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# BURGAGE PLOTS AND THE FOUNDATION OF THE BURGH OF EDINBURGH

ROBIN TAIT

THE FOUNDATION of the Scottish royal burghs, including the Burgh of Edinburgh, took place from the reign of David I (1124–53) onwards.<sup>1</sup> These early royal burghs often had the same simple layout, based on a linear High Street extending from a royal castle to the burgh centre and wide enough to house the market. The street would be lined with houses, behind each of which would be a plot of land initially used for cultivation.

The award by the king of a charter gave to a burgh certain rights and privileges, intended to facilitate the establishment of the burgh as a centre for trade. One of the initial steps in establishing a new burgh was the provision of formally laid out plots of land within the burgh, known as burgage plots or tofts. Those allocated a plot were expected to build a house on it and take up residence there within a specified time. During this time they were excused by the king from paying taxes. Having met the conditions, they were admitted as burgesses, with trading rights, but also with certain responsibilities to the burgh.

The typical burgage plot would have the owner's dwelling on the foreland. On the backland, animals would be kept and crops grown, and in time, barns, stables and workshops would appear. In addition, the plot owner could build or permit others to build dwellings and other properties. Meanwhile, plot boundary positions were carefully maintained under the supervision of burgh officials known as liners. The building and re-building process continued over the centuries, initially mainly with wooden, and then with stone, structures. In later years many foreland buildings were extended forward with galleried or arcaded frontages. By the eighteenth century, cartographic evidence indicates that most of the burgage plots in Edinburgh were densely populated with buildings. A great many plot boundaries have survived, at least in part, to this day, although slight lateral movement of many will doubtless have taken place.

## THE PATTERN OF BURGAGE PLOT DEVELOPMENT

The configuration of the burgage plots in Edinburgh can be described in terms of a multi-faceted pattern. The fundamental component of this pattern is provided by the main street which descends steadily from the Castle Esplanade to the site of the Netherbow and onwards. There are small changes of direction at places, but the street heads steadily in an east–west direction. The long narrow burgage plots with their forelands fronting the street are at right angles to the street, in an approximately north–south alignment.

The main street is not uniform in width over its length, in that it narrows significantly at the two extremities, just below Castle Hill at the west end, and at the site of the Netherbow Port at the lower, east, end. The whole of the width adjustment is found from cartographic evidence to take place on the north side of the street, the south side remaining straight, apart from a slight angular change near the Tron Kirk, which may perhaps mark the boundary between successive phases of development of the burgh. The straightness of the southern street line is clearly discernible in Gordon of Rothiemay's map of 1647, and in all subsequent maps. It is notable that the straight line passes right through the present St Giles and almost certainly through the site of its Romanesque predecessor, so its establishment conceivably pre-dates the erection of the early church building. Such a sight line would facilitate the layout of the burgage plots, providing a clear and reliable datum line. There is also a possibility that the course of the main street may have been influenced by geological or topographic factors.

Castle Hill does not fit well into the general pattern. It has an informal appearance, is narrow but of approximately uniform width, and undergoes a substantial change of direction along its length. It may perhaps be of earlier, less formal origin.



Fig. 1. The upper section of the main street of the Burgh of Edinburgh from the 1849–53 Ordnance Survey map of Edinburgh. (Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.)

There are many interruptions to the course of the street, provided by more recent features such as public buildings, roads and courtyards. The basic features are to be seen on the first Ordnance Survey (OS) map of Edinburgh (1849–53). This map is of particular significance in providing the first accurate large scale plan of the city. The part under discussion is illustrated in fig. 1. The long straight boundaries between burgage plots are visible at places on the map, more frequently beyond St Giles to the north and east.

The closes which provide the necessary access to the backlands of the plots can also be seen. It is clear that these are not equally spaced along the street. This can partly be explained in terms of single and shared access. Single plots are likely to locate their close along one side so as not to divide the land into two narrow strips (fig. 2a). One plot boundary is along the right hand side of the close in this example. This side will appear straight on the OS map, and will not in general be used for access to backland properties in the adjacent plot. By contrast the left hand side of

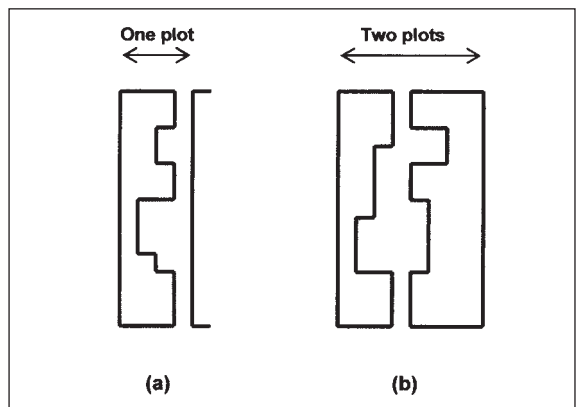


Fig. 2. Plot access to a single plot, 2(a), and shared access to a pair of plots, 2(b).

the close typically provides access to individual backland buildings of varying dimensions, thus producing an irregular frontage onto the close. The other plot boundary is located further to the left at the back of these buildings. By contrast, a close providing shared access to two plots will be irregular

in form on both sides of the close. The overall boundaries of the pair of plots will now be to left and right (fig. 2b). There would, in principle, be a boundary between the plots somewhere within the width of the close, but there is no obvious way of determining its position. A mixture of plots having single and shared access can produce a corresponding mixture of single and double plot spacings between the closes.

Valuable historical evidence is available regarding these access patterns in Edinburgh. One document proves particularly helpful. In 1635 a detailed survey was undertaken of the whole Burgh of Edinburgh to provide an assessment of house rental values, at that time known as 'housemaills', for taxation purposes. The manuscript recording the results of the survey is held in the Edinburgh City Archives.<sup>2</sup> It describes, for a person walking systematically down one side and back up the other side of each close, the location of the access to each building. This information is particularly valuable in determining the plot boundary positions in cases where these are not clear from inspection of the OS map. The document has an additional contribution to make — the assessed rental values quoted are of help in providing an indication of property sizes, although the precise factors used in the valuation process are not known.

#### VARYING BURGAGE PLOT WIDTHS

The purpose of the present study is to look specifically at the disposition of the plots in Castle Hill and the Lawnmarket, the upper main street. It follows an earlier study of the plot pattern in the whole of the main street.<sup>3</sup> The positions of the plot boundaries in that study were determined using the method described above, and the distances between the boundaries were measured, as in the present study, using the 1849–53 OS map provided online by the National Library of Scotland at [www.nls.uk/maps](http://www.nls.uk/maps).

Three particular aspects of the plot pattern emerge from this earlier study. Firstly, throughout the complete length of the main street, closes providing single access invariably appear to be located on the eastern, downhill, side of the plot. The reason for this is not known.

A second aspect concerns plot widths. These were not all the same, and were found to fall into three distinct groupings. For most of the length of the street the largest group had widths averaging 7.7 m (25.3 ft). The other two groups had average widths of 5.8 m (19.0 ft) and 9.7 m (31.8 ft). These are respectively  $\frac{3}{4}$  and  $1\frac{1}{4}$  of the central or unit width. The presence of such fractional widths is not unexpected as it has been found elsewhere, e.g. at Alnwick and Perth.<sup>4</sup> It has not been established whether the plots were set out to these widths or started out at uniform width, altered by exchange of land in later times, but archaeology may eventually provide a solution, as exchanges of land would involve quarter unit adjustments in the position of plot boundaries, possibly observable during excavations. If they were set out to these different widths, the larger plots might well have been allocated to potential burgesses who were wealthy, or had strong trading links within Scotland or abroad. Such persons would be able to make a particularly valuable contribution to the economic development of the burgh. The presence of these different widths adds further detail to the plot pattern.

Thirdly, at Castle Hill and the Lawnmarket, only a small number of the plots were found to display clearly defined boundaries. These appeared to have a unit width of about 6.6 m (21.7 ft), clearly differing from that for the remainder of the street. One pair of plots close in width to two  $\frac{3}{4}$  units was also identified. This upper part of the main street has now been studied in greater detail using an alternative technique.

#### PLOTS IN THE UPPER MAIN STREET

A number of complications are encountered in determining plot widths at Castle Hill and the Lawnmarket. As elsewhere, there are areas where later developments have partially or completely obscured the original plot pattern, including roads such as George IV Bridge and its extension northwards, Bank Street (fig. 1). There are also more fundamental problems, for example on the south side of the Lawnmarket west of George IV Bridge and to a lesser extent on Castle Hill. These sections have a number of irregular shaped closes and small courtyards, while in some places buildings and yards



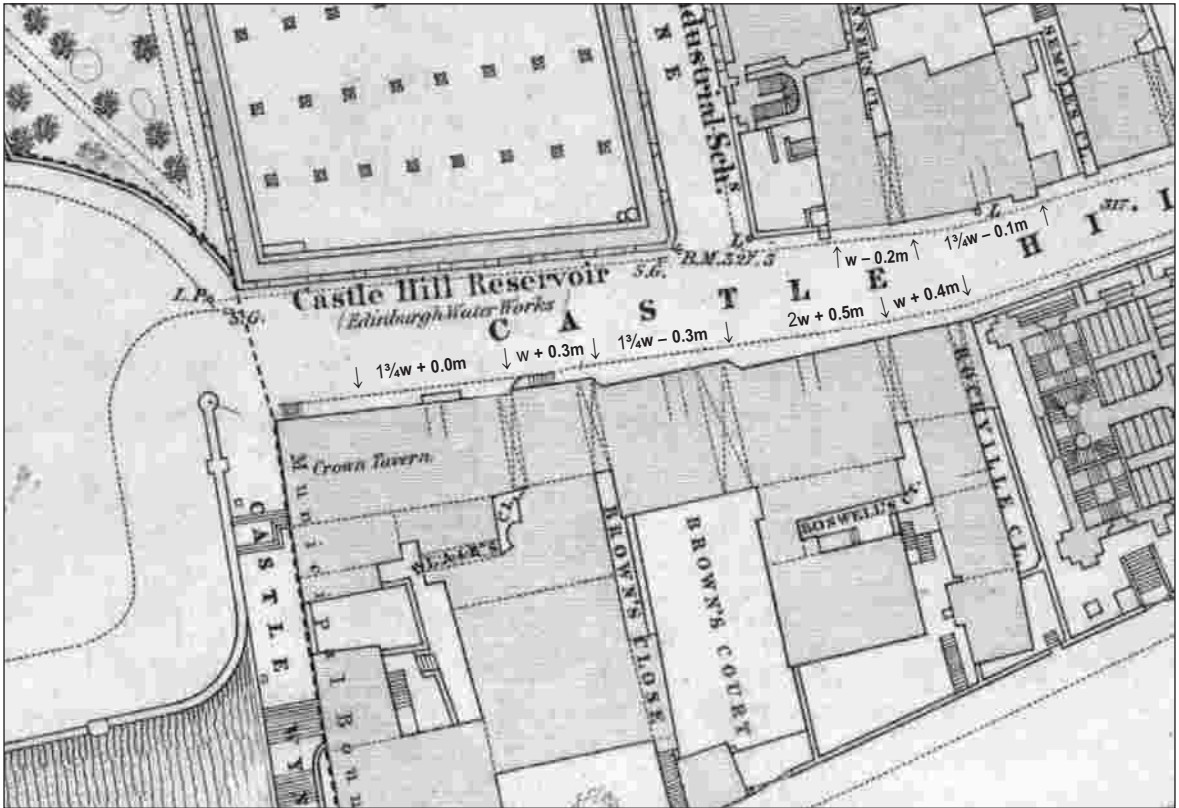


Fig. 3. The west-most section of Castle Hill from the 1849–53 OS map, indicating the positions of the plot boundaries. (Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.)

or gardens are found to occupy parts of more than one plot. This is in clear contrast to the relatively orderly progression of plots and closes encountered for example to the north and east of St Giles.

In view of this situation it was decided to change the approach to plot width determination. If, as suggested by the earlier study, there is a unit plot width in this part of the street around 6.6 m, it is possible to look for possible plot boundary indicators such as foreland building boundaries or other features, using this distance or its fractional ‘neighbours’ for guidance.

The approach produces clear, self-consistent results, exemplified by the west section of Castle Hill (fig. 3), the small arrows indicating the boundary positions determined by this procedure. The plot widths for the whole of the upper main street are displayed in a histogram (fig. 4). Here, all measured widths are subdivided into half-metre intervals, with each plot represented on the histogram

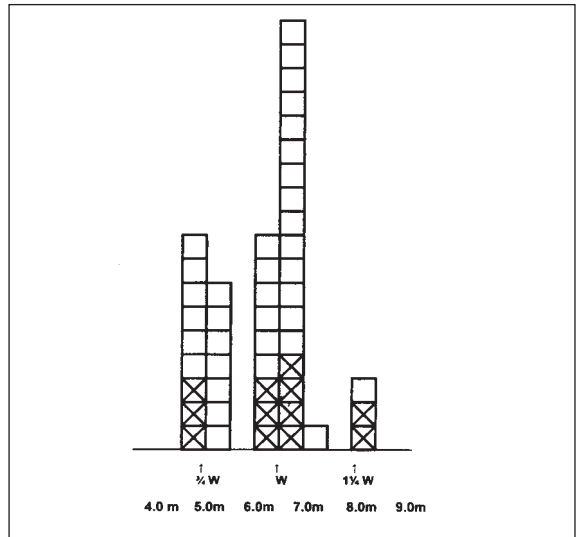


Fig. 4. Histogram of plot widths. Each square represents one plot. Squares marked with a cross represent single plots, those without are from pairs of plots.

by a square. The squares marked with a cross come from single plots. These provide clear evidence that the unit width together with  $\frac{3}{4}$  and  $1\frac{1}{4}$  ‘neighbours’ are present as in the earlier study. The unmarked squares are from places where boundaries were identified that included two or more plots. For these, good matches were invariably found to the overall width using a combination of unit and fractional plots. The unmarked squares fit well into the histogram.

The histogram presents three peaks. The average width of all the plots in the central, unit peak is 6.5 m (21.3 ft), close to the 6.6 m found in the earlier study, which involved a smaller number of plots. The other two peaks are then seen to agree well with the expected positions for plots of  $\frac{3}{4}$  (4.9 m, or 16.1 ft) and  $1\frac{1}{4}$  (8.1 m, or 26.6 ft) of the unit width. The peaks are quite broad — the plots in the central peak vary from 6.2 m to 6.9 m in width. Contributions to this variation will come from inaccuracies in the setting out of the plots in the first place, from subsequent movement in the boundary positions, and from inaccuracies in the OS map and online measuring system. A repeat of the earlier study, using foreland features rather than backland plot boundaries produced slimmer peaks than before, suggesting that the subsequent changes in boundary positions were smaller at the forelands than the backlands. Any broadening of the peaks due to inaccuracies in the OS map and measuring system could of course be avoided by measuring the distances directly rather than basing the study on the

map. A simple statistical analysis of the results indicates that the average widths quoted above, because of the averaging process, are likely to be correct within about  $\pm 0.1$  m.<sup>5</sup>

The characteristics of plots and their boundaries are now examined at various locations on Castle Hill and in the Lawnmarket. At two key locations, where the line of the boundaries on the backlands can be clearly discerned, changes of direction of the street frontage and of the plot boundaries have been measured to see how these are related.

#### CASTLE HILL

Figure 3 shows that the plot system, at least on the foreland, extends right up to the Castle Esplanade. The numbers between the boundary arrows in the figure give an idea of how well the widths fit into the scheme. For example ‘ $\frac{3}{4}W - 0.2$  m’ means that the distance is 0.2 m less than that for a plot of three quarters of the unit width  $W$ . Single plots, e.g. at Rockville, Semple’s and Skinner’s Closes, have the close on their east side, as found elsewhere.

Examination of the 1635 Housemaills document shows that most foreland buildings at that time were shops and small dwelling houses, typically valued at £10 to £50.<sup>6</sup> Two notable exceptions, located on the south side of the street, were at Boswell’s Court where the foreland building contained four dwellings each valued at £100, and near Castle Wynd where a single dwelling was valued at £120. Measured



Fig. 5. Section of a measured drawing by Thomas Hamilton, 1830, showing the north side of Castle Hill from Semple’s Close to Blyth’s Close. (*City Art Centre.*)

drawings produced in 1830 by Thomas Hamilton (fig. 5) indicate that the foreland buildings at that date were typically of three to five storeys, compared with five or six further east in the Lawnmarket.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the foreland properties, many of those on the backlands were substantial. On the south side, in 1635, there were nine backland dwellings valued at over £100, the largest at £266. 13. 4.<sup>8</sup> Three had yards or gardens. On the north side there were seven, four with yards or gardens. Four, accessed from Tod's or Nairn's Closes, were perhaps remnants of the Palace of Mary of Guise which was located there in the sixteenth century.<sup>9</sup> On the south side of the street, Gordon of Rothiemay's map of 1647 shows several such backland buildings and gardens clearly occupying more than one plot in width.

THE LAWNMARKET – NORTH SIDE

Proceeding eastwards, the street slowly opens out to its full width at the top of the Lawnmarket, then curves gently until the north street line is approximately parallel to the south one (fig. 1). This happens in the section of the street between James Court East Entry and Baxter's Close. The change of direction of the street frontage totals 9°, distributed uniformly over four adjacent plots. At the same time successive plot boundaries, clearly visible in this region, are angled by about 2.7° to follow the change. As a result the plots, instead of being rectangular, are slightly wedge shaped. The plot pattern is best demonstrated with angles exaggerated and other

features simplified (fig. 6). The very fact that it is possible to discern the pattern demonstrates the detail with which the street lines and plot boundaries were set out and maintained.

The buildings in this part of the street varied greatly in size in 1635. Thomas Gladstone's foreland building contained four dwellings valued at a total of £610 while Lady Stair's House, on the neighbouring backland, owned at that date by William Graye, contained two dwellings valued at £160 and £200.<sup>10</sup> It is notable that these large buildings conform strictly to the plot boundaries.

Continuing eastwards on the north side of the street, the frontage appears to curve irregularly inward through about 3.8° between the east side of Baxter's Close and the east side of the un-named section of close nearest Bank Street, now connected to Paterson's Court (fig. 1). The angle between these boundary lines is about 5.3°, in approximate agreement. According to the sixteenth century protocol records, which provide valuable information about land ownership, this area contained two pairs of plots and also, probably, a single one.<sup>11</sup> That is incompatible with the close and boundary structure both on the OS map and at the present day, due to subsequent changes. This later development, together with the truncation of the street line at Bank Street to the east, makes detailed interpretation of the direction change difficult. There is a suggestion of the beginning of a narrowing of the street in this region but such an interpretation must remain tentative in the absence of additional evidence.

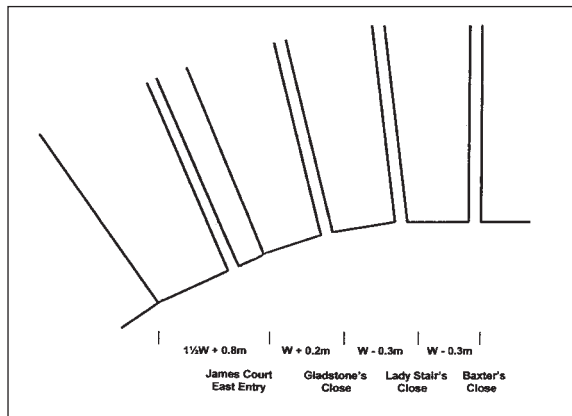


Fig. 6. Schematic diagram illustrating the angular changes between James Court East Entry and Baxter's Close in the Lawnmarket.

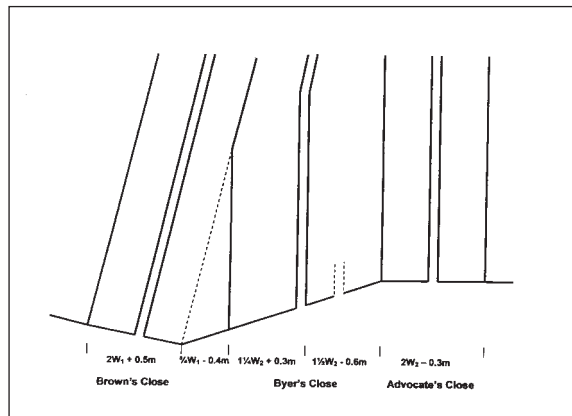


Fig. 7. Schematic diagram illustrating the angular changes between Brown's and Advocate's Closes in the High Street.

## THE CHANGE OF UNIT PLOT WIDTH

As the street approaches St Giles, the northern street line takes an abrupt turn through  $11^\circ$  northwards, followed later by a lesser turn through  $7^\circ$  southwards. Brown's Close serves a pair of plots of total width  $2W_1$ ,  $W_1$  being the unit plot width of 6.5 m found in the upper main street. This is illustrated in the schematic diagram (fig. 7). Beyond, to the east, is a small triangular area of width at the foreland of  $\frac{3}{4}W_1$ . This results from the change of direction of the plot boundaries. All plots to the east of this are found to relate to the unit width  $W_2$  of 7.7 m encountered in the earlier study in the lower parts of the street.<sup>12</sup> The single plot at Byer's Close has a width of  $1\frac{1}{4}W_2$  and is aligned with the plots to the east, although it reverts to the direction of those to the west some way back from the foreland. The next plot eastward probably started as a pair of  $\frac{3}{4}W_2$  plots with shared access. The long narrow Bothwell dwelling on the backland is located entirely on one of these. In later days the plots were amalgamated into a single plot of width  $1\frac{1}{2}W_2$ , containing one very large property owned by Sir William Dick, with a private entrance from the street.<sup>13</sup> The two plots with shared access at Advocate's Close and of combined width  $2W_2$  adjoin to the east. The frontage has now turned back to the south by  $7^\circ$ .

The changes in this region appear to represent a systematic modification to the line of the street. It is significant that the unit plot width changes here.

In 1635, Byer's Close contained one house valued at £320 (3 dwellings). The Dick dwelling was valued at £500 and Advocate's Close contained a number of large buildings. These were valued at £466 (5 dwellings), £160 (a single dwelling), £210 (3 dwellings), £200 (a single dwelling) and £500 (3 dwellings).<sup>14</sup> Again, these relatively large backland buildings were accommodated within their respective plot boundaries apart perhaps from the Dick building.

## THE LAWNMARKET – SOUTH SIDE

On the south side of the Lawnmarket, only a single stretch has survived later development, between Johnston's Close and Buchanan's Close (fig. 8). The map gives an indication that the foreland buildings conformed to the same layout pattern as elsewhere,

and there is clear evidence of a boundary line along the east side of Fisher's Close, but other boundaries are not easy to identify.

Protocol books from the first half of the sixteenth century show that there was a single plot at the present day location of Fisher's Close, owned and occupied solely by the Cant family.<sup>15</sup> To the west where Riddle's Close and Court are now located was a pair of plots owned by the Tweedy/Elphinstone family, while Brodie's Close to the east of Fisher's Close was the site of another pair of plots, owned by the Richardson family. At the position of Buchanan's Close, further eastward again, was another pair of plots, these being owned by the Scot/Wardlaw family. The plot boundary lines at that time were irregular in form. One protocol entry describes a property within the tenement of Patrick Richardson having lands of Elizabeth Scot and James Wardlaw to the east and north, lands of John Cant to the west and south, a most unusual description to encounter.<sup>16</sup>

There is direct evidence that in the sixteenth century the Scot/Wardlaw tenements were bounded on the south by the Cowgate.<sup>17</sup> The Richardson and Cant tenements both had properties fronting the Cowgate, so it seems likely that the plots had similar southern boundaries at that time.<sup>18</sup> However, the 1635 Housemaills document shows that by that later date a number of small closes and courtyards had developed at the Cowgate end of the plots. These were accessed from the Cowgate and most of the buildings were of low value.<sup>19</sup>

The Tweedy/Elphinstone plots were purchased before 1590 by the MacMorran family who combined and developed existing buildings on the two plots to form the present building in Riddle's Court. The building had a garden to the south, and the property terminated at the so-called King's Wall, rather than at the Cowgate.<sup>20</sup> This is consistent with the line of the wall suggested elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> The old port or gateway in the West Bow is to be seen in Gordon of Rothiemay's 1647 map at the south end of the upper north-south section of the West Bow (fig. 9). The King's Wall passed eastwards from there, acting as the southern boundary of the MacMorran property, then turned south, probably skirting the west and south sides of the extensive gardens. The old wall itself is not marked, however, long since superseded by the Flodden Wall further to the south.



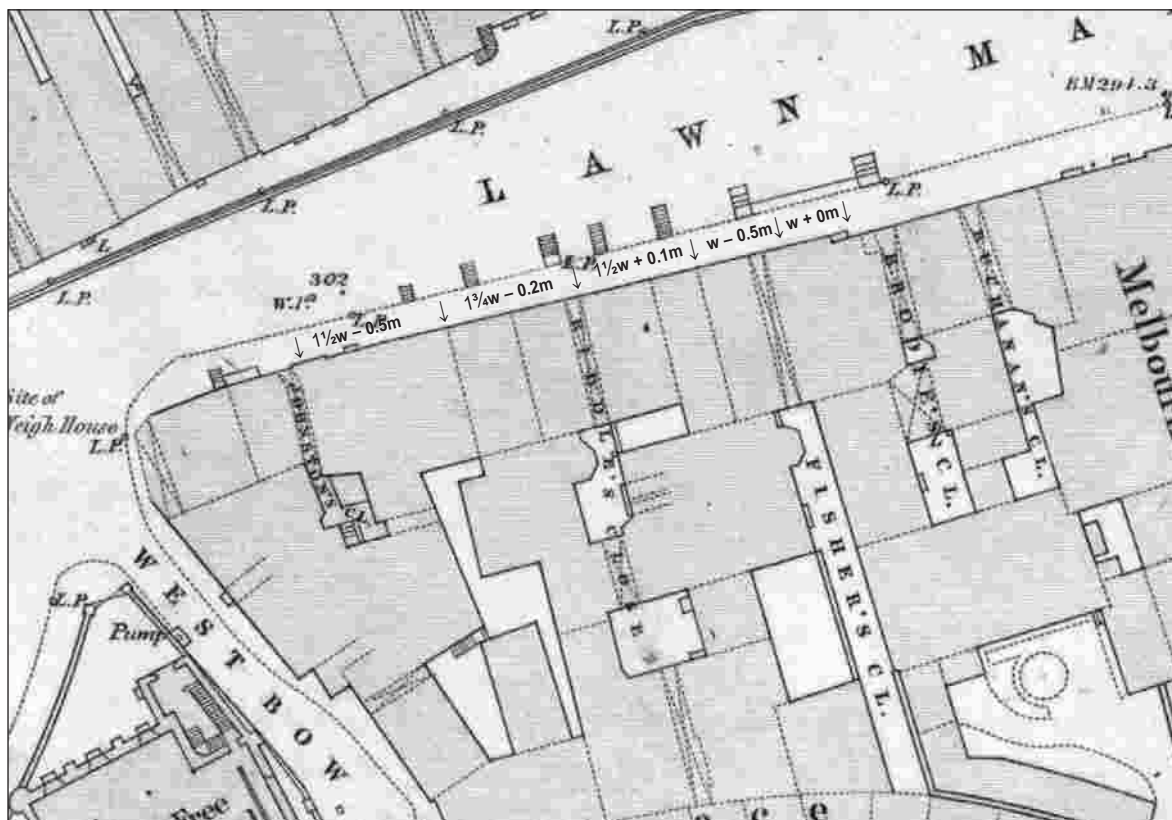


Fig. 8. The south side of the Lawnmarket between Johnston's Close and Buchanan's Close from the 1849–53 OS map, indicating the positions of the plot boundaries. (*Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.*)

A number of very large dwellings were located on the backlands of these plots in 1635. Brodie's Close contained the MacMorran house valued at £333. 6. 8, one at £233. 6. 8, and two at £133. 6. 8. Fisher's Close had one valued at £266. 13. 4, and several smaller but substantial ones, while Riddle's Close contained a single building with two dwellings of total value £666. 13. 4.<sup>22</sup> Several of these properties were accessed through private gates in the courtyards or closes. Occupiers of two of the large houses had stables southwards at the Cowgate. Gordon of Rothiemay's map shows buildings straddling more than one plot and large areas still not built over. These backlands, and some of those on Castle Hill, appear to largely ignore the regular burgage plot scheme.

#### DEVELOPMENT OF THE BURGH

Edinburgh existed long before its formal foundation as a burgh. Indeed, excavations at Edinburgh Castle have indicated that the site was occupied, probably more or less continuously, from the late Bronze or early Stone Age onward.<sup>23</sup> An associated settlement, outside the Castle precinct, will doubtless have developed over time. Dennison and Lynch suggest from documentary sources that there was likely to have been a settled community with a church by 854 AD.<sup>24</sup>

The foundation of the burgh of Edinburgh by David I can be dated to the period 1124–27, while there is a mention in a charter of David I dated between 1143 and 1147 of the gift by the king of 'unum toftum in Burgo meo de Edwinesburgh'.<sup>25</sup>



Fig. 9. Section of Gordon of Rothiemay's map of 1647, showing the lower section of Castle Hill (34) and much of the Lawnmarket (9). The building at the junction of these is the Weighhouse or Butter Tron (10), located at the head of the West Bow. The west end of the Cowgate can also be seen. (From reproduction in Daniel Wilson, *Memorials of Edinburgh in the Olden Time*, 2nd edn, 1891, vol. I.)

This suggests a date for early plot layout some time between these two events. There is no record of the speed at which the layout process proceeded, nor of who undertook the task.

The likelihood that the burgh developed in an easterly direction from near the Castle precinct has already been suggested.<sup>26</sup> The present study shows that the formal plot structure is to be found throughout Castle Hill and the Lawnmarket. If indeed this region was the site of the pre-burgh settlement, there must have been a basic re-modeling when the plots were set out there.

There is a clear change in direction of the northern street line to the west of Bank Street. This might simply follow the street frontage of the early settlement, or it

could represent the termination of a phase of development of the new burgh. The problems of interpretation in this section have already been discussed.

A second such direction change is to be seen just to the west of St Giles (fig. 7). The termination of a development phase here would fit in well with the contents of a recent report on archaeological studies at St Giles.<sup>27</sup> The findings provide an important contribution to the understanding of the early development of the burgh. The first, Romanesque, church is thought to have been established at about the same period as the formal foundation of the burgh. Excavations have revealed a short section of a substantial ditch. This was located within the present church building, but would have been outside and to

the east of the shorter early church, and was considered to be contemporary with it. The ditch is aligned in an approximately north–south direction. The authors suggest that it may have represented the eastern boundary of the church precinct and its construction may perhaps have been an integral part of the planned layout of the early burgh.

A later development phase, using the new unit plot width and adjusting the street frontage northwards to provide more space between this and the church, is a real possibility. Changes in plot width have been associated with different development phases in Perth and St Andrews, while Elgin provides an example of a burgh initially developed from castle to church, and later extended beyond.<sup>28</sup> Coleman has summarised the width of the plots found in a number of Scottish

burghs.<sup>29</sup> The range is large, and the Edinburgh plots fall well within it, but obtaining a better understanding of the information would be advantageous.

It has been noted that large backland buildings were in general accommodated within plot boundaries. Compliance with formal plot boundaries appears to break down however on the backlands to the south side of the Lawnmarket and perhaps at some locations on Castle Hill. Here the boundaries are irregularly shaped, with buildings and gardens spreading across more than one plot width. Influential families may have occupied these favourably located sites, possibly from the period before the burgh was founded, their properties being left intact when the burgh plots were laid out. Alternatively they may have been allowed to ignore the plot system in building their houses and gardens.

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My thanks are due to Allen Simpson for helpful discussions and comments during the preparation of this paper.

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