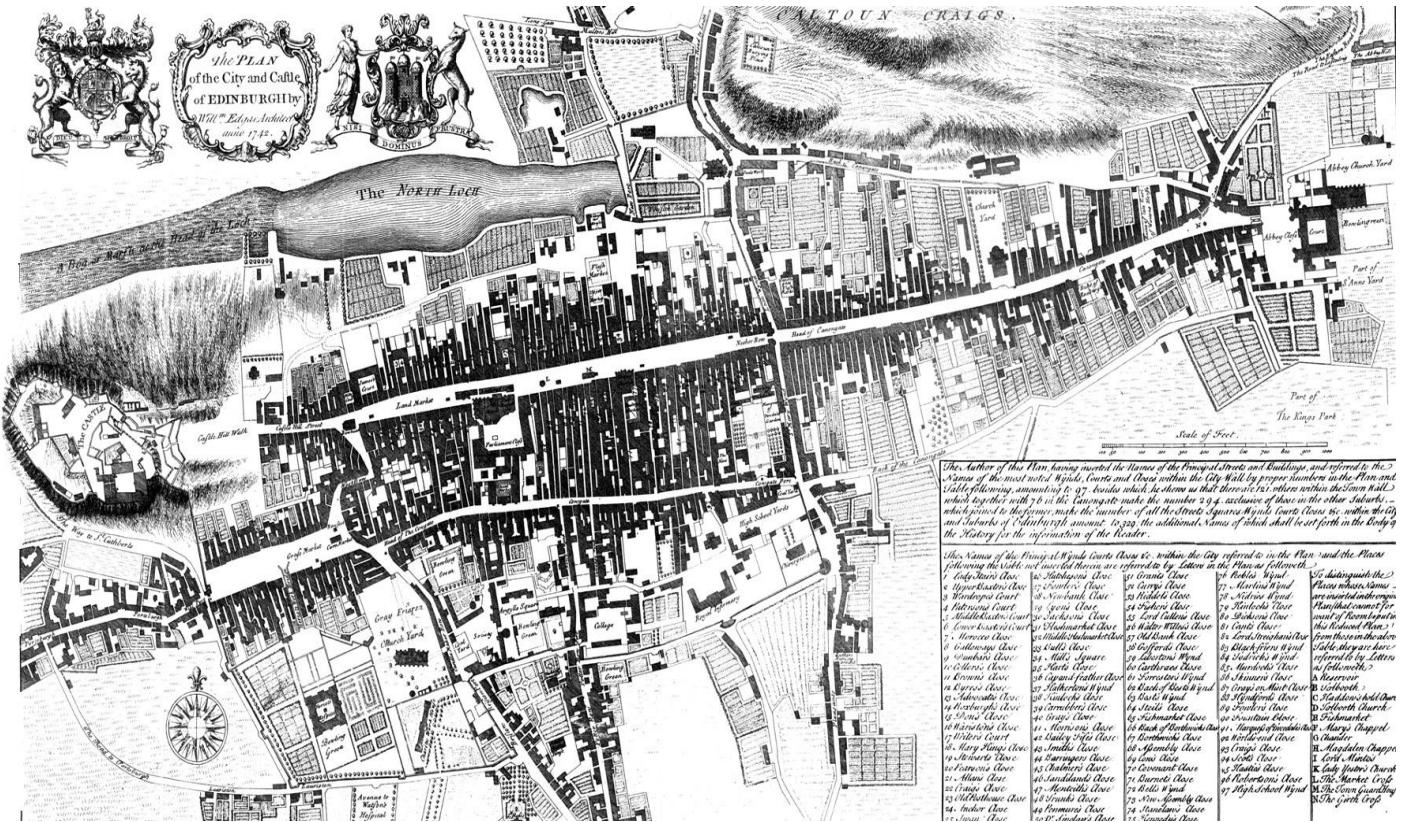


## OLD & NEW TOWN WALKS - Eric Melvin

### 1 From the Castlehill to the Tolbooth



William Edgar's Plan of Edinburgh 1746

**The Castle Esplanade** - This was laid down in the 1750s using spoil excavated from the construction of the Royal Exchange – now the City Chambers

**Cannonball House** -This is a surviving 17<sup>th</sup> century house. Go down a couple of flights of steps and look at the small, pointed dormer window above you to your right. You should be able to make out the initials of Alexander Mure and his wife, Margaret Neillans along with the date 1630. This was the year of their wedding when they moved into this house

**The Castlehill School** -Founded by Dr Thomas Guthrie(1803-1873) following the publication of his book 'A Plea for Ragged Schools' published in 1847. He was one of the leaders of the Disruption in 1843 and ministered for many years in Free St Johns, Castlehill.

**The Camera Obscura.**-The present-day Camera Obscura was built around the 17<sup>th</sup> mansion of Robert of Dalhousie. In 1853 2 floors were added for Maria Short's Observatory. It was further converted in 1895 by Sir Patrick Geddes.

**Semphill's Close.** -This was the mansion of the Barons Semphill and the doorway is dated 1638. It is a fine example of a defended townhouse. The 12<sup>th</sup> Lord Semphil commanded the left wing of the Hanoverian army at Culloden.

**The Tolbooth Church (now the Hub).** - Opened in 1844. The architect was James Gillespie Graham. Its spire is the highest in Edinburgh.

**Johnston Terrace/Butter Tron.** -Opened in 1836. Originally known as Castle Place but was renamed after Sir William Johnston, Lord Provost in 1850, and founder of W & A.K. Johnston, map makers. The construction of the road saw the destruction of several old properties including what was known locally as 'Stripping Close' where until 1822, men and women were stripped to the waist prior to being publicly whipped in the streets. The centuries' old Butter Tron was demolished in 1822 in preparation for the visit of King George IV.

**The West Bow.** -Until the early 1800s, the main approach to Edinburgh from the north and the west was up this steep winding street. There were no steps in those days, so the last stretch up to the Royal Mile must have been very tough going. This was the route taken over the years by hundreds of condemned criminals who were led past here from the Tollbooth, the town gaol, to be executed in the Grassmarket down to your right at the foot of the West Bow. The houses at the foot of Victoria Street are original and date back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most infamous prisoners to be dragged down here was the accused witch Grizel Weir who along with her brother Major Thomas Weir was executed in 1670.

**Mylne's Court.**- The earliest essay in open courtyard planning in the Old Town. Built in 1690 to the design of Robert Mylne, 7<sup>th</sup> in his family to be the Royal Master Mason for Scotland. He was also responsible for much of the extension work on Holyrood Palace ordered by King Charles II.

The 8 storey north block is entered by a stair at the 3<sup>rd</sup> storey level. The 6 storey octagonal tower is a notable feature. Like most of the Old Town, Mylne's Court became seriously overcrowded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The census of 1851 recorded 468 people living here. The Court was saved from demolition by Sir Patrick Geddes. The Court was restored as University Halls of Residence in 1968.

**James Court.** - Named after James Brownhill, the wright, who built this open-court development between 1723 -1727. It became very much a 'des res' for those Edinburgh citizens who could afford the high rents asked for. Amongst the well-known residents were David Hume and James Boswell who entertained Dr Johnson here in 1773. Boswell had taken over Hume's apartment when he moved to the New Town.

**Gladstone's Land.**- Purchased by Thomas Gledstanes in 1617. He converted the much older property and extended it some 20' into the Lawnmarket. Notable features include the segmental arch, the outside stone stairs, the shuttered windows and the recreated workshop at street level. The property was acquired by NTS in 1934.

**Lady Stair's Close.**-Built in 1622 for Sir William Gray of Pittendrum, a wealthy merchant. His initials and those of his wife, Geida Smith, are carved above the doorway. The house takes its name from Lady Stair

who purchased the property in 1719. Her son, Viscount Stair married the beautiful Eleanor Campbell, widow of the notorious Lord Primrose. He died in 1747. She survived him until 1759.

The cruelty of her late husband had persuaded her not to remarry. However the celebrated Earl of Stair was determined to have her hand. She refused all his advances. In desperation he bribed his way into her house and in the morning he stood at the street window with nothing on to give the impression that he and Lady Primrose were in a relationship. Poor Lady Primrose felt obliged to marry him to protect her reputation. At first it was a very unhappy marriage as the Earl of Stair, like many of his contemporaries, was a very heavy drinker. One night when drunk, he assaulted his wife. Although bruised and bleeding, Lady Stair did not have her injuries attended to. Instead she sat in her chair while her drunken husband slept. When he awoke next morning he was so shocked to see what he had done, that he promised never to drink again. After that the couple enjoyed a long and happy life together. For many years until her death in 1759, she was the queen of Edinburgh Society. She was reputedly the first in Edinburgh to have a black servant in her household.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the north, west and south wings had been demolished, only the east wing survived and was under threat. The property was saved by Sir Patrick Geddes who persuaded the Earl of Rosebury to restore it and to gift it to the City in 1897.

**Riddle's Court.**- Built in 1590 by Baillie John McMorran, Edinburgh's richest citizen. The Court originally ran down to the Cowgate but was split when work started on the later-named Victoria Street in 1827. John McMorran had been a servant of the Regent Morton who was executed in 1581 for his part in the murders of Rizzio and Darnley. The Court is named after George Riddle, a wright who purchased it in 1728 and extended it.

In September 1595 the boys of the High School went on strike and locked themselves into the school. Their behaviour had been so bad that the Headteacher, who went by the wonderful name of Hercules Rollock, cancelled the September school holiday. The boys defied all attempts to persuade them to open the door so word was sent to Baillie McMorran to come to persuade the boys to open the doors. No doubt grumbling about his interrupted breakfast, Baillie McMorran agreed. Imagine then the Baillie in his magnificent robes and chain of office sweeping out through this Court to the Royal Mile. Followed by a growing crowd of curious onlookers, he made his way to the school situated then off Blackfriars Wynd further down the High Street. He approached the door and demanded that the boys surrender themselves. At that, a hand appeared from a first floor window; a hand with a pistol. A shot was fired and poor Baillie McMorran dropped down dead. In panic, the boys fled from the scene of the crime as best they could. Some jumped out of windows, while others even climbed up the chimneys. The murderer though was caught. He was 10 year old, William Sinclair, son of the Chancellor of Caithness, one of the most powerful families in Scotland. Because of his age and his connections he was never brought to trial. Indeed his descendants were to become the Earls of Caithness. There was no justice for poor Baillie McMorran. In 1598 the house was owned by Ninian McMorran, brother of the shot Baillie. His house was considered to be one of the finest in Edinburgh and so it was to here that King James VI (soon to become King James I of England) and his Queen, Anne were entertained to dinner by the Town Council. The building is now being converted as The Patrick Geddes Heritage Centre.

**Brodie's Close.**- Named after Francis Brodie, Deacon of the Wrights of Edinburgh and a member of the Town Council, whose notorious son, William, also Deacon and a Council member, was hanged at the

Tolbooth for burglary in 1788, alongside his accomplice George Smith. Previously it had been known as Cullen's Close after Lord Cullen who died in 1726. The earliest part of the property dates to 1570

**George IV Bridge.**- This was designed by Thomas Hamilton, architect of the Royal High School building in Regent Road. It was built between 1827 – 1836 and was named in honour of King George IV who had visited the City in 1822. The bridge linked the Old Town with the spreading suburbs to the south. The bridge is 300 yards long and has 8 arches, only 1 of which is visible. Its construction saw the destruction of many old properties including Old Bank Close and Libberton's Wynd, home to Dowie's Tavern, a favourite Edinburgh drinking howff.

**The Last Public Execution (20<sup>th</sup> June, 1864).**-This was the execution of George Bryce, the 'Ratho Murderer' who had cut the throat of his former girlfriend. He was hanged on the morning of 20<sup>th</sup> June 1864 before a crowd of between 20000 – 30000 jeering people. Bryce went to his death calmly muttering to himself "keep composed; keep composed." The most infamous criminal hanged here was William Burke, executed in front of a crowd of 40000 in January 1829.

**Byers Close.**- Named after John Byers of Coates (1569-1629) LP of Edinburgh and City Treasurer. He bought the Coates Estate, part of the open countryside that lay to the north and west of the Nor Loch. His son, Sir John Byers, built East Coates House. (Now part of St Mary's School of Music). Another resident was Sir William Dick of Braid, a very wealthy merchant and also LP of the City. He gave financial support to the Covenanters and then to Charles II after the execution of his father in 1649. Sir William was heavily fined by Cromwell and was reduced to poverty. He travelled to London to plead his case but was imprisoned for debt. He was released but died in his Westminster lodgings in 1655.

An earlier resident of the Close was Adam Bothwell, Bishop of Orkney (1527 – 1593) and the uncle of John Napier of Merchiston, inventor of logarithms. Bothwell had officiated at the marriage of Mary, Queen of Scots to Francis Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1567 – just weeks after the murder of Darnley. For this he was roundly criticised by the Assembly. However the Assembly and the Protestant lords had to turn to him after Mary's enforced abdication on July 24<sup>th</sup> 1567 to crown the 1 year old King James VI as Scotland's principal churchman, the Archbishop of St Andrews refused to carry out the ceremony. Bothwell was again questioned by the Assembly concerning his faith and responsibilities. However he was a survivor. He gave up his bishopric and was appointed a Lord of Session and acted as an adviser to James VI.

**The Tolbooth-** The Tolbooth's earliest reference is 1385 when it was damaged by the occupying army of Richard II. It was visited by many Scottish monarchs including Mary, Queen of Scots who attended Parliament here; 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 8<sup>th</sup> of the Waverley Novels published in 1818. The Tolbooth was finally demolished in 1817.



A View of the High Street c 1795