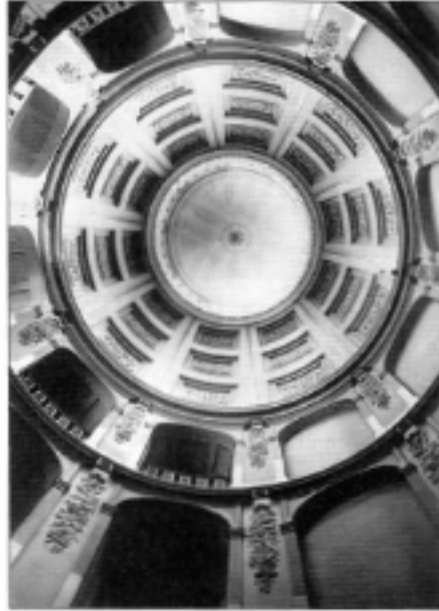


THE MINTO HOUSE DEBACLE

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The coffer domed stairhall circa 1950. Copyright The Royal Commission on the Ancient & Historic Monuments of Scotland.

Late in August, Minto House, Roxburghshire, was spot-listed category A; within a week two- thirds of it was demolished. In this article Dennis Rodwell outlines the background and reflects upon the unprecedented events which surrounded the conservation scandal of 1992.

If you wanted to make fools of successive Secretaries of State (in this case, for Scotland), to drive a coach and four through the legislation to protect our listed heritage, and to destroy one of the nation's great houses, how would you go about it?

This is a cautionary tale; hopefully the effects of its telling will go some way to avoid its repetition. Much of what follows is presented here in abbreviated form and without any, or only understated, comment. If certain aspects strain readers' credulity then, yes, you will have understood correctly.

POTTED HISTORY

This reads like an inventory of Scottish architectural history: 16th century tower encased by William Adam house (1738-43), enveloped by Archibald Elliott (1809-14), altered by 'William Playfair (1837), enlarged with a service wing by Robert Lorimer, who also laid out the stonework terraces to the formal garden (1894-1906). All set in very private and idyllic parkland.

The V-shaped plan of the house is (was!) highly distinctive, the elevations disappointingly bland, but the sequence of internal spaces through the point of the V quite stunning. The history has never been properly researched; the house has long been underrated.

The house has been owned, almost continuously over several centuries, by the Elliott family: the first Earl of Minto was Governor-General (1806-13) and the fourth was Viceroy (1905-10) of India; the present and sixth Earl has been Convenor (Chairman) of Borders Regional Council (which is both the planning and building control authority) since 1990.

DIARY OF EVENTS

Post Second World War: Following requisitioning, the house was leased in 1952 to Craigmount Girl's School. In 1962, the lease (at £250 a year) became a purchase (at £20,000). The school closed in 1966: liquidation.

14 April 1972: The present Earl, then Viscount Melgund, outbid (£15,000) a restoring purchaser (£13,000) under the Scottish blind auction system. 22 June 1972: Lord Melgund applied for listed building consent to demolish (Minto House was listed category B).

July 1972: Resigned representations from the Scottish Civic Trust and the Scottish Georgian Society, followed by determined ones from the outbid restorer. He was Mr Robin Jell, who had successfully pioneered country house restorations in Scotland (Seminal work: 15th century and later Saltoun Hall, East Lothian, converted to separate houses 1970-72). His schemes were always undertaken without any grant aid.

Late July to September 1972: The amenity bodies reversed their acquiescence, and an increasingly forceful correspondence developed concerning Mr Jell's

reiterated offer to buy. He upped his bid twice, effectively out-matching what Lord Melgund had paid.

11 September 1972: Six-page letter of personal pleadings from Lord Melgund to the Roxburgh County Planning Officer. Mr Jell's advice to me, September 1992: "It is clear that he bought the house back fully determined to demolish it".

24 October 1972: Listed building consent to demolish granted. The County Clerk's covering letter stated: "the County Council came to their decision in the light of the information put before them by the County Planning Officer and by Viscount Melgund as to the impracticality of restoring the property. I would stress that they would of course give favourable consent to a restoration scheme if this were to be possible". The application was not called in (Secretary of State: Mr Gordon Campbell).



Minto House from the south-east, showing the courtyard, 22 August 1992.

27 November 1972: The Scotsman quoted Lord Melgund: "the mansion will be demolished, probably in February". 1977: Expiry of 1972 listed building consent. De-listed, there being three explanations, all deriving from Historic Scotland, as to

why: it was assumed that it would be demolished; that it had been; under pressure from the family (Secretary of State: Mr Bruce Millan).

1986: Lord Minto re-elected to Borders Regional Council (he had previously served 1974-80), becoming Convenor in 1990. He is also on the Planning Committee.

July 1987: Mr Lauder-Frost (of Duns and London) wrote to SAVE seeking its support for the setting up of “a Building Preservation Trust with the aim of rebuilding and restoring Minto House”. He applied — unsuccessfully — to Borders Regional Council for the service of a Building Preservation Order. Written response from Lord Minto: “I do not wish to sell”. This was one of many known enquiries over the years (Secretary of State: Mr Malcolm Rifkind).

March 1991: Press announcement of the ‘Japan deal’: Minto House to be dismantled stone by stone, shipped to Japan, reconstructed and restored as part of a country club development. By now it had become a roofless structural shell, but was clearly in a good enough condition for this deal. Unsuccessful lobbying for listed status to be reinstated.

28 July 1992: Minto House visited by an Historic Scotland Inspector and the Borders Regional Council Conservation Officer. 20 August 1992: The Scotsman announced abandonment of the Japan plan; recession blamed. Lord Minto quoted as saying demolition will start “next month”. SAVE wrote to Historic Scotland.

22 August 1992: I visited Minto House, photographed it and reported to SAVE. Some stone superlative, some badly weathered, centremost four bays of south elevation collapsed but otherwise, apart from some minor distortions, impressively sound in its structural shell. Conservation Officer’s assessment coincided with this.

27 August 1992: Telephone call mid morning: demolition had commenced and fires were burning (internal timbers). It later transpired that the works had started, unobserved, on 25 August. Historic Scotland press release, around 4.30pm: spot-listed category A by Secretary of State (Mr Ian Lang) who “interrupted his holiday to take the decision personally”. Listing refers to “Minto House and Garden Terraces”.

28 August 1992: Demolition halted. Press release by Lord Minto: “I have been advised (by the Building Control Officer and the surveyor employed to arrange the

demolition) that it would be unrealistic to try to make the structure safe, and the correct course is to proceed immediately with the interrupted demolition”.

30 August 1992: Douglas Connell, Lord Minto’s solicitor, over the ‘phone: “Lord Minto wants to keep the Lorimer terraces”.

31 August 1992: Lord Minto applied for listed building consent to demolish. Site meeting with Borders Regional Council officials, Lord Minto’s surveyor, and observers from Historic Scotland.



Minto House from the north, showing the west wing (right), the Lorimer wing (left) and the category A listed mound (wound?) inbetween. 17 September 1992.

1 September 1992: First (of three) Dangerous Building Notices served by the Building Control Officer (dated 31 August). Notice related primarily to the central core, at and around the main stairhall, but also to two-thirds of one side of the garden elevation (south), including the chamfered south-west corner with its William Adam fenestration. The courtyard walls were agreed to be structurally sound; however, the ‘giant mechanical digger’ was ordered by the Director of Planning to go into the core through the east wing because “the gardens are as important as the building”. The Building Control Officer has described this as a “categorical insistence”. The gardens are completely overgrown and are not listed; the garden terraces are. There exists a route into the gardens which avoids the terraces, and indeed this route was employed subsequently for mechanical access to shift and tidy up the demolished walling. Additionally, when asked why

a fence could not have been erected in the manner of Mavisbank (another William Adam house), the Director of Planning advised that “it would have taken nearly a week” (even if true, so what?). Press release by Lord Minto: “I have issued instructions that the terms of this notice should be complied with as a matter of urgency”. Demolition resumes. Two-thirds of courtyard wall to east wing demolished and digger attacked the core, shunting rubble against the south elevation and south-west corner.

2 September 1992: Lord Minto’s surveyor quoted in *The Herald*: “It is difficult to say at this stage where the demolition will stop. If you knock down one unsafe wall an adjoining wall may well then become unsafe”. Remainder of core demolished, also south elevation and south west corner. Second Dangerous Building Notice served on site at 12 noon. The first breach of the courtyard wall had destabilised other parts of the east wing. Works progress. Third Notice served on site at 5pm. The whole of the east wing must be demolished.

3 September 1992: The Building Control Officer, quoted in *The Herald*: “As you can see, we have taken down a fair bit. The thing is, where do we stop?”. Demolition of east wing completed. Just the west wing (one-third of the main house) and the Lorimer service wing remain, together with the garden terraces, and a large mound of category A listed stonework. Listed building consent application advertised.

7 September 1992: The Building Control Officer, in discussion, advised the following additional matters: first, that a crane was introduced, standing in the courtyard, to finish off the east wing (if used earlier, instead of the digger, a crane could have reached *over* the courtyard wall); secondly, “no one is seeking to deny” what happened in relation to the initial breach, namely progressive destabilisation and rapid destruction of the east wing (lack of understanding of the pack of cards effect?); thirdly, the works still to be completed comprised the bricking up of the openings to the west and the Lorimer wings, the erection of a fence across the diagonal of the courtyard, and of fences to the garden side to prevent access through the now- demolished south elevation and corner.

Around 24 September 1992: Forceful representations lodged by SAVE and numerous other corporate and individual conservation interests against the new application to demolish. These included objections to its retrospective element, and strong concern that it will be put before the self-same planning authority that has been so instrumental in the post-listing demolition and whose political leader

is the house's owner. Application due to be tabled at the November Planning Committee meeting. Outcome awaited.

9th October 1992: Colin Bell, a Radio Scotland reporter, described Lord Minto's actions as a "textbook example" of what an owner should do when he objects to his building being listed.

SOME COMMENTS

Minto House stands on a secluded estate in one of the most sparsely populated areas of the United Kingdom. The interests of public safety, without which there is no context to issue a Dangerous Building Notice, may be served by:

- excluding the public,
- making the building safe;
- demolition.

Only after two-thirds of the main house was demolished were the first two options pursued. A variant of the manner proposed for these options, of bricking up openings and erecting fences, could have been adopted without the need for any demolition works, to serve as a containment of the house whilst a new use (and presumably owner) were found. The recent precedent of Mavisbank, Midlothian, is most helpful here: the terms of a Notice to demolish (totally) were overturned by interdict (injunction) in the Scottish courts and satisfied by the alternative of constructing a secure enclosure.

The Dangerous Building Notice procedures are problem enough to conservationists without such a case as this to encourage their use where the collective will to demolish exceeds the will to conserve.

Dennis Rodwell acquired and restored the derelict category A listed Me/rose Station, Roxburghshire, in 1985-86. from where he now conducts his architectural practice.