

OLD & NEW TOWN WALKS - 2

The Tolbooth

The Tolbooth was visited by many Scottish monarchs including Mary, Queen of Scots; held many famous prisoners and was the scene of many executions. Perhaps the most infamous incident took place in 1736 when the commander of the Town Guard, Captain Porteous, was dragged from the Tolbooth cells and lynched by an angry mob. Despite the promise of a large reward, no-one was ever punished for this outrageous crime. The incident inspired Sir Walter Scott to write 'The Heart of Midlothian', the 8th of the Waverley Novels published in 1818. The Tolbooth was finally demolished in 1817.

Parliament Hall

The oldest part of Parliament House is Parliament Hall, which the Town Council of Edinburgh, at its expense, had built as a permanent home for the parliament, and as such is the oldest extant purpose built parliamentary building in the British Isles. It was completed in 1639 to the design of James Murray. It has a dramatic hammerbeam roof made of Scandinavian oak, which may have been designed to evoke Parliament Hall at Stirling Castle, a previous home to the Scottish court. After the Act of Union 1707 the Parliament of Scotland was adjourned, and the building ceased to be used for its original function. The Hall was used for the sitting of courts, but in recent times has been subject to restoration work and now remains open as a meeting place for lawyers. In 1822 King George IV was entertained here to a lavish banquet by the Town Council.

Beneath Parliament Hall is the Laigh Hall which original contained stabling for the members of the Scottish Parliament – The Three Estates. For many years it housed the records of Scotland before the opening of Register House at the East End of Princes Street in 1785.

The Mercat Cross

The Mercat Cross is where important national proclamations are still made. Interestingly until quite recently they were made 3 days after the event. This is because that was the time that it took a fast rider to bring the news from London to Edinburgh. This Cross was restored in 1885 by William Ewart Gladstone, the local MP and Prime Minister. The Cross traditionally was the centre of Scottish burgh life. People would meet to chat, to exchange news and to conduct their business. There was also a darker side to the Cross as it was here that many executions were carried out. It also at the Cross that criminals were publicly punished, often with great cruelty. The Burgh Records for September 1652 describe how 2 unfortunate Englishmen, who had toasted the health of the exiled Charles II, were given 39 lashes and were then nailed by their ears to the gallows beside the Cross.

The site of the original Cross which had stood for centuries, is marked by special stones just outside the Festival Fringe Office. This was demolished in 1751 to try to persuade citizens to move their business inside to the planned new Royal Exchange, the imposing building across the street. The Exchange, opened in 1761 was the brainchild of George Drummond, 6 times the Lord Provost of

Edinburgh. Drummond was determined to improve the appearance of the city. It became the City Chambers in 1811 and is still the Headquarters of the City of Edinburgh Council.

Anchor Close

This Close dates back to 1521 and is named after the Anchor Tavern which was another popular Edinburgh 'howff'. The Close was the home of George Drummond (1687-1766) who was 6 times Lord Provost of Edinburgh. He did more than any other citizen of his day to bring improvements to the Old Town and to promote the construction of the New Town.

The Close also held the premises of William Smellie the printer. Here was printed the 1st edition of the 'Encyclopedia Britannica' in 1768 and the Edinburgh Edition of the Poems of Robert Burns in 1787. It was also the home of the Crochallan Fencibles, one of Edinburgh's famous 18th Century clubs. The name apparently came from an old Gaelic song - 'Cro Chalien' = Colin's Cattle sung by the landlord Dawney Douglas. Smellie introduced Robert Burns to the club.

North Foulis Close

The 16th century home of the Foulis family, the hereditary Lords of Colinton. The plaque commemorates James Gillespie of Spylaw, who along with his brother John had a well-known tobacconist and snuff shop here. The brothers were typically canny Scots businessmen who gradually amassed a small fortune from their business. In 1759 they purchased the snuff mills in Colinton. James oversaw the manufacturing side of the business while John managed the shop. James purchased the estates of Spylaw, Bonaly and Fernielaw. In 1773 he built Spylaw House on the site of an older property. The brothers never married and lived very frugally. The 1 luxury that they allowed themselves was the purchase of a bright yellow coach. This prompted Henry Erskine, the witty Lord Advocate to remark:

"Wha wad hae thocht it

That noses could hae bocht it!"

Shrewd investments in tobacco in the new United States further increased their wealth. John died in 1795 followed by James in 1797. He divided his fortune between two charitable enterprises - a hospital for needy senior citizens and a school for poor children, now of course James Gillespie's High School.

John Kay (1742 - 1826) also lived near here. He was born in Dalkeith, moved to Edinburgh and set up a successful barbershop in Parliament Square. He was an excellent self-taught caricaturist and began sketching his customers. He displayed these sketches in his shop window. They proved very popular. He retired from hairdressing and became a full-time caricaturist. In all he sketched some 900 'portraits' of his contemporaries. These were collected and published after his death in 1837 by his friend Hugh Paton as 'Kay's Portraits.'

The Tron Kirk

The Tron, as it is commonly called, was built to house worshippers from the over-crowded St Giles - particularly those offended by the attempts by Charles I to impose episcopalianism on the

Presbyterian Scots. It was built between 1636 and 1647 to a design by John Mylne, Royal master mason. The width of the building was reduced when both side aisles were removed in 1785 to accommodate the South Bridge and Blair Street leading to Hunter Square. In 1828 a new spire was constructed to replace the original, destroyed in a fire of 1824. The Tron closed as a church in 1952 and was acquired by the City of Edinburgh Council. It has recently been taken over by the Edinburgh World Heritage Trust with the view of converting the building into a Visitors' Centre.

Niddry Street & Blackfriars Wynd.

Niddry Street formally known as Niddry's Wynd. In 1732, this was the scene of a shocking abduction. Lady Grange, the estranged wife of Lord Grange, brother of the powerful Earl of Mar had taken exception to her husband's affairs. She took up lodgings here in the Wynd to keep an eye on him. Lord Grange objected to this and arranged to have his wife abducted. She was taken first to St Kilda. After some years of captivity she managed to smuggle a letter out to her friends in Edinburgh. A rescue mission was launched but sadly word of this reached her captors and she was taken away again, this time to the Isle of Skye. There she died in 1749. Because of his influence, Lord Grange was never punished for his crime.

The next street down from Niddry Street is Blackfriars' Street. This was the scene of a violent street brawl in 1520 when supporters of the powerful Douglas and Hamilton families fought for control of the young King James V. Street brawls known as Tulzies were all too common on the Edinburgh streets of old. This one though was the worst. This bloody affray, known as 'Cleanse the Causeway', left over 80 Hamiltons dead and dying in the street.

About 50 metres down on your right is a building, now a hostel, but formally the town house of the Earl of Morton, one of the key players in the downfall of Mary, Queen of Scots. Justice finally caught up with him in 1581 when he was executed for his part in Darnley's murder. Interestingly he was beheaded by 'The Maiden', a form of execution invented by the Scots some 200 years before the French Revolution's guillotine and now to be seen in the National Museum of Scotland in nearby Chambers Street.

Paisley Close.

Paisley Close was the scene of a tragic disaster in November 1861; a disaster that was to have far-reaching consequences for the city.

"Edinburgh Evening Courant 25th November 1861. One of the most appalling disasters...occurred yesterday morning. An immense, tall and thickly populated tenement...suddenly gave way...floor carrying down floor, and in a few moments buried the unwarned inmates in the ruins."

In all 35 people were killed and many more injured. Rescuers frantically searched the rubble for any survivors. Suddenly a faint voice was heard crying from underneath the rubble. *"Heave awa' lads, I'm no deid yet."*

Shocked by this tragedy, Lord Provost William Chambers pushed through a wide-ranging programme of improvements. Old houses were demolished, streets widened and, most importantly, clean water was provided. Edinburgh's first Medical Officer for Health, Dr. Henry

Littlejohn, was appointed. Over the next 30 years, nearly 90% of the Old Town was demolished in the name of progress.

John Knox's House

Beside the old well stand two of Edinburgh's oldest surviving houses – Moubray House with its traditional outside stone stair and, ahead of you, the better-known John Knox's House with its decorated frontage and timbered gallery. Both of these houses date from the early 1500s but are built on much older foundations. In 1544 an English army captured Edinburgh and set the town on fire. Henry was trying to force the Scots to agree to the marriage of the infant Mary, Queen of Scots to Henry's young son, Prince Edward. The Scots refused so an enraged Henry launched an attack on Edinburgh. As well as setting fire to burgh, the retreating English army set about destroying the Border towns and abbeys that lay in its path. No wonder then that Scots refer to this grim time as 'The Rough Wooing'. In 1548 Mary was sent to France for her own safety. So a new Edinburgh, including these two houses, arose from the ashes. During the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots, it was the home of James Mossman, a goldsmith, and his wife Margaret Arras whose arms and initials can be seen on the wall along from the figure of Moses – not John Knox! The house also carries a religious motto, a popular practice of those days. Mossman, whose father had refashioned the Scottish Crown, for Mary's father James V, was executed in 1573 for his loyalty to Mary.

Even if this was not the home of John Knox, who may have been brought here to die in 1572 out of range of the Castle's guns – the Castle was being held by supporters of Mary, Queen of Scots -the tradition that it was, saved the house from demolition in the 19th century. Now it is preserved as an interesting example of a 16th century town house.

Tweeddale Court & The World's End

Make your way across the High Street into Tweeddale Court. Some of the property that surrounds you dates back to the early 1500s. The small building on the right is thought to be a shed for sedan chairs used for carrying well-off folk around 18th century Edinburgh. The old wall is believed to be the only surviving section of the town wall built during the reign of King James II in the 15th century to protect the town from the English.

The house at the foot of the Court belonged to the Marquises of Tweeddale. It was improved by Robert Adam in the 1750s. In 1791 it was taken over by the British Linen Bank. A famous unsolved murder took place here just where you are standing. On a dark November evening in 1806 a child stumbled across the body of Thomas Begbie, a bank messenger. He had been stabbed to death and robbed of £3000. Although most of the money was later found hidden in a wall, no-one was ever brought to trial. However it was widely believed that the murderer was a well-known criminal James Mackoull who died in prison in 1822 having been convicted of bank robbery.

World's End Close, previously known as Stanfield's Close marked the last Close on the southside of the High Street before the Netherbow Port.