COMISTON FARMHOUSE: ITS LINKS TO SOME OF EDINBURGH'S MOST FAMOUS ARCHITECTS, CIVIL ENGINEERS, SCIENTISTS, WRITERS AND THE CITY'S MASONIC HISTORY.

It's proposed that the wrecking ball shortly be taken to the sturdy and handsome **Comiston Farmhouse** (83 Pentland View) lately in full use by the City of Edinburgh Council to house youngsters and those charged with their care; clearly, therefore, not in an unsafe state.

Aside from its architectural worth the importance of this building, so treasured by locals, is its place in the chain of the historic structures of the lands of Comiston, all linked by the farm track Cockmylane. This right-of-way from Swanston through the former farmland to the Braid Burn is today an official public footpath, contiguous with the rear grounds of **Comiston Farmhouse**.

The lands, ancient farm track and cluster of historic Comiston buildings of which the Farmhouse is part have associations with a number of Edinburgh's great achievers.

1. THE PLAYFAIRS and WILLLIAM NOTMAN

The Dictionary of Scottish Architects cites the Edinburgh architect **William Notman** in connection with the design (c.1859) of this farm villa.
Notman is linked with **two** of the City's famous Playfairs.

He was for a period Assistant to **William Henry Playfair** (1790-1857), one of the greatest Scottish architects of the 19th century and whose work has been **in a large part responsible for Edinburgh's World Heritage status**.

Records show that Notman worked (1825) with William Henry Playfair on the Calton Hill monument to **Professor John Playfair** (1748-1819), uncle to William Henry Playfair.

John Playfair, FRS, FRSE, Professor of Natural Philosophy, was a mathematician (Playfair's axiom), astronomer and geologist and first President of the Astronomical Institution of Edinburgh (1811) which body promoted the new Calton Hill Observatory. **Craters on Mars and the Moon are named after him**. John Playfair's strong connection with **Comiston** is through his involvement with the three-year survey of the supply and quality of the city's water. This Report (published 1813, Constable) had been instigated by the Lord Provost and Magistrates in 1810 because of serious water scarcity.

Also involved in this project and spending considerable time studying the **Comiston** environs were the great engineers **Thomas Telford** and **James Jardine**, and the scientist **Professor Thomas Charles Hope**.

2. THOMAS TELFORD, JAMES JARDINE and PROFESSOR THOMAS CHARLES HOPE

Scotland's **Thomas Telford** FRS, FRSE, (1757-1834) called the father of civil engineering, was a builder of roads, bridges and canals. Concerning **Comiston** the Report says:

"Mr. Playfair, in conjunction with Mr. Telford, engineer, after examining the ground and taking into consideration the sources from which the required supply could be obtained, suggested the propriety of employing Mr. James Jardine, engineer, to inspect the different springs; to ascertain the quantity of water delivered by each at different seasons of the year; to survey the proposed pipe tracks and lay them down on a plan."

James Jardine FRSE, FSAScot (1776-1858) was a notable Scottish civil engineer, mathematician and geologist. He studied mathematics under **Professor John Playfair** and was a friend of and collaborator with **Thomas Telford** on a number of projects. James Jardine was to build the great **reservoirs serving Edinburgh** and worked on the Edinburgh Dalkeith railway line.

Writing the *"Report on the means of improving the water supply for the city of Edinburgh … "* along with Thomas Telford was Professor Thomas Charles Hope.

Professor Thomas Charles Hope FRSE, FRS, PRCPE, FFPSG {1766-1844) was an Edinburgh-born physician and chemist, **discoverer of the element Strontium**.

"Dr. Hope readily undertook the chemical investigation of the water of every available spring in the vicinity of the city."

On the supply from **Comiston** the Report notes: "*Four springs, duly covered*". Recorded as The Foxes, Tewhat, Hare and Sand. This 1813 Report remarks in particular on **Comiston Wellhouse**:

"In this division it is proper to remark that the Comiston Water House, and especially the cistern, deserve much commendation, the form of the cistern is judicious, and the workmanship of the whole has been performed in a way which may be imitated with great advantage in the future operation of this establishment."

Built in the 1670s, B Listed **Comiston Wellhouse**, at the northern end of the Comiston historic cluster, still stands, and attracted some 700 visitors on each of its Doors Open Day events (2008, 2009). Sadly, it was recently (2012) added to the 'at risk' register.

Involved in constructing the city's first piped water supply (1670s) from **Comiston** were notable engineers and inventors, architects and stonemasons.

3. GEORGE SINCLARE (SINCLAIR), PIETR BRAUS (PETER BRUCE), ROBERT MYLNE (MILNE) and JOHN THEOPHILUS DESAGULIERS

Lothian born **George Sinclair** (d.1696), a Leith schoolmaster and former Glasgow professor, was engaged by Edinburgh Council (1673) to calculate the gravitational suitability of the **Comiston** site as a source of 'sweet' water for the city. He was a designer of a diving bell and an early manufacturer and populariser of barometers. He wrote books on various sciences, in one of which his **Comiston** work is mentioned. But his best known work, written in 1685 and several times reprinted, is *"Satan's Invisible World Discovered".* Glasgow University's **George Sinclair Chair of Mathematics** was established in 1984.

Peter Bruce, the German engineer who laid the pipes from **Comiston** to the Castle Hill, seems to have arrived in Scotland in 1674. Records says he was invited - most likely by James Sinclair of Rosslyn.

Like George Sinclair, Peter Bruce had an interest in mines and sunken ships; he was a builder of harbours and an inventor of *"useful ingines".* He was one of Scotland's earliest paper makers and a printer of playing cards and religious works, latterly, briefly, Royal Printer at Holyrood. He met with much antagonism in his Scottish years. What became of him is not known.

Comiston Wellhouse (or Water House) appears to have been rebuilt in 1676 *(see Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 22 Oct. 1675)* by **Robert Milne**, who also built the High Street receiving wells to designs of Sir William Bruce.

Robert Mylne, (1633-1710) architect and builder, **Royal Master Mason**, reconstructed **Holyrood Palace**, as ordered by King Charles II. He was also a speculative builder, and it was in Edinburgh's Mylne's Square (1684 - now demolished) that the **Articles of Union were signed in 1707**.

John Theophilus Desaguliers (1683-1744), water engineer and inventor, a London-based French Protestant refugee, is said to have been smuggled out of France to safety in a barrel as a child. Desaguliers was a scientist, experimenter, writer, lecturer and clergyman. F**riend and experimental assistant to Isaac Newton**, and a Fellow of the Royal Society, he travelled widely promoting Newtonian ideas and Freemasonry, in which he was a significant figure and in which respect he's **mentioned in the bestseller** *"The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail"* (1982).

Desaguliers was an **early experimenter with electricity** and gave public lectures in his London home on hydrostatics and other topics to audiences of men *and* women. He also **entertained the Royal family with his experiments**. Desaguliers had been invited to Edinburgh in 1721 to solve the

problem of air locks in the water pipes, which brought about his visits to the area of **Comiston**. *"I gave directions in that work, and had the pleasure to see everything succeed."*

Sir James Forrest of Comiston

Further up the farm footpath 'chain' we come to the Listed gate piers of the driveway to **Comiston House**. Left past these is the Listed **stable courtyard**, once outbuildings of Comiston House - again, nearly demolished, but now saved, and currently being admirably restored into a family home. Also being restored as part of this is the **angle tower of the ancient castle or manor house of Comiston** which once stood on the site (now the Doocot). There was an **old well** here, too, but this was filled in during housing development in the early 1990s and is now lost.

Then comes **Comiston House** itself, built c.1815 by James Forrest, advocate, of Comiston (1780-1860). 1st Baronet James Forrest was Lord Provost of Edinburgh from 1837-43, and the City's **Forrest Road is named after him.** The foundation stone of the Metropolitan Monument (the Scott Monument) was laid in 1840 by James Forrest, the silver trowel inscribed: "This trowel to be used at the ceremonial was presented to the Right Honourable Sir James Forrest of Comiston, Bart., Lord Provost of Edinburgh, **Most Worshipful Grand Mason over all Scotland**."

Robert Louis Stevenson

The farm footpath skirting **Comiston Farmhouse** was regularly used by Robert Louis Stevenson on his way to Swanston. **Comiston**, Cockmylane (and the White Lady) are recorded in his essay *"To the Pentland Hills".*

So many eminent feet, then, have paced the lands of Comiston in connection with its 'necklace' of historic structures; so many eminent pens recorded it. Remove one gem from a necklace and its appearance and value is destroyed. Comiston Farmhouse is surely such a gem.

* **COMISTON HOUSE**

Built in 1815 by the advocate James Forrest this house was very nearly flattened but saved to be renovated into attractive family dwellings in the 1990s. In a quote in Charles J. Smith's "Historic South Edinburgh Vol 4" it's described as: **'"a neat country villa, typical of its time" but nevertheless with interesting architectural features.'**

Accorded a B Listing.

* **COMISTON FARMHOUSE**

Described in the 2015 Historic Scotland's 2015 Listing Report as a 19th century **"classically styled former farmhouse … built in the style of a country villa", with some architectural features of note** (cornicing, decorative banisters, porthole windows). **Rejected for Listing.**

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