

# Dundas family of Fingask and Kerse

(*per.* 1728/9–1820)

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Dundas family of Fingask and Kerse (*per.* 1728/9–1820), landowners and politicians, came to prominence with Thomas [i] Dundas of Fingask (1681?–1762), woollen-drapeer, the son of John Dundas (*b.* before 1670, *d.* 1724) and grandson of Sir John Dundas of Fingask (*d.* 1670). In 1650 Sir John's Perthshire estate had been confiscated by the Scottish covenanting regime as punishment for the family's royalism, an action his descendants sought to redress. Having prospered in business, and after receiving a small inheritance, Thomas [i] was able to borrow money and in 1728–9 he purchased Letham and other lands in Airth, Stirlingshire. He obtained a crown charter for this property 'by which the names and designations thereof were to be changed into that of Fingask' (Dundas, 40), and he was henceforth known as Thomas Dundas of Fingask or of Letham. He married Bethia Baillie (*fl.* 1686–1732), sister of Bernard Baillie (1673–1743), abbot of St James's at Ratisbon in Bavaria.

Notwithstanding this Roman Catholic connection the Dundas family conformed to the Church of Scotland and accepted the Hanoverian succession. Thomas [i] and Bethia had two children—Thomas [ii] Dundas of Fingask (c.1708–1786) [*see below*] and Sir Lawrence Dundas of Kerse first baronet (1712–1781), army contractor and landowner—both of whom were born at Edinburgh and probably were educated at the city's high school. Lawrence, though the younger son, benefited as the namesake, godson, and favoured nephew of Professor Lawrence Dundas of Edinburgh, who, in 1734, left him £1500 sterling. In 1737 Thomas [ii] married his first wife, Anne, daughter of James Graham, a judge of the Scottish court of admiralty. Following her death he married on 11 November 1744 Lady Janet (1721–1805), daughter of Charles Maitland, sixth earl of Lauderdale, and Elizabeth Ogilvie; the couple had five daughters and two sons, Thomas Dundas (1750–1794) and Charles Dundas, later Baron Amesbury (1751–1832). On 9 April 1738 Thomas [ii]'s brother Lawrence married Margaret (1716–1802), daughter of Alexander Bruce of Kennet, Clackmannanshire. The couple had one son, Thomas [iii] Dundas of Kerse [*see below*].

## Sir Lawrence Dundas: Nabob of the North

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At the time of Thomas [iii]'s birth Lawrence Dundas was established as a wine merchant. Shortly afterwards, however, he became involved as an army contractor, in which business he soon made his fortune. In the wake of the Jacobite rising of 1745 he accompanied the duke of Cumberland as commissary for bread and forage in Scotland (1746–8), and by his favour he was appointed commissary for stores in Flanders (1747–8) and in Scotland (1748–57). With seven battalions stationed in Scotland and a major building project beginning at Fort George, Ardersier, Lawrence grew rich. He used his wealth to buy a residence in Argyle Square, Edinburgh, and in 1747 he obtained the estate of Kerse, near the mouth of the River Carron in Stirlingshire, which, bought in the name of his father, passed to him in 1750. In 1747 Lawrence was elected to parliament as MP for Linlithgow Burghs, having paid what Scotland's political manager, the third duke of Argyll, described as 'the greatest sum to purchase an election that was ever known in the country' (HoP, *Commons*, 1715–54, 1.628). He also helped his friend, George Haldane, to win Stirling Burghs. Both Argyll and the prime minister, Henry Pelham, objected to Dundas's successful campaign, for which he had not sought government approval. Argyll collected evidence of bribery against the new MP and displayed his hostility by ensuring that the post of barrack-master in Scotland was given neither to Dundas nor to his nominee, Lord Lauderdale. Dundas was unseated, on the grounds of electoral corruption, in March 1748. His attempt to return to parliament at the election of 1754 was unsuccessful, and it became clear that his political career would be blocked during Argyll's lifetime.

Thwarted in politics, Lawrence Dundas focused his efforts on social advancement. He joined the Society of Dilettanti in 1750 and sent his son, Thomas [iii], to Eton College. In 1756 he purchased the house and lands of Castlecary, Stirlingshire, formerly owned by members of the Baillie family. Lawrence's career as an army contractor was furthered by the outbreak of the Seven Years' War (1756–63), which generated supply contracts for a combined force of British and allied troops in north-west Germany numbering 100,000 men with 60,000 horses. Dundas was soon involved in creating magazines for forage (1757–8), and on 16 March 1759 he engaged to supply the Hanoverian army with bread for six months. Although this contract was not renewed he secured others for a series of wagon trains, and from these and other activities he had acquired massive profits by the end of the war. James Boswell's claim that Dundas would 'bring home a couple of hundred thousand pounds' (11 Dec 1762, *Boswell's London Journal*, ed. F. A. Pottle, 1950, 75) underestimates the scale of profits, which others have put at between £600,000 and £800,000. Yet whatever the potential for corruption it appears that Dundas's gross profit rate (estimated at 17 per cent in 1762; see Little, 383) was not excessive; rather his success may be attributed to the huge scale of the contracts with which he was involved.

In 1762, through his involvement with Lord Shelburne, whom he had met in Germany, Dundas negotiated a baronetcy and the purchase of a parliamentary seat. Shelburne accepted a large loan and on 19 August 1762 informed Henry Fox that 'Dundas, the Nabob of the North, writes me to desire I'll get him made a baronet; this made me go to Lord Bute yesterday' (HoP, *Commons*, 1754–90, 2.358). He received his title on 20 October, and by the end of the year had become MP for Newcastle under Lyme. 1762 also saw the death of his father, Thomas [i], who was buried in the Old Greyfriars churchyard, Edinburgh, on 2 June.

Throughout this period Sir Lawrence continued his series of considerable land purchases. Between 1759 and 1762 he paid £63,696 for an estate in the counties of Sligo and Roscommon, in Ireland, and a further £31,000 for Ballinbreich, Fife. In 1762 he acquired Marske and Upleatham, in the North Riding of Yorkshire, and Aske Hall, with its Richmond estate and pocket borough, on the west side of the North Riding. In December he paid about £22,000 for most of the Clackmannan estate, once the patrimony of his wife's relatives, while leaving the last Bruce laird in the castle, which was purchased later. Following the peace of 1763 he purchased the palatial Moor Park, Hertfordshire, for £25,000 and a house in Arlington Street, London, for £15,000. In the following year he added Loftus to his Yorkshire properties, and in 1766 acquired the Earldom estate, Orkney, and the lordship of Shetland for £63,000. Two years later he purchased Burray and its associated lands on other Orkney islands for £16,500. All these acquisitions made him one of the great landowners of the United Kingdom. He also became owner of two slave estates in the West Indies; one in Dominica and the other in Grenada. Later acquisitions were few but significant. In 1773 he bought Letham from his elder brother, Thomas [ii]. His culminating achievement came later that year, in Edinburgh, when he used his influence with the town council to obtain the best site in the New Town, originally intended for a church, and there built Dundas House, St Andrew Square (designed by Sir William Chambers and now head office of the Royal Bank of Scotland).

Besides his taste for property Dundas was also active in commerce and finance. He had a preponderant interest in the Forth and Clyde Navigation Company and dug the first spadeful of earth when work began on the canal in June 1768. The line surveyed ran conveniently via Castlecary, Carron Hall and Kerse, enhancing the value of these Dundas properties. He was a governor of the Royal Bank of Scotland (1764–77), and in 1767 secured the parliamentary act that led to the building of Edinburgh's New Town. Other campaigns in the Commons included his (only partly successful) attempt to have Treasury commissioners settle war contractors' accounts in full. He also failed in another aim—elevation to the House of Lords and a leading role in Scotland's political management—for which he needed more influence than even his wealth and connections could achieve. Re-elected for Edinburgh in 1768, 1774, and 1781, he established himself at the head of a small parliamentary group of relatives and friends whose support was useful for the prime minister, Lord North. Denied a peerage by George III, despite assisting the Grafton ministry to influence the election of East India Company directors, Sir Lawrence was given a consolation position on the privy council in October 1771.

However, by the mid-1770s relations with North had grown increasingly strained. Dundas was now subject to attacks from a distant kinsman, Henry Dundas of Melville (1742–1811), later Viscount Melville, who entered the Commons in 1774 and became lord advocate in Scotland in the following year. In alliance with the duke of Buccleuch, Henry Dundas was soon in a position to influence Lord North and to challenge Sir Lawrence's control of Edinburgh town council. Sir Lawrence's success, not to mention his often controversial business practices, had provoked envy and opposition for a number of years. Under Henry Dundas's co-ordination he now became the target of a pamphlet war that exposed his alleged corruption and vanity. Trade guilds were encouraged to break free of his control and in 1777 he was ousted from his governorship of the Royal Bank of Scotland. Increasingly disgruntled with North's refusal to curb the actions of his lord advocate, Sir Lawrence began

building bridges to the opposition Rockingham whigs. At the election of 1780 he faced a concerted attack from the Henry Dundas–Buccleuch interest but was still able to bargain successfully to retain control of three Scottish seats: Stirlingshire, held by his son, Thomas [iii]; Orkney and Shetland, held by his nephew Charles Dundas; and his own Edinburgh constituency. James Boswell, who met Dundas for the first time during the contest, commented that to his surprise he was not the 'cunning shrewd man of the world as I had imagined' but a 'comely jovial Scotch gentleman of good address but not bright parts ... I liked him much. I even felt for him as a man ungratefully used in his old age' (20 Sept 1780, *J. Boswell: Laird of Auchinleck, 1778–1782*, ed. J. W. Reed and F. A. Pottle, 1977, 251). Sir Lawrence was now sixty-eight. He died on 18 September 1781 at Aske Hall, near Richmond, Yorkshire, and was buried in the Dundas mausoleum attached to Falkirk parish church, in Stirlingshire. According to the *Annual Register* he left £900,000 in personal effects and landed property, together with debts in mortgages, bonds, and annuities amounting to £400,000.

## Later politics

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It was clear, certainly by the mid-eighteenth century, that Sir Lawrence had emerged as the dominant figure in the Dundas family. This is not to say that his elder brother, Thomas [ii] Dundas of Fingask (c. 1708–1786), was an insignificant figure in Scottish property markets and politics but rather that Sir Lawrence's immense and rapidly made fortune enabled him to become the principal agent for the advancement, or rescue, of other family members, of which his purchase of Letham, in 1773, was the most eloquent statement. Thomas [ii] had previously worked as Lawrence's agent during his period as an army contractor. It was an association that brought him wealth also and, as in the case of his brother, facilitated his establishment as a significant owner of property. Purchase of Drumdryan House, Edinburgh, was followed by that of Quarrell, near Larbert, Stirlingshire, together with its coalworks and collier serfs, in January 1749. Having sold Drumdryan, Thomas then enlarged the old manor house at Quarrell and renamed it Carron Hall. In 1751 he bought lands at Torwood, north of Larbert. Notwithstanding his involvement with his brother's commercial enterprise Thomas clearly lacked Sir Lawrence's business talent, displaying instead a gentlemanly interest in genealogy and heraldry that led to his appointment as deputy lyon king of arms (1744–54). In 1768 he was elected MP for Orkney and Shetland, from which he retired two years later in favour of his son Thomas (1750–1794). Thomas [ii] died at Carron Hall on 17 April 1786 after a long period of ill health. He was survived by his wife, Lady Janet, who retired to Northumberland Street, Edinburgh, where she died on 29 December 1805.

Sir Lawrence's only son, Thomas [iii] Dundas of Kerse first Baron Dundas of Aske (1741–1820), politician, was born in Edinburgh on 16 February 1741. The beneficiary of his father's considerable wealth, he followed his education at Eton College with two years at St Andrews University (1756–8). He was introduced by Sir Lawrence to the freemasons of St Giles Lodge, Edinburgh, and in December 1758, aged seventeen, was elected master of St John's Lodge, Falkirk. Between 1759 and 1763 he toured Europe, visiting France, Switzerland, and Italy. He was summoned home in order to enter parliament as MP for Richmond in Yorkshire (for

which he sat between 1763 and 1768), and to take his place in metropolitan society. Writing to his wife from Aske Hall, Sir Lawrence Dundas requested that she did not leave London before Thomas (known as Thomie) was:

properly presented at Court and has seen Lord Bute, Lord Northumberland, [and] if possible the Duke of Bedford ... Tell Thomie that I wish my friends to be his and these are the people I desire him to be known to ... Order him to have his teeth put in and let him dress like an Englishman.

Ashcroft, 20–21

On 24 May 1764 Thomas [iii] married Lady Charlotte Fitzwilliam (1746–1833), daughter of the third Earl Fitzwilliam and a niece of the marquess of Rockingham. The couple, who lived principally at the family's Yorkshire estate of Upleatham, had fourteen children, eleven of whom reached adulthood.

During the late 1770s Thomas [iii] Dundas, now MP for Stirlingshire, actively defended his father's national and local political reputation from the attack led by their kinsman Henry Dundas. Thomas followed his father into the Rockingham camp, a position that, in view of his opposition to political corruption and sympathy for moderate reform, was a more natural association than that effectively forced on Sir Lawrence. On his father's death, in September 1781, Thomas became second baronet and, with property yielding £16,000 per annum, securities valued at £300,000, and numerous art treasures, was the principal beneficiary of Sir Lawrence's will.

During the 1780s Sir Thomas emerged as a supporter of Charles James Fox and secured a few favours for associates and relatives; a close friend of the prince of Wales, he was also made one of George's councillors of state. With his father dead, Sir Thomas now negotiated the family's removal from the costly world of Edinburgh politics, effected in return for a government loan of £50,000 to the Forth and Clyde Navigation Company, in which, like Sir Lawrence, Thomas was involved. However, he did maintain his political influence elsewhere in Scotland. In 1784 he held Stirlingshire and once more secured Orkney and Shetland for his cousin Thomas (1750–1794). He also contented himself with choosing MPs for his pocket borough of Richmond, one of whom was his cousin, Charles, who sat from 1784 to 1786. He also maintained what proved a never particularly effective parliamentary opposition to Henry Dundas. Thomas's position was later weakened further with the success of a government-sponsored candidate, John Balfour, at Orkney and Shetland in the election of 1790, which also reduced Thomas's influence in the northern burghs. During the 1780s he had combined opposition with a campaign for political reform. However, his appetite for change was deadened by the increasingly violent course of the French Revolution. Shocked by the excesses of the revolutionaries, he left Fox and sided with the Portland whigs in their support of the Pitt administration. His reward was a peerage, and on 13 August 1794 he became Baron Dundas of Aske. Thereafter he was denied further political advancement and was unable to restore the family's former Scottish influence until 1818, when his sixth son, the naval officer George Heneage Lawrence Dundas, agreed with a fellow officer, Captain William Balfour RN, that their families should share representation of Orkney and Shetland in alternate parliaments.

As a friend of the prince of Wales Lord Dundas enjoyed an active social life, being a member of Brooks's Club, the United Service Club, the Society of Dilettanti, and the Society of Antiquaries. From 1793 to 1813 he was the effective commander of the Yorkshire militia, and was lord lieutenant and vice-admiral of Orkney and Shetland between 1794 and 1820. An enthusiastic agricultural improver, he spent his income from rents on draining and enclosing land, experimenting with new crops and breeds (including merino sheep), using bone and gypsum manures, and building water- or horse-powered threshing mills. The family's alum works at Loftus were enlarged and he ran a successful alkali works at Dalmuir, Dunbartonshire. As governor of the Forth and Clyde Navigation Company (1786–1816), he presided over the canal's completion and the creation of Grangemouth and Port Dundas. He also persuaded the company to test the first practical steam-tug, the *Charlotte Dundas*. Lady Charlotte had herself always advocated retrenchment, and she was occasionally heeded. In 1785 Dundas sold Moor Park, without its contents, for £25,000 and, three years later, Dundas House, Edinburgh, for £10,000. After selling numerous paintings from the family collection in May 1794, he parted with most of the family's Irish estate in 1809 for £177,490. In 1812 he obtained an act of parliament allowing him to sell feu and teind duties in Orkney and Shetland.

Lord Dundas died at Aske Hall, near Richmond, on 14 July 1820, and was buried some days later in the Dundas mausoleum at Falkirk parish church, Stirlingshire. He was survived by his wife, who died on 11 February 1833; the barony passed to their eldest son, Lawrence Dundas (1766–1839), a determined whig politician who was created first earl of Zetland in 1838.

The Dundas family owed its place in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century national society to the remarkable career of Sir Lawrence Dundas of Kerse. Starting behind a shop counter in the Luckenbooths, Edinburgh, he amassed the wealth that enabled the family to buy its way into the whig oligarchy, to further the careers of other successful relatives, and to play a prominent role in the politics and land management of Scotland. The best monument to Sir Lawrence's success, as well as his determination, underhand methods, and excellent taste, remains Dundas House, St Andrew's Square, Edinburgh, which is still the New Town's finest building. Yet for all their wealth and local influence the Dundases of Fingask and of Kerse remained subordinate to a kinsman whose still crucial attachment to king and prime minister gave him precedence. Appropriately the statue in the centre of St Andrew's Square is not of Sir Lawrence, his brother, or nephew but of their rival Henry Dundas, later Lord Melville. In death, as in life, Harry IX succeeded and overshadows the Nabob of the North and his kind.

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parish register, Edinburgh, North Kirk, 28 Oct 1712 [baptism: Lawrence Dundas]

parish register, Edinburgh, North Kirk, 16 Feb 1741 [baptism: Thomas [iii] Dundas]

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## Archives

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Berks. RO, family corresp. and papers incl. genealogical notes

N. Yorks. CRO, corresp. and papers [Sir Lawrence Dundas]

N. Yorks. CRO, Zetland (Dundas) archive

NA Scot., Dundas of Fingask papers



NA Scot., Dundas of Kerse estate records

NA Scot., Dundas and Wilson papers

NL Scot., letter-book in Germany [Sir Lawrence Dundas]

Orkney Archives, Kirkwall, earldom of Orkney (Dundas) papers

Edinburgh City Archives

NA Scot., Carlops and Abbotskerse muniments

NA Scot., Mar and Kellie muniments

NMM, letters to Lord Sandwich [Sir Lawrence Dundas]

TNA: PRO, Treasury records

## Likenesses

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T. Hudson, oils, 1760–69 (Lawrence Dundas (1712–1781)), Aske, Richmond, North Yorkshire

P. Batoni, oils, 1764 (Thomas [iii] Dundas (1741–1820) of Castle Cary), Aske, Richmond, North Yorkshire

J. Zoffany, oils, 1769 (Lawrence Dundas (1712–1781) and his grandson, Lawrence Dundas), Aske, Richmond, North Yorkshire

## Wealth at Death

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£16,000 p.a. devolved on son; also £900,000 in personalties and landed property: *Annual register* (1781), 214

£400,000 debts: Ashcroft, 'The Zetland (Dundas) archive', 27

### See also

Dundas of Fingask, Thomas (c. 1708–1786)

Dundas, Thomas (1750–1794), army officer and politician

Dundas, Charles, Baron Amesbury (1751–1832), politician

Dundas of Kerse, Thomas, first Baron Dundas of Aske (1741–1820), politician



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