

## Alexander 'Greek' Thomson 1817–75

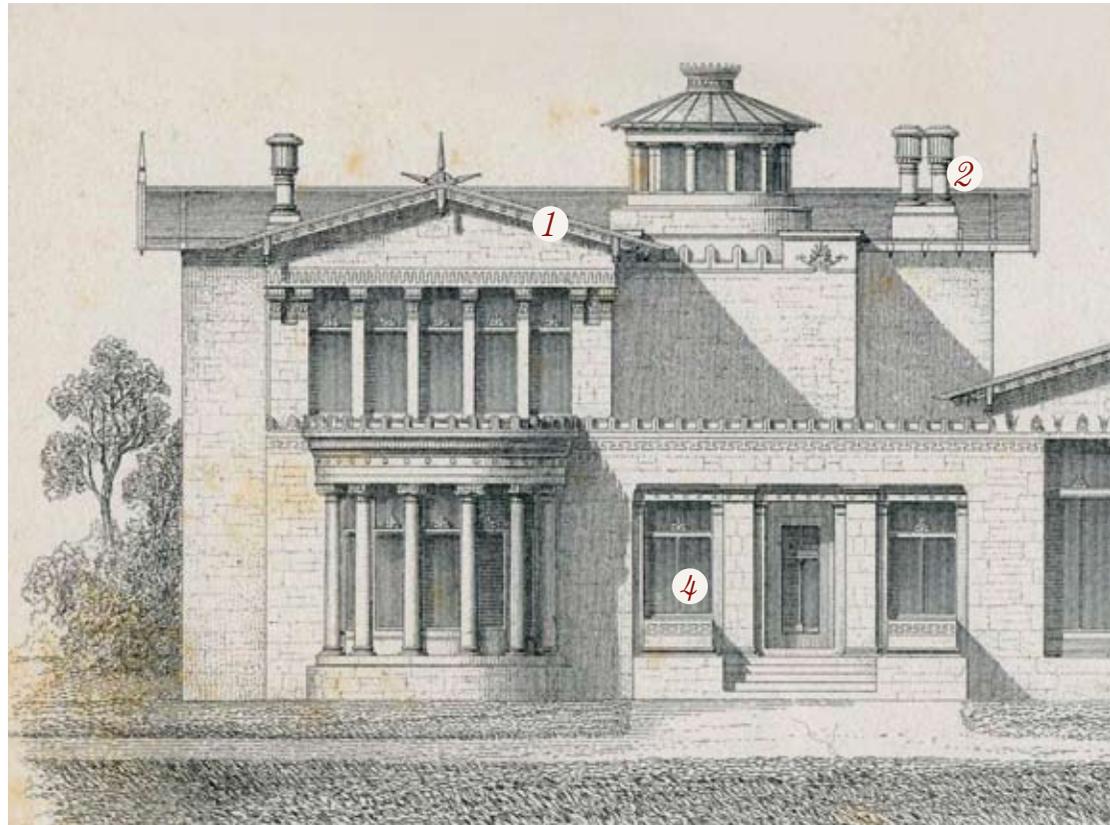


**'Thomson's predilection for abstract form was the outcome of an original mind'**

Sir Albert Richardson, 1914

Alexander Thomson was known as 'Greek' Thomson because of his tenacious commitment to an idiosyncratic interpretation of Ancient Greek architecture at a time when it was completely out of fashion and Victorian Gothic was dominant. An eloquent thinker as well as a practitioner, he came to believe that Greek architecture was an expression of God-given 'eternal laws', and Gothic was an irrational, unstable (Anglo-Saxon) style. However, he was no copyist, and believed that the Greek should be the starting point for a rational modern architecture. His work was never pure Greek, and Egyptian and other exotic influences may be detected, as well as that of the Prussian architect K. F. Schinkel. Practical and inventive, Thomson was happy to use cast iron and large sheets of glass with traditional stone masonry in his buildings.

Although his imagination ranged far and wide, he never travelled abroad, and all his surviving work is in or near Glasgow. He designed villas, terraces, commercial buildings and Presbyterian churches, in which it is possible to explore a recondite symbolism inspired by the apocalyptic paintings of John Martin. Thomson secured a reputation beyond Glasgow, too, due to the conspicuous originality of his architecture.



### Early career

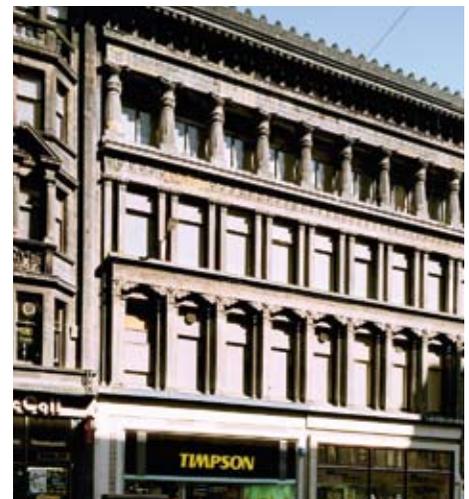
Alexander Thomson was born in Balfron, Stirlingshire, some 15 miles north of Glasgow. He was the 17th of the 20 children of a book-keeper at a cotton-spinning mill and part of an extended family that included several Presbyterian missionaries. Thomson moved to Glasgow with his widowed mother in 1825, and, because of his aptitude for drawing, was articled to the Glasgow architect Robert Foote. For about 10 years, he worked for John Baird, a leading architect in the rapidly expanding city, becoming his chief draughtsman. Thomson set up in independent practice in 1848 with another John Baird (no relation), both architects having married two daughters of London architect Michael Angelo Nicholson. The partnership was amicably terminated in 1857, when Thomson's younger brother George joined the practice, until he left to be a missionary in the Cameroons. Thomson's final professional partner was Robert Turnbull.

### Villas

Baird & Thomson began by designing villas in the new suburbs of Glasgow and along the River Clyde; these were in a variety of styles, including Gothic and Romanesque. However, by the mid 1850s, Thomson had developed the refined and abstracted Grecian manner for which he is known. He was never a conventional Revivalist and he argued that the earlier promoters of the Greek Revival had failed 'because they could not see through the material into the laws upon which that

architecture rested. They failed to master their style, and so became its slaves'.

He seems to have been the first to apply Picturesque principles of composition to the Greek style in his villas, as at his unique Double Villa at Langside (1856–57) where two identical semi-detached houses face in opposite directions. Thomson's finest villa was Holmwood at Cathcart (1857–58), of which his first biographer, Thomas Gildard, wrote that: 'If architecture be poetry in stone-and-lime—

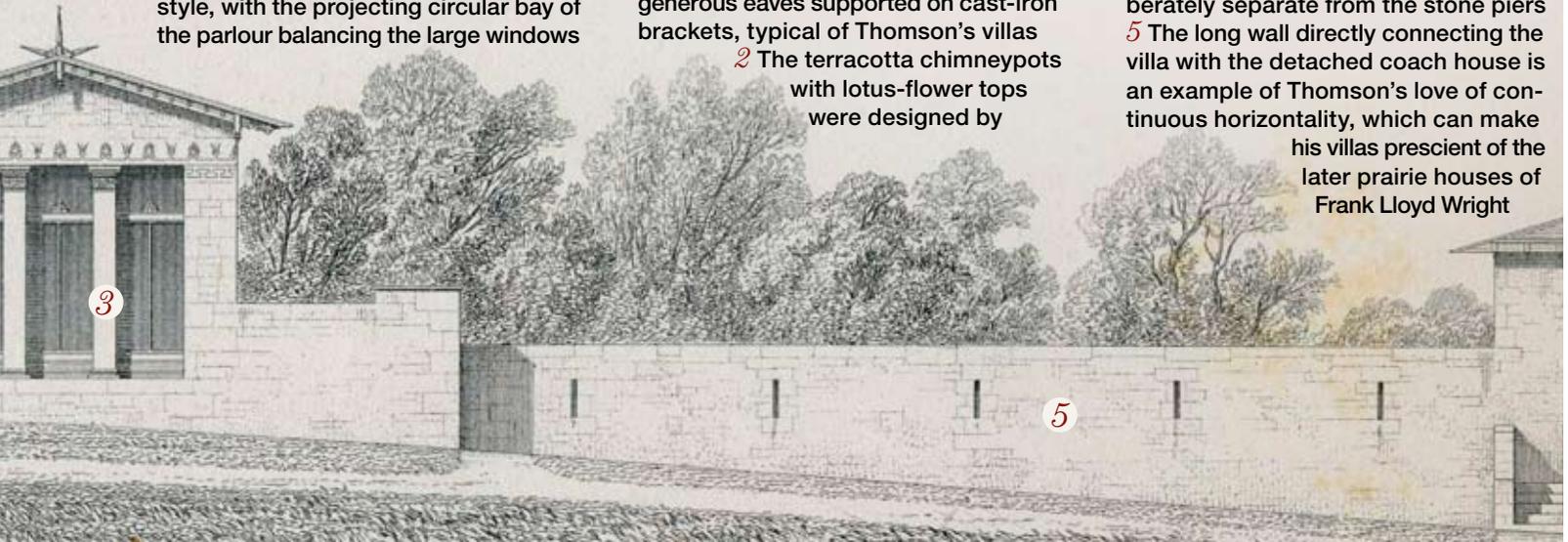


**Egyptian Halls, Union Street (1870–72), a sort of bazaar or shopping centre with an exhibition gallery, was Thomson's largest and most elaborate commercial building. The sculptural treatment of the columns articulating each floor is different, rising to an 'eaves gallery' below the enormous cornice**

## Holmwood House, Glasgow

### *What to look for*

Thomson's finest and most elaborate villa was built in 1857–58 in a rural site in Cathcart, for James Couper, a paper manufacturer. It is a Picturesque asymmetrical composition in Thomson's Greek style, with the projecting circular bay of the parlour balancing the large windows



of the dining room either side of the entrance. Inside, the staircase rises under a circular cupola, and most rooms were embellished with a scheme of painted decoration. The house is now owned by the National Trust for Scotland.

1 The low-pitched slate roof (not wholly practical in the west of Scotland), with generous eaves supported on cast-iron brackets, typical of Thomson's villas

2 The terracotta chimneypots with lotus-flower tops were designed by

Thomson and specially made by the Garnkirk Fireclay Company

3 The square piers dividing the window openings are a simple abstracted form derived from Greek architecture, but much used by Schinkel in Berlin

4 The huge sash windows, which go up and down, are placed behind and deliberately separate from the stone piers

5 The long wall directly connecting the villa with the detached coach house is an example of Thomson's love of continuous horizontality, which can make his villas prescient of the later prairie houses of Frank Lloyd Wright

a great temple an epic—this exquisite little gem, at once Classic and Picturesque, is as complete, self-contained, and polished as a sonnet.' Thomson designed the furniture and fittings, too, plus the painted decoration.

### City architect

Thomson designed a number of impressive terraces in Glasgow, in which single houses were combined in various ways to make powerful unified compositions. The grandest was Great Western Terrace (1867–77), but, for the American historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Moray Place in Strathbungo (1859–61) was 'the finest of all nineteenth-century terraces... and one of the world's most superb pieces of design based on Greek precedent'. In this terrace—in which Thomson himself lived from 1861 until his death—the 'mysterious power of the horizontal element' is evident, achieved through Thomson's 'principle of repetition'. His façade treatment for Queen's Park Terrace (1856–60, dem.) influenced the design of Glasgow's blocks of tenements.

Thomson designed several commercial warehouses in Glasgow, in which cast-iron structures lay behind stone façades that incorporated large plate-glass windows. Their elevations are remarkable for the way in which he dissolved the wall plane into a sculptural, dynamic composition of columns, lintels and architraves. These were developments of the trabeated language of the Greeks and reflected his morbid suspicion of the arch, for, as he notoriously once said: 'Stonehenge is really

more scientifically constructed than York Minster.' His most elegant example is Grecian Buildings in Sauchiehall Street (1867–68).

### Churches

Thomson's largest buildings were churches. He designed great temples for United Presbyterian congregations, which Hitchcock considered to be 'three of the finest Romantic Classical churches in the world'. All had richly decorated interiors. The first was the Caledonia Road Church (1855–57, now a gutted ruin), where a raised-up temple portico was combined with an asymmetrically placed tower. The most inventive was the Queen's Park Church (1868–69), which was as much Egyptian as Greek in inspiration; its destruction by fire in 1943 was Scotland's worst architectural loss of the Second World War. The only intact survivor is the St Vincent Street Church (1857–59), with its unprecedented exotic steeple, like a modern interpretation of the Temple of Solomon, in which the galleries and clerestory are carried on shaped cast-iron columns, and plate-glass windows were applied directly to the masonry.

Thomson's contemporaries regretted that he was never awarded a commission for a public building commensurate with his talents. The decision of Glasgow University to give its new buildings to Gilbert Scott, without competition, provoked a searing, eloquent attack on the Gothic Revival from the architect, but Thomson's designs for the Albert Memorial and the South Kensington Museum

in London must have seemed unfashionable in England to the point of perversity. Only in Glasgow, perhaps, could his idiosyncratic approach and his exotic imagination flourish. Thomson was not well in his latter years, and, had he survived the severe winter of 1874–75, he planned to make his first trip abroad, to Italy, to try to recover his health. But this was not to be, and he was buried in the Southern Necropolis in Glasgow. 🐦



**The St Vincent Street Church of 1857–59 is Thomson's only surviving intact place of worship. The Ionic portico may be fairly conventional, but the steeple, rising to an exotic dome, is full of Old Testament allusions and the whole dramatic composition, on a sloping site, is without precedent**