OLD & NEW TOWN WALKS 5

The Mound.

Successive commercial developments have meant that there is very little of the original housing still to be seen in this section of Princes Street. However if you look closely above the shop fronts, you can still occasionally see something of the former houses. There is more to be seen as you progress westwards.

If you look to the top of the Mound you will see on the left, the impressive bulk of the headquarters of The Bank of Scotland founded in 1695. Work started on the Bank's headquarters in 1802 and it was extensively rebuilt in the 1860s. The tall building on the right above the grass is New College opened in 1850 originally as a teaching college for the Free Church of Scotland. Behind it through a courtyard is the Assembly Hall built in 1859 as the meeting place for the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. It is also a very popular location for theatrical productions during the annual Edinburgh International Festival.

Now look at the two art galleries facing you at the foot of the Mound. You can see in these buildings, clear evidence of the strong classical influence on the architecture of New Town Edinburgh. Work started on the first building, the Royal Scottish Academy, in 1822. The building is modelled on a Greek Doric temple. The statue of a seated Queen Victoria by Sir John Steell, was added in 1844. The architect was William Playfair, who over the course of a career spanning some 50 years was responsible for designing many of Edinburgh's most famous buildings. The building now has a permanent art collection and regular exhibitions. There is an entrance charge for these.

The National Gallery of Scotland on your right was started in 1845, the architect was also William Playfair. Again you can see the strong influence of Greece with its Corinthian columns and Ionic porticos. The National Gallery, which has recently been extended, has one of the finest collections in Britain of European art from the 15th to the 19th centuries. (More recent work is to be found in the Gallery of Modern Art at Belford. A free bus links the galleries). The National Gallery includes works by such well-known artist as Raphael, Titian, Rembrandt, Rubens, Reynolds and Gainsborough. A gallery is dedicated to Scottish painting where you can see work by Raeburn, Ramsay and Allan amongst others. Entrance is free and there is a café, restaurant and shop.

And what of the Mound itself? It certainly was not planned by James Craig. It just appeared as the result of the builders of the New Town simply dumping the excavated soil and stones from the foundations of the houses and gardens. It has been estimated that some 2 million cartloads were dumped by the builders. This ever-growing 'Earthen Mound' was seen as a convenient short-cut between the Old Town and the expanding New Town. In 1781, George Boyd, a clothier living in Gosford's Close in the Old Town, put down planks on the Mound to make it easier for him to reach his New Town customers. He was followed by Lord Provost Greive who had bought a new house on

the corner of Hanover Street. Soon the Mound became a popular, if at times muddy, causeway. Many contemporaries were outraged. "One of the greatest mistakes committed as a matter of taste" raged one "was the erection of the Earthen Mound across the beautiful valley of the loch." There was no going back however and in 1834 the Mound was paved and lit.

Princes Street has certainly seen some excitement in its time. There have been royal processions and military parades; protest marches and demonstrations. Each September, the streets and the Gardens behind you are packed with spectators to see the spectacular Fireworks Concert that traditionally ends the Edinburgh International Festival. On December 31st, thousands of revellers from all over the world pack into Princes Street to celebrate the arrival of the New Year with music and another fireworks display against the unbeatable backdrop of Edinburgh Castle make your way to Stop 8.

LINK

Before we leave the foot of the Mound, cross over the road and enter this section of Princes Street Gardens. There you will see Edinburgh's famous mechanical Floral Clock. The Clock, the first such clock in the world, was created in 1903 by John McHattie of the City Parks' Department. A new design is planted each year using some 35000 plants. They used to be planted separately but now are planted in specially-designed containers. The statue above is of Allan Ramsay, the Scottish poet, whose equally famous son, also Allan, was a well-known artist.

Cross over Princes Street and make your way up Hanover Street towards the crossing with George Street. Here you will see much more evidence of the original New Town houses of the 1780s. The statue is of King George IV and was erected to celebrate the King's famous visit to Edinburgh in August 1822. It has to be said that the statue is very flattering! King George was by then 58 years old and years of over-eating and heavy drinking had left him very fat.

Now turn to your left and make your way about 100 metres to the entrance to the Assembly Rooms. You may prefer to cross the road here to get a better view.

The Assembly Rooms, George Street.

For better-off Edinburgh folk, the Assembly was one of the highlights of their winter social calendar. This was a weekly dance started at the end of the 17th century. These popular assemblies were held in the Old Assembly Close and then from 1756 in the New Assembly Rooms in Bell's Wynd off the High Street. Young men and women would dance under the strict supervision of a lady-directress charged with ensuring good behaviour. For many years, the dances were supervised by the formidable Miss Nicky Murray, a sister of the Earl of Mansfield. One contemporary recalled that:

"These Assemblies began about five and stopped at eleven. As the bells of St Giles rang out the hour, Miss Nicky waved her fan, the fiddlers stopped playing and the dancing was at an end…

When the Assembly was over, footmen hastened to get their ladies into their (sedan) chairs, after which the chairmen trotted off with their burdens preceded by link-bearers (with their torches) and accompanied by gallants with hat in hand and swords at side."

Clearly for those young people whose families had moved to the New Town, it was far too much trouble to travel all the way back up to the High Street, so money was raised and a new Assembly Rooms was planned. It was built to a design of John Henderson in 1784. The portico was added in 1818.

Try to imagine the scene with carriages drawing up at the door and beautifully-dressed young ladies being escorted into the building by servants carrying torches. It would appear though that the ladies had to wait for their male escorts to arrive – often the worse for wear!. Here is how one contemporary, Hugo Arnot, described the scene:

"Gentlemen reeling from the tavern flustered with wine stumbled into an assembly of as elegant and beautiful women as any in Europe."

The Assembly Rooms were also used for more formal occasions. It was here at a dinner arranged in his honour in 1827, that Sir Walter Scott first publicly acknowledged that he was indeed the author of the famous Waverley Novels which included such tales as 'The Heart of Midlothian', 'Rob Roy' and 'Ivanhoe'.

Here too popular authors of the day would give readings from their books. Charles Dickens made several visits. On one occasion though in 1861, the organisers had issued too many tickets and the hall where Dickens was to read from his ever-popular story 'A Christmas Carol' was packed to overflowing. Several people fainted and many were crushed but undeterred Dickens completed his reading to thunderous applause.

The Assembly Rooms were also the setting for two Highland Balls held to honour King George IV during his famous visit in August 1822.

Continue west along George Street. No. 81a was the home of Eugene – Marie Chantrelle who was hanged in 1878 for poisoning his young wife Elizabeth Dyer. Chantrelle had come to Edinburgh to take up a position as a French teacher. He was forced to marry one of his students, 17 years' old Elizabeth Dyer when she became pregnant. The marriage was not a happy one.

In October 1877, Chantrelle took out a life insurance policy for his wife for £1,000. On New Year's Day 1878 a maid found Elizabeth lying dead in bed in their house here in George Street. I

At first it was thought that her death had been caused by a broken gas pipe found under the bed. However, Dr Henry Littlejohn, Edinburgh's Medical Officer of Health, was very suspicious. He asked for a further post-mortem to be carried out. Traces of opium were found in Elizabeth's body. Chantrelle was arrested and charged with the murder of his wife. He was found guilty and sentenced to be hanged. The execution took place at the Calton Gaol on 31st May 1878. Chantrelle's execution was the first to be carried out in private in Edinburgh.

LINK

Make your way back along George Street to Hanover Street, turn left and walk down the first block to the corner of Thistle Street. Here you will find Henderson's Bistro and Farm Shop. For over 40 years the Henderson family have been promoting healthy eating in their ever-popular premises.

Now turn left again and make your way along Thistle Street. Continue along Thistle Street to the junction with Frederick Street. Turn right and make your way down to Queen Street, the southern principal street of Craig's New Town Plan. Turn left and make your way to house number 52.

Thistle Street, Frederick Street and Queen Street.

The narrow street, Thistle Street that you have just walked along was like Rose Street, originally intended as a more modest street with homes for shopkeepers, servants and tradesmen. There was also stabling. However, such was the desire to obtain a house in the expanding (and increasingly expensive!) New Town, that the houses were soon taken over by professional people and even people of rank. Amongst the more colourful of the earlier residents were Charles Edward Stuart, the self-styled Count of Albany and his brother John Sobieski Stuart. They claimed to be the grand-sons of Bonnie Prince Charlie, the exiled leader of the Jacobite cause who had been defeated at the Battle of Culloden in April 1746. They dressed extravagantly in Highland costume and were welcomed into society. In fact though, they were imposters. Far from being members of the royal Stuart family in exile, they were the sons of Captain Thomas Allan of the Royal Navy.

Behind the remaining original houses you can still see some of the surviving stables - a reminder that the New Town was built in the age of horses and carriages. Thistle Street continues westwards first as Hill Street and then as Young Street, the names of the two builders James Hill and John Young who developed each section.

Work started on Frederick Street in 1786. The street was named after Frederick, the Duke of York, second son of George III. He is perhaps better known as the incompetent general of the nursery rhyme 'The Grand Old Duke of York'.

Now look at the buildings around you on Queen Street. Here you will find a greater concentration of the original 18th century houses of the first New Town. The gardens to the north of you belong to the residents and were laid out in 1823.

It is perhaps hard to appreciate that when the first residents moved into these houses, they had open country behind them running down to the Firth of Forth beyond. Writing in 1824, William Chambers, the famous Edinburgh writer and publisher remarked that:

"Many are still alive (who) remember the fields bearing a rich crop of wheat that now bear houses. Game used to be plentiful on these grounds, in particular partridge and hares."

Perhaps the most famous early resident of Queen Street was Sir James Young Simpson who lived for many years at Number 52. It was here on the night of 28th November 1847 that he and two medical friends, Drs Keith and Duncan, discovered the anaesthetic properties of chloroform. The search for a means of overcoming the pain of surgery and of childbirth had for years challenged the medical profession. On that night in 1847, Simpson and his friends inhaled chloroform from individual glasses and napkins. The next thing that Dr Simpson remembered was finding himself on the floor with his friends snoring beside him. Dr Simpson was hailed as a saviour throughout the medical world. Honours were showered upon him but he continued in a typically modest way to carry out his work as a doctor. Queen Victoria had chloroform for the birth of her 7th child Prince Leopold, the Duke of Albany in 1853. Dr. Simpson died in November 1847. A grateful nation offered his family a tomb in Westminster Abbey in London. This was offer was however declined and Simpson is buried in nearby Warriston Cemetery. His funeral was attended by 1700 men in deep mourning and the procession was watched by a crowd of over 100000 people, many of them in tears.

Before continuing your tour, look over Queen Street Gardens towards the north. The original householders had a clear view over the Firth of Forth towards Fife and the Highland mountains beyond. This view was interrupted in 1807 when work started on an extension to the New Town. The governors of George Heriot's Hospital (now George Heriot's School) sold land that they held for residential development. Again the idea was for a series of parallel streets running from Heriot Row in the south to Fettes Row in the north. The connecting streets with Hanover Street and Frederick Street were named after leading figures and places of the day such as Prime Minister Pitt, Henry Dundas, Viscount Melville, Admiral Howe and St Vincent, scene of a famous naval victory over the French in 1797. This development was completed to the west by the construction of the Royal Circus in 1823. In the meantime a further extension was started to the west with the development of the adjacent Moray Estate in the 1820s for residential housing. These were houses on a grand scale designed by the architect Gillespie Graham. He took the inspiration of Royal Circus to create three sweeping curves, Randolph Crescent, Ainslie Place and the grandest of them all, the 12-sided Moray Place. The developer, the Earl of Moray stayed in Number 28.

Now turn left and walk to the junction with Castle Street. Turn left again and walk back up towards Princes Street. The street takes its name from the magnificent views up towards Edinburgh Castle. Kenneth Grahame, the author of the famous children's story 'The Wind in the Willows' was born in house Number 30.

Stop in front of Number 39. This was the home of Sir Walter Scott.

Sir Walter Scott and Castle Street

Sir Walter Scott lived here from 1802 to 1826. Much of his best work was written in the study of this house. Scott has already made a couple of appearances during our tour. Although not as widely-read as he once was, Scott dominated 19th century British literature. As most of his stories and poems were set in Scotland it is not surprising that he was nicknamed 'The Wizard of the North'. Scott was born in Edinburgh's Old Town. He trained as a lawyer and in time became the Clerk to the Court of Session. As a 15 year old he had a brief meeting with Robert Burns when the poet paid his first visit to Edinburgh in the winter of 1786-1787.

Scott came from a well-known family from the Scottish Borders. He developed a passion for tales and legends from his native land. His first published works were however poems rather than stories. In 1802 he wrote 'Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border' then 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel', then 'Marmion' and in 1810, his best known poem 'Lady of the Lake'. He now turned his hand to the writing of historical novels. 'Waverley' was published in 1814 with tremendous success. Other titles followed in quick succession. However the identity of the author was kept secret; the books were published with "by the author of 'Waverley'" on the title page. While many suspected that Scott wrote the stories, it was not until 1827 that Scott finally acknowledged that he was indeed the author of what became known as 'The Waverley Novels.' In all, 26 titles were written. Scott enjoyed tremendous success with such tales as 'The Heart of Midlothian', 'Rob Roy' and 'Ivanhoe'. At one time he was earning in excess of £10000 a year from his writing. In 1811 he purchased the little farmhouse of Abbotsford near Melrose beside the River Tweed in his beloved Scottish Borders and set about converting it into the stately home that can still be visited today. Scott was responsible for obtaining Royal permission for Edinburgh Castle to be searched for the long-lost honours of Scotland in 1817. There was a tremendous outpouring of rejoicing when the ancient Crown, Sceptre and Sword of State were discovered in a locked box. Scott was knighted for his services. He masterminded the royal visit of King George IV in 1822. Disaster though struck in 1826 when his publishing house collapsed. Scott felt honour-bound to repay his share of the debts. He was forced to give up Abbotsford and to sell this house in Castle Street.

On that sad day, 15th March, 1826 Scott wrote in his diary:

"This morning I leave number 39 Castle Street for the last time. What a portion of my life has been spent there! It has sheltered me from the prime of life to its decline and I must now bid goodbye to it. So farewell poor number 39!"

Scott moved into lodgings in St. David Street where he continued to write. As a break from writing his historical novels, Scott started work on his 'Tales of a Grandfather' in 1827 for his beloved 6 years old grandson, John Hugh Lockhart, nicknamed Hugh Littlejohn by his grandfather. Sadly the little boy died in 1831 and the series of stories was left unfinished. By now Scott was in poor health. A cruise to Europe was cut short and he was brought back to die in Abbotsford in 1832. Scott is buried in Dryburgh Abbey.

Now make your way up to the junction with George Street, turn right and walk towards Charlotte Square ahead of you. Carefully cross the road over to the central garden side and make your way to your right and look at the buildings on the northern side of the Square.

Charlotte Square.

Charlotte Square is the finest square in the City and has been designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. Work started on Charlotte Square in 1792 with Robert Adam appointed as architect. He died though later that year but much of his original plan was implemented. The northern side was designed to look like the front of a palace with a grand entrance in the middle. In fact there are 11 separate houses here. Again you can see clear evidence of the popular classical style with the Corinthian columns and the sphinxes on the roof. By now, the Council had relaxed its regulations to allow for larger windows and entrances. Whereas the first New Town houses shared a common entrance from the lanes at the rear, these houses had imposing entrance lobbies decorated with individual fan windows. Whereas the ground floor and above were of dressed ashlar stone, the servants' quarters below ground level were of rusticated stone.

These were very superior houses indeed! The first house to be completed (Number 6) was bought by Mr Orlando Hart, originally a shoemaker and now Deacon of the Guild of Cordiners for £10000, a colossal sum in those days. A study of the earliest residents of Charlotte Square confirms that the New Town had indeed attracted some of the wealthiest families not just of Edinburgh but indeed the whole of Scotland. John Lamond of Lamond (a Highland Clan Chief) lived in Number 7; Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster in Caithness moved into Number 6. He was a most energetic and interesting man. Amongst his many achievements was the publication of 'The First Statistical Account of Scotland.' This was a most ambitious enterprise. Sinclair, at his own expense, wrote to every Church of Scotland parish minister (there were more than 900 of them!) and asked them to answer a series of questions about their parish. He was interested to know about such things as location, population, agriculture, industry, education, significant changes since 1760, any events of note and so on. The returns from the parish ministers were published as they arrived back with Sir John. In all 21 volumes were produced between 1791 and 1799. These give a unique insight into life in Scotland at the end of the 18th century.

Sir John had a very large family and had to move to a bigger house round the corner in 133 George Street. He had 2 children by his first wife and 13 by his second! Like their father, the children

were all very tall, either just below or over 6 feet! It must have been quite a sight to see them on their way out together. Their neighbours joked that the pavement should be renamed 'The Giants' Causeway'

The tea merchant Sir William Fettes, twice Lord Provost of Edinburgh, lived in Number 13. From very humble beginnings in Edinburgh's Old Town he rose to become one of the richest men in Scotland. He left money to found a school which as Fettes College, is today one of Scotland's most famous public schools which can count former Prime Minister Tony Blair as one of its pupils. Lord Cockburn, the eminent judge lived in Number 14. His memoirs 'Memorials of his Time', published in 1856 shortly after his death, give a colourful account of Edinburgh life in the early 19th century. Cockburn was an early conservationist and his name is preserved in 'The Cockburn Association', the leading Edinburgh conservationist organisation.

What was St George's Church stands at the west end of the Square. Robert Reid's design replaced that of Robert Adam. Work commenced in 1811 and was completed in 1814. Those familiar with St Paul's Cathedral in London will see a similarity in the dome but on a much smaller scale. In 1964, the church was moved and the building is now West Register House.

Numbers 5, 6 and 7 were gifted to the National Trust for Scotland by The Earl of Bute in lieu of death duties. Number 6, known as Bute House, is the official residence of the First Minister of Scotland, the leader of the Scottish Government at Holyrood. Number 7 has been faithfully restored and furnished by the National Trust as it would have been in the 1790s when it was the home of the Lamont family. It is open to the public and well worth a visit.

Cross over and see if you can spot in the street outside, the iron manhole that covers the coal hole; the foot-scrapers to take the mud of your shoes and the sconces, used to extinguish the torches of the servants who had escorted you to the house.

Finally the gardens are the setting for the annual Edinburgh International Book Festival. The statue is of Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria. He died of typhoid in 1861. The statue, sculpted by Sir John Steell was unveiled by Queen Victoria in August 1867. The widowed queen knighted Steell for his work.