

The Town Below the Ground

Edinburgh's Legendary Underground City

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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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Introduction

Some people believe there is a city under the pavements of Edinburgh; a dark, mysterious, forgotten place. They say it is a metropolis – that miles of streets and houses exist down there – banished forever from the light. Others claim there is no underground city – that the town below the ground isn't real. It is a fairy-tale, no more than a legend. The truth, in fact, is somewhere in-between.

There is an underground city; it is a near-mythical place, but it does exist. And you can find it – if you know where to look.



Edinburgh is an impressive city – the towering spires and ancient buildings of the Old Town are a constant feast for the eye. With so much beauty and history on display it does not occur to many visitors that there might be anything of great interest under their feet. The same is true of Edinburgh's own inhabitants – residents often have only a vague historical knowledge of the town where they live. Ask a cross-section of the local population about the underground city and you will get an astonishing array of answers. In Edinburgh's case, however, the citizens have good reason for their lack of information as throughout its history the city has been plagued by pillaging invaders and devastating fires and this has destroyed many records and archives.

There is no doubt that the legend of an underground city has been part of Edinburgh lore as long as anyone can

remember. I first heard of it as a student at Edinburgh University but, like so many living in the city, I had no idea what it was or even if it really existed. The same was true of everyone I asked. I talked to retired citizens who had spent their entire lives in Edinburgh. Many had been told stories of a city below the streets when they were children, but they were still unsure where or in what form that city actually was. The intrigue surrounding this mythical place had far greater scope than I imagined. When I first met my wife, I was astonished to find that she too had heard of an underground city in Edinburgh – even though she was born and brought up in Texas. Her father had told her about the legend. He, in turn, had heard of the existence of a town below the ground on a visit to Edinburgh in the 1950s.

This book is the first to explore the idea that there was a city under the streets of Scotland's capital. It explores what the underground city actually was, how it came about and where it can still be found. It also relates the stories that have made this strange, hidden world a place of infamy. These tales stretch across the centuries – from the city's founding to the present day. They include fables, urban legends and some pretty astonishing facts. Where possible I have tried to separate truth from invention, but the truth, of course, has turned out to be far stranger.

PART ONE

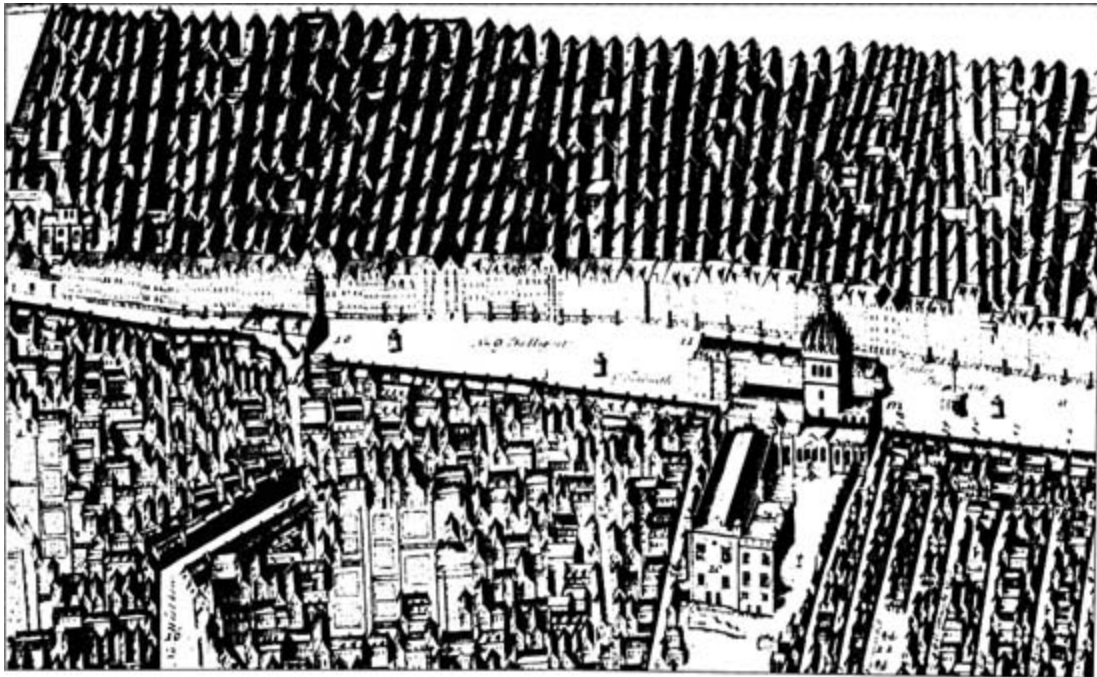
The History and the Location

Ancient History

There has been some sort of settlement on the site of Edinburgh since prehistoric times – and it is not hard to see why. Anyone who has witnessed the neck-straining splendour of Edinburgh Castle will testify that it is a superb defensive position.

Castle Rock was the focal point of Old Edinburgh and has been the site of some sort of fortress since Roman times. The first recorded settlers, around 2,000 years ago, were a tribe called the Vottadini (a Roman name – they were also called the Gododdin) who lived on the ridge running down from Castle Rock – the area now known as the Royal Mile or High Street. This ridge towered over the surrounding meadows and was easy to defend which made it an ideal spot for the settlement to grow.

The rock and ridge formation that provided a haven for the first settlers is a geological structure called a crag and tail. The crag is a volcanic branch, one of the outlet valves for the extinct volcano that formed Arthur's Seat. During the last Ice Age the basalt strata that formed Castle Rock was too hard to be eroded by advancing glaciers. A ridge of much softer sandstone (the 'tail') also survived as it was shielded from the ice by the basalt crag. Once a fort was established on the towering crag, houses could then be safely built on the tail as any attacker would have an uphill struggle to overrun the settlement. If any invaders had succeeded in taking the ridge then the defenders simply retreated to the fort and continued the fight.

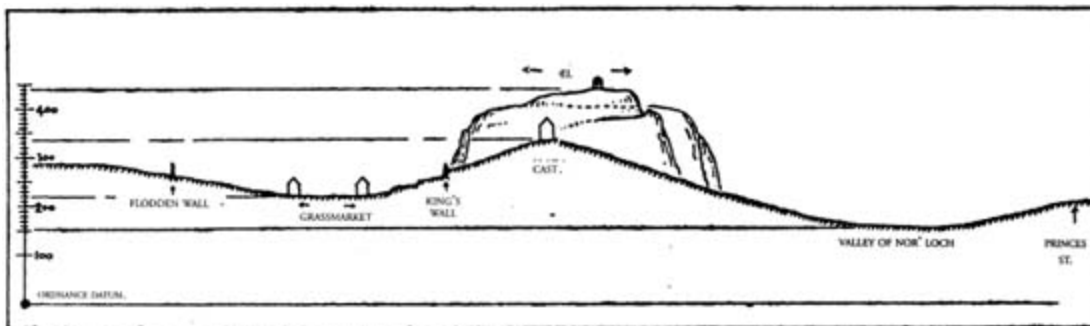


Detail of plan of Edinburgh by James Gordon of Rothiemay in 1647, showing the crowded nature of housing in the High Street (Edinburgh City Museums)

But this high ridge of soft sandstone also gave Edinburgh a unique quality that other cities simply did not have; one that was not considered by its citizens at first: you could dig into it and have an underground city.

The First Underground City – The Lands

In the early days of the city's evolution there was no need for anyone to live underground. A combination of natural hardship, English invasions and the occasional deadly pestilence kept the population to an acceptable level and there was plenty of room for everyone. Houses spread eastwards from the castle in two leisurely rows and, at the back of these dwellings, steep inclines plunged down to the pastures in the north and south. These slopes were divided into sections called 'tenements' or 'enclosures' – a word later shortened to 'close'. The enclosures were carefully tended and provided the settlement with land for growing crops and grass for common grazing. In later times, however, this pastoral idyll would completely disappear – and the term 'close' would take on a far more unpleasant connotation.



Cross-section through the Grassmarket and Castle Hill looking west, showing the King's Wall and Flodden Wall

At this stage, the High Street bore no resemblance to the monstrosity that it would become and, as yet, none of the thatched houses even reached twenty feet high. But years

passed and the town began to increase in size and importance. Early in the twelfth century the first signs that Edinburgh was a royal city are found and, despite the hardships of medieval times, the population continued to grow. It was still a pleasant place to live apparently and Froissart, visiting in 1384, called Edinburgh the 'Paris of Scotland'.

In 1450 the Scottish and English armies clashed at the Battle of Sark and, for a change, the Scots won.

In case this victory goaded the enemy into yet another invasion it was decided to build a defensive wall around the city as it was felt that Edinburgh was too close to the English border for comfort. James II of Scotland granted a petition to the city burghers to begin construction. By this charter they were free to:

fosse, bulwark, wall, tour, turate and otherwise strengthen the burgh, but only in what manner of wise or degre that beis maist spectefulle to the Provost of Edinburgh.

The city wall ran from the foot of Castle Rock, up the slope, and encompassed the upper part of the Royal Mile. As an extra defence the north pastures (which today form Princes Street Gardens) were flooded and became the North Loch.

The loch and wall may have made Edinburgh easier to defend, but it also limited the area into which a steadily rising population could expand and, suddenly, overcrowding became a problem. Protocol books, written by city notaries, show that building control in the old days was fairly non-existent. In 1500 Protocol books by John Fowler show the ground within the wall rapidly becoming covered by tall buildings. These buildings were known as 'lands' (now more commonly known as tenements) and grew to an average of ten or even eleven storeys. One block in Parliament Square reached the dizzy height of fourteen storeys.

Since space was at a premium, advantage was also taken of the soft sandstone. As the buildings of Old Edinburgh were erected higher and higher, the foundations became deeper and countless cellars were created. The steep slopes on either side of the High Street meant that these foundations and cellars didn't necessarily have to be excavated from above – builders could dig sideways into the ridge, allowing underground levels to be built at a depth that would not have been possible in any other location. This geographically defiant creation really was an unusual base on which to build a city. In many ways, the foundations of the tenements resembled a rabbit warren, and the cellars were more like caves slotted into the hillside. Though open at one end, the further into the hillside they went, the further under the main buildings they were. And, because of the steepness of the sides of the crag and tail, levels of cellars could be built, one above the other. But though these excavations were sideways rather than straight down, they were just as dark, wet and cold. This was the start of the underground city.



In 1513, James IV of the House of Stuart was on the throne, and was widely considered to be one of the greatest kings Scotland had ever had. He was charming and intelligent, and under his rule the country looked set to flourish at last – but, like so many of the Stuart kings, he threw it all away. To help the French in yet another cross-Channel war he invaded England, and the Scots and English armies met at Flodden. It was a pointless battle fought for an ungrateful ally and it became Scotland's greatest military disaster.

James had sent his best artillerymen to help France. The army marched south where it met the Duke of Surrey's second-string army. Though James had the better defensive position and larger cannon, Surrey had artillerymen who