

Parliament House – A History

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Hi, I'm Johnny Rodger and it's an honour to be invited by the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service to give a talk introducing the architecture and history of Parliament House in Edinburgh.

Parliament House is right in the heart of the city, just off the High Street to the south of St. Giles Kirk. This prominent public building embodies in a unique and symbolic way a whole nexus of historical relationships in civil Scotland, and also with civic Edinburgh. On the face of it, the name itself, "Parliament House", may present it as a confusing institution to many people. "Why is it called a parliament?" you might ask, if it is indeed just a set of law courts. Why call the new Scottish Parliament building, built in 2003 a parliament, if there is already a parliament building here since the seventeenth century? And why are both these buildings, of very different function if you like, referred to as "parliaments"? What do they have in common, or is there a special relationship between these two buildings and institutions?

The source of any confusion regarding these questions probably arises from a misunderstanding of the modern custom and practice of the separation of legal powers in the state, whereby legislative and executive powers, in other words the parliament and government, are kept separate from judicial powers and processes, or in other words, the law courts. This is a relatively modern development in European democracies, generally brought into being in the post-Napoleonic period, so from the beginning of the 1980s. Until then all functions and powers of the law were generally exercised in the same places, and generally with the same personnel. That, I would say, might be an explanation for this building's name as Parliament House –that would satisfy most people I would say, the confusion they labour under. Although now it is simply the home of the highest courts in the land, where serious legal questions are settled and resolved, and serious crimes are tried, it formerly housed ALL the functions of the law, including the Scottish Parliament, which sat there until the union of parliaments in 1707.

So, let's take a look at the building itself, and I'm going to show you some images here and we can discuss the architecture and styles of the building [let me just share something with you here, ok]. Right, so we see here a sketch of the original Parliament House and obviously nowadays it looks very different from that. It was first designed and built by James Rothiemay in 1649, and it was actually paid for, at a cost of £10,555 by Edinburgh Town Council. The Town Council were evidently very worried that if they didn't provide accommodation for the state and crown powers then these institutions would simply move elsewhere, and thus great power and prestige would be lost to the city. As such, this constitutes a typical baroque formation of a "Capital City". A capital city, as the concentration of all state power over one territory, in one urban area. And that follows the pattern set by Pope Sixtus IV's rebuilding of Rome some eighty or so years earlier in the mid sixteenth century. As you can see from this contemporary drawing, the architecture of the building, the original building, is of its time and place: Scottish Renaissance complete with bartizans and ogival domes, with decorative strapwork along the façade of the building, and with a decorative and carved doorway there.

If we look now at the interior of the building, here we see an etching by Billings in the 1830s. This is the main space in the interior, which is referred to - so the whole building is referred to as Parliament House - this is referred to as Parliament Hall. So this is where the parliament itself, the seventeenth century parliament, would convene. It's also where the courts would be held, in this space, as well as many other events of national importance. It's a relatively simple - as you can see - large, open, utilitarian space, although its virtuoso Danish oak hammerbeam roof - which you can see here - gives it a type of spectacular magnificence, we might say. Apart from that roof there wasn't much decoration in the hall, it was kept relatively simple as you can see in this etching made two hundred years after it was built. There has however also always been a very strong carving tradition in Scotland from early times on, and that is evidenced here too. So, for example on that doorway which you saw just a moment earlier there in that previous slide, there are carved figures on either side of it, carved figures of Justice and Mercy. This is the figure of Justice, which originally appeared on the doorway, but these figures were removed by Cromwell, he had them removed, and they can be - at the moment they can be seen - in the corridor behind the screen which supports the wonderful Von Kaulbach stained glass of 1868. So both of these statues are sitting currently in that corridor on display there, can be seen there. There are also other evidences of that great carving tradition, so for example in the stone corbels, that is the stone supports that support that timber beam roof, you can see these stone corbels have been carved in forms, so a series of grotesques and human faces and even architectural type carving - we see there what looks like a castle there, on the top right hand side. So there was quite an evidence of sculptural work on the original seventeenth century building.

Over the centuries, the exterior of the building has been completely reworked, so it no longer looks like that original slide I showed you there and at least on its principal facade it is completely different. It looks more like this now: this is a drawing from the late nineteenth century, for 1889, by Shepherd, and we can see the West end of the building as it looks now. And we can see that it has in fact what we might call a "New Town" style neoclassical frontage with a channelled arcade and with Ionic columns which go through the first and second floors. This elegant frontage design was first built in 1803, designed by Robert Reid, the architect Robert Reid, and it has now extended around the whole south side of Parliament Square. It was extended in 1838 when yet more specialist accommodation was added to the interior. So the building now has a different facade, it's much bigger than the original, there is much more interior accommodation added to it, and we can see a bit of that if we look at the plan, the current plan, of the building as it now exists, which we see here. So, this is a very complex, irregular plan, as you can see, because the building has been extended and added to since it was originally built in the seventeenth century. The original extent of the building can be seen in the grey shaded area, so we see how much bigger is the building, in fact. We can see that most of the additions to the building - you can see my cursor here - are specialist courtrooms, so the First Division courtroom here, the courtroom of the High Court of Justiciary, the Second division court. These rooms, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, are all courts. Six, seven, eight: these are the most recently built courts. Four and five, these are also courts. So, what we have is a move away from a general utility space towards specialist courtrooms, and in fact in 1890s painting by C. Martin Hardie there was an attempt to imagine what the Parliament hall would have looked like when it was used for court cases and the court in session. Here we can see lots of little court cases being heard by judges, advocates, sheriffs and so forth. And also we can see on the right hand side the little recesses where judges often used to sit to hear their cases, so many different cases going on at the same time in this one large utilitarian space of Parliament Hall. These recesses, as you can see here on the right-hand side were given a kind of neo-Gothic timber design in the 1820s.

So, by 1844 however, no more legal cases were heard in Parliament Hall in this big, open space. Instead we moved to having all the court cases – so rather than have court cases be heard like as in that image there, in the big open space of Parliament Hall – the court cases actually move to the individual, separate specialist court rooms there were being built gradually over the years. We can look at a couple of these courtroom now. So if I bring up another slide, this for example is the First Division courtroom which we saw in the plan there, designed by Robert Reid again in 1838, so again just before the cut-off in 1844 when Parliament Hall was no longer used for court cases, and this one here, again, in both these courts we see timber courtrooms with benches for the public and also we see the bench with the red baize and the red velvet there, for the judges and so forth. So rather elegant courtrooms I think you would agree, with Corinthian columns there holding up the balcony there. Anyway, these were the sort of courtrooms that were being built all around Parliament Hall, and corridors leading off from Parliament Hall.

So, Parliament Hall - and I think we have an up-to-date picture of it now - this is what Parliament Hall looks like now, largely the same but well come back to that in a second. Parliament Hall thus now holds neither a parliament, nor court hearings or sessions. So, without such legal functions, the hall now largely serves as leisure and decoration, if you like, within Parliament House. What I mean by that is that the relief of the open space from the tense, closed atmosphere of courtrooms for the advocates and the clients, where they can go there and discuss their case before or after the case and so forth, this is the sort of thing its used for now. And it's much more decorative as well, you see it here, we see a really beautiful photograph of that timber hammerbeam roof, and the walls are now much more decorated, in terms of holding portraits and so forth of former judges, advocates and people who have been part of the history of Parliament House and, of course, part of the history of the Scottish legal tradition. There is also in evidence again further development of that sculptural tradition that we spoke of, with for example carved statues of Lord President Forbes here, a Baroque statue, a particularly fine Baroque statue, which shows him holding court as he might have done formerly in Parliament Hall, as he would have done in fact, and we also have a Greenshields 1832 sculpture of Sir Walter Scott, who also worked in the courts of course as an advocate and as a sheriff. Both of these figures did, or must have at one point, held court in the Parliament Hall itself. So what we see here is that with almost four hundred years of history having rolled out between these walls, Parliament House continues to play a central role in Scotland's legal, judicial, political and democratic life.

New courtrooms were added in the 1990s to the southeast of the complex and again, the new façade to the Cowgate keeps up the incremental updating of Scottish styles, by vaunting a then-fashionable (in the 1990s) "Mockintosh" geometric take on the Scottish Baronial style, which you see here – this is where the three new courts were built and you see that kind of 1990s "Mockintosh" Scottish Baronial style.

But perhaps a more significant sign and symbol of its role in Scottish society is the fact that in the new parliament, completed at the foot of the Royal Mile in 2003, the Catalan architect Enric Miralles chose to design an updated, post-modern version of that seventeenth century timber hammerbeam roof, which clearly riffs off, or if you like, "reconvenes" the original Parliament House. In that way, the new building, which Morales built, makes material the continuity of Scottish political life, and sets an appropriately symbolic physical stage for what Winnie Ewing, former MSP, referred to as the "reconvening" of the Scottish Parliament as it sat in 1999 for the first time in the city for nearly three hundred years. So in many ways, this building, Parliament House, not only embodies a great deal of Scottish history, but it also bears influence on the present, and looks to the future too.