

OLD & NEW TOWN WALKS 4

The 1752 Proposals for Improvements to Edinburgh

"1. To build upon the ruins of the north side of the High Street an Exchange for the proper accommodations for our merchants.

2. To erect upon the ruins in the Parliament Close a large building, containing such accommodations as are still wanting for the Courts of Justice, the Royal Burghs and Town Council, offices for the clerks, proper apartments for the several Registrars and for the Advocates' Library.

3. To obtain an Act of Parliament for extending the Royalty: to enlarge and beautify the town by opening new streets to the north and south; removing the markets and shambles and turning the North loch into a canal with water and terraces on each side.

4. That the expense of the public works should be defrayed by a national contribution.

That this project may occasion the centre of the town to be deserted. But of this there can be no hazard. People of fortune and of a certain rank will probably choose to build upon the fine fields which lie to the north and south of the town: but men of professions and business of every kind will still incline to live in the neighbourhood of the Exchange, of the Courts of Justice and other places of public resort; and the number of this last class of men will increase in a much greater proportion, than that of the former."

So this New Town was the result of a competition organised by the Town Council in 1766. The competition was won by a young, previously-unknown 23 year old architect, James Craig. His design was a simple 'grid iron' of parallel streets balanced at either end by elegant squares each with a grand church. At the insistence of King George III, this New Town was to be a celebration of Great Britain and the royal house of Hanover. The principal street, running along a natural ridge of higher ground was to be named George Street after the King himself and his son the Prince of Wales, Hanover Street celebrated the family name of the King and Frederick Street after the King's next son the Duke of York. The original plan shown to George III had the southern street, in the shadow of the Castle and the Old Town, named 'St Giles Street' after Edinburgh's patron saint. King George was not best pleased with this suggestion! He is reported as having stamped his feet and shouted:

"Hey! Hey! What! What! St Giles Street! Never do! Never do!"

To be fair to the King, he was not being anti - Edinburgh or anti-Scottish. St Giles was also the patron saint of lepers and beggars and the district of St Giles in London was a hotbed of crime and loose living. So the name was changed to Princes Street after the King's other sons. The two squares were to be named after the patron saints of Scotland (St Andrew) and England (St George). Unfortunately there already was a George Square in Edinburgh so the western square was named instead after George's wife and his eldest daughter both named Charlotte. Between the principal streets, two lanes were to be built for merchants, tradesmen, servants and stabling. These were to be named after the emblems of Scotland and England - Thistle Street and Rose Street.

Work started on this first phase of the New Town in 1767 and was not finished until 1811 when Charlotte Square was completed.

The dream of the City Council was that the planned New Town with its grand houses would prove to be very attractive to the better-off citizens of Edinburgh. At first though there was a great reluctance on the part of Edinburgh folk to leave the familiar surroundings of the Old Town and to take up residence in what after all was a large building site surrounded by fields. When the silk merchant John Neale built the first house in Princes Street in 1769, he was exempted from city taxes for life. Gradually leading citizens like David Hume were persuaded to set up home in the developing New Town. Despite the inconvenience of access and initially the lack of any shops, the attraction of these spacious houses proved to be irresistible. And no wonder! With their own private entrance, (compared to the common tenement stair of the Old Town), drawing room, dining room, study, bedrooms, kitchen and ample space for servants and storage, these houses soon attracted buyers. Indeed the first New Town proved to be so popular that other residential developments quickly followed. In the 1820s, a work started on a second phase to the north of Queen Street Gardens while to the west, the Earl of Moray developed the Moray Estate which includes the graceful Moray Place and Ainslie Place. Meantime Sir Henry Raeburn carried out his own project around Ann Street.

The North Bridge.

- First proposed in 1752.
- Work commenced on draining the east Nor Loch in 1763.
- The Foundation Stone laid by LP George Drummond on 21st October 1763.
- The architect was William Mylne, (whose brother built Blackfriars Bridge in London). The contracted sum was £10140.
- Work proceeded unsupervised by the City. On 3rd August 1769, part of the south side collapsed killing 5 people.
- An inquiry established that the foundations had not been properly put in place. The architect had miscalculated the weight of the arches and had sunk the foundations into earth accumulated from the Old Town.
- The bridge was rebuilt at a cost of £17354 and although passable in 1772 was not completed until 1778.
- There was an understandable reluctance on the part of Edinburgh folk to venture across the bridge – a trepidation heightened by the strength of the winds.

Thistle Court

- The first house completed in the New Town (1767).

- The developer was John Young (Young Street, the extension of Thistle Street is named after him.)
- The houses are modest, rubble-built and semi-detached, facing each other across what was originally a garden. There is a nice rustic pediment above the doors.
- The little house on the left of the Court is in fact the first house to be built in the New Town. It was built in 1767 by John Young. He was awarded £20 by the Council for being the first to make his home in the New Town. As you can see, it is a rather modest building and certainly not what the Town Council had wanted to see in their grand New Town! So regulations were introduced to ensure that every house that was to be built on the main streets was to be built of dressed ashlar stone; have 3 stories and a sunken basement and a street frontage of no more than 48 feet (14.4metres).

Robert Adam (1728-1792)

- Born in Kirkcaldy, the son of William Adam (1689-1748) and brother of James (1730-1794) with whom he went into partnership.
- He studied at Edinburgh University and then travelled to Italy in 1754, visiting Pompeii.
- He held the position of Architect of the King's Works for Scotland (1761-1769) – a post previously held by 7 generations of the Mylne family.
- In 1758 he establishes a London practice with his brother.
- As an architect, he transformed the prevailing Palladian style with series of elegant variations and extended his work into interior design with internal decorations, furniture and fittings.
- His work in Edinburgh is represented by the Royal Exchange, Register House (1774) and Charlotte Square. (Commenced in 1792)

Register House (Robert Adam, 1774).

- Houses the National records of Scotland in probably the finest classical building in Edinburgh. The records had been kept previously in 2 cellars under Parliament House.
- The Government granted £12000 from the Jacobite Forfeited Estates to help cover the costs.
- The Foundation Stone was laid on 27th June, 1774.
- The building has 2 stories with a concealed basement. The ground floor is rusticated with central projecting Corinthian pillars capped by the dome behind. There are pavilions at either end which are pilastered; balustraded and capped by cupolas. There is a splendid domed hall within.

- At the front there is a statue of the Duke of Wellington fashioned in 12 tons of bronze by Sir John Steell. The statue was unveiled in a violent thunderstorm on 18th June, 1852.

“Mid lightning’s flash and thunder’s deafening peal,

Behold the Iron Duke, in Bronze by Steell”

The Royal Bank of Scotland.

- This was built on the site intended for St. Andrew’s Church.
- Through his powerful connections, the site was obtained by Sir Laurence Dundas of the noted legal family.
- This was built as the townhouse for Dundas. The building was designed by Sir William Chambers and work started in 1772 and was completed in 1774.
- The building has a shallow, 3-bay Corinthian pilastered entrance with a fine frieze and projecting cornice.
- This is now a branch of The Royal Bank of Scotland but it was originally built as the town house of Sir Laurence Dundas, a member of one of the most powerful families in late 18th century Scotland. When Dundas learnt of the plans for the New Town he bought up the land where the plan had intended the church of St Andrew to be built. To the dismay of the Town Council, Dundas proceeded to build this grand private house, modelled on Marble Hill House in London, in the popular classical style of architecture. Amongst the first residents of the newly-completed square in 1778 were the Earls of Aboyne, Dumfries and Dalhousie

Henry Dundas, Viscount Melville. (1742-1811).

- Admitted to the Scottish Bar in 1763 and appointed Solicitor-General in 1774.
- M.P. for Midlothian (1774) and appointed as Lord Advocate in 1775 and President of the Board of Control in 1784.
- He was close ally of William Pitt and was dubbed ‘the uncrowned king of Scotland.’
- In 1791 he was appointed as Secretary of State for the Home Department and created a Viscount Melville of Dunira in 1802.
- In 1805 he was impeached for ‘gross malversation and breach of duty’ as secretary of the Treasury but after a 2 week trial in the House of Lords was acquitted.
- He retired to his estate of Dunira in Comrie and died there in 1811.
- His monument was erected in 1821.

St Andrew’s Church (Major Alexander Fraser, 1785).

- The present building was erected following a competition to choose a design.
- It has a Corinthian portico with an unusual oval auditorium with fine plaster work on a flat ceiling.
- The spire, added in 1789, was designed by William Sibbald.
- The church was the scene of the 1843 Disruption of the Church of Scotland led by Dr Thomas Chalmers. On May 18th he led 470 ministers and elders from a meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Watched by thousands of people, they marched to Tanfield Hall, Canonmills and there convened themselves as the Free Church of Scotland with Dr. Chalmers appointed as the first Moderator.

The Scott Monument (George Meikle Kemp, completed 1844).

- The winner of a competition organised in 1840 to identify a fitting memorial to Sir Walter Scott (d 1832) was won by 'a modest country joiner', George Meikle Kemp who had entered his design under a pseudonym, 'John Morvo', a 16th century mason who had worked on Melrose Abbey.
- Kemp was heavily influenced by the current fashion for Gothic architecture and by the remains of Melrose Abbey. The monument is decorated with statues from the writings of Scott and other Scottish authors.
- Work started in April 1840 and the foundation stone was laid in August 1840.
- The statue is 180ft in height and 55ft. at its base. The total cost of the monument was £15650.
- This was the only known building designed by Kemp who died tragically in the Union Canal before the monument was completed.
- A contemporary described the finished monument as 'a vast and intricate pile of Gothic masonry... perhaps the most naively philistine structure in the country.
- The statue of Scott with his favourite dog Maida fashioned by Sir John Steell, was added in 1846 at a cost of £2000.