

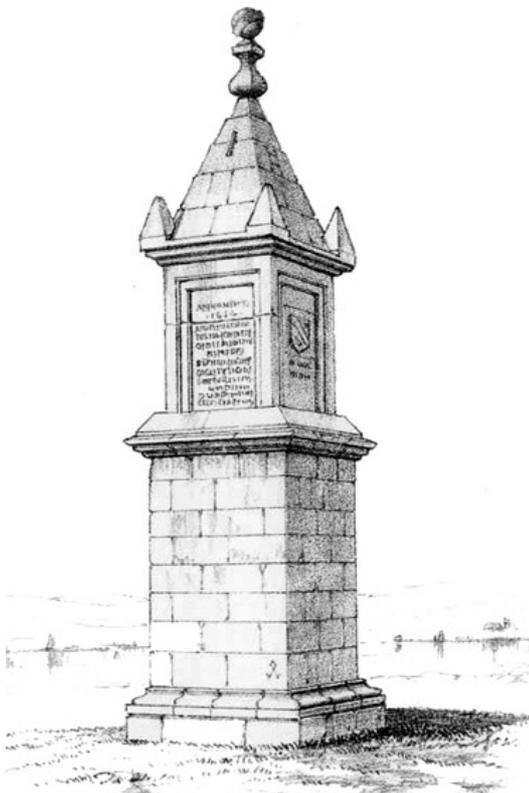
Duncan Liddell – astronomical teacher, medic and benefactor of Marischal College

Duncan Liddell MD (1561-1613) gains a place in these pages largely through his own wish to be remembered, though he does represent the scholarly Aberdonian who made a name for himself in Europe and did not forget his roots. Liddell (sometimes Liddel) left money to found the Chair of Mathematics at Marischal College under the patronage of the Town Council, he left money for bursaries that would enable poor students to attend the College, he donated his extensive library of books on Astronomy, Mathematics and Medicine along with his mathematical instruments to Marischal College, in addition to his estate, and he left money for the Town Council to erect a splendid memorial plaque in St Nicholas Church. Personally, he was never a student of Marischal College (it was founded when he was 32) nor a member of its staff. In return, a large ornamental granite memorial was erected by the Senatus in 1637 on his donated land near Dyce. The monument still stands today in excellent condition.

His books, which are now some 400 years old, are an extremely valuable resource among the Historic Collections of the University Library and include a first edition of Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus*, a copy of Copernicus' very rare *Commentariolus* and other works from the very early years of modern astronomy.

Much of the information available about Liddell's life is repeated by a variety of sources. I have used the biography by David Irving in his 1839 'Lives of Scottish Writers'¹. Liddell qualified for inclusion as a writer of well-respected medical books. There is a lot we don't know about Liddell's life in spite of the range of sources cited in the Dictionary of National Biography². We do know that he became Professor of Mathematics in 1591 at Helmstädt University (founded in 1576 by the Duke of Brunswick as a Protestant University but which no longer exists) and that he taught astronomy as well as mathematics. He visited Tycho Brahe in Uraniborg on the island of Hven and was one of the early academics to teach

Copernican astronomy in the version favoured by Brahe. This was a comparatively short-lived incarnation of the heliocentric view of the universe because Kepler's laws of planetary motion formulated in the first quarter of the 17th century would consign Brahe's model to history. Liddell did not live to see this development. He kept his mathematical Chair until 1603 but simultaneously had become a practising medic, indeed first physician at the court of Brunswick



and Professor of Physic. It is likely that his medical practices were the foundation of the significant wealth he acquired.

Liddell was born and brought up in Aberdeen. He left in 1579 aged about 18 to enlarge his education on the continent. He became well-known among the major European scholars of the time but 28 years later he returned to Aberdeen, probably because of political and religious upheaval at Helmstädt. At Aberdeen, or at least within a few miles of Aberdeen, he lived on his estate at Pitmedden. It's here that the Liddell monument can be found atop a prominent natural mound in a field. The simplest access route to the neighbourhood is via the road that goes past the Kirkhill Industrial Estate around Dyce airport. Park near a level crossing on a minor road. Cross the railway with care on foot and a rutted, muddy track leads to the even more muddy entrance of the field with the mound. Boots are highly desirable. The tall (over 5 m) and substantial obelisk, no longer fenced off, is oriented with its faces to the four compass points. The east face includes a memorial panel with armorial shield over the motto 'Sic Luceat Lux Vestra' (thus shines your light); the south face a Latin inscription confirming the award of six bursaries for Pitmedden students to study at the University; the west face the city's arms and motto 'Bon Accord' and the north face another Latin inscription noting that the monument was erected in memory of Duncan Liddell (1561-1613) Rector of the Julian University and Physician to the Court of Brunswick. The ball on the top represents the celestial sphere, with the zodiac marked as a raised band.

Much more accessible and indeed better known is the finely detailed brass plaque to Liddell in the West Church of St Nicholas near the centre of Aberdeen. The plaque was almost certainly designed by the notable Aberdonian painter George Jameson (father-in-law of James Gregory, who features in one of these notes) and was cast in Amsterdam in 1622, where Jameson had been resident beforehand. It is said to have cost 1400 marks, a large sum though I'm not quite sure how large in relation to typical wages of the time.

The plaque is about 1.6 m tall and 0.9 m wide and one of only a handful of memorial brasses in Scotland³. The central image in the plaque is shown here.



Liddell's very generous donations to the newly formed Marischal College suggest that he saw it as Aberdeen's equivalent of the protestant Helmstädt University that had been founded just 17 years before Marischal College. He had seen how Helmstädt was already a progressive establishment not hampered by the weight of Papal bull and wished to see the similar vision of the Earl Marischal helped forward.

John S. Reid

¹ David Irving "Lives of Scottish Writers" vol. 1, pp 275-291 (Adams & Charles Black, Edinburgh, 1839)

² Entry Duncan Liddell "Dictionary of National Biography" OUP, 2006

³ Andrew Gibb "Notice of the Memorial Brass of Dr Duncan Liddell, and of the Tombstone of Sir Paul Menzies of Kimmundy, in Saint Nicholas Church, Aberdeen" Proceedings of the Society of Antiquities of Scotland, vol. XI, pp 450-462 (1876).