



Gladstone's Land



Wellhead



Witches Well



Advocates Close



Riddles Court



Railings for crinolines

My Favourite History Place

Maggie Wilson
whets our appetite
for exploration of
Edinburgh's Royal Mile.

Tenement – a room or set of rooms forming a separate residence within a house or block of flats.

Land – an area occupied under some form of tenure and built on; the blocks of tenements between closes or wynds.

close/wynd – Scots term for alleyway. Strictly, a close is private property, often gated and closed to the public, whereas a wynd is an open thoroughfare, usually wide enough for a horse and cart.

Luckenbooth – booth or shop capable of being locked up.

Edinburgh's Royal Mile runs between the Castle and Holyrood Palace. In addition to these and other well-known sites such as St Giles Cathedral, John Knox's house, the Canongate Tolbooth and Canongate Kirk, and stories of Deacon Brodie, David Hume, James Boswell, Robert Burns and, obviously, Mary Queen of Scots, are hundreds of other less-visited gems. There must be more history along the Royal Mile than any other street of similar length.

Until the mid-eighteenth century all of Edinburgh, by then around 50,000 people, was housed in tenements either side of Castlehill, the Lawnmarket, the High Street and Canongate, which make up the mile-long stretch. Rich and poor, famous and infamous lived cheek by jowl in lands separated by narrow closes and wynds. These atmospheric alleys still exist and it takes little effort to imagine their past inhabitants.

Tenements could be 12 storeys high. There was no main drainage so, after the 10pm curfew, windows high above the road were thrown open for the ejection of waste, including the contents of chamber pots. A cry of 'Haud yer hand' might save a late passer-by but Edinburgh in the eighteenth century was not called 'Auld Reekie' for nothing.

While some buildings have been rebuilt or renovated, many are original, dating from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. Alongside the old are others that have been added in more recent times, most notably the controversial Scottish Parliament building, opened in 2004. Every building and every close has a story to tell. I include just a few to explain why the Royal Mile is my favourite historical place.

At the top of the mile is the Castle Esplanade from where there is a wonderful view of the whole present-day city. At the foot of the Esplanade there is a small bronze fountain – the witches' well. It commemorates approximately 300 witches who were executed nearby. In 1591 Agnes Sampson was garrotted then burnt there. She had been locked in the Tolbooth and tortured. When, finally, the 'De'il's mark' was found on her 'privie parts' she confessed to practising witchcraft. King James VI thought the charges unbelievable, so he dismissed the case, but Agnes was incensed that her confession was now being called a lie. She persuaded James she was in fact guilty!

Off the Lawnmarket is Milnes Court, renovated by Patrick Geddes, a man who did more than anyone to clean up the slums of the Old Town in the nineteenth century. Railings that bow out to allow passage for ladies with wide crinolines were included in the design.

Further down is Gladstone's Land, an early seventeenth-century building, showing how ground floors facing the street were frequently workshops and luckenbooths; above them the mid-storey apartments were for richer, and often noble, occupants, while the poorest lived at the top. Opposite Gladstone's Land is Riddles Court, where Bailie McMorran lived. The rooms he loaned to King James VI for hosting a banquet in 1598 were specially decorated with painted beams, recently revealed. The rooms are now a one-bedroom apartment available to rent at a reasonable price from the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust.

Behind St Giles Cathedral is a lead statue of Charles II, towering, perhaps a little ironically, above a slab in the car park indicating where John Knox was buried. Back on the High Street is the Mercat Cross, where royal proclamations are still made, three days after they are announced in London, signifying the time it took to ride north with 'news'.

At intervals, partially blocking the pavement, are the wellheads from which citizens collected their water. The rich employed cadies to carry it to their apartments, the poor had to carry their buckets to the top floors themselves. Continuing down the hill, above the entrance to Paisley Close, is a carved head and the words 'Heave awa' chaps, ah'm no deid yet', commemorating the rescue from rubble of 12-year-old Joseph McIver, after a neighbouring tenement collapsed in 1861. In Tweeddale Close is an unimpressive structure that is probably the only Grade II listed wheelie bin store in the world – it used to house sedan chairs. Dunbar's Close Garden, laid out in seventeenth-century style, provides an opportunity to re-energise and reflect. At the foot of the mile, the buildings on Abbey Strand gave sanctuary to debtors, a nod to Holyrood's religious origins.

And there's so much more to see on another day ...

There are many guided tours of the Royal Mile at a range of prices, including ghost and literary tours. Free during August and very reasonable at other times. See: www.edinburghfestivalguides.org/

If you would like to tell us about your history place in a future edition of *The Historian*, in about 700 words, please email: alf.wilkinson@history.org.uk

HA branches in ten tweets

The HA has over 50 branches across the UK, therefore, in this edition the ten tweets are historical clues for you to guess ten of the locations. Good luck



Answers:
Hull, Tunton, Lichfield, Ealing, Bath, Glasgow, Durham, Nottingham, Swansea, Norfolk and Norwich.



Home to one of the UK's most famous librarians who was a poet laureate. This city also beat London 4 to 0 according to some musical birds.



Where the Duke of Monmouth crowned himself king of England in 1685 during the Monmouth Rebellion.



Once the focal point for Christianity in Mercia, it is also the site of the last public burning at the stake in 1612.



The film studios here produced some of the most famous films of the early 20th century helping to present a country and its culture.



Everyone from the Romans to the Austens were drawn here for the waters. Its Regency streets are still popular with visitors today.



Home to an artist and designer who represented a movement, his influence can still be seen in buildings, textiles and jewellery today.



The man credited as the greatest European scholar of the 7th century is buried in the cathedral here close to a second saint.



Its most famous associate and his followers kept the local law enforcers on their toes while winning the hearts and minds of the locals.



Norman, Marcher, artisan town to industrial heartland. At one point a quarter of the world's coal was exported from here.



This city has close ties to the Low Countries. Before the railway it was quicker to get from here to Amsterdam by boat than to London.

Summarising an event or person using ten statements of only 140 characters (including spaces!). Yes we know that the character limit on tweets has gone up but we are a bit old school at the HA so we are sticking to the 140 limit. Compiled by Paula Kitching

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