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# FIRE AND FILTH: EDINBURGH'S ENVIRONMENT, 1660-1760

RAB HOUSTON

STARTING IN THE 1750s, new modern suburbs began to be built to the south of the Old Town of Edinburgh. In the 1760s the first stones of the New Town were being laid to the north of the castle. Edinburgh's new architecture and layout were signalling its arrival as a social, economic and intellectual centre of international standing. We see the dawning of an 'age of light' when the city's university expanded and exciting ideas emerged which were to change social and political thought profoundly.<sup>1</sup> These changes took place in response to, and against a background of, a material environment which was very different from our own. The modern inhabitants of Edinburgh may complain of unswept streets and other 'environmental hazards' but their forebears had to put up with far worse. The purpose of this article is to portray significant aspects of the material environment of Edinburgh in the century before the New Town and the Enlightenment. Its intention is to evoke an imaginative understanding of how certain aspects of everyday life reflected citizens' attitudes towards themselves, their neighbours and their town.

Edinburgh had an unenviable reputation among visitors as one of the dirtiest cities in Europe. Joseph Taylor, an Englishman, was terrified he would catch the itch during his stay in Edinburgh just before the Union. He claimed that 'every street shows the nastiness of the inhabitants: the excrements lie in heaps'. He went on: 'In a morning, the scent was so offensive that we were forced to hold our noses as we passed [through] the streets, and take care where we trod for fear of disoblising our shoes, and to walk in the middle [of the street] at night, for fear of an accident

on our heads'.<sup>2</sup> Better equipped strollers wore a sort of metal-framed 'crampon' to keep their feet an inch or two above the filth. Even this would have been little use when confronted by heaps of dung lying, in the words of a 1735 pamphlet, 'like mountains' in front of shops and houses.<sup>3</sup>

To a degree, the city's environmental problems were the result of its cramped site. Sir Gilbert Elliott, who proposed an extension of the royalty in 1752, spoke scathingly of the city:<sup>4</sup>

Placed upon the ridge of a hill, [Edinburgh] admits but of one good street, running from east to west; and even this is tolerably accessible only from one quarter. The narrow lanes leading to the north and south, by reason of their steepness, narrowness, and dirtiness, can only be considered as so many unavoidable nuisances. Confined by the small compass of the walls, and the narrow limits of the royalty, which scarcely extends beyond the walls, the houses stand more crouded than in any other town in Europe, and are built to a height that is almost incredible. Hence necessarily follows a great want of free air, light, cleanliness and every other comfortable accommodation. Hence also many families, sometimes no less than ten or a dozen, are obliged to live overhead of each other in the same building; where, to all the other inconveniences, is added that of a common stair, which is no other in effect than an upright street, constantly dark and dirty. It is owing to the same narrowness of situation, that the principal street is incumbered with the herb-market, the fruit-market, and several others; that the shambles are placed upon the side of the North Loch, rendering what was originally an ornament to the town, a most insufferable nuisance.

In the age of George III Edward Topham was more complimentary about the streets, but still bemoaned the dirty, dark and overcrowded accommodation, which he held to be far inferior to what was available in France.<sup>5</sup> And a satirical poem of 1761, 'The Cloaciniad',<sup>6</sup> warned of:

*The dangers which the wretched mortal meets,  
 Who dares at ten to tread Edina's streets ...  
 Now from a thousand windows cat'racts flow,  
 Which make a deluge in the streets below.*

Whether Edinburgh really was so bad is questionable. Any large city in Europe was likely to be filthy: it was said to be possible to smell eighteenth-century Berlin six miles away.<sup>7</sup> The vast and sprawling conurbation of Naples must have been considerably less pleasant than Edinburgh, especially during the summer.

Travellers like Taylor and Topham were confronted by refuse, but they may have avoided some even less salubrious experiences. In 1661 the Town Council criticised Landmarket (Lawnmarket) fleshers slaughtering 'in the heart of the town ... to the disgrace of the city' – the Lawnmarket was then the city's best address. Exactly a decade later it decided to move the fleshmarket from the head of the Canongate 'to some back-side and remote place'.<sup>8</sup> A group of skimmers described what it was like to work beside the North Loch in 1684. As a place for washing skins and wool it had always been less desirable than running water, 'so much more now when the fleshers reside at the side thereof, who by the running in of the blood and excrements and washing of the tripes has so abused the water that all along the sides thereof with the heat of the sun it will be an ell deep of small vermine, so that by dipping a skin there it brings out ten times more filth than is put in with it'.<sup>9</sup> Fleshers had been banned from slaughtering in the High School Wynd after 1666 since this gave access for pupils to the school.<sup>10</sup>

The smell of offal and excrement was just one of the many assaults made on the olfactory senses. When the wind was in a certain direction the smell from the Greyfriars burial ground and of tallow boiling at Candlemaker Row wafted over the city, while boiling of whale flesh was a problem at Leith in 1683 and again in the mid eighteenth century.<sup>11</sup> In 1731 the

street leading east from the foot of Halkerston's Wynd along to the North Loch had become 'almost impassable ... by laying down great quantities of dung all along the foot of the brae which slips or washes down into the street-way and ... has quite ruined the calsey'.<sup>12</sup> The nuisance even affected Trinity Hospital, a sort of retirement home for impoverished burgesses and their widows at the outflow from the North Loch. When the waters of the loch were high the building was cold and wet; when low, sewage and offal from the shambles collected under the windows and beneath the floor, making the building 'noisome and unwholesome'.<sup>13</sup> In 1733 there was a clamp-down on the use of the shore for middens, by which time some encroachments were stretching into the middle of the loch.<sup>14</sup>

Animals were an integral part of Edinburgh life, alive as well as dead. Cattle were still driven through the city in the early eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Complaining of plans to extend sheep pens outside his house in the Grassmarket, Bailie John Hay spoke of the nuisance 'occasioned by the crowds of butchers, their dogs and sheep brought so near to the entry of my house and noisome stench that it must needs occasion, prejudicial ... to the health and quiet of my family'. Hay himself, along with other brewers, used the Grassmarket for unloading ingredients and coal for his enterprise, and for loading barrels 'which require a good deal of bounds' or space.<sup>16</sup> Tethering posts were ordered for the Grassmarket in 1733 following complaints that cattle running loose there were a danger to life.<sup>17</sup> The Grassmarket must have been like a modern goods or marshalling yard with public access.

The presence of livestock seems to have been tolerated even in the mid eighteenth century. In November 1747 a delegation from the Dean of Guild Court investigating a complaint by the Incorporation of Hammermen against William Chalmers, distiller, found that 'there is no manner of damage done to the



complainers' walls by the defender's swine which are for the most part kept under rails and under shades erected for that purpose'.<sup>18</sup> Unpleasant sights, sounds and smells continued to afflict inhabitants and visitors alike. It was not until 1749 that the Council took in hand the common practice of displaying animal heads and offal outside houses lining Old Provost's Close – a busy thoroughfare to the fleshmarket – and 'boiling nolt feet [hoof] oil and paunch grease' in the houses.<sup>19</sup>

The Town Council made repeated attempts to keep the streets of the city free of refuse. One of many orders banning the disposal of refuse out of windows was issued in 1685.<sup>20</sup> An Act of 1687 required inhabitants to keep vessels in their houses big enough to hold foul water for 48 hours, reserved the right to have windows sealed to prevent people throwing things out of them, and laid down fines to be levied on those who broke the rules. In particular, servants were responsible for their actions and could be pilloried or even whipped and banished for repeated offences.<sup>21</sup> George Cathcart, who lived in the yard of the High School, got a reduction in his local taxes in 1690 because the refuse collectors never bothered to come as far as his house.<sup>22</sup>

Complaints by citizens and actions by the authorities show that people were not wholly tolerant of attacks on their environment. The historical geographer Vance has theorised that 'so long as the merchant lived among his workers, we may assume that concern for public health and simple humanity would obviate the worst housing conditions; once a strong class division of housing existed, no such enlightened self-interest may be automatically assumed'.<sup>23</sup> Edinburgh's inhabitants certainly took an interest in the cleanliness and appearance of their city before the building of the New Town. But that there were obvious limits to their self-interest is evidenced by their general unwillingness to spend money on basic health and amenity measures such as

street cleaning. Sir Alexander Brand, a Bailie and Master of the Merchant Company in the 1680s, berated his neighbours for being 'born in a Nation that has the Nastiest Citys in the world, especially the Metropolitan'.<sup>24</sup> The only time the streets of Restoration Edinburgh were really clean was when the Council paid to have them spruced up for visiting dignitaries. Even then they could be sure that within a few months the streets would be 'still more dirty than formerly'.<sup>25</sup> Until 1692, projects like Brand's to clean up the city foundered because inhabitants were asked to pay the street cleaners directly. Thereafter, the Council decided that an appeal to the economic interest of contractors was more likely to be successful than one to the civic pride of Edinburgh's inhabitants and it auctioned off the right to collect the city's refuse.<sup>26</sup> What was collected was sold to farmers and market gardeners in the vicinity of the city.

The 1670s witnessed efforts to improve the aspect of, and living conditions within, Edinburgh. After digging the city out of serious economic and political troubles during the 1660s, the Council seems clearly to have seen the need to develop the infrastructure. Perhaps they were driven by a desire to be seen to act after more than a decade of alleged mismanagement by Provost Ramsay and his creatures. Perhaps the appearance of the city began to concern them more in the age of what modern historians describe as 'the English urban renaissance'.<sup>27</sup> In December 1669 the Council ordered heritors to pave the streets in front of their properties.<sup>28</sup> The magistrates recognised the environmental problems in 1670:<sup>29</sup>

Partly by reason of the situation of this city, the straitness and narrowness of the streets, closes and vennels thereof, and that the inhabitants dwelling one above another in one tenement of land, together with the laziness and nastiness of the indwellers, has occasioned and does at present occasion this city to be exceedingly dirty and defiled with filthiness in all the parts thereof, which is both discreditible to this place amongst strangers, unpleasant to beholders, and unwholesome to the inhabitants.

Numerous orders by the Dean of Guild Court to seal up windows during the late 1680s were the result of the inhabitants' clear preference for defenestrating household refuse. This was still a pressing problem half a century later.<sup>30</sup>

Keeping the city in a tolerable condition was a constant struggle. In 1672, the Council gave Thomas Fairholme the freehold of a tenement in the West Bow, provided he rebuild it from scratch since it was 'unseemly to behold in such a special place of the city'.<sup>31</sup> The West Bow was a major thoroughfare leading from the Grassmarket up to the Lawnmarket. In 1675 the building and letting of small lean-to shops in streets and vennels was halted and those which remained were let to trades like goldsmiths which added style to the public thoroughfares.<sup>32</sup> Suburban road improvements included one to a street near Heriot's Hospital 'which was formerly a puddle and very obstructive to all persons travelling there'. There was support for having the Physic Garden re-located in the grounds of Trinity Hospital,<sup>33</sup> because it

will not only contribute to the good and ornament of the city but also prove exceedingly profitable for the instruction of youth in that most necessary though hitherto much neglected part of the natural history and knowledge wherein the health of all persons whether it be for food or medicine is so nearly concerned.

By the early eighteenth century there were four gardens growing medicinal herbs in Edinburgh.<sup>34</sup> Four swans were gifted to the town 'to be put in the North Loch upon design to make a brood of swans there which will be very pleasant to be seen swimming in the loch'<sup>35</sup> (though one wonders what colour these wildfowl took on from their habitat). There was even a clampdown on the 'furious driving' of hackney coaches, especially at night, and in 1677 a proposal for a common 'passage wagon' to supplement coaches carrying people to and from Leith. There were 20 licensed coaches in 1673.<sup>36</sup> William Home, the merchant who ran the Edinburgh-Leith stagecoach, was allowed to graze horses in the Trinity College kirk-

yard but having a stable there was felt to be 'a disgrace to the place'.<sup>37</sup>

This flurry of activity was not equalled until the reign of George II. From c. 1730, the Council instituted a scheme of public improvements. In 1732 they gave the mason Charles Mack the contract to repave the Parliament Close.<sup>38</sup> The following year saw the Committee on Public Works recommend removal of the drink shops at the entry to the Poultry Market because two people walking side by side could not get past them and because of the disturbance they occasioned in time of service in the adjacent Tron Kirk.<sup>39</sup> And in 1733 the Council agreed to pave the hitherto private Scot's Close in the Cowgate – owned by William Scot of Baveley – since it was a useful thoroughfare to the south.<sup>40</sup> There was a desire on the part of magistrates that Edinburgh's 'ports' or gates should be widened for access and to make riot control easier.<sup>41</sup> The Netherbow Port was demolished in 1764. Opening up one passage, they restricted another: a timber stile was erected in Marlin's Wynd beside the Tron Kirk 'so as to hinder the passing of carts but to allow chairs and horses with loads to pass'.<sup>42</sup>

Conscious efforts to beautify the city were made, perhaps, to facilitate inhabitants' acceptance of, and adaptation to, physical change as much as to pursue aesthetic goals. Edinburgh was becoming larger, more densely packed and more obviously different from the countryside around it. The authorities may have felt that part of their function was to make it easier for both residents and incomers to live and work in the city. Even during the terrible dearths of the 1690s the Council granted a piece of waste ground north of the new Bedlam or madhouse in New Greyfriars kirkyard, acknowledging that it 'was so proper for nothing as to be a flower garden for planting evergreens and other pleasant herbs and flowers for ornament', and gave a 'tack' or lease of land on the south side of the Parliament House where

trees and flowers were to be planted. Part of the rent was a red rose to each of the magistrates every July.<sup>43</sup> The Faculty of Advocates received a grant of land behind the Parliament House for their library and a flower garden, and by 1710 'had finished and beautified the same so as it was not only very convenient to their society and the whole other members of the College of Justice but also a very considerable ornament' to the city.<sup>44</sup> Only a stone's throw away from the nastiness of the North Loch were gardens and orchards, one created in 1724 for the merchant Robert Harris by James Bain, gardener, on his land at the foot of Mary King's Close and adjacent to a house he owned and rented to the commissary clerk of Brechin.<sup>45</sup> The Council banned shooting beside the loch in 1730 because this 'makes the wild ducks and swans that are with expense and care brought and kept there for the pleasure of the inhabitants ... fly away'.<sup>46</sup> Robert Reid, gardener, was employed in 1740 'for furnishing flowers to the Council room and new church and decking the Cross in summer'.<sup>47</sup>

The Town Council's interest in what we might term 'environmental improvement' is well documented. However, less historically visible private initiatives were arguably equally important in improving the city. In 1756 the Canongate heritors decided to build a proper pavement on the south side of the street and to institute street lighting.<sup>48</sup> Landowners had long been required to maintain the street in front of their house up to a distance of 3 ells from the gutter (c. 2.8 metres) and were liable for the cost of repairing defects such as street subsidence caused by the construction of cellars under, and extending out from, their property.<sup>49</sup> In 1743 a petition was lodged to open up the avenue south to Hope Park (later the Meadows) since 'this metropolis was destitute of any public walk reckoned in other parts so necessary to the policy of a great town and conducive to the health and pleasure of its inhabitants'.<sup>50</sup> Concern with amenity and with access to a garden became

increasingly obvious among those able to aspire to genteel suburban or rural dwelling – or even on the Castlehill.<sup>51</sup> Sir James Ferguson of Kilkerran, Senator of the College of Justice, acquired a tack of an area in the Society, adjacent to Candlemaker Row, to lay out a flower garden and to secure the open aspect of his house.<sup>52</sup> There could be pleasant smells from gardens as well as the more frequently mentioned nastiness.

Edinburgh's sanitary condition and the state of its housing, water supply and refuse disposal appear in the records as a matter of private and public aesthetics, and civic pride. However, they also had a profound effect on the life chances of the city's inhabitants. Looking back on the city's environment from the 1840s, James Stark picked up Hugo Arnot's claim in 1779 that the city was a clean and healthy place to live, saying that this was a very recent development not found before the 1770s.<sup>53</sup> Throughout Europe, population concentrations were associated with high levels of mortality, especially among infants, children and recent immigrants, caused by exposure to air-, water- and fly-borne diseases.<sup>54</sup> A monumental inscription reminds us of the uncertainty of life:

*Twice five times suffered she the childbed pains  
Yet of her children only five remains ...*

was part of the doggerel dedicated to Elizabeth Paton, wife of John Cunninghame of Enterkine ws, who died aged 40 in February 1679. Jean Johnson was buried at the age of 33 after bearing her third child in as many years.<sup>55</sup> Among airborne infections, smallpox had become endemic by the late seventeenth century. One worthy excused his failure to make a supervisory visit to the House of Correction in 1758 because the last time he had gone 'there was two women salivating in the pox which occasioned such a smell that he was like to faint'.<sup>56</sup>

The practice among the poor of sharing beds and clothes would have made it easier to pass on insect and airborne infections.<sup>57</sup> Inmates of the Charity



Workhouse must have shared beds, because in March 1741 (two years before the institution was opened) the original contract to provide beds with wheels 'for the conveniency of drawing out into the floor' only called for a total of 185. There were always at least twice that number resident in any one year during the 1740s. Not surprisingly, the managers found in 1763 that the house had 'for many years past ... been much infested with that noxious vermin bugs, to the great prejudice and annoyance of the poor inhabitants', who may have had cause to bless Ebenezer Oliphant, jeweller, who voluntarily 'by a method quite new of his own contrivance destroyed the said vermin and cleaned the greatest part of the house'.<sup>58</sup> The Merchant Maiden Hospital was so badly infested in 1735 'that the girls could get no rest'.<sup>59</sup> Lord Kilkerran would have been one of the few inhabitants of the city able to advertise his house in 1753 as 'well finished and painted, of easy access, entirely free of smoke and bugs'.<sup>60</sup>

Uncleared refuse presented a hazard to health, compounded by a chronic shortage of fresh water caused by Edinburgh's elevated geographical position. Those in low-lying parts such as the Cowgate and Grassmarket simply dug their own wells. Inhabitants of the rocky higher ground on which the main part of the city was located faced greater difficulties. The Council had taken a number of steps in 1672 and again in 1674–76 to improve supplies but a report of 1704 said they were still not adequate and it was not until the eighteenth century that major advances were made.<sup>61</sup> William Lindsey reported to the Council in 1729 about the state of the pipes which brought running water into Edinburgh and he made recommendations about future needs. He claimed that after ten years supervising the supply it was much improved – he had mended 85 leaks in 1726 compared with just 59 in 1728 – but that new sources of water and new machinery for conveying it into the city should be found.<sup>62</sup>

Taking a supply from public water pipes for a private house was expensive and a mark of status. One petition for a spur pipe lodged in June 1745 came from two advocates, two noblemen and an esquire. Water supply was always uncertain. The petitioners recognised that 'these by-pipes were always stopped upon the least penury of water for the public service'.<sup>63</sup> Running fights between brewers' and stablers' servants about access to the over-used Muse Well in the Grassmarket were reported in April 1748.<sup>64</sup> It was not until 1752 that the Calton Trades were allowed a continuation of the city's supply (from Trinity Hospital) and that a pipe was completed from Lochend (east of the city) to Leith.<sup>65</sup> Even then, if too many washerwomen used the Calton supply early in the morning, shortages were created.<sup>66</sup> As late as 1760 a severe drought meant that 'almost one half of the inhabitants were obliged to buy water from off the farmers' carts, who brought it from distant places to the streets'. A scheme to bring water from Mortonhall on the south of the city had been frustrated by the obstructive behaviour of the landowner there, 'whose madness, etc., nobody in this country is a stranger to'.<sup>67</sup>

Edinburgh's problem was not unusual. Few European cities had adequate supplies for populations which were either expanding or developing greater demands for water. Mid-eighteenth-century Paris had 65 public fountains – one for every 10,000 inhabitants, when one for 1000 would have been needed to meet demand.<sup>68</sup> Only towns like Namur, where the ratio was roughly 1 to 500, had anything like adequate provision of fresh water.<sup>69</sup> Edinburgh had just eight public fountains in the late seventeenth century for roughly 30,000 people.<sup>70</sup>

Water supplies were partly privatised. The Council also allowed improvements to streets by private individuals and indeed gave them incentives. Joseph Cave and other heritors of Robertson's Close were permitted 'to lay and calsay [pave] the said

close at their own expense with a privilege to exclude all coaches, carts, sledges, coal and carriage horses from passing ... through the same and reserving only to the inhabitants and all other passengers a patent foot way by and through the same'.<sup>71</sup> One would have to say that these improvements were designed to enhance the efficiency of businesses which used lots of water and the amenity of private dwellings and cannot be seen as evidence of a new 'public' spirit. Citizens showed a chronic unwillingness to see any connection between local taxes and local services. Disputes over who should pay calsey dues flared up intermittently in the first quarter of the eighteenth century and in 1726 the burgh had to borrow money to take the coachmasters to the Court of Session for failing to pay.<sup>72</sup>

At times, the shortage of water and of the technology to move it quickly to a particular place had disastrous and immediate consequences. For fire was a regular, feared and sometimes spectacular event within the city's tight confines. Regulations had been in force since the sixteenth century to prevent dangerous activities and combustible styles of building. One of 1666 identified baking and brewing on domestic hearths (rather than iron stoves) in high buildings and lofts, and lighting of fires in the streets and even inside houses which did not have a chimney.<sup>73</sup> The baxters kept extensive stockpiles of brush and timber for their ovens in Robertson's Close.<sup>74</sup> Other causes of fire included the use of lighted candles in shops selling flammable materials, dressing lint near a candle or fire, and the use of naked flames in stables.<sup>75</sup> In 1707 a former clergyman was reported by neighbours for running a brewery-cum-distillery in a timber-floored room in Covenant Close.<sup>76</sup> A year later anxious inhabitants of Burnet's Close complained about William Scott, wright,<sup>77</sup>

having set up a great manufactory of making chairs, cabinets etc ... where he employs a great many hands in sawing, cleaving, turning and cutting of wood. In order to make the same fit for his work

keeps on several great fires for drying of his timber and making of his varnish ... [it is said] that ordinarily once a month some part or other of his possession is set on fire.

Two deliberate attempts to set fire to timber buildings in the north of the city in November 1686 provoked widespread horror.<sup>78</sup> A newspaper report of the fire in Craig's Close in 1734 summed up the fears of the city's inhabitants: 'We live here upon a tar-barrel'.<sup>79</sup>

Contemporary descriptions of Edinburgh fires showed that they were fierce, fast and furious. Duncan Forbes, a man who had witnessed the 1666 Fire of London, was nonetheless awed by the conflagration which broke out in the Meal Market on the night of 3 February 1700 and raged for all of twelve hours – the 'epitome of dissolution'.<sup>80</sup> The heart of the city was burnt out. From the Cowgate to the High Street there was 'hardly one stone left upon another', the collapse of these ten to fourteen storey 'babells' being terrible to behold. Forbes remarked on the prosperous and prestigious inhabitants of this area near the Parliament House, lamenting that 'all the pride of Edinburgh is sunk'. The valued rent of the area consumed was estimated to exceed that of the whole of Glasgow and among the 300 or 400 families rendered homeless were 'many good and great'. Forbes reckoned that a quarter of the valued rent of the city had gone, with as many as 12,000 rooms. He blamed the crowding of buildings, wooden floors and connecting doors and passages which made the area one huge fire hazard. Serious social upheavals followed. The Court of Session was suspended because of the chaos and the city was thronging with people moving what effects they had been able to save 'they know not where'. Some 200 craftsmen and workmen helped to control the fire.<sup>81</sup>

The great fire of 1700 engendered a pamphlet literature and threw up some vivid personal accounts. An Edinburgh man wrote to a friend in Dysart to tell him he was safe:<sup>82</sup>



Francy, the lass and my papers are all safe. The moment the fire was called Francy ran up stairs not in the way did he find the least appearance of it. [He] gave my strong box to the lass but before she got two storeys down the door of the first storey flamed so strong as hindered all passage. When she came he ran down to get the box but was suffocated in a moment so he found it was lost and what was worse no passage out so back he came, locked himself in ... then fell to making a rope of sheets and tied it to the easy chair and a comrade of his, Irving, got on a little house below and adjoining and added some pack cords to Francy's sheets then he kicked out a casement window and through onto a back yard ... put his money into his pocket and then came to the rope and came safely down. The maid was long afraid, however upon some of the joists of the room crackling she put off and she being heavier it broke when she was within a yard of the ground. His comrades helped him off and what he threw out is mostly saved. Miss Jenny Crawford would have been burnt if Mr Angus the merchant had not leapt through the flames [and], finding her stopped, dragged her down. Mr Crawford's servants: some escaped by the slates, others by a deal [plank] thrown between Mr Don's and his lodging over the fishmarket seven storeys high ... not the smallest thing saved of Mr Crawford's furniture or papers, nor of Mr Murray's ... his loss of furniture and burnt papers is above £1,500.

The following list includes the dates of fires important enough to have been recorded during the century 1660–1760, based mainly on Robert Chambers's *Notices of the Most Remarkable Fires in Edinburgh from 1385 to 1824*, with some additions, mainly instances of charitable collections being made for victims: 1661, 1670, 1674, 1676, 1677, 1680, 1681, 1690, 1691, 1696, 1698, 1700, 1701, 1707, 1708, 1710, 1714, 1725, 1726, 1730, 1732, 1734, 1739, 1741, 1747, 1750, 1755, 1758.<sup>83</sup>

The Town Council was keenly aware of the need to act against fire. Municipal funds had been used to provide leather fire buckets in 1621–22 and again in 1670 when 200 were brought from London.<sup>84</sup> The effectiveness of these measures seems to have been limited as serious fires continued to ravage parts of the city. Means of coping with fire and insuring against the damage it caused improved during the eighteenth century. Firemen were employed from the early eighteenth century as they were in many English cities such as York.<sup>85</sup> The Town Council

issued a printed summary of the measures they proposed to take against fire in December 1727, including 12 companies of firemen equipped with ladders and buckets and given a recognised drill. Four new fire engines were proposed and the water supply improved to ensure there was always enough to douse the flames.<sup>86</sup> The Council minuted extensive regulations about fire procedures in 1732 and mentioned a new fire engine capable of delivering 80 Scots pints of water a minute. A hundred men were to be employed in fire control.<sup>87</sup>

Improvements in the ability to control fire went alongside the development of mutual aid to deal with its financial effects. A 'Friendly Society of the Heritors of Edinburgh' was founded in 1720 and charged 0.4% a year of valued rent for 25 years or a 100 merk lump sum for fire insurance. The association was geared towards wealthy heritors: 'Every subscriber have as many voices in the society as he has stock insured to the value of £3,000 and that subscribers under that value may join with a neighbour or two making up £3,000 value' to qualify for a vote.<sup>88</sup> A comment on this sort of body was made in a Court of Session case of 1732. Edinburgh buildings were susceptible to fire 'by reason of the nearness to each other, and the height thereof, many families inhabiting under one and the same roof'. Some people had 'entered into mutual covenants and agreements to subject themselves to the payment of certain small sums (in proportion to the value and extent of their property) to create and establish a general charitable fund or stock for their mutual relief'.<sup>89</sup> The Sun Fire Office set up a branch in Edinburgh in 1733.<sup>90</sup>

The human effects of fire were as profound as the physical destruction was extensive. The kirk session of the Old Kirk (one of the four parish churches housed within St Giles by the eighteenth century) claimed that a third of their parishioners had lost their homes after the 1701 fire.<sup>91</sup> Fire spread quickly but the physical damage and social dislocation it caused

were more enduring.<sup>92</sup> Greyfriars kirk session delayed investigating a couple accused of moral irregularities, 'considering that the conflagration yesterday morning in the head of the Cowgate is near to [their] dwelling house and that it is probable his family might be put to disorder thereby'.<sup>93</sup> While damage to property could be extensive, few people died in fires – the 1701 Lawnmarket blaze<sup>94</sup> was an exception – and fires could be useful in removing dangerous old buildings and allowing rebuilding. A fire in 1674 provoked a reiteration of exhortations to rebuild in stone, and regulations to curb obstructions in the street and other infringements.<sup>95</sup> Gladstone's Land, in the Lawnmarket, is a surviving example of the Council's preferred style of building in the seventeenth century. The Privy Council seized the opportunity created by the 1676 fire to the east of St Giles to demand a wider entry for coaches into the Parliament Close. The area was eventually rebuilt by Thomas Robertson.<sup>96</sup> Provided the money was available, new building created demand within the city's economy. The only short term disadvantage was an increase in house rents after extensive fires. Rebuilding and reoccupation was usually achieved within a year except after the worst conflagrations. The Canongatehead fire of 1696 is a good example, as £1600 of valued rent was destroyed, and a further £400 worth damaged, but subsequently rebuilt.<sup>97</sup> The 1700 fire did more lasting damage, but even that had been repaired by 1704.<sup>98</sup>

If fire destroyed the fabric of buildings, it could help to reinforce the fabric of society. Fire was one of the occasions on which neighbourly help was expected. It was not always forthcoming. The Earl of Seafield, the Episcopalian Lord High Commissioner, was unpopular for his religion but also because of his part in the failure of the Darien scheme. In 1703 he rebuilt and furnished a luxury house in St Cuthbert's parish only to have it catch fire soon after. It was said that few answered his cries for help and some told him to

fetch water from Barbados where it had been refused to the Darien settlers.<sup>99</sup> Neighbourly spirit had its limits. The Town Council's practice of giving financial rewards to neighbours who had helped to put out fires suggests that without this incentive, some would not have bothered to intervene.<sup>100</sup> On more than one occasion, victims who had thrown belongings out into the street during a fire had their goods stolen.<sup>101</sup>

Major fires must have been an eerie sight in and around a city which was poorly lit at the best of times. The need to light dark closes on winter evenings was recognised by the Council as early as 1653, but the repetition of their orders for individuals to hang candle lanterns outside doors – in 1661, 1684 and 1694 for example – shows that compliance was sporadic.<sup>102</sup> Such orders were issued less in response to a general desire to illuminate the city than as a reaction to specific events such as outbreaks of crime or rioting – in early 1686 for example.<sup>103</sup> Other European cities were developing public street lighting at this time. Paris is said to have had the first lantern system paid for by local taxes from 1667.<sup>104</sup> Amsterdam replaced poorly observed regulations, requiring private households to put lights above their doors, with a public system of oil lamps in 1669, and The Hague followed suit in 1678. Amsterdam had 133 lamps by 1679 and 2400 by 1689.<sup>105</sup> London had perhaps 15,000 by the 1750s.<sup>106</sup> The early eighteenth century saw more concerted efforts to initiate 'an age of light' in Edinburgh when in 1709 William Mitchell, whiteiron [tin] smith, was retained by the city to light the lamps.<sup>107</sup> Edinburgh's Council bought 80 lamps from London to help light the city's thoroughfares in 1760, though these could have lit only a fraction of the town.<sup>108</sup>

Even during the day, lighting in the narrower streets and closes of the city cannot have been good. The tightly packed houses made good use of space and conserved heat more effectively than detached ones but many people would have had to use artificial

light or work on the doorstep unless they lived on an upper floor or in an advantageously located building.<sup>109</sup> In May 1730 the Council commented generally on the thoroughfares of the city as part of its specific plans to enlarge the middle Fleshmarket Close:<sup>110</sup>

The heads of closes in their original use served only as entries to particular dwellings as is evident by the iron crooks remaining in them to this day. But now these closes are become real but most inconvenient and miserable streets with high and spacious buildings on both sides wherein the inhabitants enjoy not the blessings of daylight at noon, nor yet of air, which makes all household virtue and industry impracticable whereby the poor are obliged to be idle.

By widening the head of middle Fleshmarket Close access would become easier and 'a great number of valuable houses now so dark that in any other town they would scarce be habitable, would become well

lighted'.<sup>111</sup> Edinburgh was entering an 'age of light', but it still had a long way to go.

By the accession of George III, control of environmental hazards and the provision of improved water and sewage services had helped to enhance the material quality of life. As a result of both public and private initiatives, and of changing visions of civic pride and individual taste, the city's environment had improved markedly since the return of Charles II. The city was more attractive, cleaner and better lit. Steps had been taken to combat some of the worst health hazards and we know that adult life expectancy was rising dramatically in the eighteenth century.<sup>112</sup> Improvements continued to be made to 'old' Edinburgh, but increasingly the better off sought to escape its environmental constraints in the 'windy canyons' of the New Town.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

This article grew out of research on my *Social Change in the Age of Enlightenment: Edinburgh, 1660–1760* (Oxford University Press 1994). It was funded by the ESRC (Grant D 0023 2152).

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- 2 Joseph Taylor, *A Journey to Edenborough in Scotland*, edited by William Cowan (Edinburgh 1903), p. 134.
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