

# BUILDING ‘THE PALACE OF BOKES’: ROBERT REID, WILLIAM STARK AND THE SIGNET LIBRARY

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Fig. 1. The Advocates Library (The Upper Hall of the Signet Library). Thomas Hosmer Shepherd 1829. *WS Society Collections*

Since its completion two centuries ago, Edinburgh's Signet Library has been lauded by visitors and architectural historians alike as possessing one of the finest neoclassical interiors in Europe. The Upper Hall of the Signet Library – until 1833 part of the Advocates Library – is the more famous of the building's two great rooms, and in Britton and Shepherd's 1829

celebration of Edinburgh's new architecture, *Modern Athens!*<sup>1</sup> it was the sole interior of any kind to be depicted. Thomas Hosmer Shepherd's print has been the standard representation of the Library ever since. During his famous 1822 visit to Edinburgh, King George IV is reputed to have described the Upper Hall as 'the most beautiful drawing room in Europe',<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 2. The Signet Library Lower Hall. William Burn Murdoch 1889. WS Society Collections

and in 1867 the photographer George Washington Wilson chose it to be part of the first sustained series of interior photographs to be taken in the city.<sup>3</sup> The earliest known illustration of the Lower Hall is Victorian, a William Burn Murdoch sketch from 1889,<sup>4</sup> but it shows an interior that, for all of its later alterations, still possessed brilliance and charisma to rival its colleague upstairs (Fig. 2).

The Signet Library's exterior is less celebrated. When the original Midlothian County Buildings were slated for demolition and rebuilding in 1901, James Crabb Watt wrote to the *Scotsman* suggesting that the doomed structure's classical portico be saved and repositioned on the front of the Signet Library. By this action 'the baldness of [the Signet Library] would be relieved by a harmonious adjunct and the exterior of the structure made worthy of its exquisite interior.'<sup>5</sup>

That such beautiful interiors should be hidden behind such unremarkable frontage is customarily explained as the outcome of a division of labour between the two architects involved in the building's

initial construction, with the structure and frontage allotted to Sir Robert Reid (1774–1856), and the interior design to William Stark (1770–1813). We are fortunate to possess two recent and authoritative accounts of the building process that brought this division about – most notably Dr Iain Gordon Brown's magisterial *Building for Books: The Architectural Evolution of the Advocates Library*<sup>6</sup> but also the late (most regrettably, the late) Signet Librarian George Hodge Ballantyne's *The Signet Library and its Librarians 1722–1972*.<sup>7</sup> This paper seeks to augment these core accounts of the Signet Library's origins by addressing core questions which Brown and Ballantyne did not have space to address. Further documentation of the building process that has come to light at the Signet Library in recent years, and discussion of this material will complement the revisiting of existing evidence.

The Signet Library's design and construction history belies the beautiful and dignified processive symmetry of the interiors. A building that at first seems to conform to Georgian ideas of architectural design – symmetry, harmony and reverence for classical models – in fact displays considerable anomalies. The building's floor levels and the fenestration do not coincide, supporting structures normally concealed are visible through prominent public windows and the western section of the Georgian building is constructed on an axis which is (by a matter of feet rather than yards) to the south of the central section.

This paper will first re-introduce the Signet Library and summarise what is known about the circumstances behind its construction. It will then return to a key piece of evidence, first described by Dr Iain Gordon Brown: a drawing by Robert Reid from 1806<sup>8</sup> that remains the earliest known architectural approach to the Signet Library building project. We will go on to consider the evidence of the building itself and look at material recently brought to light in the Signet Library's own archives. This material includes: detailed costings of Reid and Stark's competing interior designs; a list of Stark's drawings for the project; letters by William Stark relating to the project; and most precious and unexpected of all, a ground plan of the Upper Hall by Stark, the sole known drawing to have survived from the period of construction.<sup>9</sup>

What emerges is a far more important and radical role for Stark in the Library's construction

than that of interior designer. The achievement of his magnificent interiors required the substantial reengineering and reshaping of the structure of Robert Reid's original library block. Both Brown and Ballantyne suggest that William Stark was brought in after Robert Reid's designs for the Library interiors failed to answer his initial commission,<sup>10</sup> but it may be instead that Reid was a victim both of his clients' indecision, their growing ambitions for their new accommodation and of class bias against an architect from humble social origins.

### Background

The term 'Signet Library' can refer both to the building that is the headquarters of the Society of Writers to HM Signet, Scotland's oldest corporate body of solicitors, and to the collection of books, manuscripts, art and furniture that the building contains, collected by the Society since it first began sustained, deliberate acquisition in 1722. This paper uses the term exclusively to refer to the building. Of the Society itself, W. H. Haldane wrote in 1905 that

The Society of Writers to His Majesty's Signet is an ancient and honourable body of Scots lawyers. Its members are now ordinarily employed as conveyancers, as agents practicing in the Court of Session, as factors on landed estates, and as family men of business. They have, however, a traditional connection with the functions of Government. The King's signet is, and has been — certainly since the fourteenth century, probably much longer — one of the Royal Seals of Scotland. It was in the charge of the King's Secretary, and the earlier Writers to the Signet were the clerks of the Secretary's office. Their primary duty was to conduct the public and private correspondence of the Sovereign. ... In later times the clerks to the Signet signed summonses and other writs pertaining to the supreme court of justice. ... Writers to the Signet hold office under commission from the Keeper of the Signet, who is also Lord Clerk Register of Scotland, and one of the great Officers of State. The Keeper appoints from among the members of the Society a Deputy-Keeper and a body of Commissioners, by whom the Society's affairs are administered. The Society has played no small part in the life of Scotland — political, social, and intellectual.<sup>11</sup>

The Signet Library building as it exists today was the product of a complex joint venture between the UK government, the Faculty of Advocates and the Society of Writers to HM Signet.<sup>12</sup> The consequence by 1822 was a new public square overlooked by a structure appended to the newly refronted Parliament Hall. The ground floor and basement of this structure were occupied by the Writers whilst the upper floor

belonged to the Advocates and formed part of the Advocates Library.

The joint venture to construct new premises for the Writers and Advocates emerged from decades of dissatisfaction on both parties at the existing accommodation for their respective libraries and offices.<sup>13</sup> The problem had been particularly acute for the WS Society, whose seventeenth-century home in Writers Court had been extended on multiple occasions, with a final addition in 1807 that won additional space for the Society's books whilst leaving them insufficient space for all members to meet in one body.<sup>14</sup> The land on which the new square and building would be built was occupied by typical Edinburgh Old Town wynds and closes, and it had been acquired by the Faculty of Advocates after the district had been ravaged by fire in 1792. Two Acts of Parliament — the 1806 Court of Exchequer (Scotland) Act 46 [Geo 3 c.154] and the 1808 Public Buildings (Scotland) Act [48 Geo 3 c.146] — then intervened, allowing for the rebuilding of the Court of Exchequer and refacing of Parliament Hall by Robert Reid, and constructing new premises for the Faculty of Advocates who in turn relinquished for that purpose the land they had acquired in 1792. Other public institutions were offered the chance to take accommodation in the new building, a provision intended to permit WS Society participation in the scheme.

### Robert Reid's 1806 sketch

That discussions about WS Society participation had been under way for some time is evidenced by the early sketching-out of one of the few surviving drawings for the scheme, a Robert Reid sketch for a hall and offices for the WS Society dated 1806.<sup>15</sup> The channels through which the Society negotiated its entry into the scheme are largely unknown. Following a report by the Signet Librarian Macvey Napier WS in February 1808 and a personal meeting between the Society and Robert Reid the following month, agreement was reached, and then, a year later, finalised. The WS Society was to be provided with premises on the ground floor of the projected structure, with a ceiling 20 feet high and space for offices (including the Signet Office) at the western extremity. The Society had brought into being a



Fig. 3. The new Library Block as proposed by Robert Reid. *The Scots Magazine*, October 1810. *WS Society Collections*

Buildings Committee in 1807<sup>16</sup> which alongside a similar body representing the Faculty of Advocates and the Government's trustees for the project oversaw the design and construction of the new library block.

The degree of design involvement left open to the WS Society by agreeing to participate at this relatively late stage is unclear. The fundamental form of the new building appears to have been fixed rather earlier: in August 1810, the *Scots Magazine* published an engraving of the new Court of Exchequer and refaced Parliament Hall, both of which it declared complete. The new building would extend these works and would therefore perpetuate their shape and form, a shape and form confirmed by its appearance in a second engraving published by the *Scots Magazine* in October. The new building would 'contain also a new Signet Office, with Hall, Library Rooms, and other accommodations for the Writers to the Signet.'<sup>17</sup> The Faculty of Advocates would be provided with 'a magnificent new library room, 136 feet in length, with other apartments.' The vagueness of the description of

the Writers' accommodation is mirrored by that in the Signet Library Curators' Minutes of late 1809, which postpone detailed decisions on the layout of the new premises, but it is clear that significant features of the building that they would occupy were already beyond WS Society control. (Fig. 3)

The building that is now the Signet Library was Robert Reid's first venture into building on the large scale for institutions. How he came to obtain the commission for what was the largest legal building project in Edinburgh since the seventeenth century is unknown, but Reid was the son of a housebuilder who had feued property to many of the city's leading figures, and by this stage and in his early thirties he would have been a familiar figure amongst Edinburgh's decision-makers. Furthermore, he had just enjoyed an undoubted triumph – the design and building of Heriot Row, which remains the domestic heart of legal Edinburgh two hundred years on, and Reid's design for the street became the core template for all future New Town building.

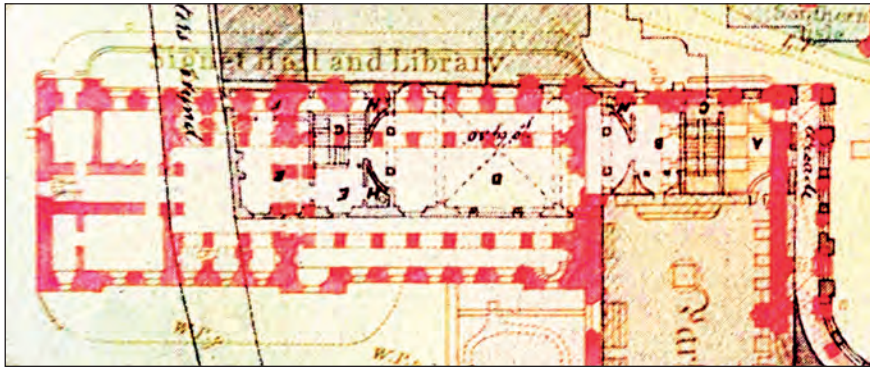


Fig. 4. Robert Reid's 1806 sketch for the Library Block (in black) superimposed on the 1849 Ordnance Survey plan of the Signet Library as actually built (in red).

Reid's designs for Parliament Square essentially took Robert Adam's corner-turning colonnades for the University of Edinburgh and allied them with his own Heriot Row elevations, proportionately enlarged. For the new block, he took the same pair of ideas, but flattened them out to create the northern front depicted in the October 1810 *Scots Magazine* engraving. For the Faculty of Advocates on the upper floor, this would work well: Advocates would enjoy access to balconies overlooking Parliament Square on two sides, with copious, well-lit accommodation within. For the Writers, the prospect was less rosy. The need to create a 'colonnade' effect on the northern front pulled the ground floor windows deep back into the façade, making it harder for light to penetrate within; the same design imposed a maximum window height of twelve feet in a room whose ceiling was almost twice as high. The WS Society's portion of the new building had dimness designed into it.

Despite the promises of the *Scots Magazine* that the Advocates could look forward to a vast new library chamber, it is not entirely clear that such magnificence was insisted upon to Reid from the beginning. There are signs in the Faculty minutes that the available premises were to be divided into several chambers at one stage,<sup>18</sup> and that the Advocates had begun the project with rather more modest requirements, reflecting their need for additional space for more than just their magnificent Library.

This is also the story told by Reid's 1806 sketch, which is shown in black in Fig. 4 superimposed on the building's final constructed form (coloured red). It shows a building consisting of two parts. The

easternmost section sits atop the northern end of Parliament Hall, providing separate entrance halls for the Advocates and the WS Society, and bringing the colonnaded refacing of the Hall around the corner to face the Lawnmarket. A second and slightly wider section – similar in width to Reid's building for the Court of Exchequer<sup>19</sup> – contains the hall and offices of the WS Society, which extends westwards as far as the eastern edge of Forrester's Wynd. Stairs at the western end lead to proposed WS Society basement and upper storey rooms.

The final constructed form of the building, shown in red, expresses as a significantly larger and more ambitious building. It is significantly wider to the



Fig. 5. NLS Spy viewer showing (a) within the spyglass, John Ainslie's 'Old and New Town of Edinburgh and Leith with the proposed docks' (1804), courtesy of the National Library of Scotland, and (b) outwith the spyglass, OpenStreetMap mapping (2020). © OpenStreetMap contributors

south, significantly off-centre from the entrance block, and ‘turns the corner’ sufficiently around Parliament Hall to create significant interference with the Hall’s seventeenth-century fenestration. (It is notable that had the building retained its original width, the lighting issues caused by the Reid’s recessed ground floor windows would have been considerably lessened).

Not only is the final building wider than that described by Reid’s 1806 sketch, it is also longer. An additional extension block has been added to the 1806 design, crossing Forrester’s Wynd and Turk’s Close, taking the building almost as far as Liberton’s Wynd. Fig. 5 shows Ainslie’s 1804 map of Edinburgh overlaid on a modern plan, with Ainslie’s ‘23’ being the entrance to Forrester’s Wynd and ‘22’ that of Turk’s Close. This additional block is on a different central axis, being positioned about three feet to the south of its neighbour.

Nothing has yet emerged in archive form to explain the growth in the scale of the project from one not dissimilar in scale from Reid’s Court of Exchequer to the substantially wider and longer tripartite development that was finally constructed. There is no comment within the surviving records to explain the southwards shift in axis from the central to the western block. The simplest explanation is to see the structure in terms of the first stated desire by the Faculty of Advocates for additional spaces for a variety of purposes. The shape of the structure as built is not one intended for the grand library hall described by the *Scots Magazine*, but one envisaged as a series of smaller apartments serving different functions.

Given the Writers’ own indecision about the precise nature of their new accommodation, it is possible that Reid had found himself in the service of clients who not only could not initially agree about what was required of him, but whose ambition and intent for the new building and the libraries it was to contain was shifting and becoming more grandiose. What was true of the Advocates was so also for the Writers. The WS Society’s book collection had begun its greatest period of expansion,<sup>20</sup> and what may have appeared suitable new accommodation in 1806 or 1809 might by 1812 have become entirely inadequate.

### Reid’s idea of a library

There is also the matter of what Robert Reid considered the commission of a library to involve. Whilst engaged on the Signet Library, Reid was also building a library and gallery extension to Paxton House,<sup>21</sup> which is situated on the Tweed just outside Berwick. The library portion of this, in its state when handed over by Reid to Jean Home, was no more than a room sufficient to hold books. The fitting out, with shelving and furniture, was undertaken by the firm William Trotter of Edinburgh.

This contrasts with the practice of Reid’s great model, Robert Adam, whose library designs invariably regard the shelves and other immovable fittings as part of the architecture of the room.<sup>22</sup> This does not appear to have been Reid’s approach, either here or in any of his other public buildings. It may have been perfectly acceptable, even expected, by both Advocates and Writers at the time of the project’s commencement, but as their ideas changed and grew, so might their expectations of what Reid might be asked to provide.

In 1815, the WS Society Commissioners called for material costings to be drawn up for both Robert Reid’s proposed interior for their Hall and Library and for William Stark’s. These costings survive.<sup>23</sup> Reid’s was drawn up by himself and it is notable for the absence of any mention of bookshelves or any specifically library-orientated fittings. Stark’s, drawn up posthumously as the architect himself had died two years previously, takes a contrasting and Adamesque approach, treating the presses and other permanent accoutrements of a working library as essential and listing and costing them in full. Such fittings also comprise a significant proportion of Stark’s drawings for the project as contained in a list of drawings provided by George Thomson to Macvey Napier on behalf of William Stark’s widow in March 1815.<sup>24</sup>

### The appointment of William Stark

In late 1811, just as Reid’s work on the building reached the point at which fitting out could commence, another architect entered the picture. William Stark had been working in the Borders with (Sir) Walter Scott on Scott’s early ideas for his country residence at Abbotsford.<sup>25</sup> Stark was living at Drumsheugh, on

the western outskirts of Edinburgh, having moved there in the hope of improving his fragile health. His greater career had taken place in Glasgow, where he had been responsible for the Hunterian Museum, St George's Tron Church and the Lunatic Asylum.

In purely social terms, Stark was everything Robert Reid was not. He was widely travelled and cultivated, having spent the final years of the eighteenth century travelling and working in France and Russia.<sup>26</sup> He counted as friends many of the Edinburgh and London literati, and saw his profession as that of an artist. It was an approach he passed on to his architectural pupils, which in late 1811 included the young William Playfair.

Walter Scott was impressed with Stark, believing him possessed of the highest talent,<sup>27</sup> and it is likely that Stark's introduction to the Parliament Square project was through the great novelist, who was a member of the Faculty committee overseeing their part of the project. Scott may also have introduced Stark to the Writers, via Scott's close personal friend and Librarian to the WS Society and driving force behind the WS Society's involvement in the project, Macvey Napier WS.

It has been suggested that dissatisfaction with Robert Reid's designs for the interior of the new Library block were what prompted approaches by both Faculty and Writers to Stark in search of alternatives,<sup>28</sup> but it is equally possible that Stark's arrival in Edinburgh opened the possibility, even with the project well advanced, for both to work with an architect who, unlike Reid, had an established track record of institutional building, and who socially was better positioned to understand the needs of both partners. Reid had to some degree been imposed upon both partners by the Government's Trustees: Stark would be a choice they had made themselves. Nevertheless, real concerns about Reid's designs did exist. In January 1812, Macvey Napier wrote to Reid to inform him that Stark had been engaged to present alternative schemes.<sup>29</sup> It is significant that Napier mentions concern about whether the Signet Hall would be adequately lit without 'additional windows'. Clearly Reid's recessed fenestration on the northern elevation was becoming an object of contention.

Napier's concerns were echoed in a letter to him from Stark on 3 February 1812.<sup>30</sup> Stark had been able to view the new building, and

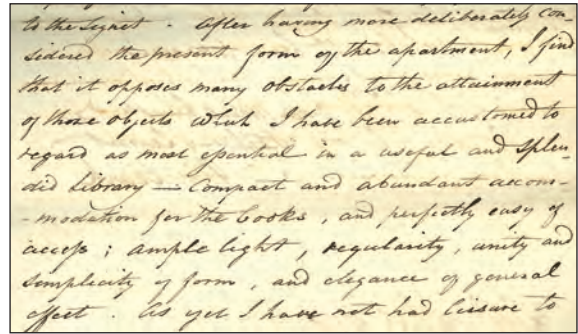


Fig. 6. Letter from William Stark to Macvey Napier WS, 3 February 1812. WS Society Collections

having more deliberately considered the present form of the apartment, I find that it opposes many obstacles to the attainment of those objects which I have been accustomed to regard as most essential in a useful and splendid library — compact and abundant accommodation for the books, and perfectly easy access; ample light, regularity, unity and simplicity of form, and elegance of general effect.

Here we see that, unlike Reid, Stark took the view that a library was more than a room capable of being fitted out with shelves: furthermore, he had a clear philosophy and vision of what the ideal library might be capable of becoming. Despite the prospect of considerable additional expense and trouble, Stark was commissioned by both Faculty and Writers to bring the Parliament Square project to a successful conclusion. Reid would retain oversight of the actual construction work (perhaps at the insistence of the Government's Trustees), although his role in its design was now at an end.

#### A new direction: William Stark's reengineering of the Library Block

The problem Stark faced in terms of lighting the Signet Library was that the northern elevation, with its precise and costly cut stone, was already in place, and the cost of any redesign at this late stage would be prohibitively expensive. The light reaching the Library would have to be increased without physical alteration to the front of the building. The southern elevation, by contrast, was not public-facing and consisted of an easily rearranged rough stone: it was here that efforts at alteration could focus. The situation was further complicated by the small southward shift in building axis between the central and western blocks, which would have to be

disguised by the interior fittings to create balance and symmetry.

On 22 April 1812, Stark wrote again to Napier on the subject of obtaining sufficient lighting for the Signet Library:

I have discovered an excellent mode of lighting the gallery without breaking out the openings formerly proposed, and have now no doubts remaining in regard to the expediency of the last projected arrangement, namely of picturing the north as well as the south windows, and of giving up the second tier on the south side, instead of which we can get ceiling lights for the gallery on both sides of the room, which will be handsome in themselves and will render it perfectly symmetrical.

The WS Society Building Committee minutes of 1 May 1812 hint at how this was to be achieved: ‘instead of the row of small windows formerly proposed, on the south side, Mr. Stark had suggested, that the necessary light could be procured with better effect in the way of ceiling lights from the under part of the windows in the Advocates Library above.’<sup>31</sup>

With the northern elevation inviolable, it is the southern elevation of the Library Block that tells the story of just how dramatic Stark’s reengineering became. It was a reengineering that Stark negotiated successfully with two different sets of customers whose needs were increasingly incompatible but had to be incorporated into an existing space. That he succeeded, with little or no evident friction with either set of Commissioners, speaks volumes for his ability both as an architect and, perhaps, as a salesman.

In order to achieve adequate lighting of the Signet Library, Stark moved the entire upper floor level perhaps as much as seven feet, so that the bottom pair of panes in the Upper Library windows were now visible on the north side of the Writer’s Hall below and could serve as ceiling lights. On the southern elevation, an entirely new row of windows was cut to illuminate the Signet Library, to pair and provide symmetry with those now visible to the north. To make space for this, Reid’s existing string coursing on the southern elevation was largely eliminated and the southern Upper Hall windows moved upwards. In the Upper Hall, a new elliptical ceiling replaced Reid’s flat one and regained some of the height the room had lost to improve access to daylight for the Writers below. With the Upper Hall windows on the north side now divided by the



Fig. 7. Left, supporting structure for an upper floor crosses ground floor window. Right, fully furnished window on first floor boarded up on the inside. *Author photos*

floor, they were concealed within the room behind full height book presses, the loss of light being compensated by a ceiling cupola and a vast new window dominating the western end of the room.

Although the stonework of the northern elevation remains in its 1812 form, even here the signs of Stark’s reengineering are discreetly visible to the naked eye. Most significantly, the raised floor level itself can be seen visible through and travelling across the windows, where the space won restored to the WS Society the second storey of offices at the western end promised in 1806 but surely sacrificed by Reid to the demands of the 136-foot Library Hall demanded by the Faculty of Advocates. This extraordinary feature is unique to the Signet Library amongst significant public buildings of the period, and exhibits a daring that would surely not have been contemplated by Reid.

Above the ground floor level, practically every visible window is both fully furnished and yet blanked – an anomaly once again unique in this style and on this scale to any known Regency or neoclassical structure. (Fig. 7) Once William Playfair’s lobby and staircase were added in 1819,<sup>32</sup> no part of Reid’s internal structure west of the Parliament Square colonnade remained.<sup>33</sup> The building wears Reid’s northern elevation like a mask, and indeed, the building has been described as a preternaturally early example of facadism.<sup>34</sup>



## William Stark's interiors

The immediate outcome of Stark's dramatic reengineering of the Library Block was, of course, the creation of his two brilliant neoclassical interiors, and it is here that his experience of architecture abroad, and particularly in Russia, came to the fore.<sup>35</sup> Stark's two library halls are a beautiful, never-repeated conversation in design between Scotland and the great palace city of St Petersburg.

The St Petersburg William Stark had known in his youth teemed with architects and designers from right across Europe, brought east by Tsar Peter III and later by Catherine the Great. Amongst these were Scots, and it has been suggested that Charles Cameron, architect of Tsarskoye Selo and Pavlovsk palaces, became an influence on the young Stark through this national connection during his time in Russia. Pavlovsk Palace's Greek Hall has been cited as an influence on Stark's aesthetic, and the example it presented of a central cupola as a principal lighting source would become Stark's most memorable calling card, one Stark would employ at the Hunterian Museum, the Glasgow Infirmary and the Signet Library. But Cameron was famously disinclined to form friendships with his compatriots, and in any case, the strongest stylistic echoes in Stark's later work point not to Cameron, but to an architect from southern Europe.

Giacomo Quarenghi (1744–1817) was Italian, brought to Russia by Catherine the Great to replace her existing (French) team of architects.<sup>36</sup> Over the next thirty years, he would be responsible for a vast array of important buildings and other structures in Russia, including the Hermitage Theatre, the Raphael Loggia in the Winter Palace, the Imperial Academy of Sciences, the Alexander Palace, the Catherine Institute and the Smolny Institute. It may be significant that Quarenghi had also been involved at Pavlovsk Palace, where he had introduced changes to the design of the Greek Hall.

Known records of Stark's travels and connections in Russia are all but non-existent. However, both the Signet Library now and Stark's now vanished Hunterian Museum in Glasgow teem with similarities, echoes and references to Quarenghi's work, over and above any other architect encountered by Stark across his career. There is no documented connection between the two men. But there are

strong design parallels in the two men's work, and the possibility must be that Stark saw and engaged with Quarenghi's sketchbooks and workbooks. Both men shared similar tastes in their classical references. The Alexander Palace and both Signet Library halls share many details, and the design parallels between Stark's Signet Library Lower Hall and Quarenghi's hall at the Smolny Institute are intense and where the shared influences are most clear (Fig. 8).

If Stark's aesthetic was shot through with his memories of St Petersburg, his approach to library design was both wholly original and remarkable. Georgian library design was dominated by the concept of the 'wall system' in which a library's shelves were flat against the walls of the chamber.<sup>37</sup> Robert Adam's 1791 designs for a new College of Justice complex in Edinburgh reflect this, and it is also found in the important domestic libraries at Arniston and Newhailes.<sup>38</sup>

Stark broke with this approach at the Signet Library. In the Lower Hall, at the western end beyond the screen, he revived the monastic stall system, with shelves extending out either side of the windows in a manner reminiscent of Duke Humphrey's Library in Oxford. The rest of the hall is a brilliant rethinking of the wall system (now obscured by Victorian alterations) with wall shelving performing the role of pilasters behind a grand parade of ionic columns, echoed above at gallery level in beautiful symmetry and rhythm. The columns centre the entire length of the space, obscuring entirely the room's shift in axis at its western end (Fig. 9).

Stark's Upper Hall is a brilliant, never-emulated merging of the wall and stall systems. His only known surviving drawing of the project<sup>39</sup> is a floor plan of the Hall centred upon the curved shelving, window seats and alcoves beneath the cupola. The space is chaperoned from end to end by a gallery and a parade of Corinthian columns. The cupola and vast, almost church-like Great Window at the western end of the space are unique Stark touches. Again, the columns, coupled with the greater depth of the book presses to the south compared to the north, centre the entire space and obscure the shift southwards in the room's axis at the western end (Fig. 10).

The great nineteenth-century Scottish architect William Playfair was engaged in study under William Stark during the building of the Signet Library,<sup>40</sup> and although Playfair's Library at the University of



Fig. 8. Above, Lower Hall of the Signet Library. *Author photo*. Below, Hall of the Smolny Institute, St Petersburg. *Karl Bulla Archive*

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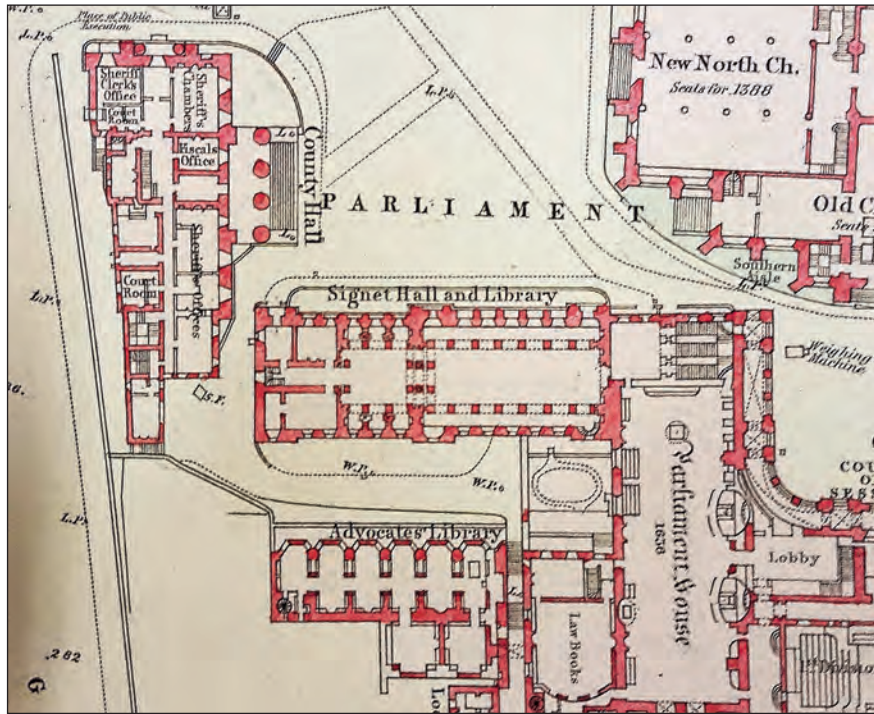


Fig. 9. Ground plan of Stark's Lower Hall of the Signet Library as built, seen in context in the 1849 Ordnance Survey of Edinburgh. *WS Society Collections*

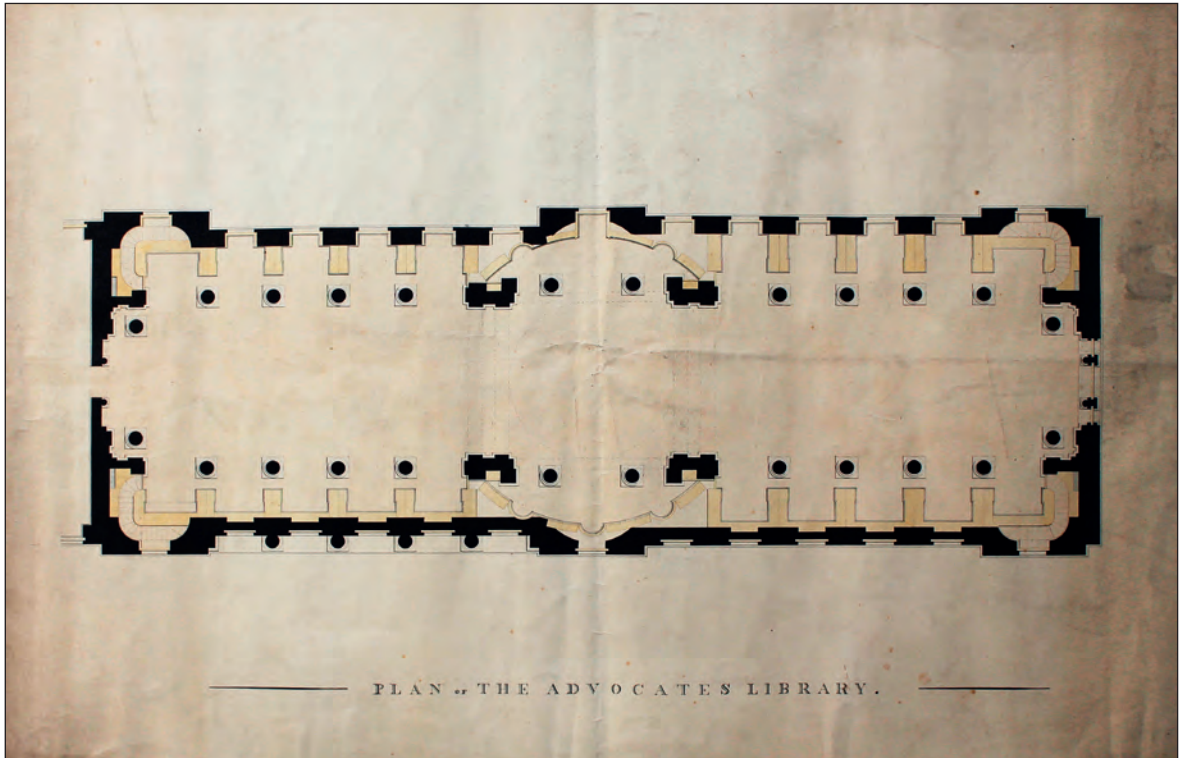


Fig. 10. Plan of the Advocates Library (the Upper Hall of the Signet Library). William Stark c.1812. *WS Society Collections*

Edinburgh is a plainer, blockier affair, it is worth noting that his early designs deployed lighting from ceiling cupolas<sup>41</sup> reminiscent of those employed by Stark first at Glasgow's Hunterian Museum and subsequently at the Signet Library.

Sadly, William Stark did not live to see his Signet Library completed. He died at Drumsheugh in October 1813, leaving his assistant William Brown to bring the building to a conclusion. The Signet Library would prove to be his last project, and as so much of his work elsewhere has been demolished or altered beyond recognition, it is now his greatest memorial.

The WS Society took possession of its new premises in November 1815, and immediately embarked upon a golden age of expansion and collecting that would make the Signet Library world famous. Shortly after, Macvey Napier would report to the Committee:

It must appear abundantly evident, that the possession of such apartments as those which the Society now enjoys cannot but enhance the public opinion of its importance, and the Committee humbly think that it will on reflection appear equally clear that the possession of an extensive and well-chosen library must greatly add to the that feeling, but stamping upon the Society a character for liberal endowments, as well as for professional eminence. But it is not merely as a graceful ornament – it is not merely as being highly calculated to produce a favourable impression on the public eye, that the Library is an institution well worthy of the best wishes and the fostering care of the Society. In an age like the present, when reading may, in some measure be said to constitute a part of the business of life, when some acquaintance with literature is indispensable to every man who is called to exercise a liberal profession, and when new books are printed in such succession, and at such high prices, it is only by having access to an extensive library that individuals of moderate fortune can enjoy the means of gratifying their taste for liberal enquiry.<sup>42</sup>

### Remaining questions and aftermath

The records that survive of the Signet Library's construction focus almost entirely upon the two main halls. The building contains many other spaces, whose design and development are yet to be fully researched. The building of Stark's Great Window in the Upper Library obscured much of the evidence for Reid's original ideas for the fenestration of the western elevation of the building, and the addition of the West Wing from 1902 removed what was left, along with the original Georgian staircase. But we know that the western elevation was fenestrated, and at every nineteenth-century sunset the windows must

have filled the West Lobby and the basement corridor with the beautiful pink light of evening. The basement corridor contains a superb procession of Regency apartments whose inner and outer fenestration feed a soft light into the corridor that was originally enough to render artificial lighting unnecessary. Did Stark have a hand in their design?

And what of Reid's surviving spaces? The remains of his staircase from the entrance lobby to the Laigh Hall survive on the wall in the latter. Reid's rooms overlooking his colonnade in Parliament Square are festooned with graffiti that date their last possible redecoration to the 1850s. As no redecoration would take place in any part of the Signet Library until 1867, have we at least these two spaces to speak for his original intentions? If so, they include a grand balconied walkway between the Upper Library and the court complex, now walled off at the court end. In opting for Stark, the Advocates may also have surrendered not only this but a second, narrower balcony overlooking the new Square and the Lawnmarket.

The Signet Library opened in November 1815, although the work required to build to Stark's designs upstairs meant that the Upper Library is not thought to have been completed in the fullest sense before the visit of King George IV in 1822. Stark had provided the Signet Hall and Library with fireplaces, but almost immediately the Society opted to install a similar system of warm air heating to the one that had proven so successful at Register House. The iron tables that served both as desks and as conduits for the warm air remain in the Library today.

Stark's staircase (and it must have been his, not Reid's) that connected the Upper Hall to the ground floor was lost to his pupil Playfair's reworking of the eastern end of the building. Playfair also introduced two new ceiling cupolas at the eastern end and panelled off what was left of Reid's northern windows. Stark's original doorway and entrance to the Upper Hall was lost at the same time, although his doorway to the Lower Hall remains to give an idea of how it had been. (Playfair's own staircase was itself short-lived. Following the Great Fire of Edinburgh in 1824, the Faculty of Advocates sold their part of the building to the Writers to the Signet and built a new Library on land to the south. A new staircase was commissioned from William Burn to replace Playfair's structure and unify the building. This was completed in 1833).

The rapid growth of the book stock in the Lower Hall overtook Stark's already generous provision quickly, and in the 1850s, with every available alternative space already crammed with book presses, the beautiful rhythmic exchange between Stark's ionic columns and the pilaster shelves at wall and gallery level was interrupted by the installation of new shelving beneath the gallery windows. At the same time, the windows at the western end of the Hall were altered on the south side to allow in more light, compensating for the smoke of the Canongate foundries and breweries. In 1889, longitudinal cases were installed in the Lower Hall's eastern portion, replacing the pilaster shelving beneath the gallery (Fig. 11).

In December 1852, Librarian David Laing obtained costings for a plan to replace the Upper Library ceiling with glass and to shelve over the Grand Window, but fortunately the cost proved too great.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, it is not Stark's Grand Window we see today. Stark's window was replaced by a larger opening in 1867 and the gallery running in front of it removed. It was reworked again in 1887 when the current stained glass was installed to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. In 1937, Stark's inner windows to the Lower Library gallery were removed, and the balcony overlooking the Lawnmarket reopened to provide a viewing platform for the visiting Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret whilst their parents attended the Thistle Ceremony in St Giles'.

The loss or concealment of crucial parts of Stark's original designs is compounded by the vanishing of his original decorative scheme, initially beneath the tan shades and scarlet banding installed shortly before the Great War by the Society's architect Sir Robert Rowand Anderson. Stark had intended an overall chalk white colouring for both halls, relieved only by the gilded railings of the galleries (the commissioning of Thomas Stothard's mural for the cupola in the Upper Hall postdated Stark's death). Although recent restoration has returned Stark's scheme to his columns in both halls, it is unlikely that the magnificent gilding and painting added to the halls and staircases in the twentieth century will be returned to the Regency colouring in any conceivable timeframe.

But surely enough remains of William Stark's designed intentions for the Signet Library to justify its claim to be his greatest work and finest memorial. Twenty years after Stark's death, the great bibliophile



Fig. 11. The Lower Hall of the Signet Library in its current form. Stark's pilaster shelves can be seen supporting arches on the gallery. *Author photo*

Thomas Dibdin would describe the Signet Library as a 'Paradise of Bokes' [*sic*], comparing it to 'the purple light of Virgil's Elysian fields' and, perhaps making an oblique reference to St Petersburg, declared that 'the whole has an absolutely palatial air. Grandees with fur cloaks should be the inmates.'<sup>44</sup> If the Writers had built a palace, it was one for everyone: Dibdin concluded 'but let it not be supposed that the humblest aspirant may not obtain the volume of which he is in need, and that this interior is not frequented by students, artists and readers of every grade and description.' Stark's brilliant rescue operation meant that the Signet Library would not need any form of artificial illumination until the arrival of the electric light in 1904, and to this day his magnificent book presses still serve lawyers and scholars of his native land and those of the adopted countries of his youth. As a designer of libraries of beauty, utility, durability and originality, he is without parallel in his own time, and his recognition in this respect is long overdue.

- 1 John Britton and Thomas Hosmer Shepherd, *Modern Athens! Displayed in a series of views: or Edinburgh in the nineteenth century: exhibiting the whole of the new buildings, modern improvements, antiquities, and picturesque scenery, of the Scottish metropolis and its environs* (London 1829).
- 2 The account of King George IV's remarks is George Thomson's, quoted in R. G. Stark, *Memoir of William Stark, Architect*. National Library of Scotland (NLS) MS.1758 1935 f.10.
- 3 George Washington Wilson's images of the Signet Library Upper Hall span the period of the Hall's first redecoration of 1867 and depict the space without its furniture and carpets. The George Washington Wilson photographic archive has been digitised by the University of Aberdeen and may be searched at <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/special-collections/george-washington-wilson.php>.
- 4 Reproduced in *The History of the Society of Writers to HM Signet* (Edinburgh 1890), lxxii. The original ink sketch remains in the possession of the WS Society.
- 5 *The Scotsman*, 23 July 1901, p. 7.
- 6 Iain Gordon Brown, *Building for Books: the architectural evolution of the Advocates Library 1689–1925* (Edinburgh 1989).
- 7 George Hodge Ballantyne, *The Signet Library and its Librarians* (Glasgow 1979). George Ballantyne sadly passed away in July 2020 during the writing of this paper.
- 8 Brown, *Building for Books*, pp. 83–84. Reid's drawing is in the possession of Edinburgh Central Library, pl. YDA 1918, C61849.
- 9 The final lot in the sale of William Stark's books and pictures was one simply described as 'architectural drawings'. Their fate is unknown. See *A catalogue of a valuable collection of books, comprising ... the ... library of ... William Stark ...; also catalogues of paintings, drawings and prints, which will be sold ... by Mr. John Ballantyne ... 20th January, 1815, etc.* National Library of Scotland (NLS), K.R.14.e.1(11). None of Robert Reid's working drawings from the 1809–1812 period of the Signet Library's construction are known to survive.
- 10 Brown, *Building for Books*, p. 88; Ballantyne, *Signet Library*, p. 37.
- 11 W. K. Dickson, 'The Signet Library, Edinburgh', *The Book-Lover's Magazine: Books and Book-Plates*, vol. 6 pt. 1 (1905) pp. 1–13.
- 12 See Brown, *Building for Books*, ch. 6, 'Paradise of Bokes'.
- 13 A joint scheme was drawn up by Robert Adam in 1791, the drawings for which survive at the Soane Museum in London.
- 14 For the purchase and development of Writers Court, see Ballantyne, *Signet Library*, pp. 67–68.
- 15 Edinburgh Central Library pl. YDA 1918, C61849.
- 16 See *Minute Book of the Library Committee and Committee on Buildings*, 1807–1816. WS Society Archives WS/7/2/1.
- 17 *Scots Magazine*, August 1810, front page matter.
- 18 This is reflected by Francis Jeffrey's misgivings about the Faculty's provision in the new building, discussed in Brown, *Building for Books*, p. 84.
- 19 Two drawings by Robert Reid for the proposed Court of Exchequer survive in the Dean of Guild Papers Box 1807/7, Edinburgh City Archives. See Joe Rock, *Edinburgh Dean of Guild Court*, Part 3, January to December 1807: <https://sites.google.com/site/edinburghdeanofguildcourt2/home/january-to-december-1807>.
- 20 In 1805, the Writers' librarian Macvey Napier WS had inherited a collection of about 1,800 works; by 1835 he had increased this to over 10,000 titles and 40,000 volumes.
- 21 For Paxton House see A. Rowan, 'Paxton House, Berwickshire I, II & III', *Country Life*, 1967, pp. 142, 364–7, 422–5, 470–73.
- 22 Adam's 1791 drawings for the proposed complex of halls and libraries for the College of Justice are discussed by Brown, *Building for Books*, ch. 5, 'A Handsome Library for the Faculty of Advocates'.
- 23 *Measurement of the Work in the Writers to the Signets Library Conforming to Mr Reid's Plans*, Robert Reid, dated 29 June 1815. WS Society Archives WS7/2; *Measurement of the Wright and Plaster Work in the Library Belonging to the Writers to the Signet as now executed*, George Cairncross, dated 7 July 1815. WS Society Archives WS7/2.
- 24 Letter from George Thomson to Macvey Napier WS, 27 March 1815. WS Society Archives WS7/2; *A List of the Drawings of Mr. Stark's design for the Society of Writers to the Signet*, March 1815. WS Society Archives WS7/2.
- 25 '[Scott] has got a plan of a cottage from a Mr. Stark a young architect which I have not yet seen but I am told it is very beautiful', Deputy Keeper of the Signet Colin Mackenzie to James Skene, letter dated 6 March 1812 (letter photocopy in WS Society Archives donated by Professor Frances C. Singh).
- 26 Contemporary accounts and records of William Stark's career are scant. In the absence of any fuller account, much has necessarily fallen on the manuscript R. G. Stark, *Memoir of William Stark, Architect*. National Library of Scotland (NLS) MS.1758 1935.
- 27 Sir Herbert Grierson *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. III, 1811–1814 (Edinburgh 1932–1937), p. 368. To Daniel Terry, 20 October 1813 'And this brings me to the loss of poor Stark, with whom more genius has died than is left behind among the collected universality of Scottish architects.'
- 28 Brown, *Building for Books*, p. 88; Ballantyne, *Signet Library*, p. 72.
- 29 Letter recorded in *Minutes of the Curators of the Library*, vol. 1, p. 54. WS Society Archives WS/8/1/1/1.
- 30 These and subsequent exchanges between Macvey Napier WS and William Stark: WS Society Archives, *Correspondence of Macvey Napier relating to the building of the Signet Library 1807 to 1824*, WS/7/2/2.
- 31 *Minute Book of the Library Committee and Committee on Buildings*, 1807–1816. WS Society Archives WS/7/2/1.

- 32 Brown, *Building for Books*, pp. 94–96
- 33 The Signet Library's Restalrig Room, with its attic containing two centuries of graffitied names and drawings left by the craftspeople who have cared for the building, is believed to be the last remaining space in the building for which Reid can claim responsibility. It is also believed to retain Reid's original intended floor level for the main upper storey.
- 34 Dr Eleanor Harris, quoted at <https://twitter.com/eleanormharris/status/671725517578588161>.
- 35 Both Stark and Reid await their biographers. For Stark, see David Walker, 'Stark, William (1770–1813)' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/38005>.
- 36 Many of Quarenghi's architectural drawings from this period of his career have been digitised and may be viewed at <https://www.arthermitage.org/Quarenghi-Giacomo/index.html>.
- 37 For a modern reflection on Georgian and Regency library design see James Campbell and Will Pryce, *The Library: a world history* (Chicago 2013), ch. 5. Brown, *Building for Books*, pp. 90–91 points out that the design of Stark's Upper Hall provided insufficient capacity for future growth and would quickly become an anachronism: nineteenth-century design separated reading rooms from book stacks, which would become the case at the Signet Library with the 1904 opening of the West Wing extension.
- 38 For the design of the principal Georgian private libraries in Scotland, see Kit Baston, *Charles Areskine's Library: lawyers and their books at the dawn of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Leiden 2016), pp. 170–8.
- 39 *Plan of the Advocates Library* (Single sheet in ink), 1812? WS Society Archives 7/2. We are indebted to Andrew Clark whose patient detective work revealed Stark's name and other notes on the plan in the faintest of Regency pencil.
- 40 Charles McKean, 'Playfair, William Henry', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004) <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/22371>.
- 41 The University of Edinburgh, *Reports, &c. relative to the completion of the College Buildings. For the sole use of the Trustees, as ordered by their minutes of 25th November, 1816*, p. 53.
- 42 *Report of the Committee on the New Hall and Library*, 1 February 1816. WS Society Sederunt Book, vol. 6, p. 140. WS Society Archives WS/2/1/6.
- 43 *Minutes of the Curators of the Library*, 6 December 1852. WS Society Archives WS/8/1/1/2.
- 44 Thomas Dibdin, *A Bibliographical, Antiquarian and Picturesque Tour in the Northern Counties of England and in Scotland* (1838), vol. 2, p. 592.