

## GARGUNNOCK HOUSE – HISTORICAL NOTES

The lands of Gargunnoch have existed as a distinct property since the Middle Ages. William Wallace, leader of the Scottish resistance to Edward I's conquering armies, is said to have taken up position on a hill close to where Gargunnoch House now stands, before attacking an English garrison occupying the original Peel or fortified tower of Gargunnoch. This stood to the north-east of the present house, defending a ford over the river Forth. Today's Gargunnoch, like many Scottish houses, started life as a tower house in the 16th century. Sir Alexander Seton, a distinguished lawyer and a Lord of Session, is the most likely candidate for its builder, choosing a site on higher ground away from the river. By 1675, Gargunnoch was in Campbell ownership and remained so for over a century, passing from one branch of the family to another.

Through the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, wings were added and the rooms inside were remodelled in line with evolving tastes and patterns of life. In a final and impressive architectural conjuring trick, the last wing to be built, by Sir James Campbell in 1794, was merged with its 17th century companion behind a tidy Georgian front. Outside, Sir James was conforming to the prevailing fashion for houses set in a landscaped park, running smoothly to the front door and planted with scattered trees (mostly oaks and Spanish chestnuts). All traces of earlier enclosures and formal gardens were swept away. The walled kitchen garden to the north west may have been built instead, although it is not shown on a map of 1790. The stable court and fine octagonal dovecot (which still has its potence or moveable gantry for collecting the eggs) could also date from this period.

The next owner, Colonel Eidingtoun, made the final transformation from tower house to seemingly symmetrical Classical mansion. He bought the Gargunnoch estate in 1793 and had added the new front by 1794. He presumably added the South East wing, containing the drawing room, at the same time. Soon, however, came evidence that the Eidingtouns had overstretched themselves and were borrowing money. In December 1825, Gargunnoch was advertised for sale as a flourishing estate: 400 acres of good queries ground (water-meadow), 500 of dryfield (well-drained fields in the foothills) and nearly 600 of hill pasture, all let, with farm steadings that were 'mostly new and substantial'. Despite this, it took the Eidingtouns ten years to find a buyer. This was a man who had been advancing them money since 1817, and who finally bought Gargunnoch in 1835.

This was Charles Stirling, fifth son of an old and distinguished family and a prosperous merchant from Glasgow. Charles Stirling had ambitions as a collector of art and he seems also to have bought a lot of new furniture for Gargunnoch, especially for the dining room and drawing room, possibly from Trotter of Edinburgh, a leading furniture maker. Charles Stirling died before he had done much more than set his new house in order, in 1839. His widow, Mary lived on at Gargunnoch, bringing up their young children, Caroline and John.

The children did not lack for uncles and aunts and cousins: Charles came from a very large and lively family. Two members of it in particular were to leave some mark at Gargunnoch. Captain James Stirling commanded H.M.S. *Ferret* during the Napoleonic wars. His ship later formed part of the squadron which escorted Napoleon I into exile on St. Helena in 1815. On his death, his paintings of naval battles, a bust of himself and a portrait of his wife, together with his books and wines and two brass signal cannon from the *Ferret*, came to Gargunnoch, where some of them can still be seen.

The youngest of the family, Jane Stirling, was both gifted and beautiful. She is said to have turned down numerous offers of marriage. Instead she lived with a much older widowed sister, Mrs Erskine. They often visited Paris, where in the 1830s Jane met the composer and pianist

Frederic Chopin and later became his pupil. She also fell in love with him, an adoration which was shared to a great extent by her sister, but sadly was not returned by Chopin. It could have been with the hope of nudging him towards marriage that she persuaded him to visit England and then Scotland in 1848, when Paris was becoming uncomfortably revolutionary.

There is also a strongly held tradition that Chopin came to Gargunnock. By coincidence, the piano in the drawing room, made by Broadwood, is dated 1848. Did a mild panic seize the household after the visit was proposed, as the realisation struck them: 'We don't have a piano!', followed by a quick order to Broadwood's? Jane Stirling herself may have commanded its purchase. At Calder, another family house, a Broadwood was placed in Chopin's bedroom and a Pleyel in the drawing room, under her instructions. Whether he ever played on that at Gargunnock is also best left to the imagination.

In 1848, John Stirling, inherited Gargunnock aged just 16. He later joined the Royal Artillery, rising to the rank of Colonel. Presumably, he then returned to Gargunnock, and settled down as a country landowner, J.P. and Deputy Lieutenant for Stirlingshire. His two great interests were botany and forestry, and he planted many rare trees and shrubs in the grounds at Gargunnock, including an avenue of Sequoia along the drive. This enthusiasm was one that he passed on to his son, Charles, so that Gargunnock came to have some of the best woods in Stirlingshire.

Charles and his wife Evelyn had just one child, a daughter, Viola, born in 1907. She was brought up to take full advantage of all the opportunities offered by a Scottish estate, learning to shoot and fish and ride. Conscious that she would be her father's heir, she also studied estate management at Roselle, in Ayrshire. It must have been a great disappointment to her when her father put the estate up for sale in 1933 - a move which she countermanded on his death a year later. When War broke out in 1939, Miss Stirling joined up to serve in the Auxiliary Transport Service., staying on after the war in the Scottish Command until 1948, reaching the senior rank of Controller. She later became a Colonel of the WRAC Territorials.

All this had kept her away from Gargunnock for long periods. During the War, the house was occupied by a Finishing School for Young Ladies. At its end, the house was partly divided into flats. Tenants came and went. Rooms on the upper floors became kitchens and several extra bathrooms were fitted in here and there. When Miss Stirling came back to run the estate in 1948, she made a flat for herself in the stables behind the house. She initiated repairs to the house: it was re-harled and other necessary works carried out. West of the house, helped by her companion, Miss Fairlie, she formed a new flower garden. In the early 1970s, she moved back into the house, where she occupied the main rooms at the front.

With no direct heir to succeed her, Miss Stirling left Gargunnock to trustees at her death in 1989, with the expressed hope that it could be 'preserved and administered so as to exemplify and perpetuate the tradition of Scottish country life'. In particular she suggested the house might be used as a base for 'quiet perambulation and contemplation', its grounds and garden being 'attractive at all times of the year to those in search of peace and quiet'.

In the autumn 1993, Landmark's trustees made a detour from their itinerary on their annual tour to look at Gargunnock House. Landmark could not afford to take the building on itself but suggested instead that we helped the Gargunnock trustees by overseeing such work as was needed, and then let it on their behalf. To do the work as economically as possible, Landmark employed a team of men who lived and worked on site, supervised by an architect/ clerk of works, Andrew Thomas. The work began in August 1994 and was completed in March 1995.

*The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Gargunnock House sleeps up to 16 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.*