

THE OLD STEEPLE, ST MARY'S, DUNDEE



A SURVEY OF STONEMASONS' MARKS

2014

A survey of stonemasons' marks was undertaken over 2 days in 2014 by the Mason's Mark Project with the assistance of two volunteers. This recorded 226 marks over the five floors in the tower and which can be attributed to 22 different masons.

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Background

The tower of St Mary's is all that survives of the Church of St Mary's, which was built in the 15th century after the destruction of an earlier church. The tower itself was said to have been completed about 1480, and today it is generally known as 'The Old Steeple'.

The Survey

After receiving permission from Dundee City Council a survey was undertaken over 2 days in early 2014 to record the surviving stonemasons' marks. This was undertaken by the Mason's Mark Project, along with the assistance of two volunteers, Dave Orr & Jack McIntosh.

Method of Recording

All internal walls on the ground floor, the upper floors and spiral stair within the tower were carefully checked for marks. None were noted on the exterior, but this was most likely due to loss through weather erosion on the stone. All visible marks were recorded by photography with an L-scale for size where suitable, and sketches and notes taken of their locations. Each mark was given an individual number to identify its location on schematic plans which were undertaken later. The marks were subsequently checked and identified to individual numbered masons.

The Results

A total of 226 marks were recorded over the five floors and stairway, which were identified as belonging to 22 different masons. Initially it was thought that there was another single mark (No. 21) belonging to a mason but this was later discounted as a mason's mark. However, due to some close similarities it is possible that one or two marks may belong to the same mason, but because of the slight difference they were given their own number. Also some stone spalling and

general erosion was evident in some areas and therefore not all marks were clearly visible enough to give a definitive allocation.

All photographs were catalogued with the site identifier code OLSP (Old Steeple) and the individual mason's allocated number, along with the mark number, so that it's location could be identified on the schematic plans (eg OLSP mason mark 0016- 0074).

Masons with their marks

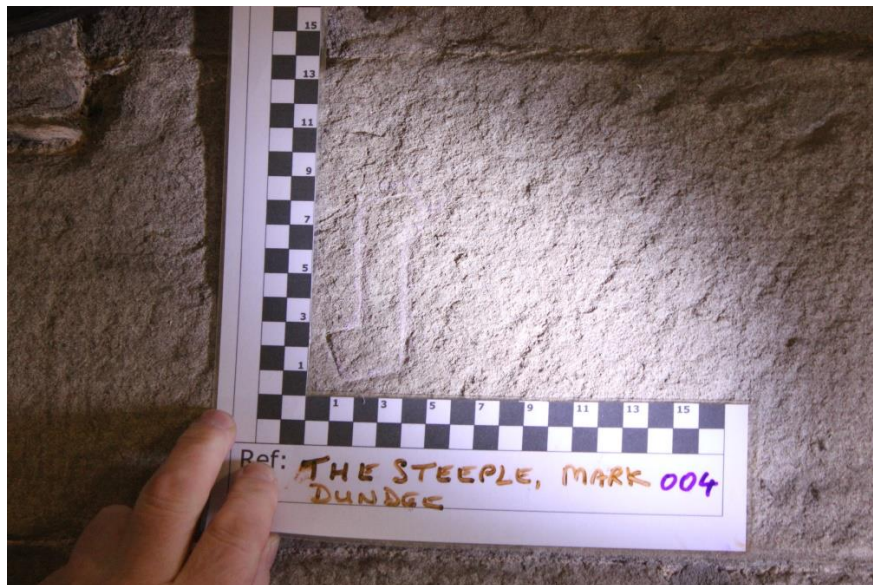
***NB** The masons below, with their numbered marks, are not set out numerically but are grouped together reflecting a similarity in the marks.*

A number of masons based their marks on letters such as A, W, Z, X or J, while a few others were of more geometric shapes, such as the triangle or diamond.

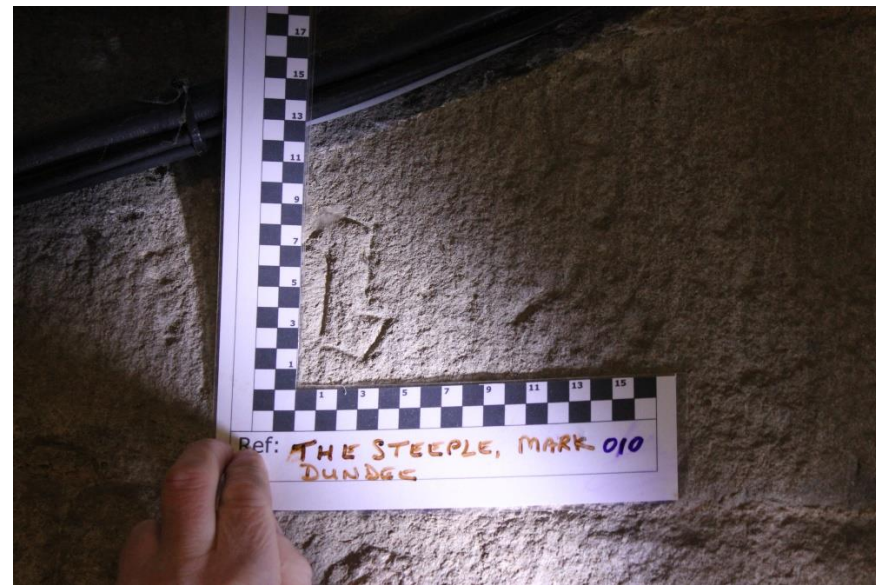
There are two small groups, each with two of masons, whose marks were mirror images of each other. It is therefore possible that they were related to each other. They may have been brothers, or a father & son working together, or even possibly having been former apprentices to the same Mastermason. This is in reference to Masons 3 and 8, and Masons 11 and 20

The first of these are **Masons 3 and 8**, who based their marks on a Z-shape. Of the two Mason 8 was the most prolific, with 50 of his marks being recorded in most areas, apart from the ground floor and the 2nd floor. Only 4 marks of Mason 3 were recorded, one on the ground floor and three on the spiral stair, between the ground floor and the 1st floor.

Mason 3 used a double Z, whereas **Mason 8** used it in reverse.



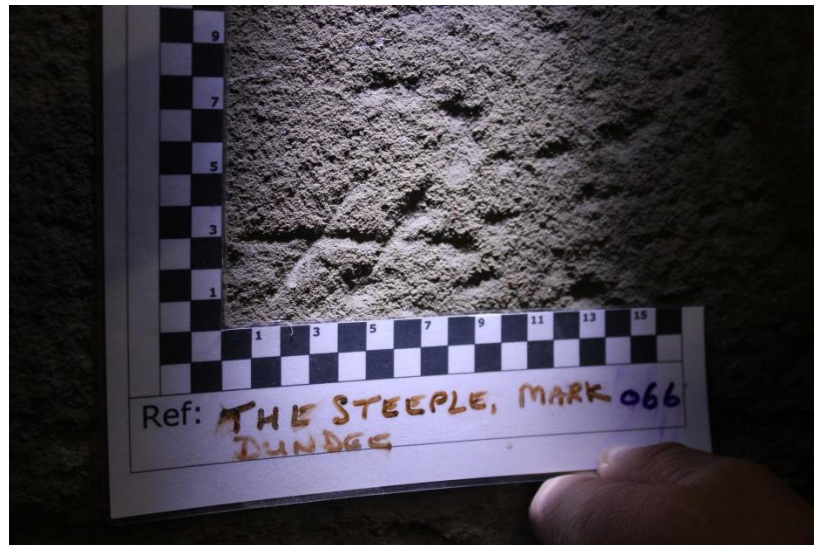
Mason 3 – Mark record 0004



Mason 8 – Mark record 0010

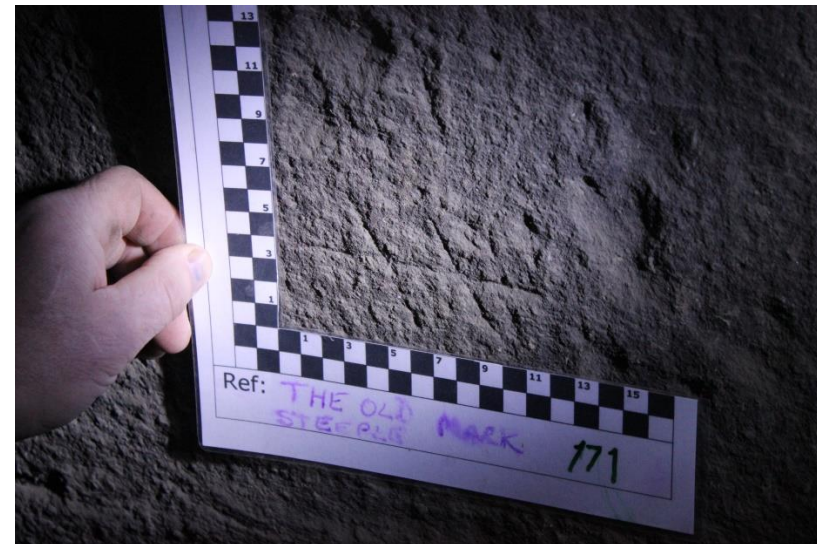
The second small group of two masons the use very similar marks are **Mason 11** and **Mason 20**. They both used a simple 3 lines mark a horizontal with two small parallel, diagonal lines cut across it. However each had their parallel lines running the opposite way. **Mason 11** worked in all areas although none of his marks were notes on the 2nd floor. A total of 33 of his marks were recorded. Mason 20 worked on the 3rd and 4th floors as well as on the upper areas of the spiral between the clockroom and the caphouse. Six of his marks were recorded.

Mason 11



Mason 11- Mark record 0066

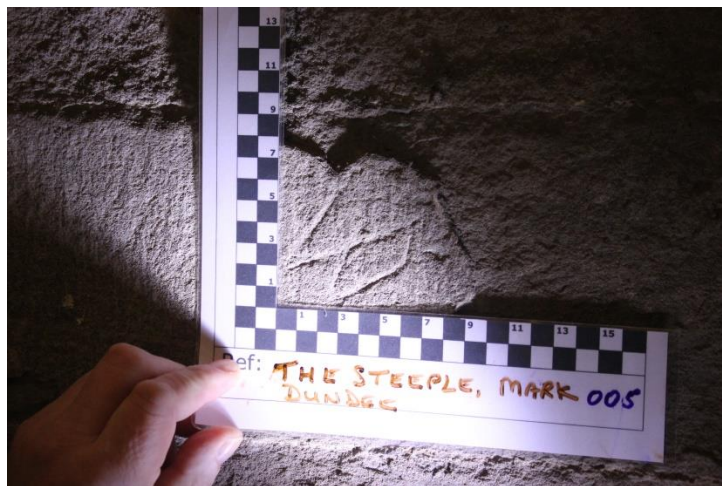
Mason 20



Mason 20 – Mark record 0171

Four masons based their marks on the letter W or M. These were **Masons 4, 5, 6 and 18**. However only one mark of **Masons 4, 5 and 18** were found, while 18 marks of **Mason 6** were recorded. All worked on the spiral stair, although Mason 6's marks were also recorded on the 1st, 3rd and 4th floors. It is possible that Masons 4, 5 and 18 specialised in cutting curved stones. However as so few of their marks were found this is speculation. It is also possible that some of their marks are built in and are therefore not visible.

This may indeed be the case where only one mark is found of any mason.



Mason 4- Mark record 0005



Mason 5- Mark record 0006

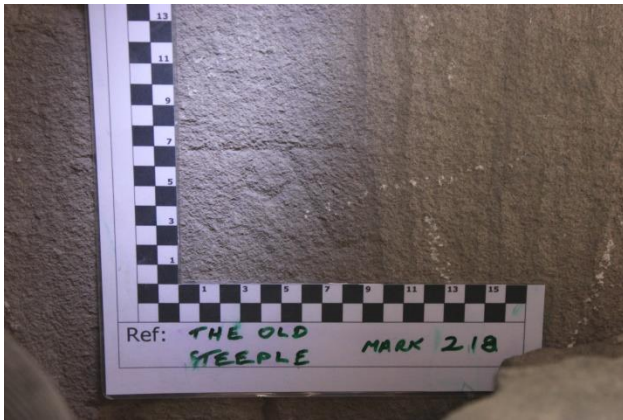


Mason 6 – Mark record 0182

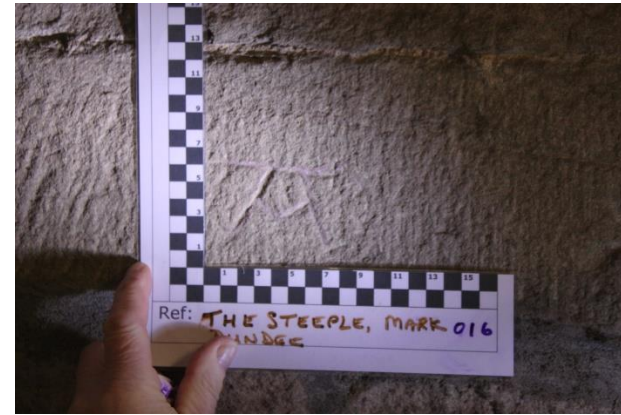


Mason 18 – Mark record 0124

Two masons based their marks on the letter A and J. **Mason 9** used an elaborate A, whereas **Mason 22** used a simple J. Only two marks of **Mason 9** were recorded, one in the 1st floor and one on the lower level of the stairs. **Mason 22** worked on the 2nd and 3rd floors and on the stairs up from the Bell room. Again only a few marks (4) were recorded.



Mason 9- Mark record 0218



Mason 9 – Mark record 0016

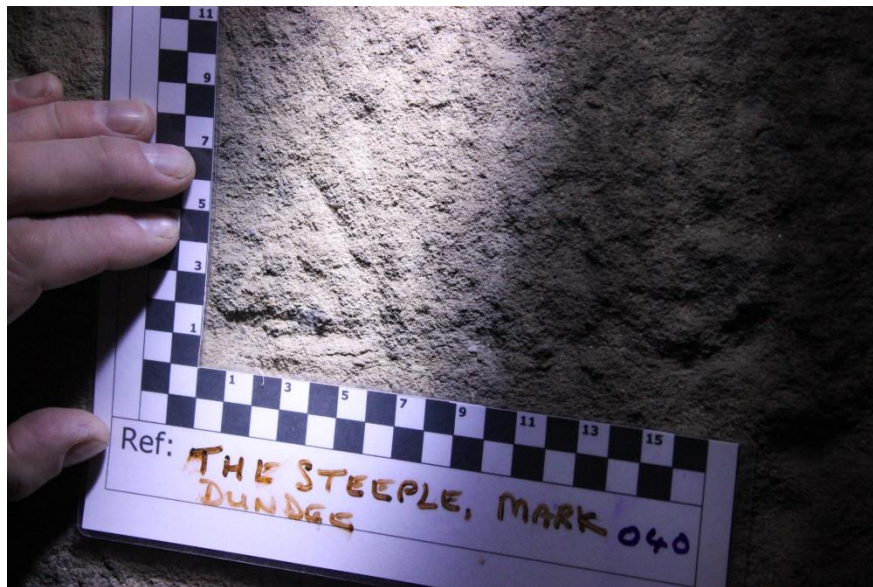


Mason 22 – Mark record 0197



Mason 22 - Mark record 0199

Five masons made use of a triangle within their marks, although only one used a simple small triangle, **Mason 2**. Only 3 of his marks were recorded, all on the spiral stair. The other four masons using a triangle also combined it with a St Andrew Cross, **Masons 10, 13, 14 and 15**. Only two marks of **Mason 10** were recorded, on the ground floor and the lowest run of the stairs, although unfortunately neither was very clear. Six marks of **Mason 14** were recorded only on the stairs between the bell room and the clock room. **Mason 13** worked on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th floor levels as well as the upper parts of the stairs, with a total of 17 of his marks being recorded. **Mason 15** also worked on the 3rd and 4th floors and the stairs between the two, and also on the 1st floor. Seven of his marks were recorded in total.



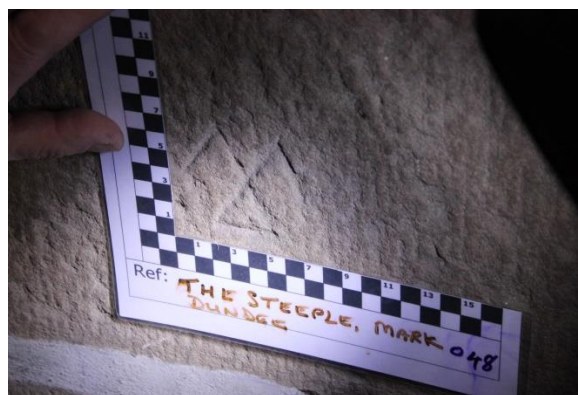
Mason 2 – Mark record 0040



Mason 10 – Mark record 0018, very faint



Mason 13- Mark record 0168



Mason 14 – Mark record 0048

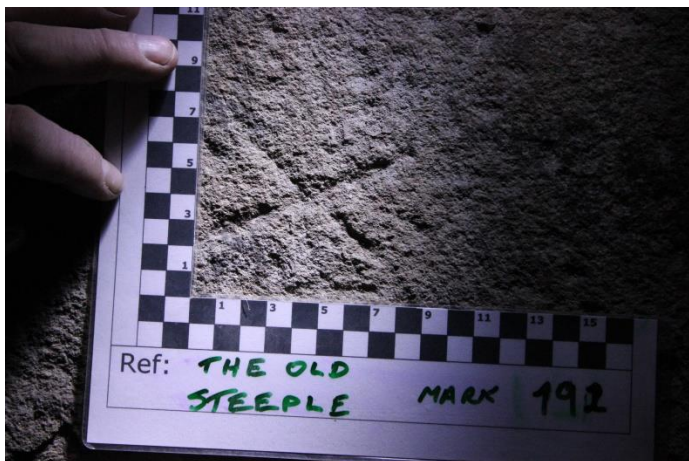


Mason 15 – Mark record 0043

Four other masons, 16, 17, 19 & 23, also used the St Andrews Cross as the base of their mark. However, only **Mason 16** used it in the basic form. Nine marks of this mason were recorded in the 5th floor and on the upper stairs. **Mason 17** added a line extending from the centre point, but only one of his marks was recorded on the upper stairs. **Mason 19** used the cross but added to small lines on either side. Only two of his marks were recorded, one on the ground floor and the other on the lower stairs below the 1st floor. Unfortunately neither were particularly clear.

The mark of Mason 23 was only found in the caphouse , where one mark was found only on the side of what appears to be a possible toilet. This mark may be of a slightly later date. Again he used a cross but added an extension to it to form a small letter H.

Again it should be pointed out that others marks make exist but have been built inwards so that they are not visible.



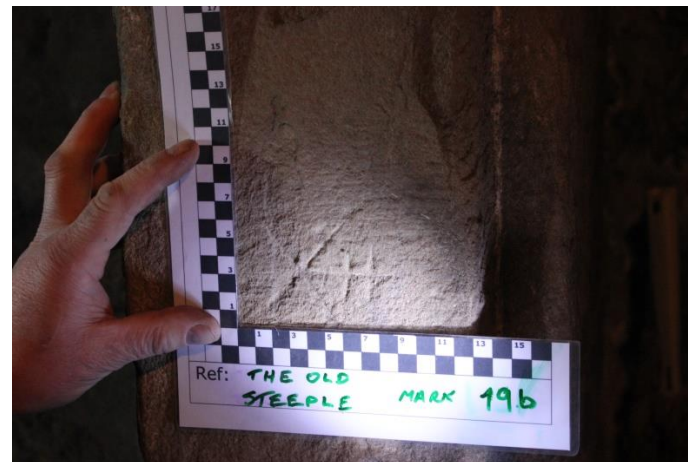
Mason 16 – Mark record 0192



Mason 17 – Mark record 0120



Mason 19 – Mark record 0129, very faint



Mason 23 – Mark record 0196

Mason 12 had a rather unusual mark which is similar to two crecent moons back to back. Only two of his marks were recorded in the small passageway leading off the stairs to the original church roof.



Mason 12 – Mark record 0036



Mason 12 – Mark record 0037

His mark is distinctly different from all other marks so may be of a later date than the majority of others.

Mason 7 used a simple heart-shape for his marks with 35 of his marks recorded on the ground floor, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th floors as well as the stairs, although not for some reason on the 1st floor, but again it is possible some were built inwards.



Mason 7 – Mark record 0167



Mason 7 – Mark record 0177

Another mason using a heart is **Mason 1**, with a small extension to one side with a cross bar on it. Only two of his markswere recorded at the entrance to the stairs behind the door, which is of a later build having been repaired.



Mason 1 – Mark record 0001

Discussion

The topic of masons' marks can be controversial, as some leading architectural building archaeologists dismiss them as of little use. Often when Standing Building Surveys have been undertaken the marks are sometimes mentioned but not actually studied and recorded carefully, if they are even mentioned at all. Having now studied and carefully recorded all visible marks on a number of buildings over several years and noted where each mark is located, I am of the opinion that they can, in many cases, help to work out building sequences, especially if there have been a number of different additions or repairs over the years. However, it becomes a little more difficult if a building was erected in one main phase, but some information can be gained nevertheless.

In the case of the Old Steeple tower is said to have been finished about 1480 and generally considered to have been built in one phase but with later work being undertaken in the caphouse. One mark which may help to confirm this is that of Mason 23, which was only found in the caphouse, but unfortunately only one example was found. Mason 16 was also found in the caphouse but his mark was also found on the stairs between the 3rd and 4th floor.

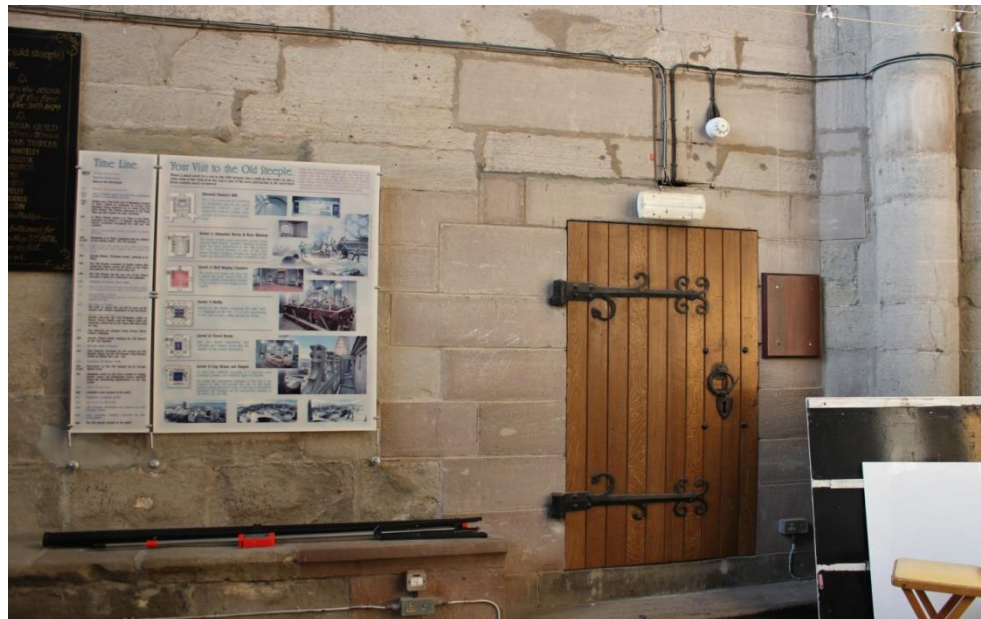
Six masons worked on the ground floor, Masons 1, 3, 7, 10, 11 and 19, but only one, Mason 1, was only found there. Two of them also worked on the stairs from the ground to the 1st floor, (Mason 3 and Mason 10), and Mason 19 worked on the stairs between the 4th & 5th floor. The other masons 7 & 11 worked in a wider spread of areas and many more of their marks were recorded. However, as has been mentioned before, one must remember that, even if only one mark is visible, it does not mean to say that that mason only cut one block. Other marks may now be hidden by being built inwards. This has been noted on a number of buildings when repairs have been undertaken.

Four masons appear to have been more prolific than the others with higher numbers of their marks recorded than of the others. This is particularly the case of Mason 8 where 50 of his marks were recorded in most areas, apart from the ground floor and 2nd floor, although his mark is on the stairs between the ground and 1st floor, and between the 2nd and 3rd floors.

Similarly Mason 7, although he worked on the ground floor, he didn't appear to work on the 1st floor, although he worked on the stairs up to the 1st floor. He then worked on all the other floors and the only area of the stairs where his mark was not visible was between the 2nd and 3rd floors.

One mark that does stand out a little, as it is of a different style compared to the majority of others, is that of Mason 12. It was only found in the narrow passage off the stairs leading towards the original door to the roof. From its style it looks slightly later than the others, but without documentary research and evidence it cannot be stated definitively.

The other mark than can be placed at a later date is that of Mason 1, which was found behind the door leading off the ground floor towards the stairs. From looking at the stonework in this area it is obvious that there has been some repairs done in this area but again documentary evidence will be required to pin down a date for this work.



It is known that the tower was besieged in the mid 17th century by General Monk so it may have been repaired shortly after this episode.

The caphouse is thought to be a later addition with possibly having a type of spire previously. However, from the marks found within it on the walls it would appear to be of a similar date to the rest of the main structure, as the marks of Masons 7, 8, 11 and 13 are visible here as well as overall the tower.

Named Masons

Two masons can be named as having worked in the tower, although we don't know their mark unfortunately. These are George Boiss and John Mylne, who later became the King's Master Mason.

George Boiss was employed by the Dundee Town Council in 1536 to work on the Kirk when required. Information on this is held by the Three Trades of Dundee, although exactly what work he undertook is not known.

We do know that John Mylne worked on strengthening the turret head in 1607 and later he also helped to strengthen the tower itself in 1643 possibly just before it was attacked by Monk.

We also know that in 1870 Sir George Scott was employed to plan and manage restoration and conservation work, although the exact extent of this is not quite certain.

Conclusion

Although we can't name these earlier masons we do now have their marks recorded and can give a reasonable accurate date for the majority of mid to late 15th century. We also know that work was undertaken in the 16th century by George Boiss and in the 17th century by John Mylne. We can also suggest that Mason 1 is possibly of mid to late 17th century.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank firstly Dundee City Council for giving us permission to record the marks within the tower and to Christina Donald for arranging the access. Secondly, I would like to thank my two volunteers Dave Orr and Jack McIntosh for their help with the recording – and for putting up with having to rush down the stairs each time the clock bells were going to strike.

One general observation I would like to make is that some of the marks were marked with chalk, which does not help with their conservation.

Moir Greig