

City Walking Tour Episode 2 Transcripts

Luckenbooths, 253 High Street

Hello and welcome to the National Galleries of Scotland City Walking Tour. In this series, we'll journey along Edinburgh's Royal Mile exploring stories and places connected to the nation's outstanding collection of Scottish Art. We'll also chat to local experts to uncover hidden stories about the sites on this historic street and why they are still important today.

Facing opposite St Giles' Cathedral is the site of the Luckenbooths shops, which was once Edinburgh's retail hub. Over centuries the location of the Luckenbooths shifted, as the crowded High Street was developed, from the centre of the street as described in Walter Scott's *Heart of Midlothian* (1818). William Donaldson Clark captured this type of shop in his photograph titled *High Street*, which serves as a record of the businesses on the street during the mid-19th century. Donaldson Clark was an amateur photographer, who used his knowledge of chemistry from his trade as a cotton-cloth printer to document locations around Edinburgh. Local historian, Andy Arthur explores the site of the Luckenbooths through the years, explaining how Old Town commerce has changed since the 15th century.

Hello, my name is Andy Arthur, and I write a website of local history threads called threadinburgh.scot. A history thread takes an object, say an old photograph, and follows the thread of its subject matter through the references, trying to tell its story, and maybe turn up a few interesting facts along the way. If you had been standing here 250 years ago, you would not have been able to see much of the City Chambers in front of you. This is because you would have been in a narrow dark lane between the high Kirk of St Giles and a tall block of buildings called the Luckenbooths, looking down a forbidding passageway called the Stinking Style.

The word 'Luckenbooth' comes from the Scots word 'lucken', meaning locked, and the medieval word 'booth', for a covered stall or shop. These were lockable shops. When the first wooden structures were built here in 1440, they were known as the Buith Raw - the row of shops. The word 'Luckenbooth' was in use by the 1520s, and these were probably the first permanent shops in the city, if not in Scotland. They had lockable shutters that could be unfolded to form an upper canopy and a lower counter. This suited artisans and craftsmen in need of a covered workspace and a safe place to store their goods.

Over the next couple of hundred years, they evolved into a row of seven tenements of varying heights, which almost totally filled the high street, narrowing it to a width of only 14 feet. The Luckenbooths housed a whole range of businesses, the city's earliest postal directory published by Peter Williamson in 1773 records, amongst other occupations: a haberdasher, a jeweller, tailor, barber, vinter, shoemaker, watchmaker, and so on and so forth.

Probably the most famous Luckenbooth resident was the poet Allan Ramsay, who opened his bookshop and Scotland's first circulating library here on the first floor in 1725. He had over 30,000 titles available, and his establishment was the hang-out for Edinburgh's literati in the 18th century.

In the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, the city began planning for its future. The same civic improvement schemes which gave us the New Town and the North Bridge, would also give us the Royal Exchange. This was the building in front of you which is now the City Chambers. It was commissioned in 1753 as a modern centre for commerce in the city. The exchange opened in 1760,

and at its heart was a courtyard, surrounded by a piazza, in which the merchants could walk and talk. There were three different coffee houses in which they could meet and ten shops facing onto the High Street. Six were set within the arches of the piazza's south colonnade, these are which you can see in Clark's photo.

In 1773, there was a toy shop, a milliner, a saddler, a China merchant and a shoemaker. When the upper classes of the city began to migrate from the Old to the New Town in the late 18th century, the Luckenbooths position as the retail centre began to wane, and entrepreneurial shopkeepers began to move their premises to the New Town to be closer to their customers. By the 1810s the Luckenbooths were said to be a shadow of their former selves, and the haunt of mere trinket and toy sellers.

The town Council, wanting to open up the High Street to traffic and daylight, and to reclaim St Giles from the shadows, had the Luckenbooths and the old Tollbooth demolished in 1817. With the city needing an ever-larger administrative body and the Town Council finding and demolishing many of its meeting chambers, the solution of the half empty Royal Exchange presented itself. They began to occupy it in 1811 and spent the next 90 or so years transforming it into the City Chambers, buying up the various privately owned parts as they became available, including the shops in the photograph. These were demolished in 1901, and replaced with the visually similar but open colonnade that you can see today, to give a more dignified and ornamental approach befitting its status.

Bailie Fyfe's Close, 107 High Street

Bailie Fyfe's Close can be found at 107 High Street, through the archway under the low, oval-shaped window. The building that stands at this location today was built in the late 19th century after the original 17th-century building collapsed. David Allan's *A View of the High Street from the Netherbow* captures this part of the Royal Mile as it once was. The street scene faces west towards St Giles' with the old Bailie Fyfe's Close building about halfway up on the righthand side. Bailie Fyfe's Close appears on the right of the image, just past the square Netherbow Wellhead. This etching gives us a real sense of the life of the Royal Mile in the 18th century. In the foreground the shop signs tell us about the trades of the time, a wigmaker's next door to a bookseller, and a shoemaker. Horse-drawn carriages are transporting people up and down the Royal Mile, and day-to-day business is being conducted by the people seen dotted around the image. Writer, Diarmid Mogg investigates the residents of Bailie Fyfe's Close over the years, and how they lived.

I'm Diarmid Mogg, a researcher and writer here in Edinburgh. I'm interested in the stories of ordinary people who lived their lives in the places where we live today, and I spend a lot of time writing about them, mostly using stories I find in old newspapers. You can find out a lot about people in the past from the newspaper archives, and about the places they lived, and I often search the old papers for mention of the addresses of tenements that have caught my eye to see what stories I can find about people who lived there.

Bailie Fyfe's Close is an interesting example. On the surface, it's one of the less remarkable closes on Edinburgh's High Street - I should say, a 'close' is what we call the steep alleys, that branch off either side of the street. Originally they were densely lined with high houses and tenements (some of them still are), a lot of them are named simply after people who happened to have a house there at a certain time, this one is named after Gilbert Fyfe. The only thing we know about him is that he was a merchant, he lived here in the 1670's and served three terms as a Bailie, which is a sort of council official. These days Bailie Fyfe's Close is a short lane that leads to the back of the single tenement

that was built in 1902 after the crumbling ancient slums of the High Street were demolished. The old newspapers record a few moments from the lives of people who lived here in the years after the new building's construction, many of them of course, quite sad.

So, in 1917 we find Catherine Devine, a ten-year-old girl, the daughter of an army sergeant living here, who was taken to hospital with terrible burns after her clothes caught fire in her kitchen and she died three days later. For years after, on the anniversary of her death, a memorial notice was placed in the Evening News, which read:

'In loving memory of our dear daughter Catherine, Mother misses you most of all, because she loved you best.'

And of course, like most closes in the High Street, Bailie Fyfe's Close had once been home to Scots gentry. In the 1820's Miss Nicky Murray, sister of the Earl of Mansfield, who acted as Mistress of ceremonies in Edinburgh's high society dancing hall in Old Assembly Close, where nightly, she oversaw proceedings from a kind of throne, on a raised platform. Young debutantes from the country would visit her house at the top of Bailie Fyfe's Close to receive training in fashion and deportment.

And finally, just a bit further back in time, the close was the home of Nathaniel Gow, the son of the most famous Scottish fiddle player of the 1700's, Niel Gow. Nathaniel wrote more than 200 fiddle tunes and was the leader of many bands, he played for King George IV during his visit to Scotland in 1822. Nathaniel's best known composition *Caller Herrin* takes its melody from the traditional call of the Newhaven fishwives that you would have heard as they sold their herring from door to door down the close. Of course, there was no recording equipment back then, so this fiddle tune is a unique record of the voices of those women, and the sound of this very street.

I've always been aware of the fact that in an old city like Edinburgh, the places we live in and the streets we move through have been home to generations of people before us, people who were here and have now gone, just us we'll be gone someday with someone else living where we live. It's maybe a melancholy idea, but I like the thought of us all handing on these places to each other, down through the decades and centuries. Because, that chain of people is permanent, even if each link on it is temporary.

Old Playhouse Close, Canongate

In the 18th and 19th centuries, Edinburgh had a number of theatres. Several Scottish artists started their careers as scenic painters for playhouses in Scotland and beyond, including Alexander Nasmyth and David Roberts. Old Playhouse Close, which can be found under the archway at 196 Canongate, was once home to the short-lived Canongate Theatre (1746–1786). This photograph captures the close from the inside, looking towards the archway, out to the Royal Mile over to the baker's shop opposite. The narrow composition gives us a sense of what entering the close at the time of the Canongate Theatre may have been like, bustling with performers and audience members. Both the photographer and the date of the photograph are unknown, adding a layer of mystery to this claustrophobic image.

Exhibition designer and modelmaker Stuart Smith-Gordon explores Edinburgh's early theatres, and what it would have been like to attend a play at the Canongate Theatre.

My name is Stuart Smith-Gordon, and I am theatre illustrator and modelmaker at Ice Cream at the Interval. I have always been fascinated by theatre and theatre spaces from a young age.

Theatre and performance is such an important pillar of Edinburgh and is really woven into its DNA, throughout history, long before the festivals. Many of us have experienced visiting a theatre and walking through those dark thresholds and entering a world of escapism and imagination. It's magical!

These theatres should really be celebrated and the work of the incredible architects, artists and makers who crafted them. Mainly as these artworks and decorations were seen as ephemeral and would be updated due to gas light damage or tobacco smoke or changing fashions. Which has left them vulnerable to loss.

In my work I am particularly interested in lost theatres, and theatres that have been demolished or suffered fire damage. The evidence and archiving of these spaces is really fragmented and limited and requires looking at more unconventional sources, such as newspaper articles, accounts, reviews, playbills as well as early photography and etchings. There is a real worry that these spaces will fade from history and memory.

It is thought Edinburgh's first attempt to establish a public theatre was in 1736 by poet and painter Allan Ramsay. He had rented a tenement at the foot of Carrubbers Close just off the Royal Mile and had fitted it out as a performance space. Its early Georgian aesthetic would most likely have featured timber panelling and painted walls with simple wooden chairs and benches. It opened on the 8th November with *The Recruiting Officer* as the main piece - a popular play of the time that followed the social and sexual exploits of two officers, the womanising Plume and the cowardly Brazen. But the theatrical venture was doomed from the opening.

2 years earlier the Church and Town Council had introduced the Licensing Act of June 1737 which forbade all stage plays outside Westminster. However, Edinburgh prevailed and further attempts to set up public theatre continued.

One such significant theatre was the Canongate Theatre or concert hall located in Old Playhouse Court. The exact location of the Theatre was discovered using the description given in a lease and comparing this with architectural drawings from the Canongate Kilwinning Lodge in 1927. Entering the court today off the busy, noisy royal mile through a narrow and gloomy alley, we find an escape in this quiet spot. This feels like a theatrical experience in itself, not dissimilar to walking through from the foyer into an auditorium today. The theatre sat behind an early 17th century tenement on either side of the entrance. It is suggested that it was small and held an audience of around 70, measuring 9 by 5 metres and had two floors forming part of a gallery on three sides. Evidence suggests that the scenery had to be simple and compact given the size of the space which was revealed in a letter by the scenic painter William Delacour. The scenery would feature front scenes, such as towns, chambers, forests, and the Theatre opened on Monday 16 November 1747, with the play Hamlet.

Theatre ushers of today talk of standing in empty auditorium and almost feeling and hearing the applause of an audience. Standing in the close today you can almost feel the sound of an actor warming up through an open window, or the applause from the audience. The theatre was a great success, and it ran performances of all the important plays.

Theatre manners and talking through performances were a problem historically when at a performance of *High Life below the Stairs*, Mr. Love, one of the management, walked onto the stage and read a letter warning the audience to be on their best behaviour. Traditionally attendees would have housed their servants and footmen in the balcony and could be quite disruptive. As soon as the performance began it is quoted 'a prodigious noise was heard from that quarter'.

They were ordered to be silent, but without any success. After some force including the use of swords from their masters (and the audience too) they were evicted from the theatre. Swords have been replaced with ushers and torches today to expel unruly audience members, which I have to say I prefer!

We may not have etchings or photographic evidence today of that original theatre interior, but standing in the close today you can feel its history, its presence and the faint applause from the past.