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THE WRYCHTISHOUSIS: 'A VERY CURIOUS EDIFICE'

CHARLES MCKEAN

Nothing could be more striking when seen against the evening sky.

Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of his Time*.¹

RENAISSANCE CAPITAL CITIES attracted clustering Renaissance villas. Over a hundred of them, admired by the Duc de Rohan in 1600 and by Sir William Brereton in 1636, adorned Edinburgh's fringes.² The Houses of Dean, Ravelston, Prestonfield, Inch, Craigcrook, Colinton, Kilbaberton, Woodhall, Barnton and Malleny were fashionable and smart; but the most exotic of them all was The Wrychtishousis that once lay on the edge of the Boroughmuir on the western fringe of what became Bruntsfield Links.

The villa stood proud in the rising Edinburgh hinterland, and figured as backdrop to Paul Sandby's sketch of the 'Horsefair on Bruntsfield Links' in 1750.³ During the eighteenth century it was called variously Wrightshouses, Wrights Houses Castle, or – immediately prior to its rousp in 1797 – Bruntsfield Castle (presumably to distinguish it from nearby Bruntsfield House). The name change might also be evidence that its Renaissance title was no longer deemed sufficiently fashionable. Nor, sadly, was the villa itself. It was demolished in July 1800 to make way for James Gillespie's Hospital and School, which stood at the end of Gillespie Crescent until it was itself demolished in 1976. The group of houses beside the Barclay Church now occupies the site of the old hamlet of Wrights Houses.

The Napiers of Wrychtishousis (an unlikely territorial designation if ever there was one) were cadets of the Napiers of Kilmahew, Dumbartonshire, only

distant cousins of the Napiers of Merchiston whose castle stood but a golf drive away.⁴ Daniel Wilson recorded that William, an ancestor of the family of Wrychtishousis, was Constable of Edinburgh Castle in 1390, holding the property from the King on annual payment of a silver penny.⁵

The name and date of the villa were a source of great confusion. Maitland held that it had belonged to a laird of Wryte, dating the western wing (in consequence of a stone bearing the date 1376) to the fourteenth century, the eastern wing to the reign of Robert III, and the central (southern) range to that of James VI, though Wilson was in no doubt that all the sculptured stones dated from the same era, in the early seventeenth century.⁶ The name, however, implies a *wright's house*; and rather than suggesting that the territorial designation of a Napier should be so curiously proletarian, it raises the pawky possibility that the owner might have been his own wright – in other words he had built the house for himself. Its spiky femininity misled Arnot to believe that the villa had been built for a mistress of James IV, whom Wilson then obligingly identified as a damsel denominated 'The Daisy'.⁷

Surviving drawings imply that The Wrychtishousis was extremely important in the canon of Scottish Renaissance architecture. However, the few sources of original information mostly suffer from perplexities of perspective and detail. The challenge has been to synthesise that information, and to stiffen it against the sinews of the inherent proportions and customary plans of the Scottish Renaissance.

The original illustrations are as follows. A 1785

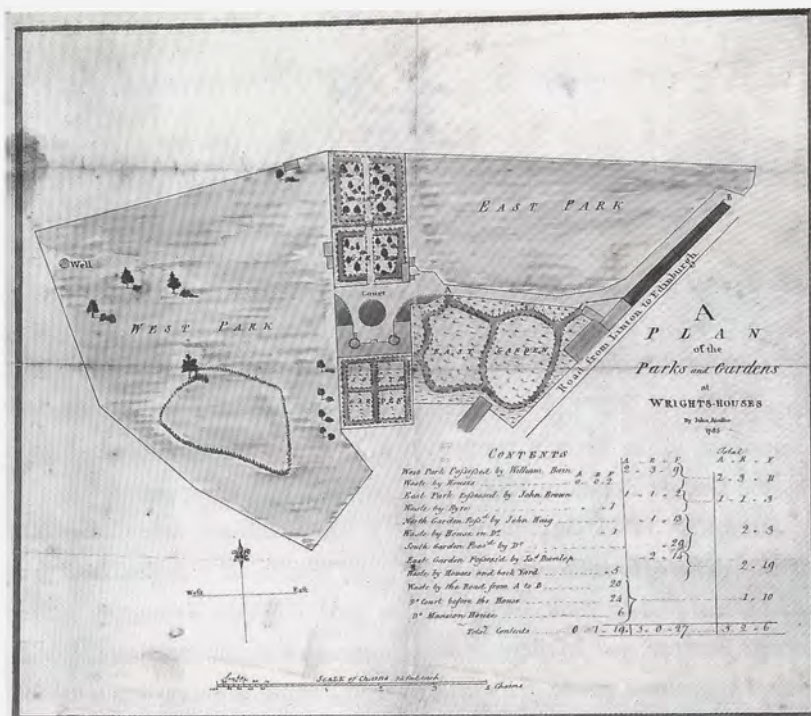
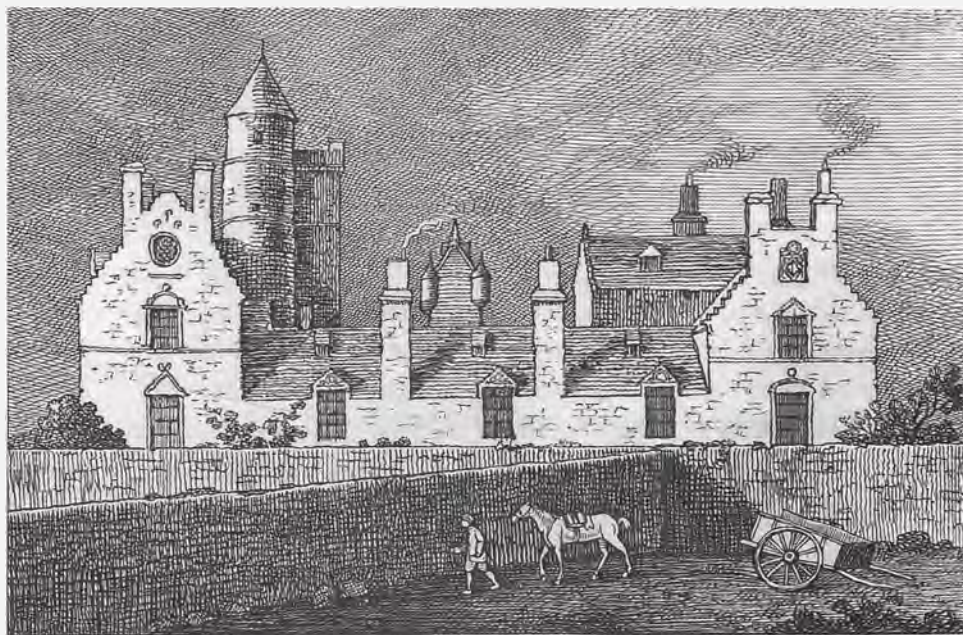


Fig. 1. A Plan of the Parks and Gardens at Wrights-houses, John Ainslie, 1785, with a list of the tenants of the ground. (NMRS, EDD/543/2.)



Wrights Houses
Wrights Houses
sold by L. Ainslie at the Cross Edinburgh

Fig. 2. Wrights Houses from the south, drawn by John Ainslie, probably 1785. (From Grant's Old and New Edinburgh, 1880-83; NMRS, EDD/543/1.)

plan by John Ainslie (fig. 1), with a perhaps contemporary drawing of the south facade by Ainslie (fig. 2), later rescued by the antiquary Charles Kirkpatrick Sharpe and printed by both Daniel Wilson and James Grant.⁸ There are two 1788 drawings by Francis Grose: the south facade (later published in his *Antiquities of Scotland*, fig. 3), and the view from the north west (fig. 4). The originals are pale watercolours held in the Department of Prints and Drawings, National Gallery of Scotland. There are significant differences between Grose's drawing of the south facade and that of Ainslie (only some three years earlier), and even between Grose's drawing and the engraving by Sparrow in 1789 for publication in the *Antiquities*. All are taken from the Edinburgh to Linton Road (a little to the east of the present Bruntsfield Place), with the picturesque roofline of the villa rising over the formal walled garden that lay to its south. A view from the north east was sketched by J. Dick, possibly for either the *Edinburgh Magazine* or *Edinburgh Herald* (fig. 5); this was later re-worked into a beautifully atmospheric watercolour by James Skene of Rubislaw in 1817 (now in Edinburgh Central Library). Finally, in early 1800, Alexander Nasmyth stepped into the rubble to sketch the north facade whilst they were busy demolishing the east wing (fig. 6).

Ainslie's 1785 plan of the parks and gardens of Wrights-houses (fig. 1) shows a symmetrical E-plan mansion house with a hexagonal tower in each re-entrant angle, bounded by formal walled gardens north and south, an English garden to the east, and east and west parks. The symmetry of plan was more apparent than real. It seems probable that the villa was built in phases, beginning with the east wing, possibly slightly broader and lower than the later western one. Projecting from it (as in Castle Gogar) was an octagonal stair-tower corbelled out to square for a room above. Nasmyth's drawing (fig. 6) shows that the doorway into this tower was a principal one,

distinguished by the string-course which runs along its adjacent wing, and up over an armorial panel above the door.

The villa was then extended westwards from the south end of the east wing, making an L-plan. Though only a principal storey above ground-floor cellars and kitchens, the new range was lit by an astonishing array of tall high windows projecting through the roofline into dormerheads. In the Scottish Renaissance, that is the typical form of a gallery. At some point, a matching western wing was added, with another semi-octagonal tower in its corner corbelled out to the square above, but this time taken two storeys higher, ending in a balustraded viewing platform at the top, from which superb views were to be had of Edinburgh and the Forth. An early seventeenth-century date is appropriate for the western wing (and much of the decoration), since the tower, with its balustraded platform, has all the characteristics of the period; and the entire composition has much in common with the house of Kilbaberton (Baberton), by Sir James Murray of Kilbaberton, the King's Architect (who may also have been responsible for the U-plan Renaissance villa of The Binns, Linlithgow, and possibly even for Pitreavie, Dunfermline). That the tower was not simply a stair-tower, but a series of large apartments is evident from the slit windows and the conical turret of the turnpike stair which served these rooms and extended up to the viewing platform (fig. 3).

In the middle of the north facade – it was normal to enter Scottish Renaissance villas from the north – an extraordinary diminutive entrance tower was added, again with chamfered corners corbelled out to square, from which a stair must have led straight up into the principal floor. There was clearly a high-level room on the top of this entrance tower (to judge from its window) but no clue as to how it was reached.

The two wings appear to be near-identical, con-

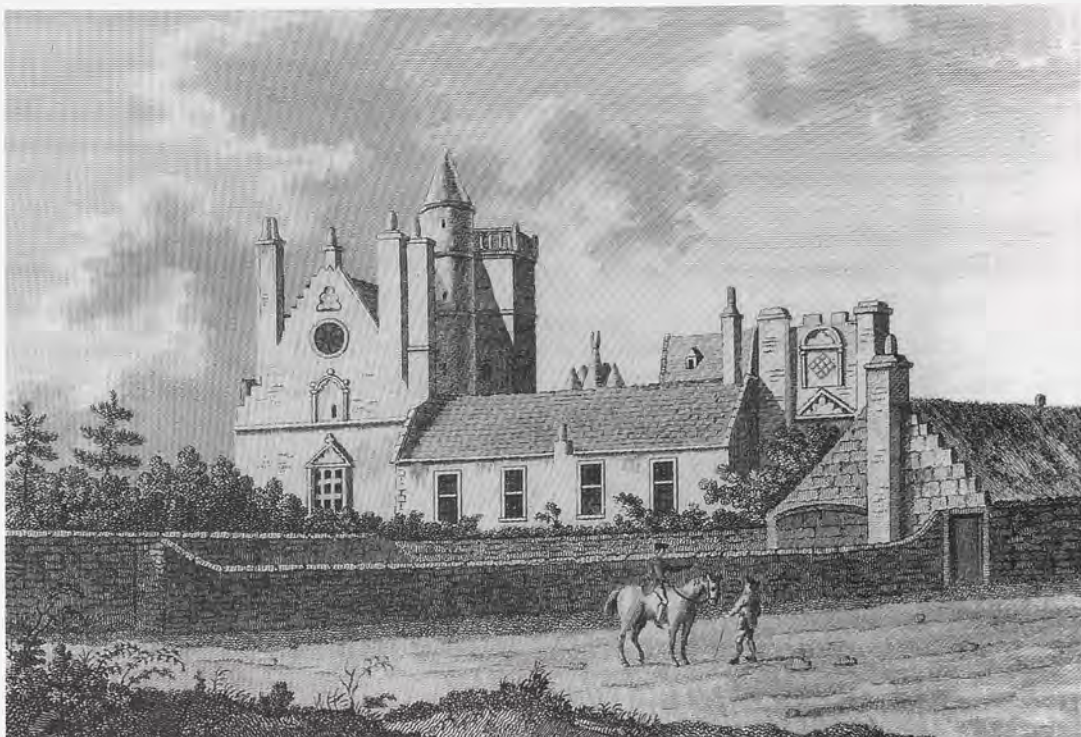


Fig. 3. Wrytes Houses from the south, by Francis Grose, engraved by Sparrow, 1789. Compare the widened, stripped-down south gallery wing to that in fig. 2, drawn by Ainslie three years earlier. (From *Grose's Antiquities of Scotland*; NMRS, C 34500.)



Fig. 4. Wrytes Houses from the north west, drawing by Francis Grose, 1788. (*National Galleries of Scotland*, D24.)



Fig. 5. View from the north east, by J. Dick, c. 1798. Note that the majority of windows in the central range have been blocked (C. McKean; NMRS, A/60739.)

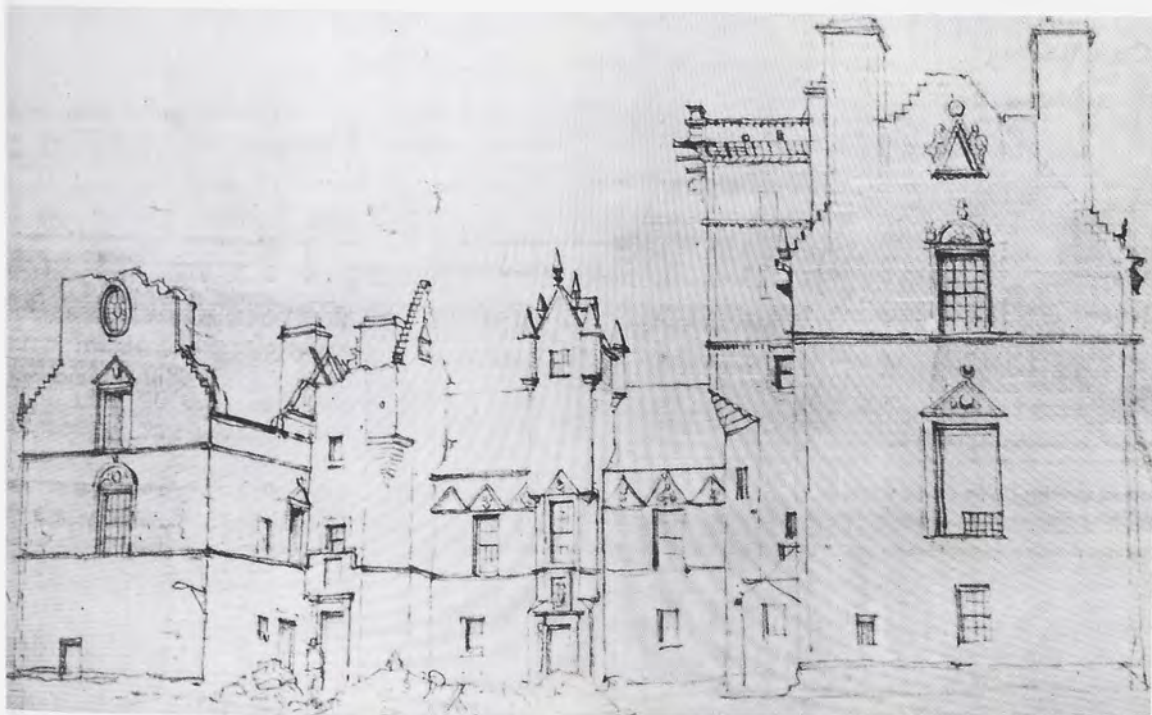


Fig. 6. Wrights Houses from the north, during demolition, drawn by Alexander Nasmyth, c. 1800. (NMRS, C 33319.)

sisting of tall well-lit apartments the entire width of the wings. The principal rooms on the *piano nobile* (principal floor) had enormous pedimented windows on the flanks, and round-headed broken-pedimented windows on the gables. The formality of the gable composition is indicated by Nasmyth (fig. 6) who indicates ashlar pilasters at the edges capped with finials. Those finials and pilasters, and the detail of the round-headed pedimented windows, again echo the work of Sir James Murray at Kilbaberton. Perhaps he had been asked in to extend, and to regularise into graceful symmetry, a building that had grown over several generations. The formality of the composition was enhanced by framing the gables between tall chimney-stacks, with a decorative oculus lying beneath each apex. The skyline was extraordinarily fantastical, even by the standards of the Scottish Renaissance.

When Grose visited the building for his *Antiquities*, he was displeased to find that it had just been 'deformed with a daubing of lime or whitewash, and had besides been otherwise much injured ... by the modernising of the windows of the centre building, which before agreed with the style of the wings'.⁹ A clue to what had been going on in the three years since Ainslie sketched it lies in an architectural elevation of the south front prepared by Francis Buchan in 1786.¹⁰ Called Wrights Houses Castle (fig. 7), Buchan's plan involved classicising the Renaissance villa by removing any old-fashioned details and carvings, and truncating the height of the two wings by virtually a storey-and-a-half each. It would have ended up looking something like Brunstane House.

When referred back to Ainslie's original (fig. 2), Grose's drawing a year or two later (fig. 3) reveals

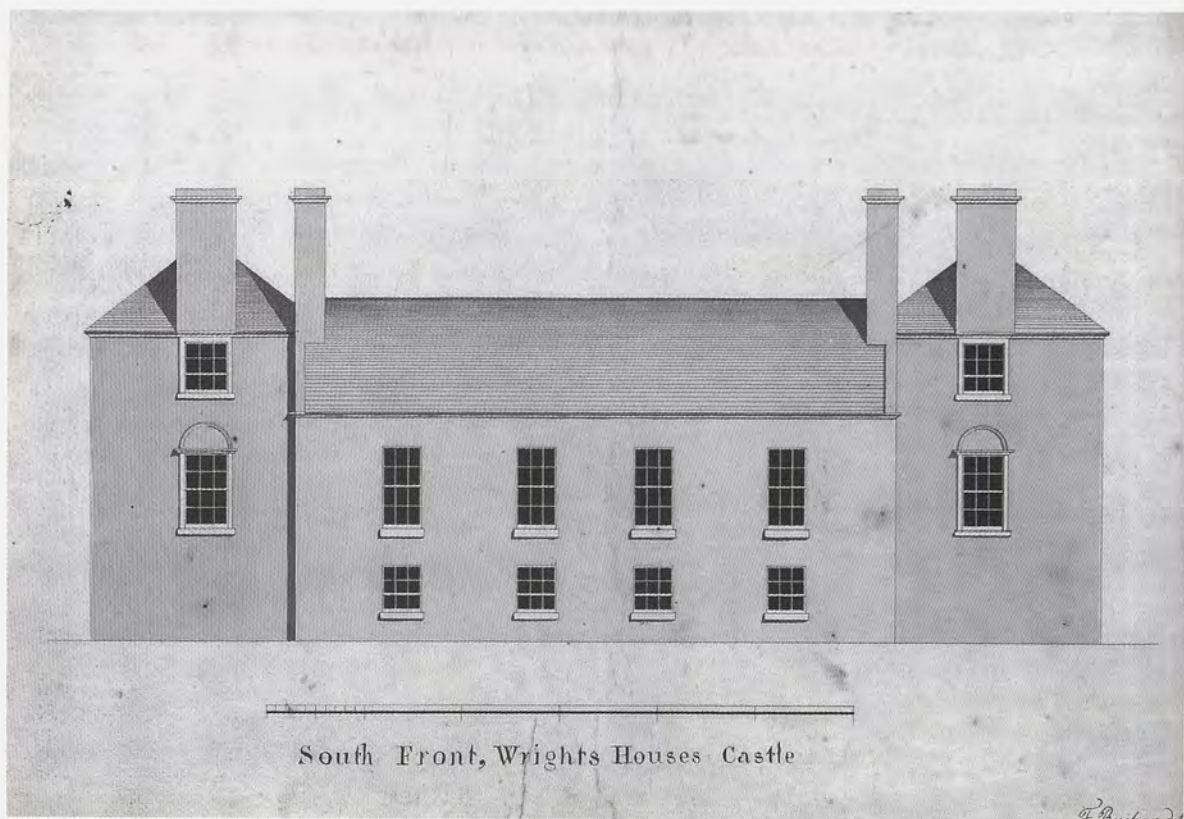


Fig. 7. Alterations to the south facade proposed by Francis Buchan, 1786; the Renaissance villa classicised. (NMRS, EDD/543/3.)



Fig. 8. Gillespie's Hospital, drawn and engraved by J. & J. Johnstone. (From John Stark's *Picture of Edinburgh*, 1831; NMRS, C 34307.)

that what Grose took exception to was the partial implementation of Buchan's proposals. Work had been carried out, if not completed, to the central (or gallery) block, deepening it so that it now projected southwards from its two wings (normally explained by the addition of a corridor, which Renaissance houses did not have); the wall-head had been raised and the roof flattened, and dormer window heads either removed entirely (on the south facade) or built into the new wall (on the north). The picturesque chimneystacks had been relocated to each gable of the gallery range, to frame the composition. The upper window on the west wing had been blocked, presumably pending the drastic decapitation that was planned.

Daniel Wilson was appalled that this lovely building should be replaced by what he regarded as the 'tasteless' James Gillespie's Hospital (fig. 8). In his *Memorials*, he recorded that the Wrychtishousis had been profusely decorated with heads of Roman Emperors and of the Virtues, and that heraldic descriptions and devices adorned every window and doorway.¹¹ Some door pediments and decorative

details were built into the boundary wall of the hospital,¹² and others, including a sixteenth-century fireplace, were preserved at Woodhouselee, Midlothian. Two stones survive built into an archway at St Margaret's Hope, North Queensferry, one of which bears the motto *Sicut oliva fructifera* 1376, with the initials WN: IF – presumably recording in seventeenth-century mode the founding of the family 300 years earlier.¹³ But the others reveal an unusual elaboration and vigorousness. The use of mottoes, as in the pediment to Octavius Secundus, Roman Emperor (a carving very like the design of the painted ceiling from Prestongrange now in Merchiston Castle), implies that they must originally have been close enough to the ground to be read. The stones may have been tympana above first-floor windows, or dormer heads in the gallery. There is the strong sensation that most of these carvings are of the same period – the early seventeenth century when the Napier of his time (WN married to MB) decided to record his entire genealogy from its origins in 1376 through heraldic carvings, just as the Kings of Scotland later decorated Holyroodhouse with



Fig. 9. Author's reconstruction of Wrychtishousis from the north east, based upon a drawing by Skene of Rubislaw, 1817. Note that only a central gallery window in each bay is shown as glazed. (*C. McKean; NMRS, C 33203.*)



Fig. 10. Author's reconstruction of Wrychtishousis from the north, based on Nasmyth's drawing, 1800. The roof has been taken down to its original level and the gallery windows restored. (*C. McKean; NMRS, C 33200.*)

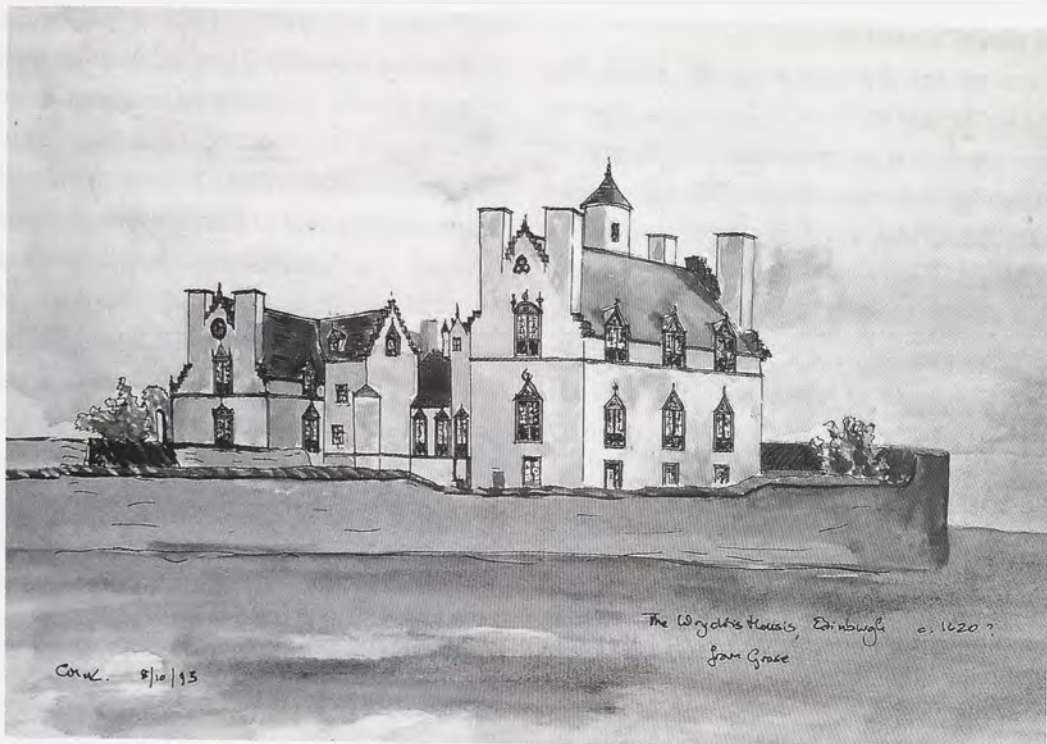


Fig. 11. Author's reconstruction of Wrychtishousis from the north west, based on Grose's drawing, 1788. Central gallery windows shown as later immured in the raised wallhead. (C. McKean; NMRS, C 33201.)

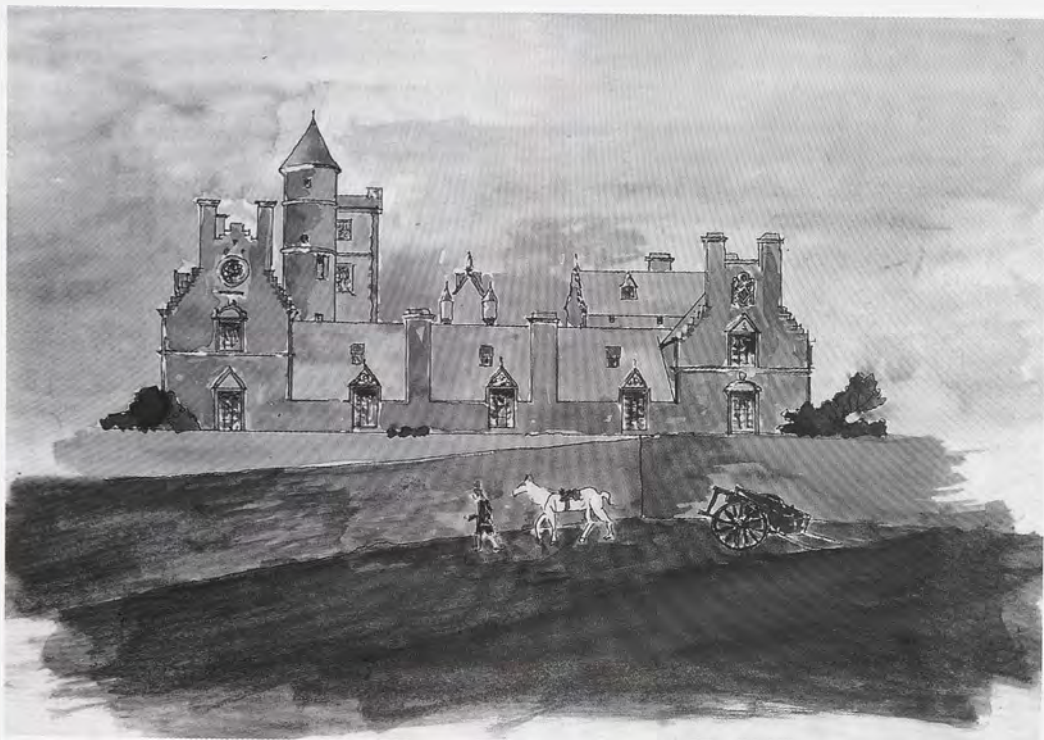


Fig. 12. Author's reconstruction of Wrychtishousis from the south, based on Ainslie's drawing, 1785. There is a hint that the square tower may have been edged with buckle-quoins. (C. McKean; NMRS, C 33202.)

specious historical portraits.

The four modern drawings are by the author (figs 9–12). As the form of the Wrychtishousis has gradually become apparent, it became possible to distinguish between rooflines, dormer windows, chimneys and gables. By taking the standard proportions of the Scottish Renaissance, it was possible to locate windows and dormer windows correctly, although the

deployment of chimney-stacks as part of the gable composition is unique. These drawings are intended to offer an accurate commemoration of one of the prettiest and most sophisticated Renaissance villas near Edinburgh – a counterblast (if ever one was needed) to the primitivism said to have prevailed in Scotland at this time. The Wrychtishousis proved the opposite.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

The author wishes to acknowledge his debt to Mungo Campbell, Lady Janet Cooksey, Kitty Cruft and Andrew Fraser, and his gratitude to the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS) for permission to reproduce photographs held in the National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS).

- 1 This, and the quotation in the title, are from Henry Cockburn, *Memorials of his Time* (Edinburgh 1856), p. 173.
- 2 P. Hume Brown, *Early Travellers in Scotland* (Edinburgh 1891), pp. 93, 148 (Fynes Moryson made the same observation in 1598: *ibid.*, p. 85).
- 3 See James Holloway and Lindsay Errington, *The Discovery of Scotland* (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh 1978), pp. 36, 44. The building is also included in a Bannatyne Club engraving of a John Clerk of Eldin drawing, c.1770, now in the British Museum: *Views in Scotland* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh 1855). Note, too, that 'Wrightshous' is represented on John Adair's 1682 map of Midlothian: see fig. 1 in Zella Ashford, 'The Lands of Warriston', *Book of the Old Edinburgh Club (BOEC)*, NS 3 (1994), pp. 1–24.
- 4 James Grant, *Old and New Edinburgh*, 3 vols (London 1880–83), III, pp. 32–36.
- 5 Sir Daniel Wilson, *Memorials of Edinburgh in the Olden Time*, new edn, 2 vols (Edinburgh 1891), II, pp. 177–180.
- 6 William Maitland, *History of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh 1753), p. 508; Wilson, *Memorials* (1891), II, p. 179.
- 7 Quoted in Grant, *Old and New Edinburgh*, III, p. 33; Wilson, *Memorials* (1891), II, p. 177.
- 8 Wilson, *Memorials*, 1st edn (Edinburgh 1848) II, *Appendix*, p. 208, and new edn (1891), II, p. 179; Grant, *Old and New Edinburgh*, III, p. 36.
- 9 Francis Grose, *The Antiquities of Scotland*, 2 vols (London 1797), I, p. 39.
- 10 Francis Buchan, south front, Wrights Houses Castle, North Berwick, 17th June 1786 (Hamilton of Bargany Collection, NMRS EDD/543/3). The drawing was witnessed by Sir Hew Dalrymple, 2nd baronet of North Berwick, and his brothers Charles and John. After long litigation, John Dalrymple succeeded to the estate of Bargany, taking the name Hamilton of Bargany. He died without issue in 1796, and the estate devolved upon his nephew, the 3rd baronet, Sir Hew Hamilton Dalrymple. It is worth noting that in 1793 *Aitchison's Edinburgh Directory* recorded the occupier of Bruntfield Castle as 'Hamilton of Balginea'.
- 11 See note 5.
- 12 Recorded in RCAHMS, *Inventory of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh 1951), p. 244; the stones were removed to Huntly House Museum when Gillespie's Hospital was demolished in 1976.
- 13 John Geddie, 'The Sculptured Stones of Edinburgh. 4. Wrychtis-housis', *BOEC*, 4 (1911), pp. 55–73.