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## MACKINTOSH, KEPPIE AND THE GLASGOW ART CLUB

In 1893, when the new premises of the Glasgow Art Club opened at 185 Bath Street, a page of details appeared above the initials of Charles Rennie Mackintosh in a local journal. The details showed the doors, the chimney-pieces and the frieze in the Club's gallery. And there the matter has rested since. Not even the late Thomas Howarth in his monumental study investigated the relationship between Mackintosh and the Glasgow Art Club. And neither indeed have other biographers and critics. And that, considering that every aspect of Mackintosh's personal and professional life — his mental state, sexual relations, intake of alcohol as well as his design works — has been subject to scrutiny, is very curious. So why not the Art Club? Is it because it is a club and therefore private?

Take Howarth. He came to Glasgow in 1939 and shortly thereafter began his researches. However, John Keppie, a long time member of the Club where he was known as 'King John', would not speak to Howarth about his erstwhile partner. Most other folk did — but not Keppie. One can but wonder why. Given Keppie's lack of co-operation it may be that Howarth was not invited to the Club and therefore would have been unaware of the existence in the gallery of the doorways and chimney-pieces exactly as drawn out on the page of details. But their authorship may well have been forgotten or ignored if it was Keppie who was held to have been the designer. After all, it was he who had been hailed as the designer in the local and the national press at the opening of the premises. That was only a week before the page of details was published — perhaps as a riposte by Mackintosh. If that was so what does it say about relations between the two men? Certainly there is a tension in the drawings and perhaps too in the textual mis-spellings. But why was Mackintosh so touchy? After all, it is the fate of the draughtsman to see the partner walk off with the plaudits and the prizes.

It is of some interest to reflect that Mackintosh was never a member of the Glasgow Art Club. John Honeyman, the senior partner in the firm, and John Keppie were both members. So why not Mackintosh? Yet it has been handed down among the Club's members that if Mackintosh had been put up for membership he would have been blackballed by Keppie since Mackintosh had jilted Jessie Keppie. Mackintosh would not have been seen as a gentleman. Yet Keppie was a supporter when Mackintosh applied to become a fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1906. But then the RIBA may not be a club for gentlemen.

The truth of what and of what did not happen was hard to come by since the early records of the Club were held to have been discarded some twenty-five years ago.

Certainly they were not in the Clubhouse nor anywhere else. However, when the last manager of the Club, Mrs. Ann Parker, was retiring in 2000 she let it be known that in a cubby-hole in a cupboard in the manager's flat there was a mound of undisturbed papers. With her departure and the emptying of the cupboard it was possible to discern that there were indeed papers. With the passage of the years the string had rotted, the wrappings had disintegrated, the bundles had collapsed. But to the historian of Mackintosh all that was of little account. Here were bar bills, till receipts, bank statements. And there was dust — dust that settled on clothing, begrimed arms and face, clogged mouth and nose. Finally, at the base of this heap of decrepitude there were metal deed boxes — and in them the early records of the Club placed in chronological order and free from all grime and dust. From them, now stored and catalogued by the Club Librarian, Theo van Aspern, the early history of the Club can be unravelled.

The Glasgow Art Club was begun by eleven young men who met in a tearoom above a baker's shop in the Candleriggs. They soon moved to the Waverley Temperance Hotel in Buchanan Street where the Club was formally constituted on 30 November 1867. Meetings were held on the last Saturday of each month. Temperance was abandoned in 1875 with the removal to the Waverley Hotel, Sauchiehall Street. Three years later the Club had its own premises at 62 Bothwell Circus at the western end of Bothwell Street. From May to the end of September the Clubhouse was closed as the artists left town to follow the popular cult of painting en plein air. In 1886 the Club leased accommodation in Bath Street as a consequence of which lay members were admitted, ninety-eight of them in that year.

Artists seeking membership of the Glasgow Art Club are required to submit works for assessment by the artist members. In 1877 of the twenty-one candidates only three were admitted. Those rejected included James Guthrie, W.Y. Macgregor, E.A. Walton and James Paterson. In 1886 new artist members included R. Macaulay Stevenson and E.A. Hornel. Francis Newbery became a member in 1890. An artist was rejected on the first ballot but was admitted after a second application. With the recent discovery of the Club archives it is now known that Mackintosh applied for membership in 1899 which is not surprising considering that all his male artist friends and architectural colleagues were already members. Mackintosh's sponsors were his friend David Gauld and the architect David Barclay. As was so often the case the application was rejected. But why did Mackintosh not reapply? Had the break-up with Jessie occurred? Was there enmity from Keppie? We do not know.

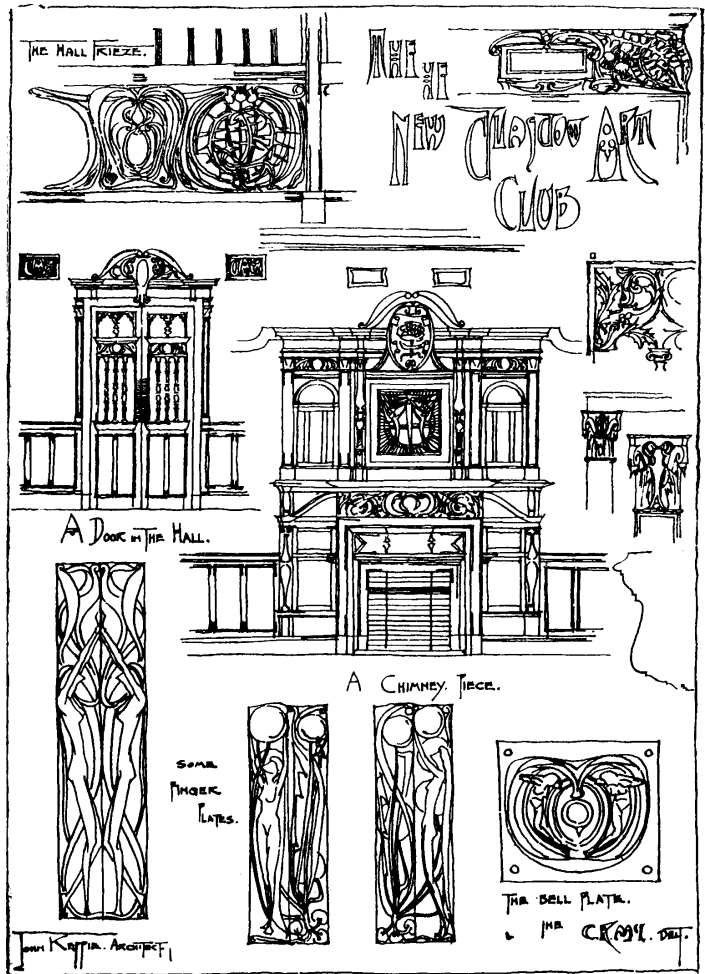
When the Club's lease of 151 Bath Street was nearing expiry a decision was made to purchase property to provide a permanent home. Several properties were looked at before bids were put in for two adjacent houses at 189 and 191 (now 185) Bath Street. They were town houses, each with a basement and three storeys, forming a portion of two opposing terraces laid out between 1830 and 1860 as part of Glasgow's westward expansion.

Once the titles had had been acquired John Keppie was appointed as the architect. Extant drawings, in Mackintosh's hand, show that the eastern house was to be left largely intact with its entrance porch, hallway with Ionic columns, staircase and lower and upper reception rooms with their original chimney-pieces and plasterwork. In the western house the hallway was incorporated into an enlarged dining-room with a billiard-room above. A gallery or smoking-room was built over the gardens at the rear of both houses.

When the new Clubhouse opened in June 1893 there was much press comment. The newly established *The Studio* reported that Keppie had been responsible for all the designs hence one reason for the publication of Mackintosh's drawings. One wonders, though, how it was that a twenty-five year old draughtsman persuaded an editor to publish them.

Among the details is one for the frieze of the gallery. It consists of two elements, one of which is thistles. Hitherto the design has not attracted comment since the gallery frieze is undecorated. Yet, as all the other details were executed as shown why not the frieze? By putting various pieces of evidence together it can be shown that the frieze was indeed executed and that the colours were sage-green highlighted with rose and mauve over a cream base.

After a lecture to the members of the Club on Mackintosh's role in the buildings' conversion and redecoration in 1893 the council authorised that scrape tests should be made by Alan Ferdinand, formerly of Historic Scotland. A cursory first inspection has revealed cream and green in the gallery frieze indicating that the stencil work was done immediately on to the plaster. The full programme of scrapes and paint analysis, not only in



*Details of the Glasgow Art Club, The Baillie, June 1893.*

the gallery but elsewhere in the Club, will be undertaken in the late summer. It seems, therefore, that the all the designs featured in Mackintosh's drawings were carried out and that The Glasgow Art Club had the first full decorative scheme by Mackintosh. If the tests provide conclusive proof it may be possible to reinstate the 1893 decorative scheme.

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