

# Alexander 'Greek' Thomson

*Discover a Victorian city and  
the architect who shaped it.*

**DISTANCE** 6.5 miles (10.4km) **MINIMUM TIME** 3hrs 30min

**ASCENT/GRADIENT** 98ft (30m) ▲▲▲ **LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY** +++

**PATHS** Pavements

**LANDSCAPE** City streets

**SUGGESTED MAP** OS Explorer 342 Glasgow; AA Street by Street

**START/FINISH** Grid reference: NS 587653

**DOG FRIENDLINESS** Not great walk for dogs

**PARKING** Sauchiehall Street multi-storey or on-street parking

**PUBLIC TOILETS** At Central Station

**M**ore than any other architect Alexander Thomson was responsible for the shaping of Glasgow with his innovative use and interpretation of classical Greek designs. Born in 1817, in the Stirlingshire village of Balfron, he moved to Glasgow to live with an older brother. He was apprenticed to an architect and began studying the plans, drawings and engravings of classical architecture. This influence dominated his later style and earned him the nickname 'Greek' Thomson although he never travelled abroad.

## Classical Influences

The range of his buildings was extraordinary, from churches to villas, warehouses, tenements and even a set of steps. Much of his work was destroyed by German bombing during the Second World War and even more disappeared in the relentless modernisation of Glasgow during the 1960s and '70s. However, those buildings that have survived provide a fine cross-section of his work. His one remaining church (1857–9) on St Vincent Street is a remarkable building with Grecian columns and an imposing tower, built on the side of Blythswood Hill. Near by, in Union Street, the curiously named Egyptian Halls (1871–3), an enormous stone-fronted building with an interior constructed from cast iron, started life as an early form of shopping centre or bazaar. In the West End, near the Botanic Gardens, Thomson created the Great Western Terrace (1869), the 'grandest terrace in Glasgow' and took the unusual step of placing the tallest buildings in the middle of the row, rather than at the ends, which was more conventional at the time.

Another example of his terraces, Moray Place (1858), is where Thomson took up permanent residence. His home at No 1 is now the contact address for the Alexander Thomson Society and, like most of the houses he designed, is in private ownership. One exception is Holmwood House (1858) in Cathcart, 4.5 miles (7.2km) from the city centre, now owned by the National Trust for Scotland. Built for a wealthy paper manufacturer, it is an asymmetrical villa with a bay window, which looks like a Greek temple attached to the front of the building. It is probably Thomson's finest work.

**Alexander Thomson Society**

Although he gained prominence during his lifetime and had a major influence on later architects such as Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Frank Lloyd Wright, Thomson is little known today. Records of his work are limited to a few drawings held in Glasgow's Mitchell Library. His own office archive has vanished without a trace and were it not for the work of the Alexander Thomson Society, he would have remained in obscurity. However after much campaigning to preserve his remaining 24 buildings within the city and the publication of a book about the man, Thomson is beginning to regain the recognition he deserves.

**WALK 31 DIRECTIONS**

**1** Exit Central Station and turn right. At the junction with Union Street turn right. The building on the opposite corner is the Ca' d'Oro building, a late 19th-century Italianate warehouse by John Honeyman, based on the Golden House in Venice. The

upper storeys are made of cast iron. A little way down Union Street from here on the same side as the Ca' d'Oro is Thomson's Egyptian Halls, sadly in need of some renovation.

**2** Cross over then head down Union Street turning left into Argyle Street at the next junction.

Cross Argyle Street, then walk along to the junction with Dunlop Street where you will find the Buck's Head building, named after an inn that previously stood on this spot. Cross Argyle Street again, retrace your steps, turning right into Buchanan Street. Turn left into Mitchell Lane, pass the Lighthouse, then turn right.

3 Walk up Mitchell Street, continue along West Nile Street then turn left into St Vincent Street. Continue on this for just under 0.5 mile (800m), going uphill to the junction with Pitt Street. You are now standing in front of 'Greek' Thomson's St Vincent Street church, one of his greatest achievements. Cross St Vincent Street here then head up Pitt Street to Sauchiehall Street.

4 On the opposite corner is Thomson's Grecian Chamber (1865) and to the right along Scott Street is Rennie Mackintosh's Glasgow School of Art. From the front of the Grecian Chamber turn left, head down Sauchiehall Street to Charing Cross, then take the pedestrian bridge over the motorway to Woodlands Road. Go along here until it ends at Park Road, turn right, then left again into Great Western Road.

5 Go right on Belmont Street, left at Doune Gardens, continue

#### WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

The Willow Tearoom in Sauchiehall Street was designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh for Kate Cranston who had a string of tea rooms. Entered through a jeweller's shop, there is often a queue for the 1904 Room de Luxe, where everything is Mackintosh. It's worth the wait and the food is good and reasonably priced.

#### WHILE YOU'RE THERE

Thomson designed Holmwood House in Cathcart for James Couper, a paper manufacturer, and everything including the interior design and the furniture came from Thomson's drawing board. Unfortunately the furniture has not survived, but his original paint scheme has been uncovered including a frieze depicting scenes from Homer's *Iliad*. Now in the care of the NTS.

along Doune Quadrant, then left again at Queen Margaret Drive. Cross the road and head down past the Botanic Gardens to turn right, back into Great Western Road. Cross the road and continue to Great Western Terrace, another Thomson masterpiece. Retrace your steps back from here to the top of Byres Road and turn right then, near the bottom, turn left into University Avenue.

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

As you exit the station into Gordon Street the first 'Greek' Thomson building is the former warehouse opposite. Look out for the 'Sixty Steps' as you approach Queen Margaret Drive. There are remains of the former Queen Margaret Bridge on the left behind the former BBC buildings. The 'Steps' used to lead from the bridge to Kelvinside Terrace West.

6 Go left into Oakfield Avenue, pass Eton Terrace on the corner with Great George Street. Turn right into Great George Street, right at Otago Street, left into Gibson Street and keep going when it becomes Eldon Street. Turn right into Woodlands Road and return to Sauchiehall Street. Follow this to the junction with Renfield Street, turn right and head downhill to Central Station.