Welcome to the new series of downloadable walking tours developed by the Mackintosh Heritage Group. These will introduce you to Mackintosh’s architectural heritage and the wider architectural riches of Glasgow, a city described by John Betjeman as the finest Victorian city in the world.
Glasgow Style and Modernity

From Central Station to the School of Art.
This walk takes approximately 1½ hours.

This walk will look at some of the remarkable architecture in Glasgow created in the years around 1900 when the city was transforming itself into the self-proclaimed ‘Second City of the Empire’. Glasgow, like many other cities at the time, encouraged the development of a progressive modern architecture characterised by a distinctive decorative style.

Elsewhere, this is known as art nouveau, Jugendstil or stile Liberty, but here it is now best described as “Glasgow Style”. Its most famous exponent was, of course, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, but distinctive buildings were also designed by his friend James Salmon junior, known as the “Wee Troot”.

Other architects in the city, like James Miller, were influenced by this manner. In addition there was a separate modern school in the city associated with Sir John James Burnet and his sometime partner J.A. Campbell which was influenced by architecture in both Paris and the United States. Particular and yet international, the remarkable buildings of both schools link fin de siècle Glasgow with what was happening in Paris and Brussels, Barcelona and Chicago, Budapest and Riga.

Opening hours are provided for those buildings that are open to the public. These were correct at the time of writing, but you are recommended to check current times to avoid disappointment. Occasionally unforeseen building works may restrict viewing.

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The walk begins at Central Station, whose spacious top-lit concourse is today perhaps the real centre of the city. The terminus of the main line from London Euston, the station was greatly extended by the Caledonian Railway in 1899-1906.

Exit via the main entrance (signed to Gordon Street) and right into Gordon Street, which is lined with several stone Victorian commercial buildings. One of the most distinctive is the Ca’ D’oro on the right at the corner of Union Street. Its facades, inspired by Renaissance Venetian palaces, are in fact constructed of cast-iron. This former furniture warehouse was designed in 1872 by Mackintosh’s future employer, John Honeyman. It is now occupied by a supermarket and other retail outlets.

Cross Union Street and continue along Gordon Street. Second right into Mitchell Street, whose narrow winding length is dominated by the extraordinary red sandstone water-tower on the corner of the former Glasgow Herald Building. Now The Lighthouse. Built in 1893-95 and designed by the firm of Honeyman & Keppie, this tall building has strange details, naturalistic and yet somehow symbolic, which proclaim it an early work by the firm’s new young assistant, C.R. Mackintosh.

The building housed the production of the Glasgow Herald newspaper and commercial warehousing. It has two external elevations of red sandstone. The style is the Scottish Baroque manner conventional for such late 19th-century urban buildings, but in Mackintosh’s hands none of the details is strictly conventional. Games are played, as with the windows on the staircase bay in the centre of the Mitchell Street elevation, above the original entrance at no. 68; each window is different in its detailing and projections; mouldings are proud of the wall plane on one level, recessed on the next. Window shapes vary overall: some are vertical, some horizontal in proportion; and the higher the building rises the more the architectural forms seem to have a slight flavour of the art nouveau, especially above the strong cornice.

This is particularly true of the corner with its oversailing water tower, which can seem to resemble a poppy-head. The tower was a necessary precaution against the threat of fire. The utilitarian interior of the Herald building was not remarkable and, in 1998-99 was converted and partially rebuilt by Glasgow architects, Page & Park as The Lighthouse: Scotland’s Centre for Architecture, Design and the City. The centre contains a Mackintosh information centre and the water-tower now provides a vantage point giving spectacular views of the cityscape.

Back up Mitchell Lane, crossing over into West Nile Street, then left at the traffic lights into St Vincent Street. This part of the street is lined with an impressive collection of Late Victorian and early 20th-century commercial buildings. On the north side, the striking white building at no’s 86 – 94, is the former

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was the usual one: how to get light into a building placed in a narrow dark lane. So Mackintosh faced the elevation in glazed white brick and, so as not to cast shadow, recessed the sandstone segmental arches and abstracted mouldings on the ground floor, its self-conscious exaggerated use of classical forms making a fascinating essay in Mannerist Classicism.

Even at his most utilitarian, Mackintosh remained a Romantic, for, between the modern-looking cantilevered window bays, green glazed bricks pick out a pattern of the “Tree of Life” while the top floor on the higher part of the building, with its concave parapets and art nouveau detailing, is made of stone.

Continue along Renfield Lane and look back to see a wonderfully dramatic view of this too little known utilitarian masterpiece. The towering upper floors, with their unusual stonework, make it irresistibly reminiscent of a castle. In Mackintosh’s imagination, Scottish castles were never far away.

Go back to Hope Street, turn left, past Rowand Anderson’s Central Hotel of 1882-84, then right into Waterloo Street where, on the left, is the red sandstone Waterloo Chambers of 1898-1900: one of two inventive commercial buildings designed by John James Burnet just before the turn of the century (the other is Atlantic Chambers just around the corner at 43-47 Hope Street).

Burnet also applied his resourceful mind to the problem of designing tall commercial buildings that did not resemble elongated houses or palaces, but whereas Mackintosh and Salmon may have looked across the Border and across the Channel for inspiration, Burnet looked to the United States—which he had visited in 1896. The front of Waterloo Chambers is a symmetrical but highly unusual Classical composition in which canted bays, Baroque doorcases, a giant order, an eaves gallery and bold sculptural Classical details are combined in a way that plays games with wall planes and illusions of structure. The figurative sculpture is by McGilvray & Ferris, Glasgow.

Right into Wellington Street then left into Bothwell Street. The large red sandstone block on the left (opposite David Barclay’s grand Central Thread Agency offices of 1891-1901) is Mercantile Chambers of 1896-98 by James Salmon of Salmon, Son & Gillespie. When built, this early steel-framed office building was one of the largest in the city. The ground floor arcade and the two tall gables make the building vaguely reminiscent of Northern Europe and the Hanseatic ports, but its actual composition could only be Glaswegian, and it was surely influenced by Mackintosh’s Glasgow Herald building.

There are canted bays, playful Baroque detailing and carefully placed decorative sculpture. Notice the inscription which references the tree, bird, fish and bell of Glasgow’s coat of arms and the central figure of Mercury. Mercury and the figurative sculptures, from left, of Prosperity, Prudence, Industry and Fortune, were modelled by Francis Derwent Wood. A contemporary architectural journal thought it had “the merit of daring originality”, but what — from a modernist perspective, was even more original was (again) the rear of the building in Bothwell Lane. Here you will see Salmon designed a severely functional elevation — the first of its kind in Glasgow — with canted bays of glazing (separated vertically by lead panels) separated by simple brick piers.

Further up the hill then right into West George Street, passing more modestly-scaled early 19th-century blocks, originally housing but now mainly offices. On the right at the corner with Hope Street, 169-175 West George Street is a great cliff-like mass of red sandstone is a block of speculative offices designed by Burnet’s former partner, John A. Campbell, and built in 1902-03. Although the detail is comparatively conventional, the overall composition is very dramatic, with plain walls and gently canted bays rising five stories before bursting out into balconies, domes, arches and obelisks. On its sloping site, this powerful building is somehow reminiscent of American cities of a century ago.

Turn left up Hope Street. On the left, on the corner of West Regent Street, is a mid-19th-century corner house that was enlarged and altered as offices in 1900-04 by the younger James Salmon. In addition to bay windows and a steep roof, he added extraordinary beaten copper decorative panels, now darkened, to the West Regent Street elevation. These are in characteristic Glasgow style, and present versions of the city’s coat of arms and other Scottish symbols.

Salmon’s second highly innovative building stands diagonally opposite, a little further up Hope Street. Lion Chambers was built in 1904-07 as a block of lawyers’ offices with artists’ studios.

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and Margaret Macdonald — a first-floor apartment — now rebuilt as Mackintosh House. On the north side of the square, No.5 has a distinctive and delicate Glasgow Style doorcase: this was the entrance to the former Lady Artists’ Club and was designed by Mackintosh in 1908.

Continue along the north side of the square into West Regent Street, then right into Pitt Street and on to Sauchiehall Street. On the north side of Sauchiehall Street is Grecian Buildings, a block of commercial offices with shops below built in 1867-68 and designed by Alexander ‘Greek’ Thomson. This corner block, with its imaginative combination of Greek and Egyptian elements, now houses the Centre For Contemporary Arts. If you stand opposite the Centre you will have the only view left in Glasgow of buildings by the two greatest and most original designers the city produced can be seen together. Beyond and above, at the top of the steep, pedestrian-defying, 20% gradient slope of Scott Street, rises the castle-like mass of Charles Rennie Mackintosh’s supreme masterpiece, the Glasgow School Of Art. The towering, stone side elevation, with its tall oriel windows lighting the library, was the last part to be completed, in 1909, but what is most visible from below is the wide south-facing rear elevation, artfully asymmetrical, enlivened by a range of different window designs and all harled, or rough-cast, like an old Scottish castle — indeed like Fyvie Castle which probably inspired this remarkable elevation.

But we do not climb up to the School of Art yet but are saving that treat until last. Continue west along Sauchiehall Street, then left into Elmbank Street, at the Beresford (striking Art Deco former hotel of 1937-39 by Weddel & Inglis).

On the corner of Bath Street, is the Griffin Bar, formerly the King’s Arms. The interior of this public house, of 1903-04 by William Reid, was spoiled in the 1960s but its jolly Glasgow Style exterior, with a range of etched decorative windows in inventive Art Nouveau timber frames, survives intact.

Right into Bath Street, past the King’s Theatre of 1901-04 by the doyen of theatre architects, the London-based Frank Matcham. Then on until Bath Street ends in the urban desolation created when the M8 motorway was smashed through the city in 1965-72 dividing the city centre from the West End.

On the other side of the chasm is the Mitchell Library, an imposing Edwardian Baroque building of 1906-11 by William B. White surmounted by a great copper dome. The library houses one of Europe’s major reference libraries and a highly important collection of architectural drawings documenting the city’s growth. But we turn right and go north, back to Sauchiehall Street, passing under the remnant of an abandoned motorway development.

On the curved corner, urbanity is maintained by Charing Cross Mansions, an ebullient red sandstone apartment block, reminiscent of Paris and built in 1889-91 by the Beauch-Arts trained J.J. Burnet.

Continuing north along St George’s Road, St George’s Mansions of 1900-01 by Burnet & Boston across the motorway clearance promises the resumption of proper urban architecture to the west. But we turn right, and east, into Renfrew Street, climbing slowly up Garnethill.

And just beyond the unwellcome intrusion of the Bourdon Building of the early 1970s by Keppie, Henderson & Partners, arrogantly straddling the street, is the original building of the Glasgow School of Art designed by Mackintosh.

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the corresponding west elevation facing Scott Street, as later redesigned, is in a streamlined, towering Tudor style. The big studio windows along the principal facing Renfrew Street might be Elizabethan in inspiration, but clever asymmetry is introduced, especially around the central entrance where Classical elements are reinterpreted with the decorative wilfulness of Art Nouveau.

The interior has too many subtleties and idiosyncrasies to describe here, suffice to say that it culminates in the extraordinary double-height library. The competition for a new building for the School of Art was held in 1896 and won by Honeyman & Keppie, although it is clear that the building is wholly the work of the firm's then assistant, Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The eastern half, together with the central entrance hall, was built in 1898-99. Mackintosh later redesigned the western elevation with its tall windows lighting the library before the western half was commenced in 1907. And when it was completed two years later, Mackintosh's career in Glasgow was almost over, for no more complete buildings were constructed to his designs. Mercifully, changes in architectural fashions did not affect the School of Art and today, over a century later, this celebrated Glasgow monument stands virtually as Mackintosh designed it.

We would welcome your feedback on your experience of these new tours.

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Glossary

Bay: repetitive façade unit; projecting unit of façade

Canted: the edge of a corner of wood, stone etc. that is bevelled or angled off, usually at 45 degrees

Cantilever: a horizontal projection such as a balcony or beam, supported at one end only

Console: projecting ornament or bracket

Corbel: block of stone projecting from a wall, providing support for a feature

Cornice: horizontal moulded or otherwise decorated projection which crowns the part to which it is affixed e.g. door, wall, window

Dormer window: window projecting from roof

Gable: vertical triangular portion of the end of a building with a pitched roof, from the level of the cornice or eaves to the ridge of the roof

Ionic: a Greek order of architecture distinguished by a plan concave moulding of the shaft and a capital with spiral volutes

Moulding: a plain or curved narrow surface, either sunk or projecting, used for decoration to frame features such as windows or doors

Mullion: vertical member dividing a window

Order: classical arrangement of column and structurally related elements

Oriel: bay window that projects without direct support from below

Pediment: a triangular feature over a door or window

Pier: vertical solid support, generally rectangular in shape