

## Stone heads, keystones, headstones

### The Falconer Museum sculptures in context

*By Dr John R Barrett*

The Falconer Museum in Forres first opened its doors to the public on 1 August 1872. The museum was founded in an age of optimism. Imperial expansion, industrial development and tentative democratisation all promised a future of peace and prosperity. Meanwhile, scientific advances challenged established certainties by revealing the astonishing complexity of Creation.

The museum is the Victorian age set in stone. In the 1860s free universal public education lay some time in the future; but private philanthropy responded to the public thirst for knowledge. The wealth that Hugh and Alexander Falconer earned from commerce and colonial enterprise laid the foundation for a museum in their home town. Public subscriptions added an income to underwrite running costs. The list of subscribers mirrored Forres society: landowners at the head and a fat body of farmers and burgesses gave £5; a long tail of shopkeepers and ordinary folk were tiered into a half-guinea middle class and a five-shilling lower order. Meanwhile, the individual generosity of Moray's dynamic antiquarians, anthropologists, botanists, geologists, and naturalists established the foundation collections of a cabinet of curiosities that brought the wide world home and history to life for the people of Forres. And Hugh Falconer's own contributions – including precious fossils from the Siwalik Hills of northern India and Palaeolithic artefacts from St Acheul in France, worthy of being cared for in national museums – form an original treasure among collections that attract scholars from across the world.

Moray's leading architects, Alexander and William Reid, were commissioned to design the new museum. The Reids inherited the architectural flair of their uncle, William Robertson: designer of the sturdily vernacular Forres Tolbooth, the airily classical Anderson's School, and the politely elegant Cluny Cottage which Hugh Falconer's geological friend J. G. Malcolmson intended for his retirement. A site was cleared in the centre of town, by demolishing several charming seventeenth-century buildings at the head of Tolbooth Wynd. The Reids fitted an Italian Renaissance *palazzo* onto the plot. The style chosen for the new seat of learning in Forres reinforced a slender Italianate thread that dignified the architectural fabric of west Moray: for example St John's church in Forres and the sprawling home farm at Altyre. The glorious ebullience of the Falconer was perhaps intended to eclipse the sedately tasteful Italianate rival museum in Elgin. The original design for the Falconer included a campanile – a usual accoutrement of the Victorian Italianate. Sadly, this crowning glory proved unaffordable; and the museum, as built, wears its decorative excesses with a demure modesty, as though embarrassed by its unfinished, towerless condition.

Dr Hugh Falconer, physician, botanist, palaeontologist, archaeologist, philanthropist, was elevated to preside over the High Street façade of the museum he founded. The Falconer bust was copied from a marble original by Timothy Butler presented to the Royal Society in London.

On the Falconer's Tolbooth Street front, high above a projecting cornice punctuated by affable stone lions, is a medallion carved with a low-relief profile portrait of Prince Albert. He is not named. There was no need. Queen Victoria's consort was a celebrity too well known to require a caption. And the Falconer Museum is a proper place for the popular prince. Albert died in 1861, a decade before the Falconer opened. But the cult that the grieving queen created around her beloved husband's memory ensured he would not be forgotten. And Albert's legacy lasts to the present day. The Prince Consort's enthusiasm for art, science and industrial technology culminated in his involvement in the Great Exhibition of 1851. This celebration of British Imperialism and creativity, in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, generated a profit that underwrote the creation of a museumopolis in South Kensington: beginning with the institution that would become the V & A; and most gloriously epitomised by the gothic cathedral of the Natural History Museum. Victorian academics regarded museums as the dynamic institutions that would both enshrine human knowledge and drive scientific progress. And so Prince Albert was apotheosed (permission was not required) as a presiding genius for the Falconer Museum.

But it is the Falconer heads that most catch the eye and intrigue the casual visitor. The keystone of each round-arched window carries a single portrait head. The Falconer's keystone images are carved in a hard grey sandstone that contrasts with the mellow yellow ashlar of the museum masonry. The execution is stiff and formal; and the eight grey faces of the scientific and cultural worthies stare from the façades with sombrely compelling gravity. The heads were carved by Thomas Goodwillie, sculptor in Elgin. Goodwillie's bread-and-butter work was gravestones: at Birnie he memorialised farmers with a flourish of wheatsheaf; in Elgin's new cemetery he dignified bourgeois graves with tasteful classicism. Goodwillie's masterworks are the monumental Duke of Gordon on Elgin's Lady Hill and an exuberant confection of lions rampant, foliage and heraldry for the Earl of Seafield's remodelling of Cullen House. Goodwillie was the stone-carver of choice for Elgin architects, enlivening the burgh's newbuilds with playful animals and floridly classical keystone masks. For the new mart at Forres (designed by A. & W. Reid) Goodwillie sculpted a keystone bull, a ram, and an ironically naturalistic wheatsheaf with neep-and-tatty. Goodwillie's Falconer sculptures find echoes among A. & W. Reid's Elgin buildings. Notably, the affable lions who peer from the Falconer cornice have cousins on the Italianate Elgin Club in Commerce Street – where keystone sculptures bear a familial resemblance to the Falconer Museum heads.

Nobody remembers how and by whom these eight genii were chosen. Most (but not all) of the heads belong to contemporaries and colleagues of Hugh Falconer. All were dead. Unfortunately, there is no secret recording of the table-thumping and high emotion that amplified arguments among the advocates of various candidates. (Edison's phonograph still lay a generation in the future.) Presumably, the provost and councillors of Forres and the parish minister had a loud voice in the discussion; but the Falconers' relatives, including Hugh's niece, Grace Anne Milne, museum subscribers and colleagues among the nationwide network of botanists and geologists probably also made suggestions for the Falconer pantheon. With benefit of hindsight, we might point out several glaring omissions. William Smith 'The Father of English Geology' surely deserved a place. Wallace and Darwin too; but they were disqualified by being still alive. And theories of evolution were commonplace

by the 1860s – and the Darwin mythology was still being evolved (by his disciple T. H. Huxley). Burns was perhaps too louche and democratic to join the sturdily academic (and Free Church) company of museum heads. And Shakespeare was too English. But where are the women? Ada Lovelace (1815–1852) might have been head-hunted for the Falconer keystone team, though she was an English metaphysical mathematician who might sit uneasily among so many Scottish naturalists. So what about the fossil-hunter Mary Anning (1799–1847)? But she too did not belong to the Scottish/Indian/naturalist circle – and certainly was not one of the boys.



*Edward Forbes, founder of the new science of oceanography, keystone portrait by Thomas Goodwillie. Photo © Christine Clerk*

The final selection of heads for the museum keystones reflects Hugh Falconer's world and the small-town predisposition of the Forresian middle class. The main door on the High

Street front is flanked by Georges Cuvier and Isaac Newton. Cuvier (1769–1832) was an anatomist who applied his comparative method to living species and extinct mammals before progressing to a consideration of racial diversity in humankind. And he was a moderate political liberal who resisted the reactionary *ancien régime* conservatism of the restored Bourbon monarchy in France. Cuvier was admired in his own time; and his reputation was undiminished in the mid-nineteenth century, when he was honoured as the 'Father of Palaeontology'. Newton (1642–1727) balances Cuvier on the museum front, perhaps because he could not be ignored in the roll-call of scientific worthies – even though he was English, long dead, and his main achievements were in mathematics, optics and currency reform. Nonetheless, every Victorian schoolboy could recite a version of Newton's laws and understand the nature of white light as a rainbow spectrum of colour. Famously Newton declared "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants". And Newton was himself a giant upon whom later science rested.

The Falconer heads selection committee may have been assisted by the popular biographical works of Samuel Smiles, whose *Self-help* (1859) was on the bookshelf of every circulating library, Mechanics Institute, and petit-bourgeois parlour. Smiles created a Victorian mythology of small-town poor-boys who rose to greatness through natural genius, thrift and hard work. Among the museum heads are Hugh Miller (1802–1856) and James Watt (1736–1819). Both were admired (and partly invented) by Smiles, as autodidacts who overcame humble origins to dominate their chosen fields (geology and engineering). Of course, the reality was more nuanced. Both men came from comfortable homes; and neither was obliged to go out to work until late in his teenage years. Watt's father was a Greenock businessman and town councillor; his uncles were mathematicians, land surveyors and engineers. There was no need for a tea-kettle to inspire young James with a passion for steam power – which was in fact encouraged by generous academics at Glasgow University. Hugh Miller's sea-captain father could afford a showy Cromarty townhouse for his family – though in subsequent mythologising this was overshadowed by the humble thatched Hugh Miller cottage next door. And Miller was educated for a professional career. He became 'the stalwart stonemason' in a fit of teenage rebellion; and when that career choice palled his education and family connections secured him a comfortable desk job in the Commercial Bank. James Watt's technical innovations were seminal for later industrial progress; but he made his fortune through partnership with the shrewd Birmingham capitalist Matthew Boulton. Miller's original discoveries and insights were applauded within the geological community. But Miller enhanced his own image through a carefully cultivated eccentricity. Unfortunately, his scientific rationality was spiced with an explosive mixture of Christian zeal and native superstition (which went far beyond ordinary religious observance or academic folklore study). Eventually the heady cocktail of science and superstition frothed to a crisis. Miller went mad and shot himself. It was the sensation of his suicide rather than the solidity of his science that secured his reputation.

Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) hangs uneasily from his keystone, uncomfortable in the company of so many brilliant scientists. But Goodwillie carved Scott larger than the others and that must mean something. Walter Scott was a prosperous lawyer, a popular poet, and when his creditors came a-knocking – a prolific novelist. Especially, Scott managed to be a literary celebrity without unsavoury scandal in his personal life. And Scott was a



conservative unionist and monarchist, uncontaminated by the republicanism of earlier romantics; and he was active in crushing working class radicalism in 1820. In poetry and prose Scott nicely glossed over the uncomfortable improprieties of everyday existence: his novels were enjoyed by Queen Victoria and could be safely read by middleclass maidens. Scott infused his writings with potent historical myths and a romanticism that created an identity for Scotland, helping to restore the national pride that had been shaken by civil conflict, economic collapse, and union with England. Scott reinvented Scotland for the nineteenth century, and so earned himself a place on the Falconer façade.

David Brewster (1781–1868) was a scientific heavy-weight. He was included among the heads probably as a late entry, having qualified for inclusion by dying just as the museum design was being finalised. Brewster's field was optics, applied practically to lighthouse design. He was also (with Hugh Miller) a leader in the tentatively democratic modernising clique that propelled the Disruption of 1843 and the formation of the Free Church. Brewster's science was realised in playful popular applications. Children were delighted by the Brewster kaleidoscope. And Brewster's improved stereoscope brought 3-D images of faraway places into Victorian drawing rooms.

Edward Forbes (1815–1854) is misnamed 'Edmund' on his Falconer Museum lintel. Forbes was a naturalist and founder of the new science of oceanography. And he was an affectionate friend of Hugh Falconer. Especially he drew playful cartoons – in the nonsense genre of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and John Tenniel. One of Forbes' drawings depicts Hugh Falconer as an amiable elephant tipsily perched on the back of a tortoise. The cognoscente would recognise this as a reference to Falconer's discoveries – of fossils of pygmy elephants and a gigantic tortoise – viewed through the lens of Hindu mythology. The Forbes cartoon was realised as an astonishing sculpture: In 2018 Dom Buxton's *Tortiphant* was installed in the museum as the last major addition to the collection before closure.

John Grant Malcolmson (1802–1844) was a local scientist who was a particular friend and counterpart of Hugh Falconer. Malcolmson trained as a physician and, like Falconer, he sought his fortune in India, where he too discovered geology. Malcolmson published original medical research; but especially he studied the geology of Moray, collaborating with an energetic network of local fieldworkers, who explored the stratigraphy and fossils of the coastal sandstones. Malcolmson probably intended to retire to Forres; this must have been planned in conversation with Falconer. But he died in India. And (except for his carved head on the museum) Malcolmson never became an ornament to the royal burgh.

Nineteenth-century Britain was a small world, and intricately connected. The coincidences and chance meetings that propel the plots of nineteenth-century fiction might jar with readers in the alienated, unconnected twenty-first century; but such syzygies would seem unremarkable to contemporary readers. So, in the manner of a sprawling Victorian novel, we can trace threads that enmeshed the Falconer heads men in a single-story web of intersecting networks. In particular, Falconer, Malcolmson and Miller were all Moray men, all born in the first decade of the new century (Malcolmson and Miller were born in the same year – 1802). They grew up within easy reach of Forres – at Keith and, a short hop across the firth from Findhorn, at Cromarty. Malcolmson, like Falconer, sought his fortune in India; and so both were involved in the same broader colonial community. Malcolmson and Forbes

were connected by their shared friendship with Falconer. Miller was connected to Brewster as a fellow pioneer in the early Free Church. Brewster connects to Scott in his *Letters on Natural Magic*, which were addressed to Sir Walter. Meanwhile, geological giants who were not included among the museum heads, including J. L. R. Agassiz (1807–1873) and Roderick Murchison (1792–1871) bound the community of fieldworkers in a Gordian tangle of written communication. The complex ramifications of personal, political, financial and familial relationships among the heads men, and their collaboration with the busy community of Moray scientists and membership of academic societies, are further fertile grounds inviting deep biographical exploration.

The Falconer Museum struck deep roots in the heart of Forres. But the Falconer rested upon shaky financial foundations. More than once the museum trustees ran out of money. However, Forres Town Council accepted the responsibility: valuing its local museum as an educational resource and a cultural ornament. Until the powers and corporate identity of the royal burgh were extinguished in 1975 – subsumed into a new Moray District Council. Still, an old guard of former Forres councillors promoted their museum as a precious jewel among cultural treasures engrossed in the care of the new local authority. The Falconer joined a glorious architectural inheritance that included Nelson Tower, Oldmills, Craigellachie Bridge, Bow Bridge, Grant Lodge, and several stunning town halls – all subsequently burned down or otherwise alienated from public care. Meanwhile, across the road from the Falconer, the Tolbooth – the political heart of old Forres – was promoted through the efforts of the last provost, Alfred Forbes, to an appropriate new role as the Moray District Record Office. MDRO assembled an unrivalled local archive collection. For a short time Forres – tolbooth and museum – thrummed as a pioneering cultural and historical powerhouse that enshrined the history and identity of ancient Moray.

But only fleetingly. The archival eggs, gathered in one basket, were dangerously exposed. A new crop of councillors decimated – and more than decimated – the archives. In 1998 the service was shut down and the surviving rump of Moray's documentary heritage was sent to Elgin. The Tolbooth, now an expensive white elephant, was abandoned as a symbolic *coup de grâce* for the Royal Burgh of Forres.

Meanwhile, in 1996, the Moray Council formally acquired the Falconer, under a promise to manage, administer, finance and preserve the museum. But promises intended to last in perpetuity are sooner or later regretted. Sooner in the case of the Falconer Museum. Where archives led the Falconer was doomed to follow. Moray Council chafed at the cost of its public museum service. Councillor trustees tired of their responsibility, discovering that the museum was variously, irrelevant to the tourist economy, extraneous to the school curriculum, an unaffordable luxury, an anachronism, or an assemblage of stuffed weasels. Council official assessed museum collections for possible sale. Several councillors declared they would be heartbroken if the Falconer closed – and then voted for closure.

The Falconer Museum was shut in 2019. In an age of pessimism, atrophied attention spans and penny-pinching pragmatism, the vacuum left by the retreat from public funding and public services was not filled by private money. The management of a professional museum service is beyond the ragged-trousered philanthropy of Friends, enthusiasts and old fogeys – who are already stretched to the limit by the slave-labour of covering a slew of abandoned

public services (horticultural, educational, archaeological, social, environmental, historical, cultural).

And so we celebrate 150 years of the Falconer Museum with the doors shut fast. The Falconer Museum – a precious gift from the past to posterity – teeters on the brink of disintegration. The museum's stone heads hold their breath, hoping for a future ...



*Hugh Miller, looking into an uncertain future of the Falconer Museum, keystone portrait by Thomas Goodwillie. Photo © Christine Clerk*

***About the author***

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