

[View this email in your browser](#)



The Falkland Society

Scottish Registered Charity SC017201

www.falklandsociety.org.uk

www.historicfalkland.scot

www.falkland.wiki

news@falklandsociety.org.uk

Falkland Society Newsletter, January 2024

Dear <<First Name>>,

Thank you for signing up to receive news from the Falkland Society!

We start 2024 with a talk by Professor David Munro, Archivist at Drumlanrig Castle: more details below. As usual this meeting will be held online only – please use the link below to join the meeting – and if you have friends who might be interested in the topic, please encourage them to sign up using the form at www.falklandsociety.org.uk/contact.shtml so they can receive their own invitation.

Ross Burgess (Secretary)

In this issue:

- [January Meeting](#)
- [The Church of Santa Caterina in Palermo](#)
- [Previous events](#)

January Meeting

Professor David Munro, Archivist at Drumlanrig Castle, will be giving the first lecture of 2024 on **Wednesday 10 January** at the usual time of 7 p.m. His subject will be the treasures of a great historic archive, and the fascinating stories that derive from them.

Please join us by Zoom from 6:45 p.m. onwards on the 10th, at

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81288236983>

You can also join by phone on **0203 481 5240**, **0131 460 1196**, or **0208 080 6591** quoting the meeting ID: **812 8823 6983**

Dr David Munro, MBE, FRGS, FSAScot



A Geographer with a special interest in landscape studies, David Munro was a Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh before taking up an appointment as Director of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, a post he held for 12 years from 1996. As a teenager, he first started to explore and write about landscape from his home in the Kinross-shire village of Kinnesswood overlooking Loch Leven, and as a postgraduate he carried out an in-depth study of changing patterns of land use and rural settlement in Strathspey which earned him a doctorate in 1983. A decade later his book on Loch Leven and the River Leven was published by the River Leven Trust and in 2006 he co-authored *Scotland: An Encyclopedia of Places and Landscape* published by Collins.

Currently Writer in Residence and Estate Plan Archivist to the Duke of Buccleuch at Drumlanrig Castle in Dumfries-shire, he is applying landscape studies to the management of the Queensberry Estate in the belief that understanding landscape is an important prerequisite to caring for and managing our natural and man-made heritage.

Drumlanrig Castle: the archival treasures of a great Scottish country house



Overlooking the River Nith, which flows south through Dumfries-shire into the Solway Firth, Drumlanrig Castle is one of the four great houses owned by the Dukes of Buccleuch. What you see today was built in the 1680s–90s by the Douglas Dukes of Queensberry. In 1810, Drumlanrig and its extensive estate were inherited by the Dukes of Buccleuch. As the centre of a large estate extending over Nithsdale and Annandale, Drumlanrig Castle houses a major collection of archives as well as art.

Chief amongst the archives at Drumlanrig Castle is a large collection of maps and estate plans which reflect over 600 years of history on the Queensberry Estate, ranging from the management of the castle and its gardens and policies to wider aspects of agricultural improvement, forest planting, architectural heritage and the development of roads and railways.

In his talk, David Munro will explore the work of individual land surveyors and architects, touching on the recent management of a vast and unique archival collection at Drumlanrig Castle, which aims to provide greater access to the archives by estate staff, researchers and the wider public.

The Church of Santa Caterina in Palermo

Beginning on 27 November 2023, we had the great good fortune to visit Palermo for twelve days and nights. Of the twelve times I have been to Sicily, on only three of them have I visited Palermo – which deserves to be the major focus of a visit rather than a sideline. On this occasion we had as our guide a superb new book *Art and Architecture of Sicily* (Lund Humphries, 2023) by two friends of ours: the text by Julian Treuherz and the superb and informative photographs by Peter de Figueiredo. The book ranges across the complex history of Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, through chapters on Greek, Punic, Roman, Early Christian, Norman, Byzantine and Arabic Sicily to the final chapter on the arrival of Modernism in art and architecture. But on a visit to Palermo, I found that the chapter I turned to most frequently was that on the coming of the Baroque to Western Sicily.

Palermo is situated in that Western Region, in a stupendously wide natural bay on the north-western coast of the island. Further west still are the towns of Trapani, Erice and Marsala while the second city of Sicily – Catania, the first place where I encountered Sicilian Baroque art and architecture – is on the other side of the island, mid-way along its eastern-facing coast. Staying in Catania for three days on my own, in April 1991, I felt as though I were treading the stage of a never-ending Baroque opera. The style and energy of the Baroque seem ideally suited to the landscapes, urban and rural, of Sicily and to its exotic climate.

The heart of Baroque Palermo is the Quattro Canti ('Four Corners') where the long axial Via Marqueda crosses the Corso Vittorio Emanuele. The Quattro Canti crossroads forms one of the most striking examples of Baroque town planning, and is still, today, a very good starting point for explorations of the city where the four great wedges of urban landscape meet. One corner provides the western face of the noble church of San Giuseppe dei Teatini, another corner is part of a palace whose other main façade looks towards the Municipio or Town Hall across a spectacular fountain. The other two corners contain apartment blocks or palaces which begin the northward march of the Via Marqueda.

The church of Santa Caterina is five minutes' walk away or less from the Quattro Canti, towards the north. It immediately strikes the visitor that the façades of the church are very different from one another.



Santa Caterina, the south flank of the church



Looking from that façade across the Fontana della Vergogna towards the equally spectacular north flank of San Giuseppe dei Teatini

The western end of Santa Caterina is largely invisible. The southern and eastern façades (the latter facing Piazza Bellini) are designed to show their elegant character to the two piazzas of which they respectively form a part. The northern flank of the church forms the background to the cloister on that side of the church and can only be seen from the formerly 'closed' parts of the complex, the Clausura, for the nuns or monks only. Consequently, it is as plain as plain can be.

Ornament costs money, and financing such magnificent conventual churches was often a difficult, slow and challenging business.



Looking down on the Fontana della Vergogna from the terraces high above Santa Caterina.

There are at least three reasons that make a visit to Santa Caterina exceptionally interesting and worthwhile. The first of these is the decoration of the interior with *marmi mischi* to an extent which Julian Treuherz suggests is 'an excessive degree of elaboration'. Instead, I find the interior not only powerful and colourful but thrilling in its inventive details and consummate craftsmanship.



The interior of Santa Caterina looking towards the high altar

The richness of the decoration of the sanctuary is remarkable. Note especially the floor.



A close-up view of the sanctuary

We were astonished by the ability of designer and craftsman to execute heraldry and to express narrative through marble panels, some of them telling well-known biblical stories.



Two of the marble panels: Jonah and the Whale, and Abraham about to sacrifice Isaac

Other decorative panels exhibit the heraldic achievements of notable Palermitans, expressed through delicately carved and coloured marbles. These display astonishing virtuosity, as expressed also in the Baroque era through music.



Two heraldic panels

The second reason why our visit was extraordinarily fascinating was to see the way in which the entire complex had been opened up to the visiting public, since my last visit in 2017. We talked to several of the young men and women who are acting as guides, some or all of them as volunteers, and we were told that after the Order of Dominicans had moved out – to a property they had, more suitable in size, in another part of Italy – the whole of the monastery had been handed over to the Region of Sicily, as heritage, to be looked after in an exemplary way and shared in a good and acceptable way with whoever wanted to visit it.

In order to offer visits which could be largely self-guided (as they are in Britain in properties of the National Trust/NTS, with volunteer guides around who can answer questions and provide reliable interpretation), you need



signage. I have noticed on sites across Sicily that the interpretation provided is really excellent. Here they were more like 'way finders' giving names of rooms and a sense of direction and done very simply in wood. In their simple way they seemed absolutely excellent, and conveyed the impression that a great deal of thought is being given as to how to open the complex effectively and well, and to enable visitors to feel welcome.

*Bilingual signs pointing to
different parts of the complex*

An elegant Neo-Classical room, clearly a former Sacristy, is being used as a museum room – with appropriately dust-free vitrines and good lighting – to show historic vestments and examples of the golden vessels used in Baroque services of devotion. The careful repair and re-use of the original cupboard doors is noteworthy.



The museum room

Like Naples, Palermo is famous for its 17th and 18th century Christmas cribs (*presepi*), with a myriad of tiny figures in a landscape setting. The central focus of this one, in a wide landscape, is the Adoration of the Three Kings. Close to it is an individual bearded figure of great beauty and realism.



The presepe

The movement of visitors is around the Cloister, but at several different levels, and it is this factor that gives the visitor such great interest and the excitement of for ever discovering something new. In the following image we are looking down on the Cloister courtyard, with its orange and lemon trees, delightful at every time of the year: but the glimpse of foliage must be especially welcome on a hot summer's day with the fountain playing.



The cloister courtyard

In another view of the cloister courtyard we are looking across at the former rooms of members of the Dominican community. Such glimpses as we were able to have of them suggested that they were pleasant under-used rooms which could be converted to accommodation for students or tourists. What a privilege it would be to stay in such an idyllic setting! An iconic provider in the British Isles (but also occasionally in Italy) of such accommodation is the Landmark Trust. Buildings need to be loved and used. The Landmark Trust has a Palladian villa in the Veneto, the apartment in Rome where the poet John Keats died and the apartment in Florence where the poets Robert and Elizabeth Barratt Browning lived.



A view across to the rooms formerly occupied by the religious community.

As was commonly the case with 'enclosed' orders of nuns or monks, they were enjoined to have as little contact as possible, physical or visual, with the outside world. Often, as in Santa Caterina, they would attend the Mass or other devotions sitting or standing behind grilles. Members of the public in the church below would only be able to catch a general impression of faces and costumes of the community.



Looking down into the church via a grille

In our tour of the complex we came across two of the historic musical instruments, relatively small organs, one in the church, another in an upper room. The fact that the more elaborate of the two has no pipes or mechanism visible probably means that they have been taken out for repair. It has become more and more clear in recent years how vulnerable church organs are, especially when a church has been slated for closure. We can also despair when we recall the costly nature of organs, which are deep reservoirs of traditional craftsmanship – joiners, metalworkers, designers and makers of cases, and other areas of knowledge and skills all come together to make a musical instrument deserving of respect.



Two organs

The visitor can climb as high as access allows. It is a fascinating experience to be able to pass through the roof structures and spaces to reach finally the flat roof areas of the complex.



In the roof space, looking down on the vault, which seems to be constructed of tiles

Having reached the roof top one has a memorable view of the Piazza Bellini far below and on the far side of the Piazza two of the other famous churches of central Palermo: on the left the Chiesa dell'Ammiraglio ('Church of the Admiral') and on the right the church of San Catoldo. Like Santa Caterina they can be visited for a modest fee. We found that charging was becoming more and more the norm, at least where churches are being opened regularly to fulfil a known tourist expectation. The same is true in Venice and Rome, both of which have numerous churches that visitors wish to see for their architecture, sculpture, altar paintings, mural paintings, textiles and other forms of art. I am all in favour of it in such cases – not everywhere – because it enables the money so gathered to feed into the regular maintenance, conservation and repair of the heritage assets of a church or cathedral. In many cases it has led to a higher standard of conservation and repair work and a sense of the responsibility and work of looking after a precious building and its contents being, to a degree at least, shared.



Piazza Bellini and the Ammiraglio and San Catoldo churches from the roof of Santa Caterina

The roof-top panoramas are thrilling and enable the visitor to see just how extensive are the survivals of Palermo's historic past, in spite of the damages caused by the heavy bombardment of the city in 1943 and subsequently by rapacious developers (sadly true almost everywhere). But if you carefully examine the following image you'll see the massive bulk of a cruise liner half-hidden by the twin-towered church of San Domenico in Via Roma. This is so much bad news. There are many reasons for being cautious about allowing such mega-sized cruise ships to come so close to heritage settings. Their exorbitant and polluting use of fossil fuels is one such reason. They often do enormous damage to wharves (historic or modern) and, worse still, to the whole local environment. They seem to symbolize a certain kind of capitalism and an attitude that might be summarised as a feeling that everything within reach is up for grabs. Don't get me wrong. I am not against cruising as an enjoyable way of exploring the natural and cultural world. It is the *scale* of such ships that is harmful. There is much literature on this topic and especially in the case of Venice where it is not just the city but the whole lagoon which is at risk.



Looking towards San Domenico and the harbour

Linked with this concern is the fact that, in fairly recent years, Palermo has become marketed and milked for all its worth as a 'party city', alongside London, Dublin, Amsterdam, Naples, Venice and, sad to say, Edinburgh. Prices rise. Some people make a profit out of such situations, there is no doubt. But is any of it ploughed back into looking after and managing the city, its heritage buildings and landscapes? What impact does it make on the resident peoples and communities of such a city? Is such a development truly sustainable? It was pitiable to walk northwards along the Via Marqueda in the early evening and run the gauntlet of young men and women begging us to eat at their restaurant, offering bargains. It is difficult to prepare and offer good wholesome local food in such settings – though I don't doubt that some were trying their best not to let standards slip completely. But by and large it was all frantic, noisy, messy and completely trashed the environment of the historic street. The introduction of numerous E-scooters has brought a new hazard into the equation. We have seen the same elsewhere. Imagine having inherited or purchased an apartment in such a street, above the day-time bustle of the shops, perhaps in a listed building with fine and attractive rooms. But then suddenly along comes the 'party city' concept, and the street becomes a maelstrom of frenetic activity until the small hours of the night.

The following image shows how a beautiful surrounding historic landscape can still be visible from the heart of a great city and that is always a welcome sight. Monte Pellegrino, west of the city, is the home to the shrine of the city's patron saint, Santa Rosalia, and on her feast day everyone who can manage it walks out of the city in a great procession to pay honour to their saint at her shrine. I wish we had here in Scotland a stronger tradition for walking together, as communities, in procession on special days and to special places. The nearest experiences I have had have been walking the Camino from León to Santiago da Compostela and the 'Demonstration of a Millon', which begged the UK Government to think again and have a second and more nuanced referendum about Brexit.



Monte Pellegrino viewed from Santa Caterina

I want to finish my ruminations, about or prompted by the visit to Palermo and to Santa Caterina, by contrasting two images, one of historic floor tiles, the other of traditional cake making.



Floor tiles in Santa Caterina

Throughout the buildings of Santa Caterina we were struck by beautiful 18th century tiles, both in the courtyard of the Cloister and in some of the rooms. The image above shows an area of such tiles which, for me, exemplifies 'pleasing decay' (a phrase of the painter John Piper in an essay of 1947). I wouldn't want them to be replaced or renewed: they bear the marks of their history, their stories. But they need to be cared for, like all ancient and beautiful things, so that they survive into the next century and beyond.

Today's Santa Caterina keeps alive the tradition of baking special cakes, like these commemorating Mary Queen of Scots!



Maria Stuarda tartlets

These tartlets, which strangely were known to the nuns as Maria Stuarda cakes, symbolise for me something quite different and very positive. They speak of the revival of old recipes and traditional skills. They speak of a vibrant new life emerging from ancient kitchens and ovens. They speak of people being welcomed into Santa Caterina from all over the world. Access is key. They speak of delicious and fragrant flavours, which can be shared with one another; they speak of welcome and delight.

Peter Burman

Previous events

You can download any of our previous recorded talks at
www.falklandsociety.org.uk/recordings.shtml.

[Back to top.](#)



Copyright © 2024 Falkland Society, All rights reserved.

Want to change how you receive these emails?
You can [update your preferences](#) or [unsubscribe from this list](#).

