

[ARCHITECTS]

Volume 3

BASIL SPENCE



HISTORIC SCOTLAND
ALBA AOSMHOR

INTERNATIONALLY renowned as one of Britain's most important architectural practices of the 20th century, the work of Sir Basil Spence and his partners has been revisited in recent years in the wake of the vast Spence archives entering the public domain. A survey of the work designed by Spence and his Scottish partners was completed by Historic Scotland in 2011, resulting in a number of newly listed buildings. This booklet gives a summary of some of the incredible range of the Scottish projects.



Spence in his Edinburgh office with a model of Kilsyth Academy (1947)

Sir Basil Spence (1907–1976) excelled at many things: he was a superb freehand draughtsman, an astute businessman and a charismatic spokesperson for his profession. Following completion of Spence's reconstruction of Coventry Cathedral (for which he was knighted in 1960) it was noted that Spence had probably done more than any other architect to make contemporary architecture acceptable to conservative public opinion.



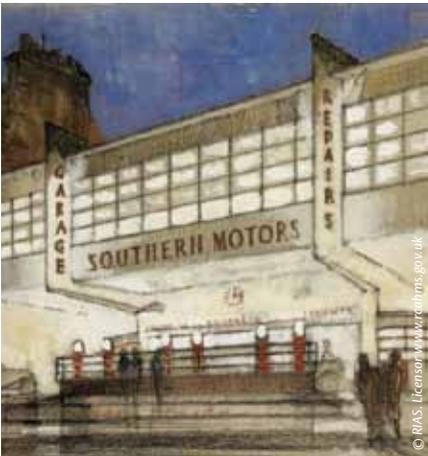
Spence's sketch of Kilsyth Academy, Rowand Anderson & Paul & Partners/Basil Spence & Partners, 1938-53

From initial sketches to material finishes and furnishings, the level of creative control brought to each of his projects, large or small, is one of the defining aspects of Spence's work. He surrounded himself with skilled apprentices, assistants and associates ready and able to contribute to the various stages of the architectural process.

Of Orcadian descent, Spence was born in Bombay and educated there until the age of 12. He studied architecture at the Edinburgh College of Art (ECA) in the mid 1920s and spent a year in the London office of the Arts and Crafts architect Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1929. Spence returned to the ECA to finish his studies in 1930 and continued as a design instructor at the College until 1936.

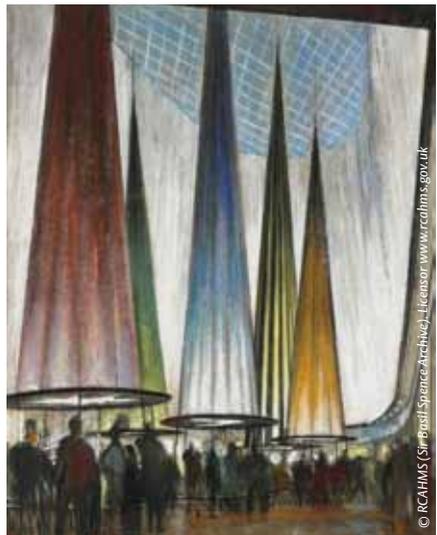
PARTNERSHIPS ARE FORMED

Spence favoured partnership working throughout his career. In the year he graduated (1931) he joined forces with ECA friend William Kininmonth, designing a number of suburban houses for Edinburgh professionals and also the Southern Motors Garage (1933-4) in Edinburgh's Causewayside.



Spence's sketch of Southern Motors, Causewayside Garage, Edinburgh, Kininmonth & Spence, 1933-4

The two became equal partners in the Edinburgh-based practice Rowand Anderson & Paul in 1934 with large-scale residential commissions occupying much of their time before the Second World War. Basil Spence & Partners was established in Edinburgh in 1946 with William Bruce Robertson, also from the Rowand Anderson office, while talented students from the ECA, Hardie Glover and Peter Ferguson also joined the team. In the early post-war years, Spence became known as a leading exhibition designer, notably as chief architect of the Enterprise Scotland Exhibition of 1947 and, famously, for the Sea and Ships Pavilion for the Festival of Britain in 1949-51.



Spence's sketch for Enterprise Scotland Exhibition, Edinburgh, Basil Spence & Partners, 1947

EVOLUTION OF A SCOTTISH PRACTICE

Further fellow students from ECA, John Hardie Glover and Peter Scott Ferguson, joined as associates in the Edinburgh office after Robertson's departure in 1950 and became partners-in-charge in 1956 when Spence opened his second London office at Canonbury Place. Work in Coventry and London consumed much of Spence's time, resulting in a certain amount of autonomy for his partners in Edinburgh. Further restructuring in 1964 saw the renaming of the Scottish practice as Sir Basil Spence, Glover & Ferguson under Hardie Glover. Sir Basil Spence retired from his Scottish practice in 1972, leaving Glover as the senior partner. A roll-call of Scottish talent

passed through the Edinburgh office over the years, some of whom became partners while others, including Andrew Merrylees, started their own practices.



4 Easter Belmont Road, Edinburgh, Kininmonth & Spence, 1933-4



National Library of Scotland, Causewayside, Edinburgh, Sir Basil Spence, Glover & Ferguson, 1984; Andrew Merrylees Associates, 1985-95

PRIVATE HOUSES

BROUGHTON PLACE, PEEBLES SHIRE (1935–8)

Rowand Anderson & Paul & Partners (Basil Spence)

This evocation of a Scottish L-plan tower house with crow-stepped gables and turnpike stair towers was requested by the client. Although at first glance it appears to be a historical design, it actually skilfully incorporates a range of Arts and Crafts influences including references to the

domestic architecture of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and castle restorations carried out by Robert Lorimer. Windows are much larger than those found on a tower house and Spence has combined the essence of traditional Scottish architecture with modern ideals, such as light.



Broughton Place, a modern interpretation of tower house architecture



Broughton Place, Garden House, sketch by Basil Spence

GRIBLOCH HOUSE, NEAR STIRLING (1937–9)

Rowand Anderson & Paul & Partners with Perry Duncan

At Gribloch, in contrast to Broughton Place, Spence's American client wanted a fashionable and glamorous contemporary house. Here Spence combined neo-Regency and Art Deco styles to create a

streamlined design typical of the 1930s. The main hall features a cantilevered stair with a finely looped wrought-iron balustrade sweeping up past a full-height bowed window.



Preliminary sketch for Gribloch House by Spence



Interior, Gribloch House

SOCIAL HOUSING

DUNBAR HARBOUR, EAST LOTHIAN (1932-5, 1948-52 AND 1955-6)

Kininmonth & Spence, Rowand Anderson & Paul & Partners, Basil Spence & Partners

This local-authority housing development is one of Basil Spence's practice's best-known works in Scotland. Constructed in three phases, the additions to Kininmonth & Spence's stepped terraced run of 1938 were taken forward by the new partner William Bruce Robertson and won the Saltire Award for architecture in 1952.

The development blended modern design with traditional features and details associated with Scotland's East Coast fishing villages including recessed entries and rubble-clad forestairs. The carefully considered informal groupings at Dunbar Harbour provided a model for Scottish burgh redevelopment in the 1950s and 1960s and established Spence as a key figure in post-war urban architecture.



Spence's evocative perspective drawing of Dunbar Housing



Detail of forestair, 3-9 Victoria Place, Dunbar

GREAT MICHAEL RISE, NEWHAVEN, EDINBURGH (1956-9)

Basil Spence & Partners

Closer relationships between the Spence partnership and the Edinburgh Corporation Housing Committee led to the ideas at Dunbar Harbour being developed at this site in Edinburgh. The use of brick, iron railings, timber cladding and traditional stacks are distinguishing features. The fishing theme is captured again in the distinctive forestairs.



Great Michael Rise, Newhaven housing

LAVEROCKBANK, EDINBURGH (1957–60) AND CLAREMONT COURT, EDINBURGH (1959–62)

Basil Spence & Partners

These two housing schemes illustrate the practice embracing mainstream Continental Modernism as the 1950s drew to a close. Spence's concept of 'place-making' and a regionalised approach to Modernism continue to remain evident in both.

Laverockbank uses a reinforced concrete frame with a modern take on the deck access used in 19th-century tenements in Edinburgh. Timber and reclaimed granite setts from Newhaven roads are also employed as cladding. The modular, grid-like arrangement of units at **Claremont Court** is more formally Modernist in design. Part of the substructure makes use of salvaged sandstone rubble so that the structure appears to sprout from the remains of a much earlier building on the site.



Showing angled balconies at Laverockbank



Glazed curtain wall entrance at Laverockbank



Claremont Court

CANONGATE HOUSING, EDINBURGH (1959-61)

Basil Spence & Partners, Sir Basil Spence Glover & Ferguson

Here, Spence continued the move towards distinctive housing design for a dense urban context. Although there are still references to the Scottish tradition including use of pends, rubble

cladding and allusions to the fortified tower house, here they are combined with more obvious Modernist design such as monopitch roofs and projecting balconies.



General view of west block



Brown's Close block

HUTCHESONTOWN 'C', GORBALS, GLASGOW (1957-65)

Basil Spence & Partners, Sir Basil Spence Glover & Ferguson

A dramatic illustration of the breadth of Spence's architectural output can be seen by contrasting the relatively contextual low-density urban projects above with his more uncompromisingly modern and structurally complex twin blocks at Hutchesontown 'C'. Although tower blocks are now often disliked by the public, a huge amount of preparatory work went into this scheme and its associated infrastructure. Every four units within the pair of 20-storey towers shared a massive 'garden' balcony for drying clothes, the intention being to reproduce the communal spirit associated with 19th-century Glasgow tenement buildings. Constructed as part of the City's slum-clearance programme of the 1950s and 1960s, the flats provided hot water and bathrooms for the first time for many of the families living there. In 1993 they

became the first and only example of Spence's social housing in Scotland to be demolished.



View of the recently completed south block

BUILDINGS OF WORSHIP

ST ANDREW'S CHURCH, CLERMISTON VIEW, EDINBURGH (1954-8)

Sir Basil Spence, Glover & Ferguson

One of four churches designed by Basil Spence and his Edinburgh practice and the only one built in Scotland, this building may appear ordinary at first glance, but a closer look reveals a sophisticated design. Triangular shapes,

representing the Holy Trinity, dominate the composition while the church's interior space is almost kite-shaped – an interesting and unusual interpretation of the traditional cruciform plan.



Principal elevation of St Andrew's Church



Interior with original seating

MORTONHALL CREMATORIUM, EDINBURGH (1961-7)

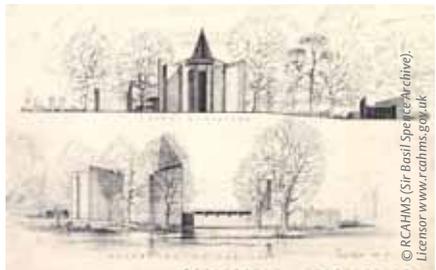
Sir Basil Spence, Glover & Ferguson with A Steele – City of Edinburgh Architect

This is a masterful piece of architecture with sharp angular walls radiating outward and a pyramidal roof letting light into the central core of the building. The handling of natural light and sense of scale are reminiscent of Spence's experience designing Coventry Cathedral

and also the influence of Le Corbusier's celebrated chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut (1955) in France. Processional routes through the building leading to and from the detached remembrance chapel and landscaped grounds beyond are key elements of the scheme.



Interior of Mortonhall Crematorium



Sketch elevations of Mortonhall Crematorium

BUILDINGS FOR EDUCATION

NATURAL PHILOSOPHY BUILDING EXTENSIONS, UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW (1947-53 AND 1955-9)

Basil Spence & Partners

Early forays in school architecture in the 1930s such as Kilsyth Academy set the scene for the Spence practices' astonishing range of buildings for universities and schools across Britain during the 1950s and 1960s.



Principal elevation

Comprising additions to James Miller's 1903–6 Kelvin Building, the Natural Philosophy commission is a landmark in the evolution of Scotland's architecture and provides a link between pre-war and post-war approaches to Modernism. It was the first of Spence's university contracts, the first major contract for his new practice and one of the first post-war university buildings in the UK.



Showing the concrete superstructure of the lecture theatre

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, GEORGE SQUARE, EDINBURGH (1962–7)

Sir Basil Spence, Glover & Ferguson

For this rectangular-plan library in a late Modernist style, John Hardie Glover adopted a user/designer collaborative approach providing high levels of functionality within a building of finely balanced proportions. The location of the Library was chosen in 1955 as part of Spence's earlier Edinburgh University development proposals.



View of library looking east

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COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS

SCOTTISH WIDOWS FUND AND LIFE ASSURANCE SOCIETY, ST ANDREW SQUARE, EDINBURGH (1957-62)

Basil Spence & Partners

Designed to harmonise with the neighbouring Guardian Royal Exchange building, this understated but sophisticated work of classical Modernism uses only the finest materials throughout: the facades at ground floor are in polished

black granite, while upper storeys and interior walls and floors are clad in marble. The principal entrance is a piece of theatre, mirroring the treatment of 42 St Andrew Square which it faces, and the interior has survived much as intended.



General view facing St Andrew Square



Lift and stair in the foyer

SCOTTISH WIDOWS HEADQUARTERS, DALKEITH ROAD, EDINBURGH (1972-6)

Sir Basil Spence, Glover and Ferguson

A building of international status, it received the RIBA Award for Scotland in 1977. A series of interlocking hexagonal prisms of reflective tinted glass that vary in height, the building's plan form is like a crystalline structure, inspired by the

Salisbury Crags which form its backdrop. The device of setting a building over a pool of water was used in some of Spence's earlier keynote works including the British Embassy in Rome, also working with the landscape architect, Dame Sylvia Crowe.



Glazed reception area and pool



Aerial view

THIS BOOKLET IS THE THIRD IN A SERIES FOCUSING ON SOME OF THE LEADING ARCHITECTS WHO WORKED EXTENSIVELY IN SCOTLAND. EACH GIVES A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE ARCHITECT, THEIR APPROACH TO DESIGN AND THEIR INFLUENCES AND FOCUSES ON A NUMBER OF KEY BUILDINGS, GIVING AN INDICATION OF WHAT MAKES THEM SPECIAL.

Historic Scotland is an executive agency of the Scottish Government charged with ensuring that our historic environment provides a strong foundation in building a successful future for Scotland. Amongst the duties of Historic Scotland is to compile and maintain statutory lists of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. We have a dedicated listing and designed landscapes team which researches and assesses listing proposals.

To find out more about Basil Spence and his listed buildings in Scotland you can search online at www.historic-scotland.gov.uk or contact the Listing and Designed Landscapes Team at hs.listing@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

Further Sources of Information and Weblinks

L Campbell, M Glendinning and J Thomas (eds), *Basil Spence – Buildings and Projects* (2012)

P Long and J Thomas (eds), *Basil Spence – Architect* (2008)

www.scottisharchitects.org.uk *Basil Spence & Partners*

www.historic-scotland.gov.uk *Historic Scotland (2011) Scotland's Listed Buildings – What Listing Means to Owners and Occupiers*

www.canmore.rcahms.gov.uk *Sir Basil Spence Archive Collection and the Spence, Glover and Ferguson collection of architects' papers held by RCAHMS.*

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