



30 PRINCES STREET
THURSO



CONSERVATION
STATEMENT



February 2009



ANDREW PK WRIGHT
Chartered Architect & Heritage Consultant

HIGHLAND BUILDINGS
PRESERVATION TRUST

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1 Introduction



This conservation statement has been prepared as part of a suite of documents for a feasibility study commissioned by the Highland Buildings Preservation Trust, through which options for a sustainable future for the structure at 30 Princes Street, Thurso, are being examined. In recent years the condition of the property has deteriorated and a portion of it has been demolished by the current owner. The feasibility study follows on from the serving of a building repairs notice by the Highland Council, through which emergency repairs have been commissioned in the past.

The purpose of the document is to provide guidance to the project team on the significance of the building from what has been gleaned from studying its history through to the present time. When compared with other similar documents, the scope of the document is restricted due, primarily, to the fact that it has not been possible to gain entry to the interior of the building. Therefore, of necessity, certain assumptions have been made regarding the significance of the interior based on photographs and the personal memories of a member of a family that had once inhabited the property, to whom the author extends his gratitude for having made this most valuable insight available.

The property at 30 Princes Street occupies a key position in the planned town grid layout of the distinguished early nineteenth century new town of Thurso. Its dilapidated condition has been for long a cause for concern among those in the local community, confirmed by the unanimous support given at the public meeting held in April 2008, during which a strong desire was expressed to see an eyesore removed, with the building repaired and brought back into life once more. A recent in-depth study of the redundant buildings of Caithness has identified the property as being potentially a key project having a regenerative effect¹. The conservation statement addresses the policies to be put in place for establishing new uses which will preserve and enhance the historic fabric of the property, all of which are based upon an understanding of its significance.

The emergency repairs which have been carried out have bought additional time, and yet the property continues to deteriorate.

Solutions that will secure its future must be found, and quickly. The local authority has fulfilled its statutory obligations under difficult circumstances, and it is now incumbent upon the agencies to provide the support that will secure the future of the building to vindicate the actions that have been taken to date.



2 Methodology

2.1 Conservation planning: terms of reference

The document has been prepared as a conservation statement, best defined as an abridged conservation plan, appropriate for the early stages of a project to establish significance based on limited knowledge of the site. It is in order for the findings of a conservation statement to be revisited at a future date as a project proceeds when more exhaustive examination of the documentary evidence, and the evidence of the building itself, may be commissioned.

A conservation statement will normally follow the basic format of a conservation plan, with the key sections within the document relating to Statements of Significance and Conservation Policies set out in outline, based on a preliminary evaluation of the property from what is known from documentary sources and the evidence of the building itself. In the Outline Statements of Significance no attempt has been made at this early stage to set down values based on an assessment of *relative* significance. It should be noted that, of course, all matters listed cannot be assumed to have equal significance.

2.2 Statutory designations

The property is in a prominent location within the Conservation Area of Thurso.

It is currently listed Category B. Properties in this category are considered to be 'buildings of regional or more than local importance, or major examples of some period, style or building type which may have been altered'². The importance of the property had been recognised at a relatively early date, having been listed in February 1975. The listing notes are of interest in themselves as they appear to relate to the date of the original listing, as the property has changed in appearance since then:

Circa 1800, tall 2-storey house over raised basement, 3 bays with centre door; rear 2-storey and attic, 2-bay wing facing Sir John Square; all rendered and lined as ashlar; basement, ground, 1st floor and diminutive window in NE gable; large modern shop window in wing to Sir John's Square, and piended dormers; 12 pane glazing corniced end stacks; slate roof

The above listing notes suggest that there may have been more than one dormer, but the evidence of dormers having existed to the main street frontage onto Princes Street has been lacking to date. This is examined further in Section 3.

The property is currently on the Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland, administered by the Scottish Civic Trust on behalf of Historic Scotland. The list entry is 2171.

2.3 Archival and other sources referred to

Cartographic references, with the exception of the original layouts for the new town of Thurso, have all been sourced from the online images of the Map Library of the National Library of Scotland (NLS). Plans for the layout of the new town of Thurso and for the other settlements of Caithness have been sourced from the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland (RCAHMS).

Historic photographs of the property have been made available from the Manson Collection, Thurso, and are acknowledged accordingly. Street photographs of Thurso have been sourced from the George Washington Wilson Collection at the University of Aberdeen, and the Valentine of Dundee Collection at the University of St Andrews respectively. Other photographs for which the provenance has yet to be established have been taken from a pictorial record of Old Thurso by Henrietta Munro³.

Recent photographs of the interior of the property, associated with the serving of building repairs notices on the owner, have been supplied by The Highland Council.

Information on ownership of the property and former tenants has been taken from extensive information supplied by Darren Manson, and from the Valuation Roll entries examined at the North Highland Archive.

All other photographs appearing in the report were taken by the author in February 2008. Literary sources which have been consulted are mainly from the author's own collections.

2.4 Site evaluation

The external fabric of the property was inspected from ground level on 25 February 2008.

2.5 Restrictions to access

To date access has been denied to the interior of the property, and so, of necessity, assumptions made regarding the significance of the internal fabric of the property and these are based on limited information supplied by others. These assumptions will require to be reviewed once access is granted.

2.6 Orientation

For reasons of simplification the report follows the convention of the earliest plans of the new town of Thurso which are orientated west-east. The same orientation has been used to describe the elevations of the building. Later plans, beginning with the Hydrographic Office plan of 1844, show the true orientation in which Princes Street runs from southwest to northeast.

2.7 Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance he has been given in the preparation of this document. Particular thanks are due to Darren Manson whose images from the Manson Collection, his recollections of the property, and outline plans of previous internal layouts, have all been made available. The assistance given by Gail Inglis of the North Highland Archive in Wick in locating documents and sourcing them has also been immensely helpful.

2.8 Copyright

Copyright in this document is vested jointly in the author and in the Highland Buildings Preservation Trust. Sections or images contained within the document should not be reproduced without the consent of either, or of the principal copyright holder.

2.9 Author of the report

An accredited conservation architect and architectural historian, Andrew Wright has prepared numerous conservation plans for complex heritage sites. He has also prepared conservation statements for historic properties, conservation management plans, heritage reports accompanying applications for the redevelopment of sites and heritage impact assessments as appropriate for each to meet conditions of project funding.

He is the author of the Caithness Redundant Buildings Inventory Report, published and launched in August 2008, and acts as a conservation adviser to the Highland Buildings Preservation Trust.

3 Evaluation

3.1 Sir John Sinclair and the New Town of Thurso

One of the leading figures of his age in Scotland the indefatigable Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster (1754-1835) was a polymath. He indulged his passions for the numerous schemes of improvement he promoted, some of which were fanciful and not all of them, it has to be stated, proved to be successful. Beyond Caithness he is best known as the compiler and driving force behind the Old Statistical Account of Scotland, a vast and unprecedented undertaking commenced in 1791 and completed by 1799. By the time the venture had been completed the every parish in the country had been surveyed and the results set out in a standardised format.

Through his exertions in setting up the Board of Agriculture Sir John was well acquainted with the benefits that the leading landowners considered flowed from the creation of new planned settlements. The vogue for planned towns and villages laid out to a formal regular design gathered momentum from the middle of the eighteenth century, finding particular favour among the improving landowners of the North-East of Scotland where many of the earliest planned settlements are to be found. As TC Smout has observed:

The eighteenth-century village was developed in response to and also assist a revolution in the economy of the estate and of the nation: it was expected to provide a completely new framework for human life in the countryside.⁴



Plan of Halkirk (c1803) © RCAHMS

In the years after Culloden landowners faced difficult moral decisions over the future of their tenants for whom most felt a duty of responsibility. Landowners in Caithness were by no means immune, even if the impact of enforced change arrived later than in some other areas of the Scottish mainland. While planned settlements were introduced in the rural areas originally to provide a market for the food grown by the tenants, they also promised a refuge for those tenants dispossessed of their landholdings from the combined effects of agricultural improvement and from the introduction of sheep farming in the more marginal upland areas of the county. Perceived as having the potential to stem the growing tide of emigration, the new urban settlements acted as a magnet for employment to serve the manufacturing activity which was to exploit so effectively the natural resources of the county. Monopolies were set up with the tacit approval of the landowners, as in the case with the fisheries which had been the principal mainstay of the coastal economy of the settlements from Berriedale to Staxigoe to the north of Wick, well before the British Fisheries Society invested heavily in Pulteneytown in the early nineteenth century. Around 1800, when Sir John was planning his new rural village of Halkirk, he sought to encourage new industry there in the form of a wool mill for which he gave the financial incentive of £250 to a mill owner to acquire the necessary machinery. As a venture it proved to be short-lived.

Thurso had for long been the principal mainland port on the Pentland Firth. The merchants of the burgh traded in a wide variety of commodities from as early as the medieval period, and trade was consolidated during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In 1633 the town had been granted the status of a burgh of barony, and the diversity of the established trade routes is recorded in the street name of Rotterdam Street within the old town. In the eighteenth

Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster set out his intentions for the new town in the following extract from his entry for the Old Statistical Account:

Sir John Sinclair, however, now proposes to feu off a tract of ground on the south side of the town, which will give ample scope to the inhabitants to extend the town, and must prove an ornament to the place, as the feuars, in the new town, are to be restricted to building according to a fixed plan. The proposed situation is remarkably pleasant, extending along the banks of the river, which at stream-tides is navigable for vessels of 50 or 60 tons burdens, the full length of the ground appropriated for building. Of course, the new town will possess every advantage for trade which the old town enjoys, while at the same time, it will be less exposed to encroachment from the sea.⁵

Captain John Henderson wrote in 1812 that the plan for the new town of Thurso was:

..... according to the most regular plan that could be contrived and in a manner not only ornamental but also positively well adapted for preserving the health & promoting the convenience of the inhabitants.⁶

century the burgh was made the social and administrative centre of Caithness from which was exported the largest portion of the produce of the county, necessitating the establishment of a Customs House in 1707. Later in the century eminent travellers were to record at length the activity they saw at the harbours and noted down the merchandise that was being exported from the quaysides⁷. A hundred years or so later the quaysides of the town's harbour were still bustling, but mainly from the pavement works to which the flagstone from the inland quarries was brought to be processed, to be taken away by vessels to the far corners of the globe.

In 1719 the feudal superiority of the burgh lands passed to the Sinclairs of Ulbster⁸. The appearance of general prosperity was such that, in 1735, it had been described as 'a neat little fashionable town'⁹, but by the end of the century Sir John was lamenting the poor state of the streets of the old burgh and how, even though the streets had been laid out to a regular plan, it irked him that the development of the building plots had been haphazard and irregular, leading to what he considered a confused layout¹⁰.

It is not known for certain when Sir John embarked upon the design of the plan layout for the new town at Thurso, which he proposed should be grafted onto the layout of the old burgh, nor who may have drawn it up for him. A number of sources have given the date of the plan as 1798¹¹, but it is clear that when Sir John prepared the lengthy final entry himself for the parish of Thurso in the Old Statistical Account to crown his lasting achievement, written in the third party and not to be published until 1799, the proposal was still in the process of being planned and was not yet on the ground.

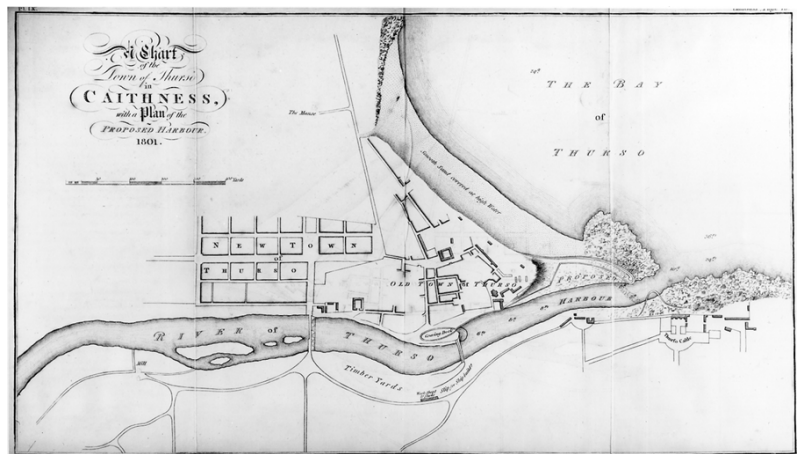
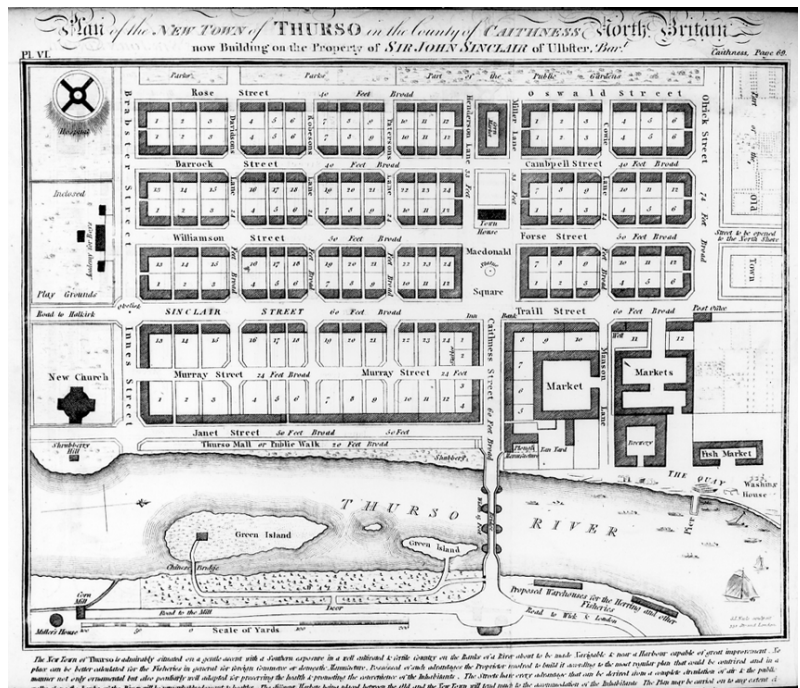


Chart of the Town of Thurso (1801) © RCAHMS

Fundamental to the success of the scheme was the new bridge across the river, erected in 1800 on the principal approach from the south. Sir John was not too hopeful that the funding for it could be raised when he prepared his account of the previous year. Associated improvements to the harbour were also planned and, while Sir John raised the necessary Act of Parliament, the funding never materialised and so the scheme had to be dropped¹². The 'Chart of the Town of Thurso' dated 1801, shows clearly the proposed harbour, and the arches of the new bridge across the river. The plan shows also a rudimentary layout for the proposed new town.

The definitive plan for the new town is generally considered to be the later plan prepared in some detail by Henderson in 1812, upon which street names are shown, although these were to change later. On this



Plan of the New Town of Thurso (1812) from Capt Henderson's *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Caithness* © RCAHMS

plan the earlier buildings on the quayside are shown linked into the scheme, including the brewery, shown as the courtyard building on the riverside in the earlier plan. While it has been said that this may have started life as a ginnal¹³, Sir John noted in his entry for the Old Statistical Account that it was only then in the process of being erected¹⁴. Alongside the brewery, anchored at the south-eastern corner of his plan were to be also large market courts for selling the products of the rural hinterland, and a fishmarket.

Of all of the plans devised for the settlements of the Northeast coastline, Sir John's plan for Thurso was by far the most elegant and ambitious in the breadth of its vision. By the time that it was conceived, the street blocks of James Craig's competition-winning plan of 1767 for the New Town of Edinburgh had all been filled in, but only after a painfully hesitant start. Sir John would have been well aware of its magnificence and, as it neared completion, it may have been an inspiration for his own design. As in Edinburgh the principal streets of the new town of Thurso were to be of generous width and, from the dwellings lining Janet Street (the first of the streets to be developed, and among the most desirable due to the south-facing view to the river) it was clear that the suburb was intended to be primarily for the 'upper rank'. There appeared to be no evidence of the social hierarchy built into the plan for the New Town of Edinburgh from the outset.

With the land sloping gently from north to south, and from the northwest to the southeast, the site proved ideal for the grid plan. Emphasis was given to new public buildings on the principal axes. In 1799 Sir John had lamented the fact that the medieval kirk of St Peter was the only public building in the old burgh, and so at the heart of his plan, on axis with the principal route from the south, the town house was to be located to close off Macdonald Square where the principal east-west roads were to meet. Macdonald Square was to be renamed Sir John's Square in the late nineteenth century to commemorate the achievements of the town's most illustrious citizen and benefactor. Immediately behind the town house was shown the

site for the corn market. The thoroughfare shown as Williamson Street to the west of the square and passing on the north side of it (later to be renamed Sutherland Street and then, finally, Princes Street) aligned with Forse Street to the east, was intended to be the principal artery of the town. The long vista of the street was to be framed at the west end by the proposed academy and, at the east, by a route to be opened up on axis leading to the old town.

The houses bordering Janet Street were erected to a sophisticated architectural design with the whole assembly designed as a unified street frontage, but the take-up of the feus for the rest of the plan was much more protracted than Sir John might have expected. Reflecting perhaps the seemingly haphazard manner in which the individual feus were developed, the overall townscape is much less unified than the plan had promised. Not unlike Craig's plan for Edinburgh the feus of the street blocks at the east end were taken up first, but here the extension of the grid plan was drawn out, to the degree even that some of the gaps in the street frontages were not to be developed until the mid-twentieth century, or later. Overall however, the new town is essentially the creation of the nineteenth century, of which a surprising amount of the original fabric still survives when compared with other towns of the Scottish mainland. At Halkirk, also laid out to a grid plan by Sir John around the same time, the take-up was even slower. To this day it remains very substantially under-developed.



Detail of the Hydrographic Office plan of Thurso and Scrabster (1844) © NLS



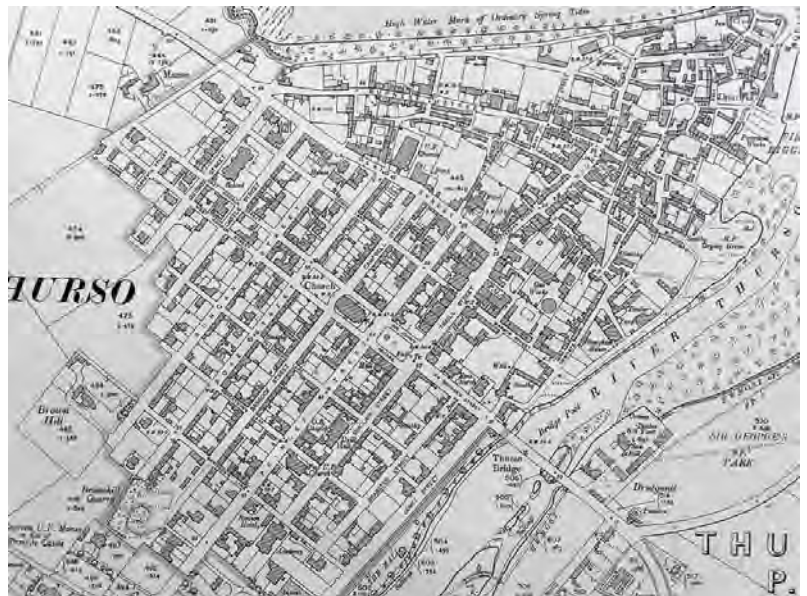
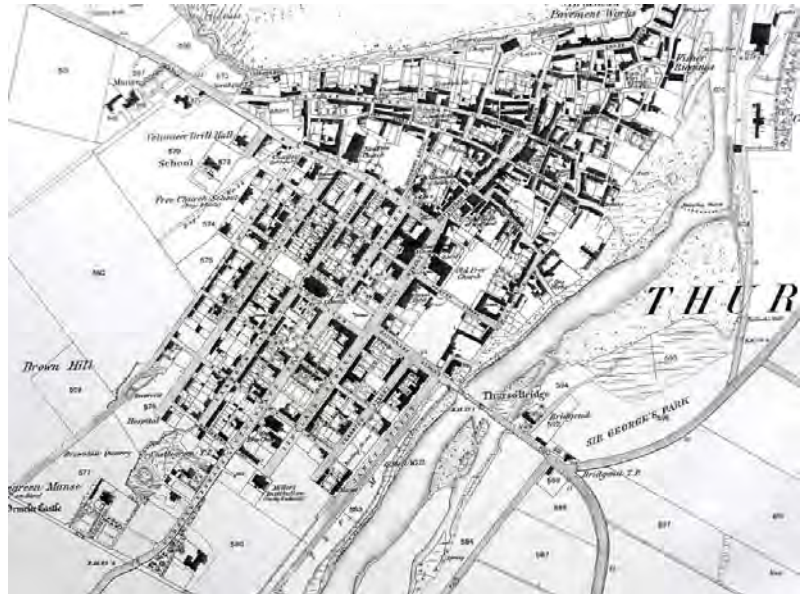
Inset from the Hydrographic Office map

Sir John's unshakeable belief that investment in both industry and commerce would foster the expansion of the burgh had been founded, in part, upon the numbers of new dwellings erected in the closing decade of the eighteenth century. He predicted:

It is satisfactory to add, that the population of the town, has not only increased of late, but it is likely to be rapidly augmented. This can hardly fail to be the case, in a place so happily situated, and where encouragement is given to the extension of its commerce and manufactures, and to every species of improvement.¹⁵

At the time of preparing the entry for the New Statistical Account in 1840 the minister following in the pioneering steps of Sir John observed that the town was increasing in size yearly. He recorded that in 1831 there had been 367 houses and 2,429 inhabitants living in the burgh¹⁶. The Hydrographic Office plan of the town of 1844 appears to have been drawn with some level of accuracy and it

reveals that, beyond the first street block to the west of the main square, the grid-plan had been hardly laid out at all. Comparisons between the First and Second Edition Ordnance Survey maps, surveyed in 1872 and 1901 respectively, are instructive in revealing how much development had actually taken place over this relatively short period and confirming a marked improvement in the general levels of prosperity towards the end of the century.



Comparisons in the growth of Thurso: the First Edition Ordnance Survey map (1877), top, and the Second Edition map (1906) © NLS

In reality, the way in which the new town developed was quite different to the original plan, and it came to be modified for quite pragmatic reasons. The high quality and relatively low density of the properties on Janet Street were perpetuated, but after a promising start most of the properties did not appear until the latter part of the nineteenth century. Elsewhere the housing was to a much denser pattern for which the houses had no standardised elevational pattern, although many were built to a similar floor plan. The cross lanes, narrow in width, were not developed to any great extent in the early years and, much later, they were to accommodate single storey artisan housing. Feus on Barrock Street and Rose Street were taken



Sinclair Street looking west towards William Smith's Miller Academy

up from a relatively early date where houses were built to a more domestic scale than was to be found on the principal thoroughfares.

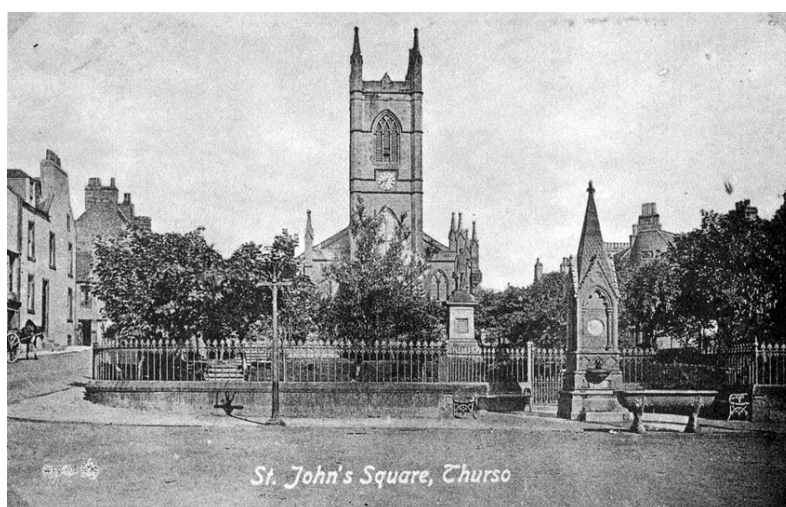
The imposing classical frontage of the Miller Academy (now the Public Library) was not erected until 1859-60 to the design of William Smith¹⁷, and it closed off Sinclair Street rather than Williamson Street as had been first intended. The continuation of Forse Street into the old town plan never materialised, and the vista was closed off much less convincingly by the asymmetrical frontage of the building occupied by the Commercial Bank on Orlig Street, now the Royal Bank of Scotland building. Neither was the town hall ever to occupy the square at the heart of the plan: it was replaced by an imposing new church was completed on the plot in 1832 to the design of the Edinburgh architect, William Burn, to seat a congregation of 1,540¹⁸. With its pinnacled tower soaring above the new town it looks imposing on its elevated site, especially on the southern approach across the bridge. The corn market never materialised on its site to the rear of the new church, and neither did the market courts or the fishmarket which were to have been situated close to the quayside.



Elevation to Princes Street

The dwelling erected at 30 Princes Street occupies, therefore, an important site in relation to the planned street grid. Its importance is heightened by the topography of the site and by the open aspect from

being located next to the central square of the new town plan. Contrary to what the listing notes suggest it is unlikely to be part of the earliest development of the grid plan, and is most likely to date from the period 1825-1840. It may lack some of the grace and architectural sophistication of the houses on Janet Street, but it is nonetheless an imposing house with refined architectural detailing not found in the fabric of the earlier houses at the east end of the same street. Compared with them it is of a larger scale altogether and the forerunner of later houses on Princes Street as it extended westwards. The depth of the masonry above the window lintols of the first floor may suggest that dormers were incorporated originally, the front face of which might have been brought forward to meet the wallhead of the main elevation. This arrangement appears on later houses on the same street, but no dormers can be made out on the earliest photographs. It can be seen that a single straight-sided dormer of this type, with a piended (hipped) slated roof had been in existence at the elevation facing Sir John Square until it was removed when the recent emergency repair works were undertaken.



Picture postcard of c1918 showing Sir John's Square (noted erroneously as 'St John's Square') looking towards William Burn's St Peter's and St Andrew's Church; the dormer on the east elevation of 30 Princes Street facing the square can be seen clearly (from Munro)



Detail of the 1877 OS map © NLS

It is tempting to conclude from the slightly uncertain evidence of the 1844 map that the house had been erected originally as a simple rectangle to match the house on the opposite corner of the square, with the jamb to the rear being a later addition. However, neither the cartographic evidence, nor the evidence of the building itself, supports this supposition. The plan layout is clearly shown as being L-shaped on the 1872 map while the evidence of the masonry coursing, now that it has been exposed to view, all points to a single build. The earlier map of 1844 is difficult to decipher with any certainty, but it appears that the building was L-shaped originally, and that the stair tower to the rear could only have been a later addition. Confirmation of the original L-shaped arrangement can be seen from the masonry of the east elevation facing Sir John's Square where the windows of the upper storey are set out within the wall with equal spacing, a decidedly amateurish arrangement considering that there is a gable within the composition. Correspondingly the middle window clashes with the internal dividing wall and has been left as a blind window in the façade.

The masonry is of a bluish grey colour, rich in shale, or clay possibly, from a local quarry that had supplied the buildings of the burgh during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is not of the very

best quality, and prone to weathering unless protected by harled finishes. The window and door rybats, quoins and skewstones are all of yellowish-brown sandstone used consistently in Thurso throughout the nineteenth century. Sir John gives an indication of the possible origin of this in his notes for the parish entry of 1799. He refers to an outcrop of rock below the high water line at Scrabster, which he indicated was available for quarrying at low tide, and capable of producing freestone suited to ashlar work¹⁹. There is good surviving evidence that the masonry was never harled originally and that it had received several successive coats of what may have been a naturally coloured limewash which has bonded itself to the face of the flagstone, and is now very hard and brittle from calcification. It would have given a homogeneous appearance to the building compared with what is seen now. Evidence has been uncovered by the author of a similar finish having been applied to properties of a roughly similar age in Lower Pulteneytown where a yellow ochre limewash has been identified.



Pre-1872 view of Princes Street (then Sutherland Street) looking east (from Munro)



West gable

Windows are well proportioned, positioned on the principal façade in accordance with classical principles based on the established pattern books. The satisfying proportions are reinforced by the twelve-pane sash and case windows with slender astragals, and there is a good diamond-patterned fanlight to the front door assembly. The original roof had been slate, and it is inconceivable that this could have been other than the same West Highland blue slate by which the roofs of the principal dwellings and public buildings of Thurso of the nineteenth century are finished. The chimneyheads are bold, and of generous width at each gable, which again points to a construction date not much later than 1840. Similar to the chimneyheads of the early nineteenth century store-houses of Telford's Pulteneytown, having plain copes they are not particularly refined in detail. The principal elevation to Princes Street is odd in one respect: at the west gable there are no quoins of sandstone built in, unlike the south gable, which gives an imbalance to the elevation. The explanation for this may be a simple one: when the property was erected it had been envisaged that there would have been properties immediately to the east, continuing the terrace. In fact, this length of Princes Street, to the west of Sir John's Square, had never been developed in this manner. This may also explain also why, originally, there had been no windows on the west gable.

One aspect of the surviving fabric that merits comment is the level at which the windows to the basement storey occur. Whereas, say, in the New Town of Edinburgh access to the basement would have been possible through a sunken well to the front of the building, in Thurso all buildings on the principal streets of the grid plan are erected hard onto the pavement line. Exceptions occur, with some of the dwellings



George Washington Wilson photograph of c1900 of Princes Street looking west; the property has been cement rendered by this time © University of Aberdeen



Front door to Princes Street

on the northern side of Rose Street having front gardens. The arrangement at 30 Princes Street results in three steps being formed to the principal door, with the bottom step of a different height, faced up in cement which may suggest that some minor changes in level have occurred. This is confirmed when the George Washington Wilson photograph looking up Princes Street is examined carefully, which shows two equal steps leading to the front door from the pavement of Caithness flagstone. There is also evidence that a small window aperture corresponding to pavement level on the principal elevation to Princes Street had been blocked up at some stage. The setting out of the streets of the grid plan would have involved cutting and filling operations to ensure that the street surfaces were kept reasonably level across their width, and to avoid having major falls towards the south side of each street. That the ground on the pavement line has been built up can be seen in the steps leading from the back of the pavement down to the garden ground. On Sinclair Street the problem of changes in level had been more marked, to the extent that it could only be overcome by building up the kerb edge on the south side of the road from which steps lead down to the pavement which must correspond roughly to the original ground level. From the photographic evidence it can be stated with certainty that the level of the pavement has been dropped by approximately 0.25m from around the beginning of the twentieth century. The pavement finish is currently of interlocking concrete blocks.



Interior of first floor room (west), courtesy of The Highland Council

Without having access to the interior of the property it is difficult to be precise about the internal finishes and the layout to assist with dating. However, it is clear from archival images from the 1940s, and from those supplied by the Highland Council, that the principal rooms had been finished to a high contemporary standard, with reeded architraves and blocking pieces with roundels where the architraves met at door and window openings. There are subtleties to be seen in the joinerwork: some of the architraves have convex reeded mouldings whereas others are concave. Shutters were set deep within the window openings, and there seem to have been decorative plaster cornices well suited to a high status early nineteenth century dwelling. The stairwell had been a particularly elegant feature, laid out on a half-spiral with a gentle rise between storeys, and with cast-iron balusters.

Sutherland Street and Forss (shown as 'Forse' on the original maps) Street were renamed Princes Street in 1876 to commemorate the visit to Thurso of the Prince and Princess of Wales. Sir John's Square, as it was later known, had been retained originally as the private town garden of the Sinclair family, to which Chantrey's sculpture of Sir John, commissioned to commemorate his death, was moved in 1856 from Thurso Castle²⁰. Most appropriately it sits at the heart of the new town he had planned in the spirit of unbridled optimism that accompanied the Age of Improvement.

3.2 *Changes to the fabric*



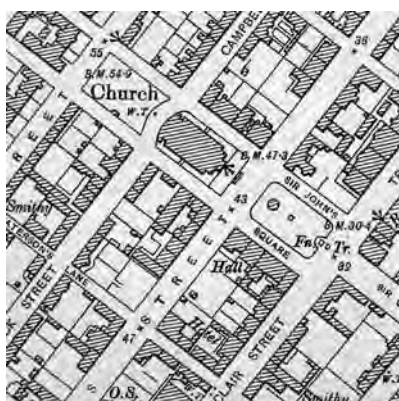
Valentine's of Dundee photograph of Princes Street looking west c1958 © University of St Andrews

If the stair tower had not been an original part of the fabric of the house, when was it likely to have been added, and for what purpose? It would have been highly unusual for a property of this date to have had two stairs on plan in close proximity to one another, and because the stair within the tower appears to have been sophisticated, set within a curved stair shaft and of generous width, it could never have been a service stair and so must relate to a segregated use of the east wing of the house. At some stage the inner window on the ground floor facing Sir John's Square was broken out and a flight of steps installed to gain direct access to the stair tower from the street. The steps cascaded out so that the bottom step was not far from the edge of the pavement, in such a way as would not be acceptable nowadays for the risk of causing an obstruction. Careful examination of the First Edition Ordnance Survey map of 1877 (page 12) reveals that the steps had been in existence at that time. Second Edition maps show less detail by way of townscape and garden features, and accordingly neither the projecting steps, nor the pavement lines, are shown on this later map, but they can be made out in the photograph believed to date to around 1918 (page 12). It is fair to conclude that the stair tower and the related flight of steps serving it were among the earliest changes to the property.

While it is difficult to resurrect the profile of the stair tower from the fragments of surviving evidence, a small part of the head of it is visible on a Valentine photograph taken in the 1950s. This reveals that the tower had been slated, that it had a piended (hipped) roof, and that the wallheads were set higher than the rest of the house. Now that the tower has been demolished, it can be seen that the stair

tower would not have extended as far as the two windows on the west facing elevation, both of which retain their sandstone dressings. The earliest Ordnance Survey map (1877, surveyed in 1872) suggests that there had been no setback against these windows and hence it may be reasonable to conclude that the ground floor space had been infilled at the same time.

Evidence of the occupancy of the house during the first years after it had been built has been difficult to establish with any degree of certainty. The manner in which the entries have been made in the valuation rolls, from the late 1870s, are hard to relate to specific properties on Princes Street and it might be reasonable to conclude from the evidence that the tenants had been a William Waters (grocer), Joseph Young (innkeeper) and a retired farmer, David Brock, in the period leading up to the mid-1890s. After this point the name of David Sinclair, a Thurso merchant, is listed as the proprietor and it is possible that he had owned the property for many years. Sinclair, who lived in Traill Street, is listed as being the owner of several properties in the town, but he must have died in the first decade of the twentieth century as his trustees were listed in the entry for the years 1910-11.



Detail of the Second Edition OS map (1906)
© NLS

Comparing the Second Edition of the Ordnance Survey map (1906) with the First Edition (1877) there are relatively few changes that have occurred; on the latter map the adjoining building on Sir John Square is shown as a 'hall', but in other respects the profile is unchanged from that shown on the earlier map and so it is reasonable to assume that the building may date from around 1870. From studying early photographs the most marked change to the property is that the external walls of the property were rendered in an early cement-based mortar for reasons that are not entirely clear. In the main settlements of Wick and Thurso it was not altogether uncommon for properties to be embellished with the addition of a coat of render, following a tradition observed in the coastal villages of the Northeast of Scotland in which the window margins would be treated decoratively. In the majority of cases it would be done as a face-lift, often as an expression of improved status. Quite why it was done here is unclear, but it may relate to problems of water penetration, or to counter the decomposition of the flagstone. Now that the rendered surfaces have been stripped off it is possible to inspect the original masonry and begin to formulate opinions. Although the application of a cement render on historic fabric nowadays is frowned upon it should be borne in mind that the early cements were much less strong, and in many cases the application of the material, which was carried out frequently to properties in the northern parishes of the county in the late nineteenth century, has proved to be successful. Stornoway adopted a similar tradition, and the ease by which the material could be brought in through the harbours would have been a factor in the choice of cement over lime – in Caithness this appears to have been slightly later, from the 1880s onwards. As the property had lacked raised margins or sandstone quoins at the west gable it had acquired a raised margin in coloured cement to create symmetry to the principal façade, as the Valentine image shows (page 15).



Windows inserted at the west gable

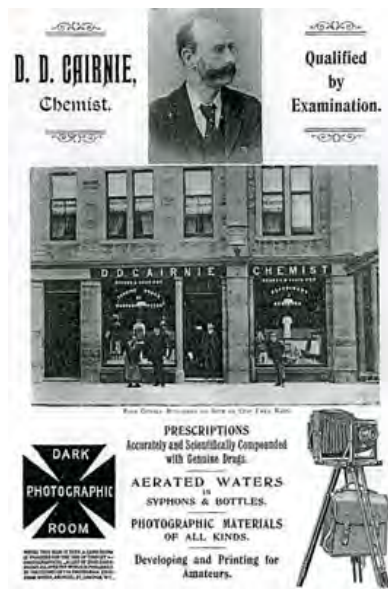
There is evidence that the windows on the west gable serving the ground floor and basement are later insertions, and may relate to when the rendered finish was applied as the raised margins have been added in cement work, and then coloured to match the exposed masonry rybats. As noted above it is probable that the windows had been left out for the same reason that the sandstone quoins were omitted, in that it was considered that the property was intended to be at the end of a terraced row of houses. The rendered finish applied



Detail of the Washington Wilson photograph © University of Aberdeen



The door threshold and lobby floor



Advertisement for DA Cairnie's business on Traill Street

to the areas of walling had never been decorated in any colour, although the window margins were picked out in a colour which appears to have been brown originally. At a later date they were repainted cream.

The late 1950s Valentine image appears to indicate that the render was beginning to wear thin on the east gable, and at some stage the upper parts of the gable were renewed in a modern dense cement mortar which is very dull in appearance when compared with the original material, the appearance of which was enlivened through the use of a seashell aggregate which was common in Caithness, and which may imply the use of a beach sand. From the George Washington Wilson photograph it can be seen that the sash and case windows were painted white or off-white, while in later photographs they are painted a dark colour. From examining the door and door frame of the front door the original colour had been crimson, followed by light green, and then it was painted black, the present colour. More detailed investigation will no doubt provide further clues.

The front outer door, in two leaves with flush beaded panelling, has an elegant fanlight laid out to a diamond pattern. It appears to be original, whereas the inner door is later. Half-glazed, with raised bolection mouldings and an angled middle rail where jointed with the styles, it is likely to date from the end of the nineteenth century. The outer lobby floor of encaustic tiles is likely to be contemporary with it.

From the late 1890s, until around 1910, the house was leased out to one of Thurso's more prominent shopkeepers, the chemist and local photographer David A Cairnie whose business premises were on Traill Street. At the end of the tenancy the lease had been taken over either by his mother, or his widow if he had predeceased her, Mrs Mary Cairnie²¹. Her tenancy was fairly short, and from hereon the history of the site becomes less prone to conjecture due to the detailed records that have been kept by a descendant of the next owner, Major Donald Manson. Manson lived locally and his previous address had been Tanfield, Castletown²². He had been initially the Clerk to the Pensions Committee, and was later appointed as the Local Area Officer of the Ministry of Pensions²³. During the 1930s he was operating from 30 Princes Street as the Agent for the Aberdeen Savings Bank, although at some stage it seems that this had been conducted from the first floor of the adjoining property at No 6 Sir John's Square²⁴. A pillar of the community Major Manson held several posts which included his appointment as the first Chairman of the Thurso branch of the British Legion He was also a trustee of the Thurso Harbour Trust, a member of the War Pensions Committee, and a Justice of the Peace. The house remained in the ownership of the Manson family until 1988²⁵.

In the period leading up to the mid-thirties the basement of the front part of the house on Princes Street may have seen relatively lowly uses, perhaps given over to a laundry, coal cellar, with a store at the west end of the range. The kitchen area was believed to have been located in the south wing of the house. In 1936 the use of the wing by Patrick Manson, Major Manson's son, led to the partial separation of the wing from the rest of the house. Patrick was to convert the space for use as an optician's premises, and from this time on the new address of No 7 Sir John's Square was created, No 6 having been the adjoining former hall premises. In addition to conducting an optician's business from the premises, photographic equipment was sold together with electrical goods and wireless radio sets²⁶. In order to create a new shopfront to the square the walling was knocked out at ground floor between the outer of the pair of wall openings and a steel beam inserted at a level well below the sandstone lintols,



The front of the house in c1940 © Manson Collection



Detail of the shopfront inserted at ground floor on Sir John's Square



Interior of the house c1940 © Manson Collection

leaving the rybats on the right hand side more or less intact at the lower levels. To the left of the opening the masonry was taken back beyond the line of the former window opening, and the walling made good with small stone pinnings and bricks. The masonry above the steel beam to the underside of the old sandstone lintols was rebuilt, and the lintols would have been covered over by the smooth rendered finish. The new shop frontage and fascia would have disguised the structural works required to support the opening, of which there appear to be no surviving photographs. In forming the new shopfront it is clear that the original ground floor level, which had been set originally to match that of No 30, must have been removed and lowered to provide level access from the pavement, requiring the flight of stone steps to be dismantled. New steps must have been introduced to reach the floor level within the stair enclosure. The property continued in this form, largely unchanged, until 1988.



The rear of the shop at 7 Sir John's Square c1940 © Manson Collection

Initially it seems there was only partial separation of the two parts of the premises as Patrick stayed with his parents at No 30. After Patrick had married, he and his wife Nancy lived in the apartments above the shop, where the room at first floor was their sitting room, doubling up as a music room. They are believed to have used also the large bedroom of the front house at the corner of Princes Street and the square, which was accessible from the stair tower to the rear of the property²⁷. The original kitchen may have been located within the south wing, and with the introduction of the new shop and shopfront the kitchen serving No 30 appears to have been sandwiched between the two stairwells; there is understood to have been borrowed light from the front stair but the space must have been relatively dark and unpleasant.

Originally the space between the two corner houses within the block, between Sir John's Square and Paterson's Lane, had been left undeveloped. Roughly the equivalent of four standard feus, the generous garden to the side of No 30 was first subdivided around 1934 when a single storey shop was introduced on Princes Street, which is shown with a hipped roof at the far extremity of the garden on the Valentine image, taken probably in the late 1950s. At a later date the feu was subdivided a further time, leaving the garden ground much less generous than it had been originally. In all, three twentieth century flat-roofed shops were added to the streetscape over the length of the block. In townscape terms they have had a detrimental



Shared access to the rear of 7 Sir John's Square and to Rose Cottage



View c1940 of the rear of 30 Princes Street showing the timber edging to the flag dyke and rear of the shop at 7 Sir John's Square © Manson Collection

effect when compared, say, with the unity of the street parallel to Princes Street, Sinclair Street, or even with the street blocks to the immediate east of the square on Princes Street. On the First Edition map the garden had been shown with long paths running east-west on the plot, suggesting that it may have been used productively, if not wholly decoratively. It retains its flag dyke, a characteristic feature of the enclosed field systems around Thurso, which separated the garden ground from the shared path leading to the back door to the property and to the adjoining Rose Cottage. It is just possible to make out a tree in the garden in the Washington Wilson image. The exposed edges of the flagstone dyke had been protected by timber edging, as the wartime images from the Manson Collection show clearly. They also show how well the garden had been tended, and that the boundary wall had been built up to increase its height by several storeys, possibly to improve privacy from the passers-by on the pavement. There had also been a gate in the wall, also built up, although evidence of this does not appear in the First Edition Ordnance Survey map.



Photograph taken within the garden of 30 Princes Street showing the extension to the height of the wall © Manson Collection

3.3 Recent history

From 1953 the property at 30 Princes Street had been in the hands of Major Manson's son, Donald GM Manson. The shop on the square was sold in 1960 to Bain & Gibson who had carried on the business along similar lines to Patrick Manson, selling TVs and radios. In the 1970s it passed to the drapers' business of Banks of Wick, but this proved to be a relatively short-lived venture because, by the late 1970s, it had been taken over by a fishmerchant, Tony Swanson.



Drawing prepared by Duncan J Fraser of Inverness for the conversion of 7 Sir John's Square (1996): the elevation shows the hipped dormer remaining in position but the east chimneyhead has been removed at the gable

In 1991 plans were submitted to the local authority for the conversion of the fishmonger's shop to a fish and chip shop. Sectional drawings submitted with the application showed the sizeable void above the ceiling of the shop, introduced when the shop floor was lowered in 1936 to avoid the ceiling height within the shop appearing excessive; in Patrick Manson's day it had been used for storage purposes. Alterations and improvements were proposed to be carried out at the upper floors to create modernised self-contained accommodation. A few years later, in 1996, plans were drawn up for the conversion of the shop to a cafeteria and takeaway food premises, for which extensive alterations were to be carried out to the rear of the property, the condition of which was noted on the drawings to be 'dilapidated'. The drawing prepared for the elevation facing the square shows clearly the configuration of the hipped dormer window serving the attic floor, now removed. At some stage the cement rendered finish was removed from the external walls leaving the original masonry exposed. The evidence of the finish can still be made out where fragments of the material have been left, but the render was left largely intact to the west gable except where it had failed towards the top of the wall where it was patched and renewed unattractively in a dense Portland cement. On the same gable there is evidence of one of the window reveals having been formed, or having been made good, in modern machine-dressed flagstone.

At around the same time plans were drawn up for the subdivision of No 30 which was to be altered extensively for bedsit accommodation, for which only the ground and first floors were to be occupied. The



Bulging masonry at the southeast corner



Temporary stabilisation works at the east gable



The re-entrant to the rear of the property following the demolition of the stair tower

stair leading to the roofspace would have been closed off. The drawings reveal that the east chimneyhead had already been taken down, and its removal may have been related to a need to reduce the load on the head of the gable which is leaning out very noticeably, leading to acute structural problems of which must have been apparent at this time. The cause of this problem, which became acute and threatened the stability of the property until the temporary works were out in place, had most likely come about because of the failure of the chimneyhead. If this had resulted in moisture entering the core of the wall, on the basis that this will have been bound in clay mortar as was customary at the time when the property was built, the instability created by the defect could have been quite rapid. There is much evidence to be seen of contorted chimney stalks throughout Thurso from this cause. In the end, the proposals for the conversion were not carried out and the whole of the property, including the former shop and its portion of the garden, were sold on.



Spoil from demolitions within the garden

Suffering from a chronic lack of maintenance and from underuse the property has fallen rapidly into decline, requiring the local authority to threaten to use, on more than one occasion, enforcement measures under their powers to force emergency repairs to be carried out to save the property. On a corner site of one of Thurso's main thoroughfares, made more visible because of the open aspect from the square at the heart of the grid plan, this once fine dwelling became a prominent eyesore within a conservation area where the buildings lining the principal streets are fundamentally in good repair.

The stair tower to the rear of the property was pulled down by the current owner, leaving a pile of rubble where it had once stood. Heaped against the ground floor of the property the problems of excessive dampness in the ground floor and basement of the property will have been exacerbated. Some of the larger stones from the doughtakings have been piled up in the garden. The removal of the tower has exposed masonry which may never have been intended to be left exposed, and many open joints are presently visible, adding to the problems of water penetration to the internal fabric.

The emergency repairs were beginning to fail at the time when the survey record notes were prepared for the conservation statement (February 2008). The slates have been removed from the roofs, and the dormer facing the square has been removed with the aperture in

the roof boarded over, with the roof finish covered in mineral felt and battens. In places the felt had been torn from wind damage at the time of the inspection and it must be assumed that some water had penetrated the interior of the property. Since the research for the conservation statement had been carried out, and when the photographs appearing in this document were taken, the Council applied a more permanent temporary roof finish of corrugated metal sheeting. Vertical spreader plates in timber have been added at first floor to the east gable and to the Princes Street elevation, tied to scaffolding bracing to prevent further outward movement of the external walls, with a forest of scaffolding poles to the interior to provide the required restraint. Windows have been boarded up, although there is evidence to the rear of earlier openings having been blocked up which is commensurate with the subdivision of the two properties. Some historic glass has survived at first floor, but a number of panes have been broken where the scaffolding poles pass through the window sashes.

In its current state the building has only a very limited life despite the emergency repairs having been carried out. It is imperative that solutions to secure its future must be found quickly. It is important to understand that the nature of the traditional construction of Caithness is such that the external walls of the property will be weakened over a relatively short period if exposed to water penetration due to the effect on the clay binding mortar at the core of the walls.

4 Outline Statements of Significance



- SS01 The property occupies a key position within the grid plan for the new town of Thurso devised by Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster; it has particular prominence in the townscape through defining one corner of Sir John's Square at the heart of the plan, and from being on the principal historical thoroughfare leading to Halkirk
- SS02 Its prominence within the new town grid layout is increased because of the gradients resulting from the topography of the site – rising from the south to the north on Sir John's Square, and from east to west on Princes Street
- SS03 Further, it is prominent within the streetscape because of the relatively large size of the structure when compared with the other dwelling houses of an earlier age on the same street
- SS04 It forms an integral part of the setting of the square, with significant public sculpture which includes the statue of Sir John Sinclair by Chantrey (relocated at the centre of the square in 1856), the whole dominated by the tower of William Burn's imposing Gothic Revival church of 1830-2
- SS05 Although the structure has been dated to c1800, it is more likely to have been erected between 1825 and 1840 and, when built, it would have defined the west side of the square; as such it is one of the earliest properties of the western blocks of the new town grid plan
- SS06 With four floors, including a semi-basement and a habitable attic storey, it had been one of the more imposing dwelling houses of the new town and appears to have been a forerunner in design, general layout and construction of later properties erected on Princes Street
- SS07 It is an exemplar of the high quality of construction for nineteenth century properties in the centre of Thurso, with sandstone ashlar dressings to window and door margins, quoins and skewes; the use of sandstone dressings is unusual for the rest of the county

SS08 Its relative importance has been recognised through having been one of a handful of properties selected for statutory listing in the 1970s, before the majority of properties in the burgh entered the lists in the following decade

SS09 Although many of the original features have been damaged, there is still much early fabric that survives externally that is historically authentic, even if from different construction phases; features include external joinery such as the front door and fanlight, 12 pane sash and case windows with historic glass, yellow chimneycans with a beaded moulding, and the encaustic tiled floor to the entrance lobby

SS10 External wall surfaces exhibit evidence of original limewashed finishes and therefore the property had never been harled originally; where the surface of the walling may have become excessively friable, or where problems may have been encountered internally with water penetration, the application of an early cement render lined out to reflect masonry coursing and detail is of some historical importance

SS11 The property appears to have been owned and occupied by leading citizens in the town which is reflected in its status; it is associated therefore with them and in particular with the Manson family whose tenure of the property ran from around 1910 until 1988

SS12 There is good surviving evidence of original painted surfaces to masonry dressings and external woodwork

SS13 The shop window formed in the wall facing Sir John's Square in the 1930s is of limited importance in reflecting how the property has evolved historically, and in showing a trend for the increasingly commercial use of properties in this part of the new town throughout the twentieth century

SS14 The boundary wall and shared entrance into the garden plots appear to be original with the dwelling house and hence are of some significance, as is the paving to the common path and the remains of the flagstone dyke



Courtesy of The Highland Council

SS15 The high status of the property was highlighted by the extensive plot of garden ground to the west, which extended over the equivalent of four typical feus; only in the twentieth century was this to be reduced with the erection of two shops units, one in the 1930s, and another in the 1960s

Based on the limited photographic evidence currently available of the interior of the property:

SS16 The following features are deemed to reflect the relatively high status of the property as a dwelling house:

- Any surviving historic ironmongery to doors and windows
- Reeded architraves to doors and windows and moulded blocking pieces
- Moulded skirtings
- Window shutters
- Panelled doors
- Decorative and plain plaster cornices



Courtesy of The Highland Council

- The semi-circular stair to the front of the property, together with the enclosing walls, handrails and balusters and associated plasterwork

The following matters are considered to be in the category of being detrimental to the significance of the property:

DS01 The advanced deterioration of the fabric, and the negative visual and economic impact on surrounding properties and on the outstanding townscape values of the new town grid plan; tied in with this, the fact that the property is presently unoccupied and boarded up

DS02 The loss of the chimneyhead at the east gable

DS03 The destruction of the stair tower: even though it had been an addition to the original house it was an early one and part of its history



DS04 The temporary measures put in place to secure the long term future of the property – these include structural scaffolding to prevent structural collapse and to restrict further movement of the external walls; breakages to historic glass; boarding up of windows; the removal of cast iron rainwater goods and the original roofing slates; the loss of the hipped dormer facing the square; and the application of felt to the roof sarking

DS05 Patched repairs carried out in modern dense cement renders

DS06 Repointing of areas of masonry with dense cement mortars smeared across the face of the stonework

DS07 Open joints in the masonry and loss of pinnings at joints permitting water penetration to the core of the wall

DS08 The structural problems in the external masonry at the prominent northwest corner of the property

DS09 Spoil from demolitions left either *in situ* where the rear stair tower had stood; or in piles in the former garden

DS10 The advanced deteriorating state of the external stonework

DS11 Stone steps patched up with concrete or cement mortar

DS12 Jambs to window openings repaired with machine dressed flagstone

DS13 The presently unkempt state of the garden ground

5 Outline Conservation Policies

- CP01 Ensure that the future of the property is secured through establishing long term sustainable uses that are compatible with the surviving historic fabric, and which respect the residential/domestic room layout of the property
- CP02 This may be defined as preserving basic domestic room layouts, respecting basic symmetry within the plan, and from ensuring that the main historic features, such as the central stair to No 30 Princes Street, survive in any proposed arrangement without major detrimental change
- CP03 Incompatible uses may be defined as those requiring excessive intervention in relation to fire compartmentation, means of escape, fire resistance and spread of flame, being of such extent as to destroy historic fabric or the character of the interior of the property
- CP04 Ensure that, in seeking compatible new uses, any intervention required to comply with full access through disability legislation is not such as to cause the destruction of historic fabric, subject to the test of reasonableness as defined within the legislation
- CP05 In seeking new compatible uses equal consideration should be given to reinstating the original openings at ground floor of the east elevation, or to reinstating the shopfront, accepting that it will not be possible to reconstruct the steps that existed here due to the excessive projection onto the public pavement; works in reinstating original fabric should be based soundly on archival evidence as well as the evidence surviving within the building itself
- CP06 Reinstatement the missing chimneyhead at the east gable to match the original detail of the two surviving chimneyheads and chimneycans
- CP07 Ensure, wherever it is possible to do so, that historic woodwork is salvaged and repaired in preference to being replaced
- CP08 Ensure that all historic glass is protected and retained within the original openings; new glass should be in matching glass
- CP09 There need not be a presumption towards the reinstatement of the rear stair tower to an earlier known state: consideration should be given to reinstating the original wall openings to the rear of the house at the re-entrant corner but, however, should new compatible uses necessitate the addition of a structure occupying the same, or a similar footprint, this should be designed in a contemporary idiom which should be deferential to the historic features of the property
- CP10 The original piended dormer facing Sir John's Square should be reinstated based on the evidence surviving within the building, or upon the surviving pictorial evidence in photographs and drawings



- CP11 Roofing should be carried out in blue slates to match other properties of a similar age and appearance within the town, having regard to matching colour, texture, coursing patterns etc; there should be a presumption for roof ridges to be of plain yellow clay unless it can be established that an alternative material had been used in the original work
- CP12 Rainwater goods should be reinstated in cast-iron to traditional sizes and profiles
- CP13 Carry out paint layer investigations in relation to historic colours applied to raised margins to window openings and to external woodwork
- CP14 Seek specialist reports on lime mortars for external walling, and over methods for conserving the flagstone walling in the long term; subject to the following there should be a presumption towards the application of successive coats of limewash to the external walls in preference to finishing the walls with harled or rendered surfaces
- CP15 Analyse the constituent parts of the historic early cement render applied to parts of the west gable; if this, or other walls require to be coated for reasons of preventing water penetration or the further deterioration of the flagstone walling, rendered surfaces should match historic finishes in terms of appearance and the performance of the render having regard to the permeability, strength and appearance of the coating



- CP16 Modern dense cement mortars and renders should be removed in their entirety
- CP17 Carry out such additional archival research as may be necessary to confirm the past appearance of the property to inform conservation decisions; such archival research should involve an examination of the Johnston photographic collection held by the Wick Society
- CP18 Restore the significance of the garden ground and of the mutual access to the rear of the property and to Rose Cottage; repair steps and relay paving slabs as required in matching materials, and restore the fence of vertical flagstones in accordance with established photographic evidence
- CP19 Ensure that the boundary wall and entrance portal to the mutual access path are conserved as part of a scheme of repairs; as early fabric there should be a presumption against making major change to these features which are presumed to be early and possibly original

Based on the limited photographic evidence of the interior of the property:

- CP20 Ensure that the following features are preserved in any scheme of alteration, as they reflect the relatively high status of the property:
- Historic ironmongery to doors and windows
 - Reeded architraves to doors and windows and moulded blocking pieces
 - Moulded skirtings

- Window shutters; in addition, seek to ensure that they are left operative for reasons of security and for reducing heat loss
- Panelled doors
- Decorative and plain plaster cornices
- The semi-circular stair to the front of the property, together with the enclosing walls, handrails and balusters

CP21 Wherever possible, ensure that structural timbers are retained *in situ*; there should be a presumption towards strengthening and repairing using recognised conservation techniques rather than cutting out and renewal

CP22 A conservation-based approach should be adopted for the repair and preservation of internal woodwork affected by damp and infestation

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