

Grassmarket Notes

The notes attached have been prepared by Eric Melvin to go with a tour he gave to Guides of the Grassmarket in June 2025

Grassmarket Notes

1. The King's Wall

Inasmuch as we are informed by our well-beloved Provost and Community of Edinburgh, that they dread the evil and injury of our enemies of England, we have in favour of them, and for the zeal and affection that we have for the Provost and Community of our said Burgh, and for the common profit, granted to them full licence and leave to fosse, bulwark, wall, tower, turret, and other ways to strengthen our said Burgh in what manner of ways or degree that be seen most speedful to them. Given under our Great Seal at Stirling the last day of April, and of our reign the thirteenth year, anno 1450. (James II)

Section of The King's Wall - Tweeddale Court

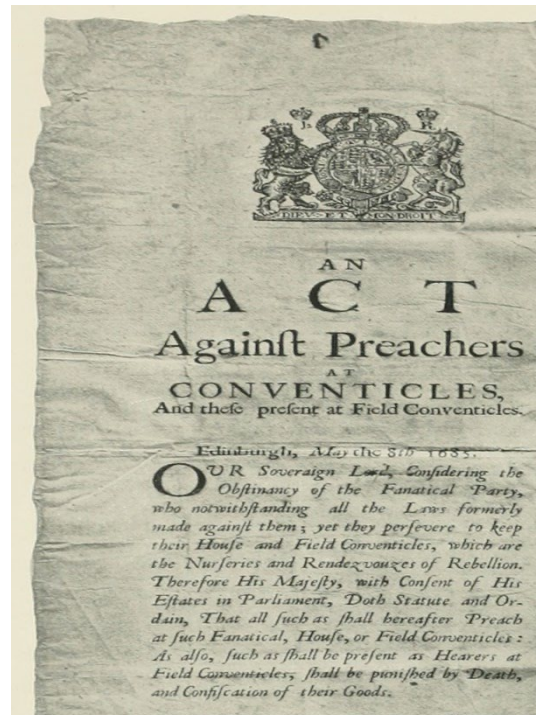


2. The Grassmarket



3. The Covenanters

The Covenant, which was first signed in Greyfriars Kirk in 1638, promised to defend Presbyterianism from intervention by the Crown



The Scottish Parliament on 8th May, 1685 have recorded the following:

Our Sovereign Lord, considering the obstinacy of the fanatical party who, notwithstanding all the laws formerly made against them, still keep their house and field conventicles, which are the nurseries and rendezvouses of rebellion; therefore His Majesty, with consent of Parliament, ordains that all such persons who shall hereafter preach at such house or field conventicles, also those who shall be present as hearers, shall be punished by death and confiscation of their goods.

The Covenanters' Prison

Behind the gates lies part of the southern section of Greyfriars Kirkyard which was used in 1679 as a prison for over one thousand supporters of the National Covenant who had been defeated by Government forces at the battle of Bothwell Brig on 22 June. For over four months these men were held here without any shelter, each man being allowed 4 ounces of bread a day. Kindly citizens were sometimes able to feed them. Some of the prisoners died here, some were tried and executed for treason, some escaped, and some were freed after signing a bond of loyalty to the Crown. All those who were persecuted and died for their support of the National Covenant in the reigns of Charles II and James VII are commemorated by the Martyrs' Memorial on the north-

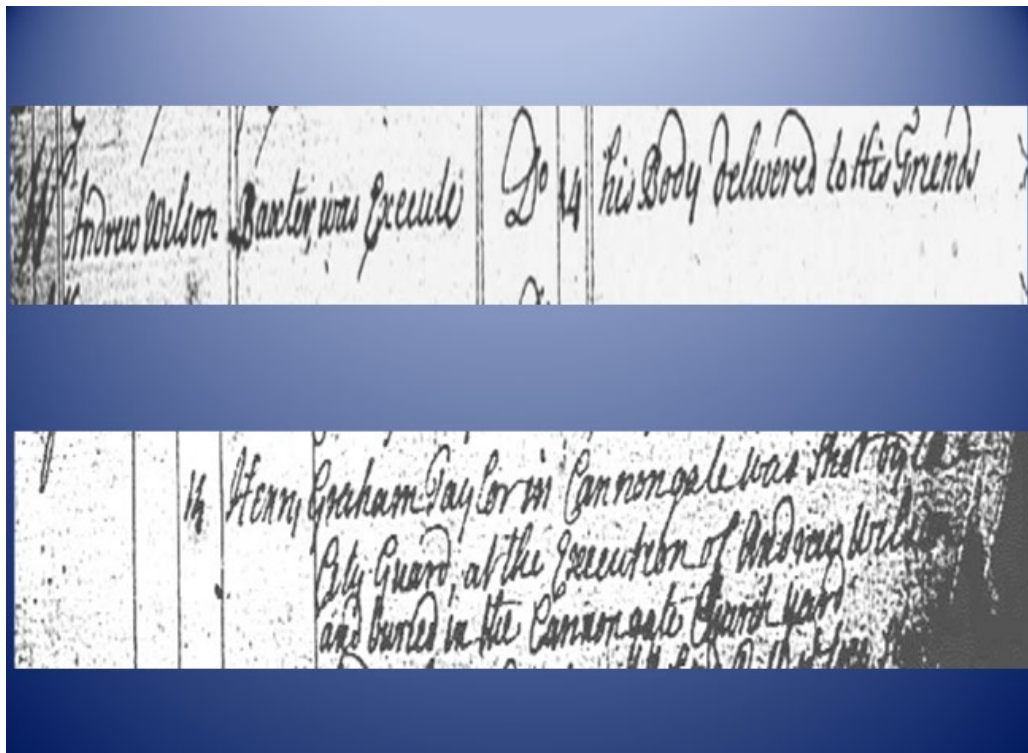
eastern wall of the kirkyard. In November 1679 the remaining 257 men, who had been sentenced to transportation overseas, were taken to Leith and placed on board a ship bound for the American colonies; nearly all were drowned when this ship was wrecked in the Orkney islands only 48 of the prisoners survived.

An Execution in the Grassmarket. (Edward Topham 1774)

"On the Guard knocking on the door of the Tollbooth, the unhappy criminal made his appearance. He [John Reid, convicted of sheep-stealing, who had been defended by James Boswell, the diarist and biographer of Dr Johnson], was dressed in a white waistcoat and breeches, usual on these occasions, bound with black ribands, with a white nightcap tied with the same . . . Two clergymen accompanied him and were discoursing with him on subjects of religion . . .

The Executioner, who seemed ashamed of the meanness of his office, followed muffled up in a great coat, and the City Guards, with their arms ready, marched around him. The criminal, whose hands were tied behind him and the rope about his neck, walked up the remaining part of the street. When the criminal had descended three parts of the hill which leads to the Grassmarket, he beheld the crowd waiting for his coming and the instrument of execution waiting at the end of it. He made a short stop here, naturally shocked at such a sight, and the people seemed to sympathise with his affliction. When he reached the end he recalled his resolution; and after passing some time in prayer with the clergymen and once addressing himself to the people, he was turned off and expired.

5.The Porteous Riots



(i). 14th April 1736 – Eyewitness Account by Alexander Carlyle

Mr Baillie had taken windows in a house on the north side of the Grassmarket, for his pupils and me, in the second floor, about seventy or eighty yards westward of the place of execution, where we went in due time to see the show . . . When we arrived at the house, some people who were looking from the windows were displaced, and went to a window in the common stair about two feet below the level of ours. The street is long and wide and there was a very great crowd assembled. The execution went on with the usual forms, and Wilson behaved in a manner very becoming his situation. There was not the least appearance of an attempt to rescue; but soon after the executioner had done his duty, there was an attack made upon him, as usual on such occasions, by the boys and blackguards throwing stones and dirt in testimony of their abhorrence of the hangman. But there was no attempt to break through the guard and cut down the prisoner.

It was generally said that there was very little, if any, more violence than had usually happened on such occasions. Porteous, however, inflamed with wine and jealousy, thought proper to order his Guard to fire, their muskets being loaded with slugs; and when the soldiers showed reluctance, I saw him turn to them with threatening gesture and inflamed countenance. They obeyed, and fired; but wishing to do as little harm as possible, many of them elevated their pieces, the effect of which was that some people were wounded in the windows; and one unfortunate lad [Henry Graham, a young tailor from the Canongate] whom we had displaced was killed in the stair window by a slug entering his head . . . We had seen many people, women and men, fall on the street, and at first thought that it was only through fear, and by their crowding on one another to escape. But when the crowd dispersed, we saw them lying dead or wounded, and had no longer any doubt of what had happened. The numbers were said to be eight or nine killed, and double the number wounded; but this was never exactly known.

(ii) 7th September 1736

Whereas upon Tuesday the eleventh Day of September in the year of our Lord 1736, great Numbers of wicked, desperate and blood-thirsty Persons of most detestable Principles unlawfully assembled within the city of Edinburgh with open Force and Violence seized the arms of the City Guard, possessed themselves of the City Gates, broke open the Door of the Tolbooth and laid violent hands upon Captain John Porteous then a prisoner under sentence of death...and having in a cruel Manner dragged him from the said Prison, hanged him by the neck, and barbarously murthered him, in manifest Violation of the public Peace, in defiance and Subversion of legal Government (and) in high Contempt of our Sovereign Lord the King and his Laws” (Report to the House of Lords)

Hugo Arnot’s Account from his ‘History of Edinburgh’ (1769). Arnot had interviewed eye – witnesses to the murder of Captain Porteous. It is interesting that he repeats the claim that Porteous had been pardoned by the Queen.

A number of people from different quarters assembled on the night previous to that on which his execution would have taken place had not the Queen granted him a reprieve. The clothes that appeared upon their different disguises as well as the conduct and deliberation with which their plan was executed, bespoke many among them to be superior to the vulgar; and that the violence they committed proceeded not from the rash and unpremeditated concert of a rabble.

They surprised and disarmed the Town Guard, blocked up the gates of the city to prevent the admission of troops quartered in the suburbs. The prison doors which would not yield to the force of their hammers, they consumed by fire. The prisoners they dismissed (Porteous excepted) whom they threatened with the tragical catastrophe which he dreaded. In vain did the magistrates endeavour to appease or quell the ferment. They were pelted with stones and threatened to be fired upon.

They marched with lighted torches to the Grass-market, opened a shop, took out a coil of ropes and paid for them; and, after allowing Porteous to give to an acquaintance in trust the money he had about him to be delivered to his relations, they proceeded to a dyer's post, nigh the spot where the unfortunate people were killed. After reproaching him with his barbarity, they hanged him on the post and dispersed quietly without committing any other outrage or disturbance whatsoever.

It is very remarkable that, although forty years have now elapsed, no information has been offered, no discovery made of those concerned in this conspiracy. Notwithstanding the high rewards offered to informers, and the number of people whom it behoved to have been engaged in it; but a fidelity has shown which none but people acting from principle could have observed.
[Hugo Arnot]

6.The White Hart Inn

The White Hart Inn is one of Edinburgh's oldest pubs, with records dating back to 1516. It has a rich history, including serving as a coaching inn and a gathering place for various historical figures.

Jenny Clow was a domestic servant to Agnes Macle hose. Her mistress sent her to deliver a letter to the poet and he seduced her. The twenty-year-old Jenny Clow gave birth in November 1788 to Robert Burn's child, Robert Burns Clow.

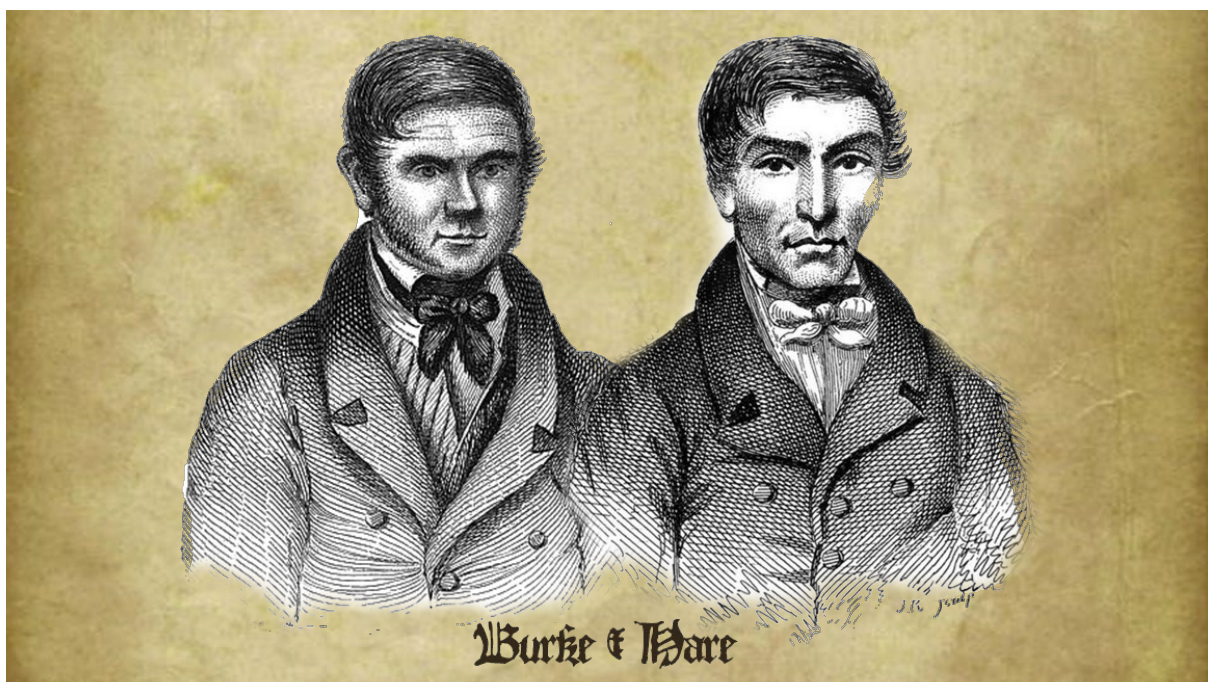
Whilst he was in Dumfries in November 1791, Robert Burns received a letter from Agnes McLe hose, informing him that Jenny Clow "*to all appearances is at this moment dying. Obligated, from all the symptoms of a rapid decay, to quit her service, she is gone to a room almost without common necessities, untended and unmourned. In circumstances so distressing, to whom can she so naturally look for aid as to the father of her child, the man for whose sake she has suffered many a sad and anxious night, shut from the world, with no other companions than guilt and solitude? You have now an opportunity to evince you indeed possess those fine feelings you have delineated, so as to claim the just admiration of your country. I am convinced I need add nothing farther to persuade you to act as every consideration of humanity must dictate.*" Burns asked Agnes to get a porter to take five shillings from him to Jenny Clow. Burns took a week's leave of absence to visit the stricken Jenny who died of consumption in 1792.

Jenny Clow and Robert Burns' son, Robert Burns Clow, was born in Edinburgh in 1788. Robert Burns was willing to take the baby into his home, but his mother would not part with him. He later became a wealthy merchant in London. Robert married and had a son, also Robert Burns Clow, who went to Borneo, married a chief's daughter and was killed by pirates. He had been given his father's names, as this was the custom at the time. Although he named his own son after Robert Burns, he never capitalised on the link with his famous poet father.

Burns wrote "*Ae fond kiss*" while staying at the Inn after their final meeting and sent it to Clarinda in December 1791 before she departed Edinburgh for Jamaica to be with her estranged husband. On 6 December 1791 Robert and Agnes met in Edinburgh for the last time; she outlived him by 45 years.

Under the date, 6 December 1831, Nancy wrote in her journal: "This day I can never forget. Parted with Burns, in the year 1791, never more to meet in this world. Oh, may we meet in Heaven!"^[4]

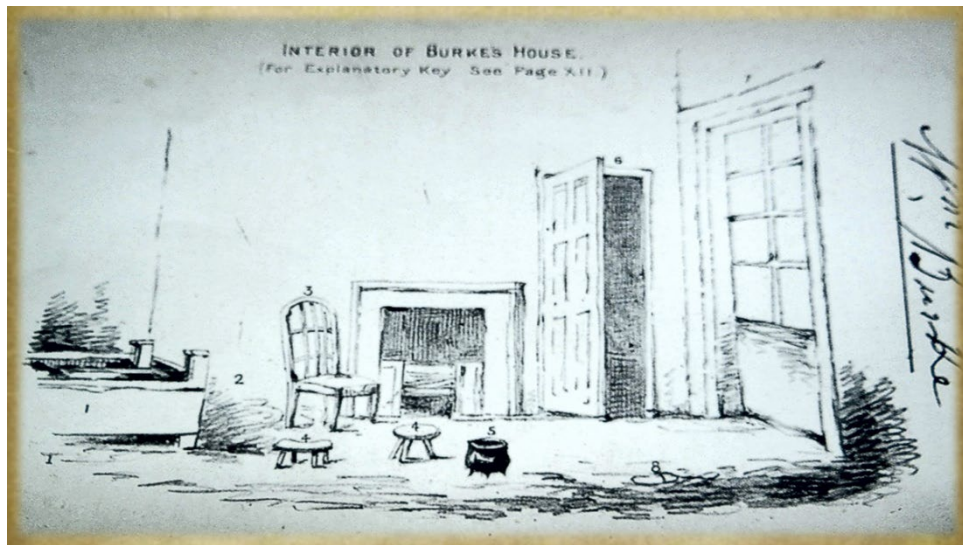
7. Burke & Hare



A Description of Tanner's Close presented as evidence at the trial.

The room is small and of an oblong form, the miserable bed occupied early one end of it.. For some days after the trial everything remained in the position in which it had been when they were arrested and presented a disgusting picture of squalid wretchedness; rags and straw, mingled with implements of shoemaking and old shoes and boots in such quantities as Burke's nominal profession of a shoemaker could never account for. A pot full of boiled potatoes was a prominent object. The bed was a coarse wooden frame without posts or curtains and filled with

old rags and straw. At the foot of it and near the wall was the heap of straw under which the woman Campbell's body was concealed. The window looks into a small court closed in by a wall.'



The Execution of Burke, 28th January 1829



8. Duncan Napier (1831 – 1921)



‘There was another awful affliction that the poor of the Old Town had to endure and that was the curse of cheap drink. Helping in his father’s pub in the West Port, Duncan experienced first-hand the horrors of the heavy drinking that was so prevalent, particularly amongst Edinburgh’s poor. There were an astonishing number of outlets for the purchase and consumption of alcohol in mid- 19th century Edinburgh.

The 1850 – 1851 *Edinburgh and Leith Post Office Directory* lists

269 Spirit Dealers,
326 Grocers & Spirit Dealers,
44 Taverns,
51 Wine Merchants and
93 Wine & Spirit Merchants.

With virtually no licensing laws to speak of (pubs were only supposed to stop serving alcohol during Sunday church services), regular drunkenness was a cruel fact of life for thousands.

Every morning there would be a number of persons waiting till the door opened. Some of these had neither a covering on their heads nor yet to their feet while the clothes they wore only served to screen their nakedness. Several of these people came with strange dishes for their liquor. One woman would have a large watering can in which she would get put half a gill of whisky and after reaching the well would let a small quantity of water run in and there raising her pitcher to her mouth would drink it off in the face of her unsuspecting neighbours. Some would have a cream jug on their way to the dairy and others cups and so the secret and open drinking went on. The old couple (Mr & Mrs Napier) were not able to help us on Sabbath as

they were sleeping off the effects of their debauchery in bed while four of us were moving to and fro as busily as we could, serving the constant, never - ending stream of degraded creatures.

Others would sit in the boxes and drink till their brains became intoxicated with the effects of the alcohol. They would then become dangerous to their neighbours. Oh, the awful cursing, swearing and yelling within the shop, while out of doors mobs of people were gathered round those of their number who were fighting and the shouts of murder and the fierce threats and cries which came from infuriated threats made one think of pandemonium itself let loose.

Such scenes were not confined to the West Port alone but throughout the whole of the poorer districts of the city such as the Cowgate, Grassmarket, High Street, Canongate and other places where the fruits of the drink traffic made the Sabbath day hideous.

‘The Fresh Air of the Summer Morning – The Story of Duncan Napier’

9.The Grassmarket Bombing

During a Zeppelin air raid on Edinburgh on the night of April 2-3, 1916, a bomb exploded in the Grassmarket, outside the White Hart Hotel, killing one person and injuring four. This was part of a larger attack where two German Zeppelins dropped bombs across the city, causing significant damage and casualties in other areas as well. The German airships L14 and L22 targeted Edinburgh, dropping a total of eighteen high-explosive and six incendiary bombs. One of the bombs landed in the Grassmarket, directly outside the White Hart Hotel.

The explosion resulted in one fatality, William Breakey, and injuries to four others. The blast also wrecked the interior of the hotel.

The raid caused damage across the city, including at George Watson's College, Lauriston Place, and Marshall Street, where six people died in a tenement building. A young child was also killed in the St. Leonard's area.

