
The Old School at Stenhousemuir

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From the time, at least, of David 1 until the day when Charles Edward Stuart fled from the field of Culloden, the nature of Scottish society remained relatively stable. No doubt changes were seen; evolution has always been with us. Agriculture, trade and commerce have invariably reacted to need and technology. Equally, there was revolution! For historians of Scotland, the Reformation is perceived as perhaps the most momentous of these. Just as trauma followed calamity, so war and famine were constant. But, through all of this, most people in the country followed a lifestyle which would have been recognised equally as much by their great-grandfather as by their great-grandchild. It was a structured society. The rule of law and order descended from the crown through parliament and the higher courts down through sheriffs, barons and burghs to the most local level of the birlaw courts. The local courts, those of burgh and baron, did not only judge matters of crime and civil dispute: they organised and formalised matters of local necessity. Other bodies were also involved in that process. Among these were the Kirk Sessions. These were composed of the minister and his elders. Their corporate existence arose from the Reformation. Imposed upon them were several statutory duties. As well as those obligations which impinged directly upon the spiritual needs of the parishioners, the maintenance of the fabric of the church was another of the Session's charges. Equally, they were responsible for the provision of the elementary education of the children of the parish. They had to supply both teacher and schoolroom. The cost of the provision of these requirements fell upon the principal landowners of the parish, the *Heritors*. They were obliged to furnish the money for the upkeep of the fabric of both church and parochial school.

Because of the relatively small number of people in the land and by the very nature of the inherent stability of society, this established order appears to have worked reasonably within its context. However, the eighteenth century brought new circumstances that were to cause the old order to stumble. It was an era which saw, for the first time in millenia, great population shifts. For instance, what is most often described as the 'Highland Clearances', was a phenomenon being experienced throughout the country. In our own area, comparing the two parishes of [Dunipace](#) and [Larbert](#) in 1791, we are told that:

"In former times the parish of Dunipace was the most populous", but that the population was "greatly diminished, owing to the Heritors taking the land into their own hands and appropriating it to pasturage for large cattle, sheep, etc." [1]

Yet another catalyst was the Industrial Revolution. This too impacted upon the local area with the founding of [Carron Iron Works](#). The foundry was actually located in what was then the parish of Larbert. From the same source of 1791, we learn that the parish had "increased in a very large proportion". There were 3,000 people over the age of 12 years. Taking younger children into account brought the figure to an estimated 4,000. Great changes had been brought to the way of life of the Scottish people. However, in their own way each of these ingredients served to counteract

the other. People newly dispossessed from the land found employment in the new industries. Those who by tradition were materially the richest in our society most often continued to prosper but a great deal of new wealth was generated. As ever, this was not equally distributed. The emerging *nouveau riche* often tended to fill the vacuum created by the forfeited lairds and absentee landlords. Despite the reservations we may have of the motivations that drove them and of their often ruthless opportunism, many of these people arguably brought vitality to certain areas of everyday life. Much of what we regard today as 'our heritage' owes its existence to the entrepreneurs of that period.

While the industrialists flourished and embellished their lifestyles with fine new mansions, many of the parish churches, most of which would have been by then some seven hundred years old, were falling into decay. Much of the neglect, we may suppose, was the result of a number of causes. Age contributed, obviously but we must also bear in mind that the local lairds and principal landowners may no longer have been resident. Some had been forfeited for their part in one or both of the [Risings](#); others, in the fashion of the time, preferred living in the city. Add to this the evidence which paints a picture of frugality amongst the landed gentry, at least in terms of social responsibility. This sense of communal thrift is repeatedly demonstrated within the pages of the records of both the Session and Heritors of Larbert parish. Certainly the sorry state of the church had been causing concern for many years. In his [history of that church](#), Ian Scott relates that the old pre-Reformation building was "*cold, damp and decaying, frequently repaired and far too small for the population.*"^[2] The last of these complaints is of great significance. As mentioned above, Carron Company, along with all of the peripheral industry generated by its presence, had caused an influx of people to the parish. Today we monitor population shifts in an attempt to plan the procurement of the essential utilities (which is not to say that such provision is always delivered). What the parish of Larbert experienced at that time was without precedent in Scotland. It could not have been foreseen. In all likelihood the impact and consequences were beyond comprehension. Certainly there was no adequate machinery in place to react to these unique circumstances. While the old establishment appears to have functioned adequately for centuries, it was simply neither structured nor empowered to respond to the demands of the moment. We must also try to visualise the circumstance from the perspective of that epoch. What we might find it difficult to comprehend in our present secular age is that the Church was an institution fundamental to the lives of the majority of these earlier people. They were faced with a situation which had to be met incisively. It was! But not through the actions of the old guard. They prevaricated. It was the new order which eventually took matters in hand. These new Heritors, industrialists and merchants alike, were largely responsible for the action that resulted in the replacement of the ancient, decayed church. It was their efforts which gave us the splendid gothic structure which today commands the north bank of the [River Carron](#).

Just as the state of the church had been a burden to the Heritors, so too was the condition of the [parochial school](#). Many parishes did not provide accommodation for specific use as a school. Pupils might be taught in the church itself or in an outhouse. In instances where discrete schoolhouses did exist, the buildings that housed these would have been two or three hundred years old by the mid-eighteenth century. Because they had responsibility for the joint parishes of Larbert and

Dunipace even before the events mentioned above, the Heritors were responsible for two schools. One lay in [Dunipace](#) on the Denovan road at a place called “the Thorn”. Its site was opposite where the nineteenth century school stands. The other was obviously in Larbert; it seems to have stood fairly near to the church which it mirrored in its distressed state. In 1713 the Heritors’ records contain the following:

The schoolmaster represented that the schoolhouse stands in great need of repairing the session finding that the Heritors is very averse for repairing the said house they appoint John Russell to provide Straw and Divot in order to Right the said house”.

As the use of turf or “divot” was commonplace in lowland Scotland for thatching, we may infer that all that was done on this occasion was to make good the roof.

Not only had the church and schools fallen into a state of decay, the massive increase in the size of the population of the parish meant that both had become too small. Over and above this, for most of the parishioners they were in the wrong place: Carron Works, along with its associated industries was situated at the opposite end of the parish. So too were the people who laboured in them. To serve the workforce, new settlements had arisen. The small port at [Quarrelshore](#) had become a focal point. It served as the principal harbour for the works and, by association, it came to be known as Carronshore. The number of people living at the original small hamlet increased rapidly. Ironfounding used vast quantities of coal and the coalworks at Kinnaird supplied much of Carron’s needs. A sizeable settlement of colliers arose there. However, what was to become the largest village of the area was established on the least productive and therefore cheapest land pertaining to the estate of [Stenhouse](#). This was on the common moor of the estate and the new village, for obvious reasons, came to be known as Stenhousemuir. By 1791 a school had been set up in each of these hamlets. The colliers’ school at Kinnaird was the smallest with 24 pupils. The old schools of Larbert and Dunipace each had around 40 students, as did the one at Carronshore. Stenhousemuir, with a roll of 60 pupils, was the largest and was by then designated as the parochial school of Larbert. For the onerous responsibility of dealing with three score children, the master at Stenhousemuir received an annual salary of 100 merks Scots (sixty-six pounds, thirteen shillings and four pence Scots).^[3] At 20 old pennies sterling to the Scots pound this represents a little over £5 sterling. It is evident that this first school at Stenhousemuir soon failed to meet the needs of the local community. The population had continued to grow and the new parish school was obviously both too small and physically inadequate. Indications of this are apparent in records such as that of 1808 when the Heritors discussed “the state of the schoolhouse etc.” Their concern was, in all likelihood, instigated by the death of the schoolmaster, William Porteous and the need to attract a suitably qualified replacement. They decided to get a local tradesman to:

“give an estimate of what would be the sum requisite to raise the walls of the schoolhouse four feet and put a slate roof and other necessary repairs on the whole tenements”

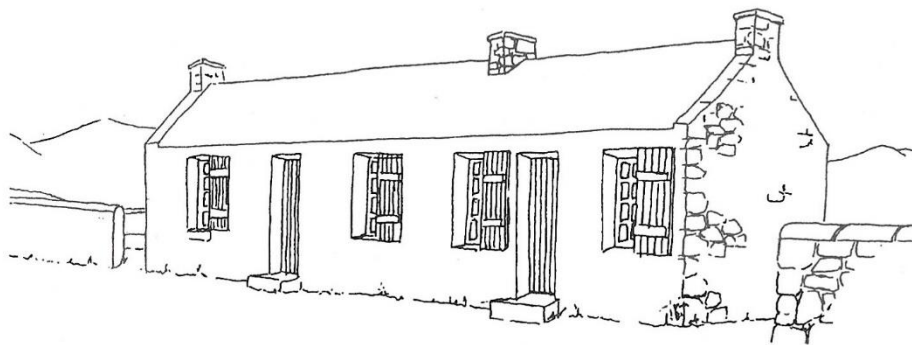
Whether or not their intentions were implemented is not recorded but, as suggested below, there are some indications that they may not have been. Nevertheless, even if such improvements were made, they were once more found to be lacking. On the 28th of January 1814, the Heritors met and it is recorded that:

"The meeting next took into consideration the state of the school and they were unanimously of the opinion that the present school is very insufficient, very incommodious and unhealthy; and that a new one ought to be built."

Two local tradesmen, Robert Reid, a mason based in Torwood and Alexander Gilchrist, a wright or carpenter from Larbert, submitted a plan for the new school and schoolhouse. Fortunately, the specifications for the new building were recorded in the Heritor's books. These gave an insight into the techniques and terminology of builders of that period and provide prices not just for the completed building but of many smaller items such as locks and latches. The cost of the whole building, we find, was £350. It was completed by the 29th of December of that same year. A report was received from two "professional men":

"We, the subscriber, having examined this school and school home find it finished in every respect according to the plan and specifications."

They also noted that the garden had been *"made up to the legal quantity of one rood of ground"*. The relevant specifications are detailed in [Appendix 1](#).



Conjectural drawing of the original Parochial School in Stenhousemuir (1791)

In 1816 came the proposal to make improvements to this building in the form of the addition of porches and the laying of a deal floor. Once more, we do not learn whether or not these were carried out. If they were, they would still seem to have left shortcomings. Without doubt, the appointment of a new teacher in 1826 was instrumental in the developments that followed. He stressed that dealing with 124 pupils was more than one person could cope with and pleaded for additional help. Equally, he was unhappy with the accommodation. Meeting with the Heritors, he put his concerns. As a consequence, it was suggested that:

"... the inconvenience of the noise arising from the school being under the dwelling house, as well as the danger of fire from the kitchen being upstairs it appeared that a new school-room should be built."

William Young, the new schoolmaster, had been induced to leave his previous post and this probably gave him some bargaining power. Not necessarily with joyful hearts, the Heritors agreed that they would build a new schoolroom. Young and his family were to have the sole use of the existing building. However, as always, the Heritors, not inclined to be over profligate with their money, required that:

“the schoolmaster shall go to the necessary expense of repairing and altering the present house as a dwelling house”.

This canny approach is further demonstrated by the fact that, in addition the schoolmaster was to use the enhanced accommodation to *“take in boarders”*.^[4] Amongst these would be his assistant. All of these innovations would, in the words of the Heritors, *“defray the costs of the teacher’s salary”*. As Ian Scott remarks, this solution was *“an ingenious one”*.^[5] The alterations were undertaken and the building was transformed into a substantial two-storey house. Situated in King Street at the corner of Muirhead Road, it survives to this day. Many people will have known it as the house with the monkey-puzzle trees, although these have been cut down within the last few years.



The former Parish School in Muirhead Road (1998)

While it is perceptibly a vernacular building, it has classical proportions harking back to the period when the Georgian style dominated British architecture. To replace the existing schoolroom, specifications were obtained for a new school. This was built behind the Master’s house. It too survives and stands just round the corner in Muirhead Road. It remained in use as a school from 1826 until 1886. Further modifications and enhancements are suggested during its lifetime. In his history of Larbert High School, McGilvray notes a return of 1850 which indicates that the school then had one large and one small classroom.^[6] The specified building had only one. There were three windows to the front while the extant structure has five. We may infer that a substantial portion had been added at an unknown date. This apparent anomaly arouses curiosity. When the present building is examined, several features are noteworthy. For instance, the north gable has been raised in height at some time – by about 1.3 metres (4 feet). It may be recalled that this was proposed for the older school in 1808. Despite this evident alteration, the roofline

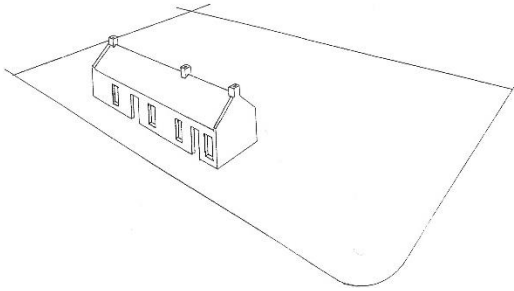
matches the street façade. McGilvray states that the later school of 1814 was built on the same site as the earliest school at Stenhousemuir which, it may be recalled, dated from before 1791. It may be surmised that part of that earlier structure was incorporated into the Muirhead Road schoolroom. Such economies were constantly practised in earlier days. Labour and materials may have been relatively cheap but the transport of the latter presented difficulties and was expensive. Equally evident is the fact that this earlier gable has been widened by about 2 metres on each side. Conversely, at the southern end of the building, that containing two front windows, it is significant that its gable is of one build. What must also be taken into consideration is the very fact that unequal portions of the building straddle the entrance porch. We must keep in mind that this was architecture of the nineteenth century: a period obsessed with symmetry. There are three chimney heads of which only one is made of stone. The others are brick built. Nonetheless, they have features in common. Each is surmounted by an identical and well fashioned cap-stone and all have thatch-stones at their base. One stands on each gable and the intermediate one is on the apex of the roof pitches. This last is not placed in the linear centre but has its southern face in line with the north edge of the porch. Behind that north edge of the porch dressed quoins are observable where it attaches to the façade. Each of these features is indicative of an earlier gable on that line. Projecting at right angles from the northern extension on its east side is another room. It appears to conform to the general style of the remainder of the building. Finally, the porch and surmounting belfry, which are such distinctive features, are not mentioned in the specifications. There can be no doubt that only the northern part of the building is the subject of the original specification (Given in [Appendix 2](#)). It is also noteworthy that the ground plan of that portion is identical with that of the two-storey building (plus or minus a few centimetres) thereby giving the same size of schoolroom as that in the two-storey building. From these observations it might be conjectured that the sequence of events was as follows:

1. A schoolroom and schoolhouse in tandem standing parallel to Muirhead Road constructed prior to 1791.
2. A two-storey schoolroom and schoolhouse standing parallel to King Street built in 1814.
3. A schoolroom, incorporating part of Structure 1, with Structure 2 becoming the schoolhouse.
4. Additional classrooms and other enhancements made to Structure 3 in the period between its completion and its abandonment.

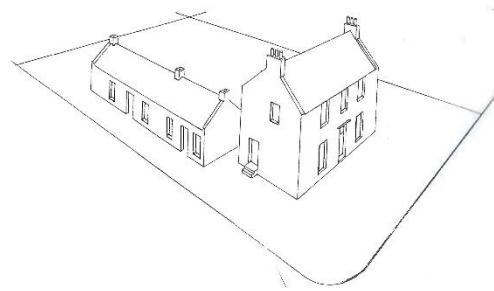
An attempt to interpret each of the recorded or inferred phases of school is demonstrated in the accompanying sketches. The Muirhead Road building remained in use as a school until 1886 when it was replaced by Larbert Central School, which institution is now incorporated into Larbert High School. Since then the old school has served other purposes. For many years it was occupied as a confectionery manufactory by John McNicol Limited. One of its most recent roles touched upon its origins when it was used as a nursery for pre-school infants.

The Evolution of the School Buildings on the Muirhead Road/King Street Site, 1791-1814

The Site in 1791

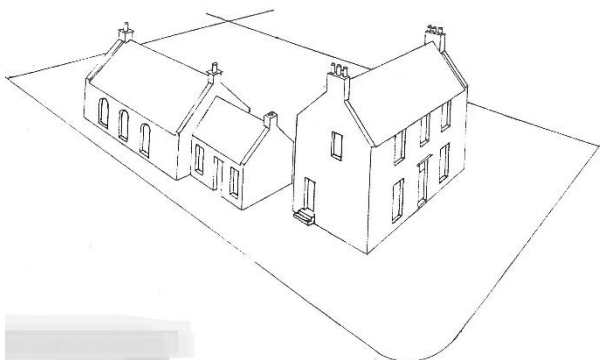


The Site in 1814

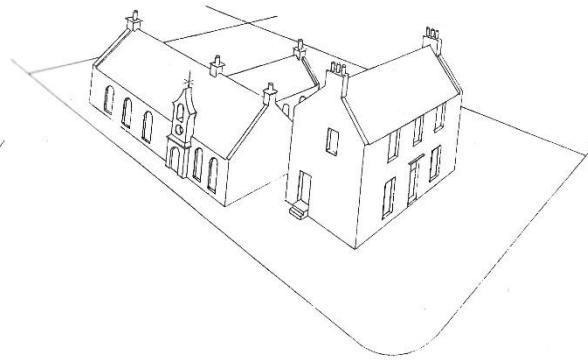


The Evolution of the School Buildings on the Muirhead Road/King Street Site, 1826 – 1886

The Site in 1826

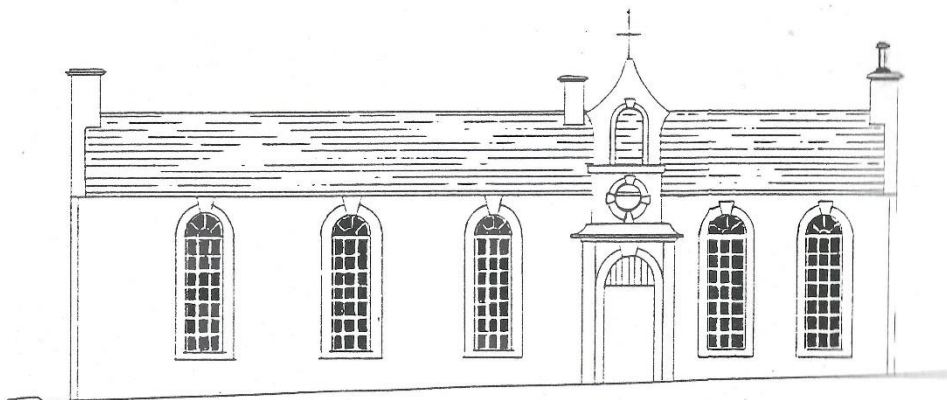


The Site in 1886

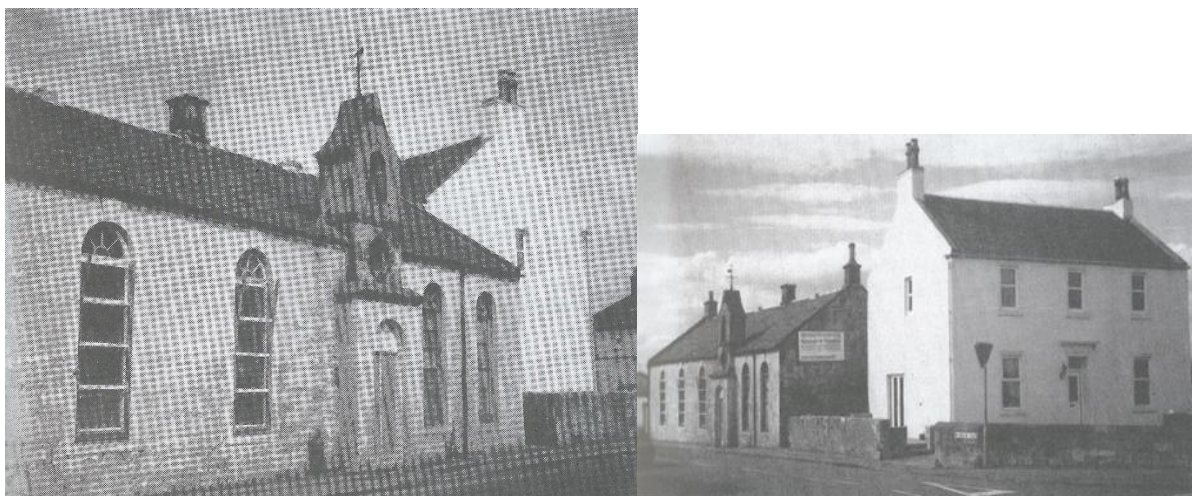




The 1814 Building after conversion to a dwelling house



The School Building in 1886



The Buildings in 1988

APPENDIX 1

Mason Work

1. The house to be good common rubble work with lime and tempered. The length to be 37 feet by 25 feet 8 inches over the walls – the height 20 feet from door of school to the top of the walls.
2. The school windows 6 in number, 3 in front and 3 in back. The front of each window to be 6 feet in height, 3 feet wide; school door to be 6 feet high by 3 feet wide; 2 pair of jambs 3 feet 3 inches by 3 feet wide.
3. The school house 6 windows; 3 in front and 3 in back; front 5 feet by 2 foot 9 inches; one window in the gable of the Kitchen 4 feet 6 inches high by 2 feet 6 inches;
4. 2 pair of jambs – Kitchen to be 3 feet 6 inches high by 3 feet 3 inches, the other pair to be about 3 feet square with proper hearthstones – one pair of these jambs to be polished – The house door to be 6 feet 6 inches high by 3 feet wide.

All the doors, windows, skews, jambs, hearth stones, two corners in front with a belt on top of front wall to be droved and back filleted $\frac{5}{8}$ inch; the chimney heads so broached. The upper course to be battled with lead; all the vents to be a foot square, well plastered with lime.

5. The foundation to be dug to a proper depth; the school floor to be a compound of wine dust and lime well mixed and laid on two inches thick above a coat of danders 6 or 8 inches thick with a place on the floor laid with a pavement 5 feet square for the stove, the school floor to be 6 inches above the outside ground.

Wright Work

Spars to be 6 at top and 3 inches at foot $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick bound with ceiling joist on the foot 6 by $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick; and upper balks.

Mason Work

The stair to be outside of house covered with slates. The contractors agree to the whole for the sum of £350."

[Appendix 2/](#) [over]

APPENDIX 2

The Mason to dig the foundations 7 inch below the surface or further if necessary and to lay one foot of Carron danders in found 3½ feet wide – The found to be of large flat stones 6 inch thick, 3 feet long header and stretcher alternately – the walls to be of good Rubble work, and well packed with proper mixture of lime and sharp sand – Floor work, soles, lintels, rybits, chimney-heads, Plinth and Base course. Jambs and Hearths, Lobby and passage to be droved work – Pavement of Lobby and Passage also hearths to be 3 inch thick, from Ferguson's quarry; rybits and corners to be back filleted.

Wright Work

Safe lintel over doors and windows to be 3 inch by the breadth required – Wall plate 7 inch broad by 1½ inch thick – Ceiling joists to be 4½ inch thick, placed 1 foot up upon the couple leg – upper balk 6 feet long. 4 inch by 2 inch all placed 20 inches from centres – sarking to be of good *St Petursburg* plank not less than ⅝ inch thick – Ridge batten for lead 3 inch by 1½ inch – the ceiling to cove round about and lathed with good split memmel lath – the cove to have a corner bead at top and bottom.

The Walls to be strapped and lathed; straps ¾ inch x 2 inch – front door 1¼ inch thick with three bars on the back hung with cross T hinges at 2/- price; stock, lock and thumb latch at 4/- price – portal door ¾ inch thick with 3 bars on the back hung with cross T hinges and thumb latch at 2/- price – All corners to have corner beads – floor standards 4½ inch by 2 inch with facings and copes – Window frames 2 inch square with good strong cases; single hung and glazed with best second crown glass – Sleepers and flooring to be laid at each side of the passage in the school - sleepers 6½ by 2½ inch – 20 inches from centres – Flooring 11/8 inch thick – The walls to be strapped all round 5 feet high and lined with ¾ inch wood. Straps 2 inch by 1 inch placed 16 inch apart – the schoolroom to have 14 desks and seats, the same size and strength as Airth School ones are; and finished in the self same manner – Front desks 32 inches high; back desks 3½ feet high with seats corresponding – Master's desk 3½ feet high with pigeon holes and lock at 2/- price – Seats to be fitted up round the walls and front seats of Master's desk – the presses to have two shelves in each ¾ inch thick with bound doors 1¼ inch thick hung with 5 inch hinges and proper locks at 2/- price each – The three front windows to have outside blinds ¾ inch thick, beaded on the joints, with three bars on the back, hung with crooks and bands 6d per pair with bolts for shutting them - Fan light above door to be glazed – all outside work to have two coats of paint.

Plaster Work

All the walls and ceilings to be finished with the best three coat plaster; properly prepared with lime hair and sharp sand.

Slater Work

The roof to be cove red with the best full sized Easdale or *Ballahaleish* slates; to have proper cover and band put on with nails weighing from 10 to 12 per 100 – All the joints of the sarking to be drawn with plaster lime.

Roofing, joisting, safe-lintles, straps, doors and windows to be good memmel timber – Framing of tables and seats to be of Baltic timber – the tops of tables may be of American yellow-pine – Copes of black birch. The whole to be finished in a substantial and workman-like manner to the satisfaction of any professional man appointed by the Heritors for inspecting the same. The whole to be finished in two months after the contract is signed.

Should anything be wanted to complete the job the Contractor to do it at his own expense. A pair of jambs to be put in at each end of the school room – the Coal-house to be at the back of the porch with a button batted door 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ inch thick, three bars on back, with oak standards, etc. Two necessities 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ foot square within, with seats, doors etc. covered with slates.

Alexander Wright and James Brown agreed to execute the building according to specification for the sum of £2,105.

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