

THE PAINTED PRESTONGRANGE CEILING



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the name Prestoungrange literally meaning priest's town farm. During the Reformation vast areas of land in Lowland Scotland including that of Prestongrange passed into the hands of Mark Ker. He was the former Commendator of Newbattle, a secular post concerned with Abbey lands and property. His family took over control of these Abbey lands initially as representatives of the Crown and subsequently as Barons of Prestongrange and Dolphinstoun and Earl and Marquis of Lothian. The house at this time underwent its first major conversion into the baronial hall of Prestoungrange or Prestongrange. By 1609, the house had passed from the Ker to the Morison family.²² A plaster ceiling installed at some point in the early 1700s resulted in some damage to the painted decoration:

“Curvature caused by the weight of the ceiling made it impossible for eighteenth century reconstructors to affix their new plaster ceiling without first adzing the beams to a level.”²³

The Morison family therefore were presumably familiar with the ceiling. Indeed, its presence may have been a factor in the dementia displayed by William Morison, described by Alexander ‘Jupiter’ Carlyle in his autobiography as a man widely believed to be a wizard. Morison inherited Prestongrange in 1684 and was:

“... so imaginary and credulous as to believe that close by his creek of Morison’s Haven was the place where St. John wrote the Apocalypse.”²⁴

The text of the Apocalypse is renowned for its visionary richness and variety not unlike the imagery on the Prestongrange ceiling.

By the 18th century, the house had passed into the hands of the Grant (later Grant-Suttie) family who occupied Prestongrange House almost continuously for more than two hundred years. During the 1830s Sir George Grant-Suttie commissioned William Playfair, one of the foremost Scottish architects of his day, to begin a radical programme of improvements. Playfair’s modifications are to a large extent responsible for the survival of the ceiling since alterations to the existing house were minimal. Instead, the building was extended to create new external walls. Although the ceiling must have been visible in 1830 when the drawing room was panelled and plastered and again in 1837 when further work

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