

*'The mansions of our country  
gentry are filled with specimens  
of his skill'*

An introduction to

# THOMAS ROBERTSON,

cabinet maker

24<sup>th</sup> December 1805 -  
22<sup>nd</sup> February 1882

by  
**Marjorie Brown**



*Thomas Robertson*

Thomas was born in Alnwick on Christmas Eve 1805, shortly after his parents arrived in the town from Scotland. William, his father was later described in census returns as "formerly husbandman" which I found defined as a farmer, but one below the rank of yeoman, and alternatively as a farm worker who looked after cattle.

One of the earliest significant events in Thomas's life would be the founding by the second Duke in 1810 of a school in Greenbat for 200 'poor boys', as part of the celebrations in Alnwick of the 50th anniversary of the accession of George III. This became known as the Duke's School, and when it opened in 1811 Thomas and his elder brother Adam were among the first intake of pupils. Application for admittance had to be made to the Duke's bailiff, and those accepted were expected to apply themselves, and make the most of the opportunity presented to improve their position in life. Pupils were in effect under the patronage of the Duke, who took an interest in their progress even after they left, when employment was found for some, and an apprenticeship provided for those who would benefit, with

'substantial rewards' for those who did particularly well.

Thomas must have been a star pupil, and after leaving served an apprenticeship with Mr. Joseph Athey, cabinet maker, and was considered by him to be hard working and capable. He was held up as an example to the others. Mr. Athey was reported to have said to his other apprentices on one occasion 'Tom Robertson made a chair in half a day! Go and do likewise!' After serving his apprenticeship, Thomas went to London to improve his skills, and afterwards returned to Alnwick to set up in business for himself.

George Tate said in his *History of Alnwick* that his 'old friend' Thomas Robertson became a Freeman of Alnwick in 1828 and entered the Guild of Wrights, that is, the guild of carpenters and joiners, and at that time there were initiation ceremonies to be undergone. Thomas would have been eligible to become a Freeman because of his apprenticeship with Mr. Athey. He appears to have been an active member of the Borough or Corporation as the Freeman were referred to in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and became a member of the Freeman's Four and Twenty in 1841 (ie, the 'Common Council of the Borough') the same year as George Tate himself, and as such, also served for some time as a Chamberlain. Thomas and George Tate, the historian of Alnwick, were roughly the same age.

Thomas was later mentioned as having been a member of the 'old town commission', that is, he was a Commissioner under the Alnwick Improvement Act of 1822. This was not an elected position, the Act named those who were to serve as Commissioners, and the list included 'the Bailiff and Chamberlains of the Town and Borough'. He cannot have served for very long, as the Act was repealed in 1850 when the Alnwick and Canongate Local Board of Health came into being, with powers under the General Board of Health, and in addition inherited the property, employees and powers of the Commissioners. Thomas stood for election to this new body, but with only 90 votes failed to secure one of the 18 seats. It was however a respectable number of votes; one man received only 2.

## DUKE'S SCHOOL'S 50<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY

The year 1860 was the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Duke's School, and Duke Algernon organised a jubilee celebration to mark the event. All former pupils were invited, and about 300 accepted. In the evening Thomas Robertson chaired the dinner that was held for pupils and guests in a pavilion in the Castle grounds.

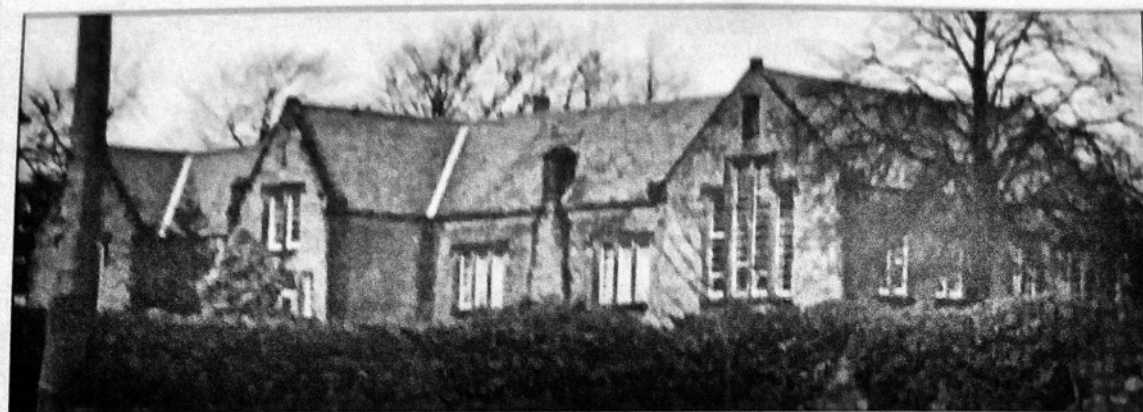
The evening concluded with entertainment, with songs from some of the old boys, including Thomas who had a fine tenor voice. As a pupil, Thomas had been expected to apply himself and make the most of his opportunities. He seems to have done that throughout his life, helped by his own talents and generous patronage. But he seems also to have had a warm personality, and to have been remembered with affection after his death.

In addition to being a Freeman and member of the Guild of Wrights, that is, in addition to his trade connections, Thomas, like other tradesmen, took an active part in the social life of the town, and was for example an early member of the Mechanics Institute, and remained a member for many years, with his name mentioned occasionally in the annual reports. His obituary in the *Alnwick Mercury* also mentioned that his services to the Infirmary, the Savings Bank and the Burial Board 'were at all times freely rendered'.

While a Victorian man's business and social life were of public interest, generally his family life was private, but we know from census returns that Thomas was married when young, and had a daughter called Christina, but lost his first wife, and later remarried, so that, for example, in 1851 when Thomas was 45, and his wife Margaret was only aged 30, Christina his eldest daughter was then aged 18, and the next child, William, named after his grandfather, was only 8 years of age.

At 45 Thomas was established and one may say, in his prime, and perhaps the 1850s were one of the most important decades in his life, because of his involvement with the great works of restoration at Alnwick Castle, but prior to this, he had designed the new Borough





*The former Borough School today*

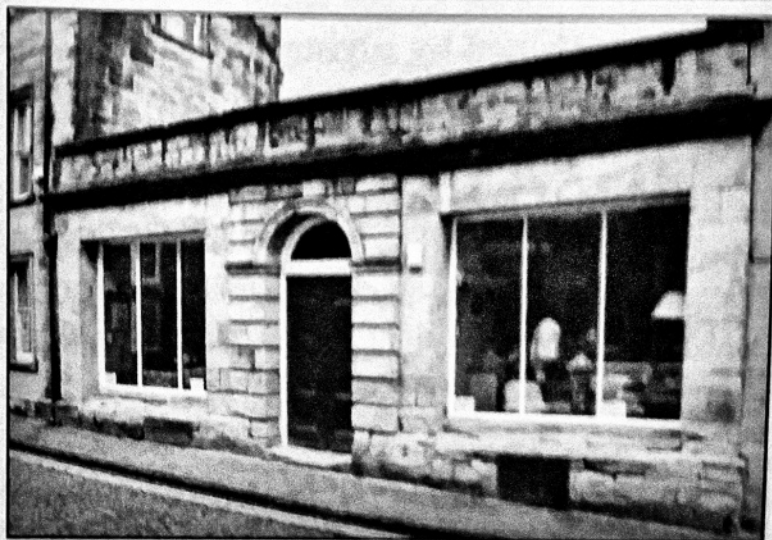
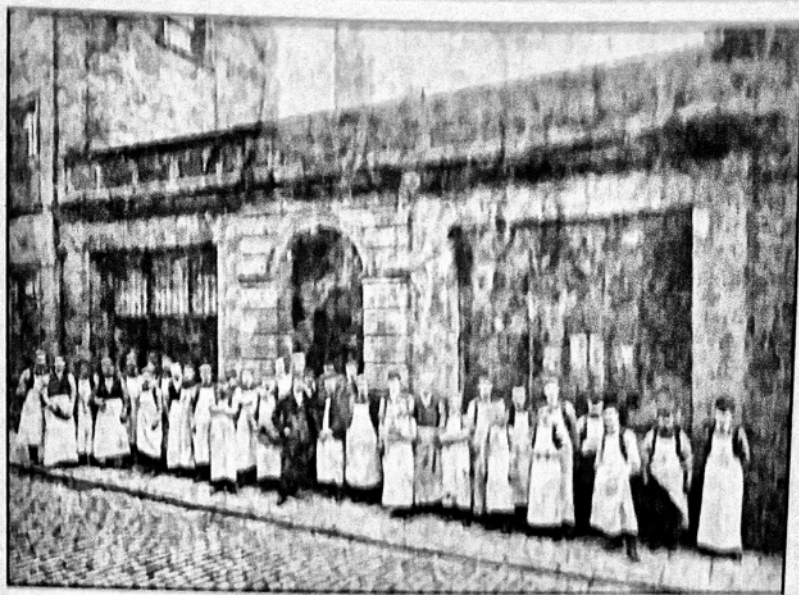
Schools and Headmasters house for the Freeman. Because this was such a large project, it is possible that Thomas had designed buildings before then and was known to be capable of the work. These buildings were at first accessed by a path from Dispensary Street, but can now be seen across the old Brewery car park as one approaches Windsor Gardens from Lagny Street. The Freeman had begun discussions about their new school at the beginning of the decade, and acquired the site from the Duke in exchange for land they owned at Bog Mill. The foundation stone was laid by the Duke on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1852, and the school was said at the time to be a 'spacious and elegant building'. It was then an important building, and larger than the Duke's school in Greenbat.

Work at the castle began in 1854 and continued until 1862. Thomas is said to have been responsible for making the oak furniture in the library, for various pieces of furniture in the dining room, and for carving the magnificent coffered ceilings in the state rooms. Thomas's skills as cabinetmaker, and indeed the skills of others employed at the castle, were enhanced by instruction from Signor Bulletti from Florence, brought over by the Duke to train British craftsmen up to Italian standards, in the school of carving established in the castle. Later, in 1862, Thomas sent two chairs to London to be exhibited at the Great World Fair, and the Alnwick Mercury described them as having a 'simple yet elegant form, carved and gilded to the Italian style from designs by Signor Montirolli, and similar in



*character to work of which so much has been lately executed at Alnwick Castle'.*

It was in the 1850s that Thomas designed his new house in Narrowgate, which he called Castleside. It is now in use as a day hospice. He submitted his planning application to the new Local Board of Health in September 1856, and it was described as a 'new house for Mr. Thomas Robertson, cabinet maker, next to his newly erected shop'. The shop is still there also, and was later commented on in an article in *The Builder* as being:



*An early photograph of Thomas Robertson's shop in Narrowgate, with his workers outside, and, below, the shop today*

*'remarkable... having large sheets of plain glass and lintels of solid stone above ten feet long'.*

In the 1850s Thomas can be seen to have expanded his interests, and was for example included in a Trades Directory of 1855 as being not only cabinet maker and upholsterer, but was also listed as an auctioneer. I am unable to say if he held regular auctions, and may perhaps have been available as and when required? There was for example an advert in the *Alnwick Journal* of September 16<sup>th</sup> 1861, which gave



notice that Thomas was going to hold a two day auction at the Rectory at Howick, during which all the household furniture and other effects belonging to the Rev. Parnell would be sold. It was later said that he was a popular auctioneer, and that his ready wit, his humour and unflinching tact made him a special favourite.

Each year during the works of restoration at the castle, a dinner was held for the workmen, and in 1862 the very last dinner, for 700 men, was held in December in the 'new' Corn Exchange. The Constable of the castle chaired this dinner, supported by Thomas, who made a speech of thanks on behalf of the contractors. It was said in the press that Thomas spoke in the most eloquent terms, praising the skill of Alnwick craftsmen by saying that 'Alnwick was as great for the skill of her craftsmen as Cremona was for her fiddles'.

Thomas had designed the new Corn Exchange earlier that year, and earned some sharp criticism in an article on Alnwick in *The Builder*. The new Exchange was condemned because the architect was an 'auctioneer, builder, cabinet maker, upholsterer and undertaker' who dabbles in architecture. The building was described as '*a parallelogram of blank masonry*' and '*an instance of the mistake of a public building being undertaken by private hands*'.

Perhaps the criticism did not worry Thomas, who continued to dabble, nor did it seem to worry those fellow townsmen who continued to ask Thomas to design buildings. One of his last designs was for his own retirement home, a spacious dwelling in its own grounds near Windy Edge Farm on the road to Alnmouth, and he called it Thornhill.

While the cabinet making business was in Narrowgate, the wood and timber premises and saw mills were at Alnmouth, across the river Aln from the village. Timber was brought from various countries to Amble then transported to Alnmouth where it was processed. He built a 'beautiful mansion' at Alnmouth, on a plot of land given to him by Duke Algernon, 'in full view of his extensive sawmills on the other side of the river' It was openly said that Thomas was a great

favorite of the Duke.

Thomas retired in the late 1870s, having earlier in the mid 60s taken his son William into partnership after which the cabinet making business became Thomas Robertson and Son. He died at his house Thornhill, and was buried in Alnwick cemetery, and as a mark of respect, his funeral was attended by the Freemen who followed his remains to the grave. His wife Margaret died in July 1888. Their family erected not a headstone, but an ornate stone cover over the grave, which can be seen on the north side of the central driveway. The inscription also commemorates his son Thomas, who was master of his father's ship, the 'Cerdic', and who sadly drowned in the Bay of Biscay in 1876.

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