

The Building of the Leighton Library, by Joshua Smith



While the books of the Leighton Library are priceless in and of themselves, the library's building also holds great historical value. Completed in 1687, it represents Scotland's oldest purpose-built and independent library building, now Category A Listed. Standing in the centre of Dunblane for over three and a quarter centuries, while the buildings surrounding the Leighton Library have undergone a great deal of change, the library has remained. Constructed in a manner typical for the 17th century, the Leighton Library is what is called a two-storey and garret gable-ended building. The main library room stands on the first floor, built over a stone vaulted cellar or Undercroft, with stair entry on the building's eastern side. The elevated main room provides both added security and protection from damp.

After Robert Leighton's death in 1684 it was left to his relatives and executors, Saphira and Edward Lightmaker, to put his final will into effect and oversee the construction of a library building. Instrumental in these efforts was Leighton's friend, William Drummond of Cromlix, Viscount Strathallan and Major-General of the Scottish Forces, who appointed his factor (or chamberlain) to oversee the library's construction and provided horses and men to transport building materials. Strathallan is also said to have sourced the furniture and furnishings for inside the library, including twelve 'turkie leather' chairs, six of which remain in the library today. Leighton had originally left a sum of £100 in order to fund the library's construction. Despite Strathallan's charity, the costs exceeded expectation and eventually came to £162 2s. 6d., with this excess paid by Leighton's executors. Construction of the library took place between 1685 and 1687, with the first formal meeting in the library held on 9 August 1688.



1: 'William Drummond, 1st Viscount Strathallan, c. 1617-1688', painting, c. 1667, © National Galleries Scotland.

The library's exterior and decoration is mainly plain, a testament to Leighton's desire that the library should not become an ostentatious memorial to him. The description of its interior in the seventeenth century, as a room 'of convenient largenes and good lights, and handsomely furnished with presses and shelves, and some desks for readeing at them, and chaires or stooles to sitt on' shows that it has not greatly changed. The original six bookcases present at the library's opening have since been joined by ten more added during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the north and west walls. Originally three reading desks catered for readers inside the library, with the present large table added in 1804. The ceiling of the library room was also raised to its present height in 1815.

Located beneath the main library room is a vaulted cellar, the Undercroft. Originally, this space was intended to serve as accommodation for the library's keeper, although it was probably never used for this purpose. Instead, the space has principally been used for storage, with historical reference made to there being 'two vaults' in the cellar, one to store coal for the library's fires, and the second vault rented out to local merchants from the eighteenth century. During the Second World War the space was requisitioned and used as an air raid shelter.



Various maintenance and changes have been made to the building over the years. In 1767, the window openings were significantly enlarged and the addition of semi-circular heads introduced a popular Georgian architectural design to the library. More substantial works were undertaken in 1815 including the updating of the library's interior, repairs to its outside walls and the repositioning of the library's entry steps. The work, which closed the library for two years and cost £167, was overseen by William Stirling, a local Dunblane architect and library member who is buried outside Dunblane Cathedral. The time and cost taken to complete these works was far larger than the library's trustees anticipated, and they met repeatedly in 1816 and 1817 to express their disappointment that members were prevented 'from receiving their Benefite from the Library which they were entitled to receive'. Doors and wire mesh were fitted to the bookcases in 1841 when the library was used as a newspaper reading room. At the same time, the window on the western wall was 'painted or otherwise darkened' so as to prevent members of the public from looking in on the manse garden of the minister of Dunblane.



Possibly the grandest aspect of the Leighton Library's building is the white marble cartouche which sits on its eastern wall. Commissioned by Viscount Strathallan, who may also have had a hand in its final design, the cartouche was presumably added to the library building soon after its completion in 1687. The identity of its maker is unknown, but it is likely to have been made by a London sculptor. Although the cartouche is now bare it was painted at the time of its creation. At its head is a bishop's mitre, originally recorded as being framed in gold colouring, or gilded. The smaller shield was believed to have shown Bishop Leighton's Coat of Arms, unfortunately now unknown, with the larger shield carrying the name 'BIBLIOTHECA LEIGHTIONIANA' in coloured and golden lettering. The winged skull at the base of the cartouche is religiously symbolic, representing the ascension of the soul into Heaven.

In Autumn 2022, the Leighton closed for its first major restoration work in over two hundred years. Extensive repairs have been made to the library's exterior, including the removal of the harling from all four external walls, the rebuilding of both chimneys and the repair of the library's roof, leadwork, and rainwater system. In advance of this work, the books were carefully removed from the library for possibly only the third time in their history and kept safely and securely in cold storage. Costing over £500,000 and funded entirely by public donation, this building work is vital in order to safeguard the fabric of the building and its collection for future generations.