 22 and 1798 when he sold it to pursue a career as a Christian evangelist.

The designed landscape and policies of Airthrey Castle are considered Nationally Significant and designated by Historic Environment Scotland (HES GDL00010). However, prior to the authors' interest neither The Hermitage nor The Summerhouse have been formally described (Cook et al 2024). This article solely concerns The Hermitage.

The ruins of The Hermitage are a well known drinking spot for young people from Bridge of Allan and in recent years the structure has become ever harder to access and comprehend due to litter, tree growth, structural collapse and fallen branches. In Autumn 2023 in collaboration with Stirling University's then Artist in Residence Audrey Grant and local volunteers the authors undertook a programme of vegetation clearance and litter pick up. In turn this allowed a basic photographic record of the structure to be compiled which in turn informed an understanding of its design and history. This article provides the first detailed description of the building and discusses its function and significance.

HISTORY OF THE HERMITAGE

Despite being part of a Nationally Significant Designed Landscape there is no formal record of the structure. It is described by the Royal Commission for Ancient and Historical Monuments (RCAHMS) (Canmore ID 47157; NS 80771 97001) as '*a grotto. Built about 1785. Now in ruins.*' This description is an edited version of the 1860 Name Book entry which in full reads '*A grotto constructed about the year 1785 by the late Robert Haldane, at the time proprietor of Aithrey. It is situated near the top of one of the many precipices that stud the southern base of the Ochils. It is approached by well kept promenades and the within its limits there is a flight of steps cut out of the rock and leading up to a seat from which a commanding view of the country is obtained. It is in a ruinous state.*' The RCAHMS thesaurus defines a grotto as '*an artificial cave or cell, often decorated with stalactites and shells. Most were constructed as garden features in the grounds of large 18th century houses.*'

Historic Environment Scotland's entry in their *Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* (Airthrey Castle GDL00010) notes the presence of The Hermitage but does not describe it in any detail: '*The Hermitage is roofless although the walls remain*' and potentially this may even describe the Summer House. The Airthrey Hermitage has also tended to be overlooked by studies of garden buildings in designed landscapes and is not mentioned by Tait (1980), Buxbaum (1989) or Campbell (2013). While Cooper (2000: 299) mentions a 'tower' at Aithrey Castle, it is not clear if this means an element of the actual castle or a structure in the landscape which of

course could be either The Summerhouse or The Hermitage. Regardless, while the building has been overlooked in the past it is clear that it forms a key part of a Nationally Significant Designed Landscape and so should be itself considered Nationally Significant.

Before examining the history of The Hermitage it is worth expanding on terminology. The RCAHMS have described it as a 'grotto' while Haldane called it a hermitage. Dr Christopher Dingwall (pers comm) suggests that while hermitages are normally viewed as places of retreat and seclusion he considers the Airthrey Hermitage to be more of a view-house or belvedere designed with extensive views in mind. Campbell (2013:97) notes that 18th century garden building design, function and terminology were not exact sciences and clients and architects were constantly being influenced by each other in what was explicitly elite social competition via conspicuous consumption.

The Hermitage is first recorded as in ruins on the 1861 1st of the Ordnance Survey (Stirlingshire Sheet X) though not in any detail and shows a single small oblong structure. The 2nd Edition (Stirlingshire Sheet x.12) surveyed in 1862 show three structures and notes that they are in ruins (Figure 1). This map also shows stairs and an oblong structure to their south. The 1896 revision (Stirlingshire Sheet X.12) shows a third building (Figure 1), no longer notes that the structure is in ruins and does not record the stairs. None of the maps show the gate/doorway structure. The structure is no longer named or recorded by 1948 (Stirlingshire Sheet NX1).

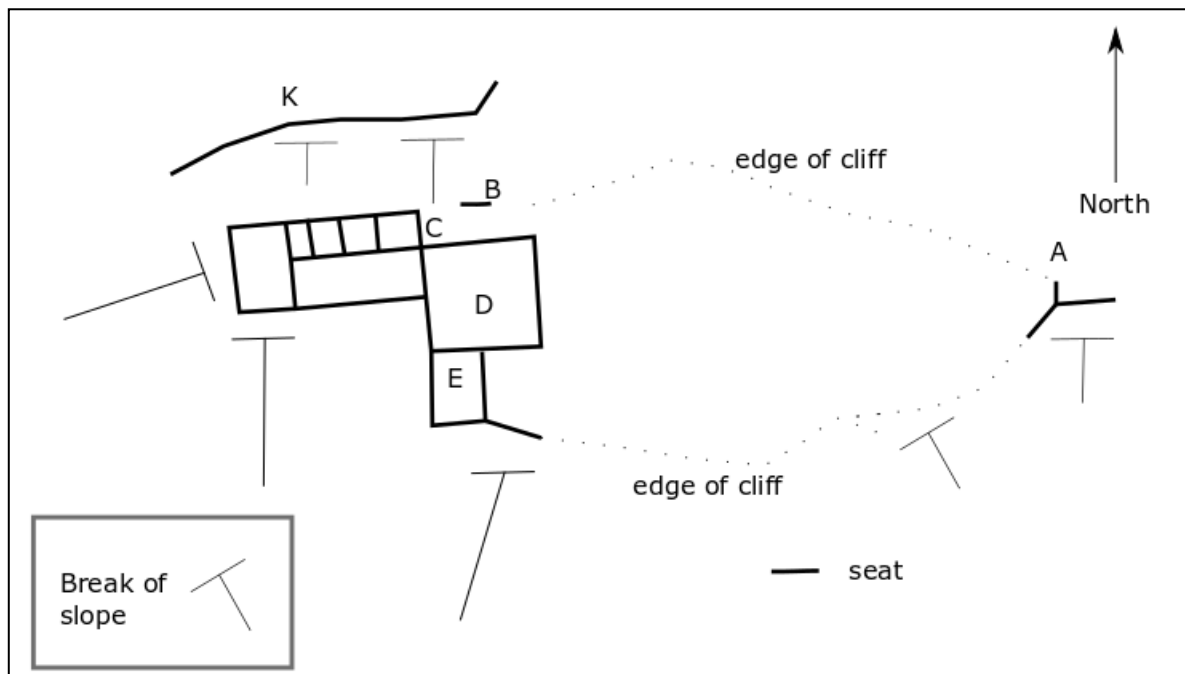


Figure 1: Plan of The Hermitage

Captain Robert Haldane, an East India Company ship Captain and later Stirling's MP acquired Airthrey in 1759. On his death it was passed to his nephew, James Haldane another Captain in the East India Company. On his death in 1768 the four year old Robert Haldane inherited the estate. Robert Haldane's brother Alexander would also become an East India Captain. It is worth noting that the wealth clawed from India in the late 18th century created a new class of person: Nabobs. These people were often fabulously rich and if they returned home often built brand new estates with their money (Buddle 1999:55). Sir Walter Scott described India as *'the corn chest of Scotland, where we poor gentry must send our younger sons as we send our black cattle to the south'* (ibid) and of course one of Becky Shaw's targets in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*

Jos Sedley was a Nabob and is clearly portrayed as a fat buffoon. Andrew MacKillop in his recent review of Scotland in the Eastern portions of the British Empire notes that (2021: 241-22) the Eastern Empire (ie the areas that Nabobs derived their profits) was *'cloaked in a reputation of corrupt conquest and unsustainable profiteering derived from plunder and asset stripping or questionable practices'*. Newly returned merchants made strenuous efforts to disguise these profits as *'a means of countering and negating the negative connotations associated with the Eastern Empire'* MacKillop gives the Haldanes of Airthrey as a key example of this process.

Robert Haldane grew up a wealthy man and embarked on a series of careers initially enrolling at University to study divinity, then joining the military, then back to University, then off

on a grand tour of Europe before returning to Airthrey at 22 to transform the estate including the construction of The Hermitage. However, contrary to the entry in the Name Book Haldane cannot have built The Hermitage in 1785 as he only moved to the estate in September 1786 and his first daughter was born in 1787, which will surely have distracted him (Haldane 1853; Mair 2018: 142-3). Haldane commissioned Robert Adam to design his house in 1790/91 (HES Airthrey Castle GDL00010) and it seems probable that The Hermitage was one of the last projects to be completed once the shape of the estate and thus views of it were established.

Craig Mair's (2108, 143-4) history of Bridge of Allan, records some local traditions: that the structure was inspired by Oliver Goldsmith's 1766 poem *The Hermit* (also known as 'Edwin and Angelina' from Chapter 8 of Goldsmith's novel the *Vicar of Wakefield* where it is described as 'ballad') and that a local man had been employed to live in the structure but had got drunk in Bridge of Allan so was fired. It should be noted that the Goldsmith poem contains no architectural description and can only have been the loosest of inspirations. However, the origins of both stories are found within a memoir written by Robert Haldane's brother Alexander which states the following: *Amongst the erections in the woods of Airthrey, there was one which excited considerable interest, and existed for many years after Mr. Haldane left the place, but which has long ago tumbled into ruins. It was an hermitage, constructed after the model of the woodland retreat to which Goldsmith's Angelina is led by the "taper's hospitable*

ray," and discovers her slighted lover, who had sought for consolation in a hermit's life away from the haunts of men. "The wicket opening with a latch," "the rushy couch," "the scrip with herbs and fruits supplied," all the other sylvan articles of furniture described by the poet, were there, whilst on the sides of the adjacent rock, or within the hut itself, the lines of Goldsmith were painted at proper intervals, — the invitation to "the houseless child of want to accept the guiltless feast, and the blessing and repose," concluding at last with the sentimental moral, —

*"Then, pilgrim, turn, thy cares forego, —
All earth-born cares are wrong, —
Man wants but little here below,
Nor wants that little long."*

The Vicar of Wakefield was Goldsmith's only novel and his biggest success (Golden 1977) and appears to have been very popular in the late 18th century which presumably explains Haldane's interest. With regard to the hermit, his brother writes the following: *'Mr. Haldane, who in his younger days always delighted in a practical joke, advertised for a real hermit, specifying the conditions, which were to be in accordance with the beau-ideal of Goldsmith's, including the prohibition of animal food. But the restrictions did not prevent the author of the jest from being obliged to deal seriously with applications for the place, and one man, in particular, professed himself ready to comply with all the conditions except one, which was that he should never leave the wood. To the doom of perpetual seclusion the would-be hermit could not make up his mind to submit, and the advertisement was not repeated* (Haldane 1853: 48-9).



Figure 2: The Hermitage from the west showing Element E, the final phase tower.

In perhaps another attempt to expiate the taint of the East India Company Robert Haldane sold the estate in 1798 (HES Airthrey Castle GDL00010, give this date as 1796) to pursue a career as a Christian missionary and philanthropist (Mair 2018:144) and there are no indications that the new buyer showed any interest in The Hermitage. Mair (2018:143) quotes an account written in 1888 by a local man Bryce, who describes The Hermitage as already in neglect by 1800 and comprising a staircase with a pebble dash finish. This formed the entrance to a room with a window of coloured glass the fragments of which were a focus for local boys' collecting.

THE HERMITAGE TODAY

This description summarises a fuller unpublished account (Cook et al 2024). The paths to the immediate east and west of The Hermitage are narrow and wrap round the immediate base of the rock face on an artificial graded path. As the structure appears the view is dominated by a ruinous rounded tower (Element D, Figures 1 and 2). As will be argued below it is proposed that D is not part of the original design but a later 19th century addition. This suggests that The Hermitage was designed to be not as prominent in its immediate environs as it currently is. The path from the east is dominated by yew and laurel which are likely to have been deliberately



Figure 3: The view from The Hermitage looking south.

planted. To the exterior on the path around the base of The Hermitage is a bedrock shelf which forms a natural bench and which may show some indications of the bedrock having been smoothed. The views south from all parts of the complex present a panorama of the estate framed by the Abbey Craig and Stirling Castle (Figure 3).

Access into The Hermitage is from the east along a revetted path through a doorway/arch (Element A; Figures 1 and 4) which has clear indications of having had a timber door within it. The doorway is made of brick and stone and its external faces are covered with a pebble dash which mimics the natural bedrock. To the interior a wall (slopes evenly down to the ground, giving the appearance of a collapsed structure, this too has the pebble dash render on it. The bulk of the structures associated with The Hermitage cannot

be seen until one is through the doorway and walked round the corner.

There is a clear gently rising path to the immediate south of the cliff face, but beyond this the ground slopes down and it is not clear if it was ever usable. The path was built by a combination of cutting into the bedrock in places and building it up in others. The path runs to a staircase (Element C) with seven built steps and a possible rock cut eighth which is built within a natural but augmented fissure in the bedrock (Figures 1 and 5). The first and last steps of the staircase are at least triple the tread of the others and built on levelled bedrock and it seems probable that there was a now destroyed wooden element. To the south and left of the staircase there is a double skinned brick wall with a stepped upper edge and the same pebble dash render. The base of the



Figure 4: The doorway (Element A) from the east.

outer wall is covered with the render but as the steps rise so the double skinned wall is revealed. Significantly, it is clear that the intended affect of the render was not to fool anyone into thinking this was a genuine rock cut structure but rather to allow a knowing nod to its skilful artifice. To the right of the staircase as one ascends there are traces of drilled and worked holes and an iron band which are assumed to present a hand rail. At the top of the stairs is a rock cut platform that straddles the stairs. Above this is a stretch of masonry revetment which raises the possibility of a missing element connecting the two.

Immediately to the east of the staircase at its base was a hearth feature (Element B; Figures 1 and 6), this was associated with a brick chimney



Figure 5: The staircase (Element C) from the east.

but had been constructed in a natural fissure and covered in the same pebble dash render. The top of the chimney appeared to have been originally capped with stonework which when smoke vented would have given the impression of it coming from the cliff face. The hearth itself has no fireplace or surround and presumably was intended to look like an irregular natural void. There are no indications of any structure enclosing the hearth and it does not appear to have been designed to warm a room.

To the left and thus south of the staircase was a possible cupboard. The function of this feature is unclear but it appears to have been originally bigger and to have been subsequently truncated. To the east of the cupboard was an oblong



Figure 6: The fireplace (Element B) from the south.

building (Element D; Figures 1, 2 and 7) with walls up to 2m high on the interior but 3m on the exterior and measuring c 3m by 3m. The northern element to this structure comprised cut bedrock. There was no obvious access to this structure and it may have required steps down into it from the rock cut platform which runs to the staircase. The interior is occupied by a substantial mature tree. It seems possible that this structure was originally roofed and may be what was recorded on the 1st Edition Ordnance Survey. The cupboard feature may have represented an upper floor to a now no longer extant building accessed from the rock cut platform. There was also no indication of the pebble render on any of the external surfaces.

The southern wall of D has been broken



Figure 7: Element E from above and north.

through to provide access to the rounded tower (Element E; Figures 1 and 7) which had not been keyed into D and there is a clear line between the two. Within the interior of the rounded tower were four small square holes that appear to be supports timber floor joists these were at roughly the same level as the hole through D. Assuming a timber floor the walls of the tower would be a chest height. The top of the wall of E appears to have been deliberately left uneven. The aim of E's construction appears to have been to create a viewing platform.

INTERPRETATION

Haldane's Hermitage is revealed to be a complex series of structures with at least two phases. It also

seems likely that the original design was partially hidden within the rock face and that it was intended to look like a natural rock grotto that had been augmented within which was a hermitage which was intended as a '*woodland retreat*' within a rocky setting (Haldane 1843:48). There were likely several points from both immediately outside and within The Hermitage from which to view the impressive vista to the south centred on Aithrey loch framed by the Abbey Craig and Stirling Castle. It seems probable that D represented some form of roofed structure and that there may have been another roofed structure at the top of the stairs (C) or even that the stairs led to a higher level. Presumably one of these was the '*hut*' described by Alexander Haldane (ibid). The staircase was not roofed and is likely missing some wooden elements as the treads of the steps at the top and bottom are too big. It was also likely supported by a bannister to the north. The two late 19th century accounts mentioned earlier appear to contradict each other: the 1860 Name Book discuss a seat at the top of the stairs while the 1888 Bryce account describes a room with coloured glass at the top. Both accounts were written decades after Haldane sold the estate and at present there is no way to conclude which is correct or indeed if they both are: a seat within a roof. The chimney and hearth (B) appear to have no other function than to project smoke apparently from the '*natural*' rock face perhaps to evoke a volcanic fissure.

Haldane (ibid) notes that the surface of the rock face and the interior of the hut were painted with lines of Goldsmith's poem. It is not clear if

the entire poem was rendered or just key scenes but the latter seems more likely. We may imagine that these could have started outside the entrance and led to the '*hut*' and presumably a tableau including '*the other sylvan articles of furniture described by the poet*' representing the culmination of the poem in an immersive experience. In this context the hearth (B) may have been another prop in the experience echoing the hermit's hearth where '*the crackling faggot flies*'. The '*hut*' (presumably D) could also have served as a covered viewing platform for the views to the south as well as some form of tea room or banqueting room. There are no surviving indications of what this structure looked like or the '*sylvan..furniture*' and it appears that the structure was neglected and a focus of vandalism almost as soon as Haldane sold estate in 1798 (or 1796). This decline may have been aided by changing fashions and Campbell (2013: 53) notes that interest in hermitages was declining by 1780. The first phase of the Airthrey Hermitage appears to have lasted less than 10 years and perhaps no more than 5 years. To be explicit there are no indications that Haldane was consciously attempting to disguise his inherited money but it seems likely. But even if he were not it is clear that this was a rather expensive whimsical joke.

The later tower structure (E) with its flag pole made the whole complex more visible within its environs and required the demolition of the southern wall of D which implies that any putative roof had already gone. It may be that E was constructed from the rubble of D. It is argued that the absence of element E on the 1861 revision of the Ordnance Survey and its presence on the

1896 revision suggests it was built after 1861. The unfinished nature of the top of the wall of E may have been deliberate to provide the impression of an older ruin. It may be that this was undertaken to open views to the newly constructed National Wallace Monument on the Abbey Craig opened in 1869. There are at present no known accounts of the appearance or use of this second phase of The Hermitage.

CONCLUSION

The Hermitage appears to have been a short lived fashionable whimsy, perhaps even an elaborate joke by a man with time and money on his hands, keen to make an impression on local society. However, the structure presumably served multiple functions including as a belvedere. Perhaps the dressing/repurposing of the structure as Goldsmith's Hermitage was the joke. It is also possible that this was an attempt to disguise the ultimate source of his wealth: the East India Company and all its associated negative connotations. That the structure was not maintained after the whole estate was sold when Haldane finally found his vocation perhaps underlines its superficial and whimsical nature as well as the incredible wealth available to the elite of the time. The production of a first formal record underlines the significance of the building and its place in the history of Scottish landscape design.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to the University Estate's Team for letting us play. Sarah Bromage liaised with the Estate's

Team and hosted the initial discussion with Audrey Grant who recorded everything. Thanks also to Francis Bell who volunteered from the University and Emma McCombie and Mark Ullrich from the University. Thanks to ACFA volunteers for assisting (Ed and Ailsa Smith; Wendy Raine and Elizabeth Swain) and also to the hardy regulars Brian Sword, Peter Dunn, Helen Sommerville and Sue Mackay. Thanks also for extra input from Christopher Dingwall and Matt Benians of Scotland's Landscape and Garden Heritage as well as Derek Alexander of NTS Scotland. Sally Foster and Hanneke Booijs also provided several useful suggestions.

Bibliography

1st Edition Ordnance Survey Stirlingshire Sheet X, National Map Library of Scotland, <https://maps.nls.uk/> accessed 03/12/2023.

2nd Edition Ordnance Survey Stirlingshire Sheet X.12, National Map Library of Scotland, <https://maps.nls.uk/> accessed 03/12/2023.

2nd Edition Ordnance Survey Stirlingshire Sheet X.12 1896 revision, National Map Library of Scotland, <https://maps.nls.uk/> accessed 03/12/2023.

Ordnance Survey Stirlingshire Sheet NX1 1948, National Map Library of Scotland, <https://maps.nls.uk/> accessed 03/12/2023.

- Addyman, Macfadyen and Howarth, T, K and R 2002 *Newhailes House and Estate, East Lothian archaeology: report 5: The Shell House architectural analysis and archaeological investigation*. Unpublished Report.
- Buddle, A 1999 *The Tiger and Thistle: Tipu Sultan and The Scots in India*. Edinburgh.
- Buxbaum, T 1989 *Scottish Garden Buildings : From Food to Folly*. Mainstream Publishing.
- Campbell, G 2013 *The Hermit in the Garden: From Imperial Rome to Ornamental Gnome*. Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, M and Sandeman, M 1964 Mid Argyll: an archaeological survey, *Proc Soc Antiq Scot* 95:1-125.
- Cook, M, Strachan, J and Sommerville, H 2024 *Saving The Hermitage: Hermitage Woods, Stirling University 2023: Data Structure Report*. Unpublished report by Rampart Scotland.
- Cooper, S 2000 *A History of Ornamental Buildings and Structures in Scotland's Gardens and Designed Landscapes From the 12th Century to 1840*. Unpublished PHD, Edinburgh College of Art / Heriot Watt University.
- Dingwall, C 1990 The Folly at the Falls, *Scots Magazine*: 133, No 3: 304-309.
- Fraser, S 2017 Courting danger: interpreting sublime landscape in a Scottish wilderness garden, in *Garden History* 45:2, 155-75.
- Golden, M 1977 Goldsmith, The Vicar of Wakefield and the periodicals, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 76: 525-536.
- Haldane, A 1853 *Memoirs of the lives of Robert Haldane of Airthrey, and of his brother, James Alexander Haldane*. New York: R Carter and Brothers.
- Historic Environment Scotland, 2016 Inventory of Garden and Designed Landscapes 2016 *Airthrey Castle GDL00010, AIRTHREY CASTLE (GDL00010) (historicenvironment.scot)*, accessed 03/12/12/2023.
- MacKillop A 2021 *Human Capital and Empire: Scotland, Ireland, Wales and British Imperialism in Asia, c.1690-c.1820*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Mair, C 2018 *Bridge of Allan: A History*. Bridge of Allan: Dr Welsh Trust.
- Tait, A 1980 *The Landscape Garden in Scotland: 1735-1835*. Edinburgh.