

# The Aitken Memorial Fountain Govan, 1884-2011

The Aitken Memorial Fountain was returned, fully restored, to Govan Cross in April 2011. The conservation works cost £40,000 to undertake and were made possible thanks to funding provided by Glasgow City Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund through Govan Cross Townscape Heritage Initiative. The restoration of the Aitken Fountain, one of Govan's most recognised landmarks, forms a central part of wider regeneration proposals being implemented during 2006-2016 to make Central Govan an attractive, vibrant and prosperous place to live, work, and visit.



The Aitken Memorial Fountain is a well known and much loved landmark of Govan Cross. Dedicated to the memory of Doctor John Aitken, it has stood for more than 120 years at the head of Water Row. In 2010, having fallen into a ruinous state of repair, the fountain became the focus of regeneration efforts led by Govan Cross Townscape Heritage Initiative. Funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Glasgow City Council made a full restoration possible, and in the course of the restoration process many interesting discoveries were made, not least the whereabouts of the fountain's missing centre piece. The uncovered details are collected here for current and future generations to share and enjoy. Together they provide a fascinating glimpse into the often harsh realities of days gone by, the character of the Govan people and the architecture and history of the cast iron drinking fountain dedicated to one of Govan's own.



# Govan's place in the past



Govan's past is rich and its history is significant. From the religious and political importance of Govan in the Dark Ages, to its hand loom weaving industry and the international significance of its 19th century shipbuilding heritage, Govan has evolved through cycles of immense prosperity and decline. The wealth and civic pride of its heyday can still be seen today – reflected in the buildings and the monuments to many of its benefactors. Dr Aitken was one of those, who, though not made famous for his wealth, made a significant difference to ordinary people's lives.



# The life of Dr John Aitken

Dr John Aitken died on March 11th 1880, just four days before his 42nd birthday. The death certificate records bronchial pneumonia, but many believed that Aitken had driven himself to an early grave, due to overwork and his devotion to the poor.

deaths and the mortality rates were the highest for children under five – a damning statistic he campaigned hard to reduce. He was at this time running an extensive practice, serving the collieries at Ibrox and Drumoyne as well as the Burgh itself.

Aitken was born in Govan in 1838, his parents were the proprietors of the Stag Inn. No records exist of his early education but he went on to become an exceptional medical student, graduating from the University of Glasgow by the age of 21 and studying under Dr Joseph Lister. Returning to Govan after graduation Aitken set up his surgery at 178 Govan Road.

In the twenty years Aitken practised, Govan became a boom town. The population grew from 8,000 to 46,000 and it was an intense period of change. As the Burgh grew quickly the water and sanitation systems could not cope, leading to outbreaks of disease and immense misery for the overcrowded population.

Dr Aitken worked hard for the people of Govan, and was presented with a horse and carriage 'for his kind and unremitting attention to the poor in their hour of need'. At the unveiling of his memorial fountain in 1884 it was said 'that the poor never wanted a physician or surgeon without fee or reward as long as he lived among them'.

When Govan became a Burgh in 1864, he was appointed the first Police Surgeon and Medical Officer based at Orkney Street Police Station. Aitken's monthly reports highlighting the Burgh's health, make it clear that respiratory diseases accounted for most

*"We are extremely excited our great, great grandfather's memorial is to be fully restored."*

John Gordon Aitken, 2010



# The Aitken Memorial Fountain



The cast iron drinking fountain is an important historic object, linking us to Victorian Govan and the living conditions that existed at that time. As a fitting legacy to Dr Aitken, the fountain provided a fresh water supply to the people of Govan in the late 19th and early 20th century. The water flowed from the urn that sits underneath the cherub and was collected using a small chained cup that is no longer a feature of the fountain today.

The cast iron figure or the putto, often referred to locally as the Govan cherub, baby or boy, is the central feature of the fountain. The putto is a common feature of Italian Renaissance Art and was often mimicked in the Victorian design of these fountains. The putto may signify a purposeful and watchful water carrier.

Other features of the fountain:

1. Boy with paddle and urn (Sun Foundry pattern no.8)
2. Alligator column connectors
3. Column finials
4. Arch faceplates with drip fret detail
5. Sectional fish scale roof
6. Crown terminal or finial
7. Memorial plaques/roundels /lunettes
8. Acanthus leaf capitals
9. Cast iron columns

The fountain has six memorial plaques including the dedication to Dr John Aitken, the Govan Coat of Arms and the fountain manufacturer Cruikshanks & Co. The plaques representing the Freemasons, Manchester Unity of Oddfellows and the Ancient Order of Foresters, suggest Aitken was a subscribing member of the Govan courts and lodges of these societies. This fits with our understanding of Aitken's charitable and compassionate character. Known as Friendly Societies, the members socialised together and supported each other through hard times, usually by providing sick pay or funeral expenses to families in need.



While the Aitken Memorial Fountain is typical of the style of the late Victorian Period, what is unusual is that it is the only known one of its type to be cast by Cruikshanks & Co. Denny Iron Works.



# Restoring the fountain



## A careful conservation approach...

The Aitken drinking fountain is a Category B Listed monument. Reflecting its architectural and historical importance the conservation work to the fountain was carried out in a very specific manner and supervised by a qualified cast iron conservator.

The condition of the fountain was assessed as a first step. The condition report indicated that there was active corrosion on many parts of the fountain and much of the cast iron was either damaged or missing. This included the fountain's centre piece 'the boy with the paddle and urn'.

The fountain design uses many parts cast by the Sun Foundry of George Smith in Glasgow. By researching in archives, drawings of the original fountain were found and these helped determine how the damaged and missing parts of the fountain, such as the bowl, the putto and the crown finial, should be repaired and recast.

Historic Scotland then analysed small scrapes of the fountain's paint under a microscope. The results revealed 33 layers of paint of differing colours including lots of Glasgow Corporation Green and some original gold leaf. The colour scheme of the newly painted fountain was selected to accentuate the beautiful features of the fountain within the public space at Govan Cross.

Cast iron repair is a highly specialised process. The techniques and materials used must be determined based on the qualities of cast iron and

not of modern day equivalent materials, such as steel. Cast iron is a durable yet porous metal that is prone to absorb atmospheric moisture and rusts easily. During repair, it must be dry-blasted with crushed garnet at a controlled temperature and then primed and painted within set timescales in order for the metal to be properly cleaned, sealed and protected from the elements.

In the 19th century, there were hundreds of foundries in Central Scotland specialising in cast iron work. Today, only a small handful survive across the UK, a reflection of the skills that are being lost as manufacturing processes and consumer tastes change. Retaining our knowledge of traditional materials and their appropriate repair and on-going maintenance is vitally important if we are to preserve heritage assets like the Aitken Fountain for future generations to enjoy.



## The restoration begins...

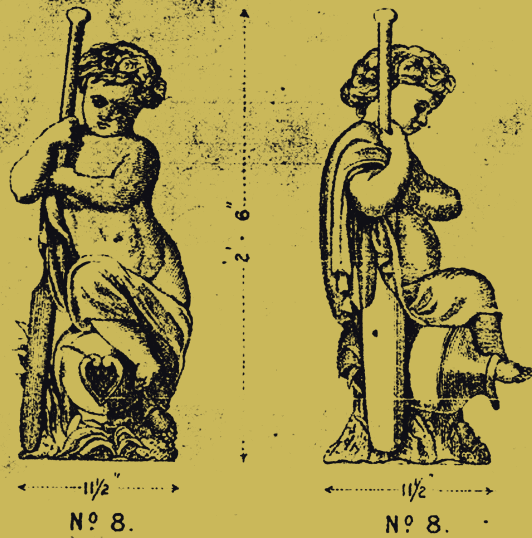
The fountain was carefully dismantled at Govan Cross in 2010 and transported to the iron foundry for repair works. Here it was blast cleaned at a carefully controlled pressure and temperature to remove the corrosion and the many layers of paint.

The missing parts of the crown finial from the roof of the fountain and the decorative fretwork to the canopy arches were carefully cast and mechanically fixed together.

The badly corroded alligators within the fountain's canopy were re-cast using the traditional 'green sand' technique. This requires the repair of one alligator to make a mould. The mould is pressed into a frame of fine, moist sand with a clay-like consistency to make an impression of one half of the alligator. This is then combined with another frame of sand with a similar indent. The molten iron is poured through a channel into the enclosed cast, leaving a perfectly formed alligator once cooled.



Archive research helped identify the exact form of the fountain's missing boy, bowl and pedestal. And then, in a most unlikely twist of fate – read on for more details - the original parts were found. These were repaired and connected together on a newly cast pedestal following closely the pattern of the Sun Foundry.



BOY WITH PADDLE AND URN. (FRONT & SIDE VIEW)



The entire structure was then primed and painted. Gold leaf was applied to accentuate the fountain's architectural features and the previously obscured details of the memorial plaques were picked out in black and bronze paint.

The fountain, in its deep red, gold and black livery, drew quite a crowd and much admiration as it returned to Govan Cross in 2011, where it continues to stand as a landmark for future generations.

*“Our work with Historic Scotland in paint analysis and in sourcing the Sun Foundry patterns gave us a great insight into the care, skill and pride that the Victorian cast iron foundry workers had in producing these handsome objects.”*

The Aitken Fountain's Cast Iron Conservator.



# The Govan Baby returns



## The strangest things can happen, usually when you least expect it!

That was the case on a sunny day in August 2010, when a phone call to the Govan Cross THI Team confirmed that the missing baby and bowl from the Aitken Memorial Fountain had been found.

The story began a week or so earlier, when a newspaper article in Glasgow's Evening Times covered the restoration of the Aitken Memorial Fountain and the mystery of the missing baby and bowl. The story described how the 'Govan baby', which vanished in 1980s, was to be recast as part of the restoration works and included a detailed drawing of the original piece. It also highlighted that

the fountain's restoration was a key priority for local people who had been consulted on improvements in their area.

Completely unexpectedly, the newspaper was then contacted by Hugh Kinnaird, who had himself been left astonished after reading the article about the 'lost baby'. Mr Kinnaird had used the statue as the centre piece of his back garden pond for 16 years, having bought it from an architectural salvage yard. Although he had moved house a few times, he had always taken the statue with him and he was delighted to give it back to the people of Govan.

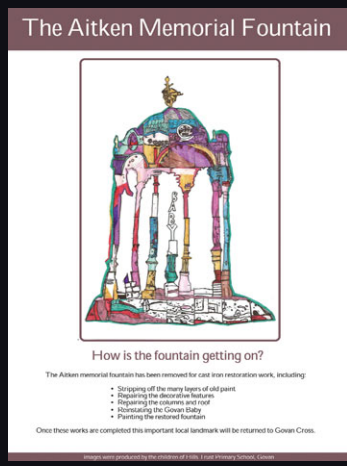
And true to his word, the boy with his paddle, urn and bowl arrived back in time to be restored and reinstated to its rightful place as the centre piece of the Aitken Memorial Fountain at Govan Cross.



On the fountain

# 'We're from Govan and our history is important'

Kimberley



In 2011, the fountain's restoration provided an opportunity for a group of students from Govan High School to explore the heritage and regeneration of Govan Cross and to discover what meaning the fountain has to Govanites in the past and today.

Their investigations took them to the foundry to see the Aitken Fountain being restored, and to Summerlee Heritage Park, where they caught a glimpse of a 19th century ironworks and learned about the importance of iron to the Scottish economy. The students worked with a graphic design artist to decide on the layout and content of this page presenting their own ideas about the fountain and its meaning to them.

In 2010, young people from the former Hills Trust Primary School in Govan worked with artist Kenny Bayne to produce a fantastic set of posters documenting the fountain's restoration. The posters were put on public display during the restoration process and ensured that the local community was kept up to date on the whereabouts of their much loved local landmark!

And back in 2009, artist Colin Begg, used the Aitken Fountain's missing baby to inspire children and adults to share their memories of Govan and their hopes and aspirations for its revitalised future. The young people sent postcards to the missing baby with drawings of their imagined vision for Govan Cross and a personal message to the baby, whilst the adults recorded their thoughts as an audio commentary. An animated film "The Govan Baby" was produced as a result with the missing baby symbolising all that there is to rediscover about Govan.

On the visit to the foundry

# 'Good going to the foundry because we saw our fountain and we seen it get restored'

Kimberley



All images taken by students from Govan High School

