

CHRISTOPHER DINGWALL

IN SEARCH OF FREE AIR AND AN AGREEABLE
PROSPECT: THE FLIGHT FROM EDINBURGH'S
OLD TOWN

We are inclined to think of the so-called New Town as the first suburban development in the history of Edinburgh. This paper presents evidence to show that the first such development occurred to the south of the Old Town, adjacent to The Meadows, before it was eclipsed by the New Town. It also seeks to highlight the pioneering role played in this development by Edinburgh builder and speculator James Brown.

In considering the establishment of Edinburgh's New Town on Bearford's Parks between the 1770s and 1820s, it is worth taking a step back to view this development in a wider geographical and social context. All early maps and views of Edinburgh give a clear impression of Edinburgh's Old Town, along with the neighbouring burgh of Canongate, crowded onto its hill, sandwiched as it was between the Nor' Loch and Bearford's Parks on one side and the ill-drained Boroughmuir on the other (Figure 1).¹ This is well seen, for example, on John Adair's manuscript map of Midlothian drawn c.1682 (Figure 2) and on William Roy's Military Survey of Scotland drawn up c.1750.²

That the city had reached something of a crisis by the mid-eighteenth century is made clear by the publication *Proposals for Carrying on Certain Public Works in the City of Edinburgh*, generally understood to have been drawn up by Sir Gilbert Elliot of Minto in the wake of the Convention of Royal Boroughs held in Edinburgh in July 1752. This document compared Edinburgh unfavourably with the city of London, with 'its healthful, unconfined situation upon a large plain [...] the neatness and accommodation of its private houses, the beauty and conveniency of its numerous streets and open squares, of its buildings and bridges, its large parks and extensive walks'.³ Edinburgh, by way of contrast, was:

placed upon the ridge of a hill, [and] 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 [...] hence necessarily follows a great want of free air, light and cleanliness, and every other comfortable accommodation.

These inconveniences Elliot gave as being among the reasons why so few people of rank chose to reside in the city. Most of those who had the means to do so, and who had not moved south following the Act of Union in 1707, chose to live outside the city walls in their comfortable country villas, coming into town only as business required.

*Washington House, Main Street, Ardler, Blairgowrie, Perthshire PH12 8SR, UK
Email: dingwall@guidelines.demon.co.uk*



Figure 1. Edinburgh's Old Town viewed from Salisbury Crags; from Robert Louis Stevenson, *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes*, 4th edn (London: Seeley & Co., 1895), p. 3



Figure 2. Edinburgh and environs as depicted by John Adair in 1682. Courtesy: By permission of the National Library of Scotland, Adv. MS.70.2.11 (Adair 9)

To address these shortcomings, the convention proposed:

to obtain an act of Parliament for extending the royalty, to enlarge and beautify the town by opening new streets to the north and south, removing the markets and shambles, and turning the North-loch into a canal, with walks and terraces on each side.

Elliot foresaw a day when 'people of fortune, and of a certain rank, will probably choose to build upon the fine fields that lie to the north and south of the town'. Among the proposals was that of acquiring 'so much land as shall be thought proper on the north side of the North-loch, on which streets are to be laid out, and houses to be built'.

Not that the idea of urban expansion was anything new, for, as we can see on both Adair's map and Roy's Military Survey, significant development had already begun to the south of the city, with the draining of the former Boroughloch and its transformation into the public open space now known as The Meadows, first at the hand of Burgess John Straiton in the 1650s and later by Sir Thomas Hope of Rankeilour in the 1720s – a

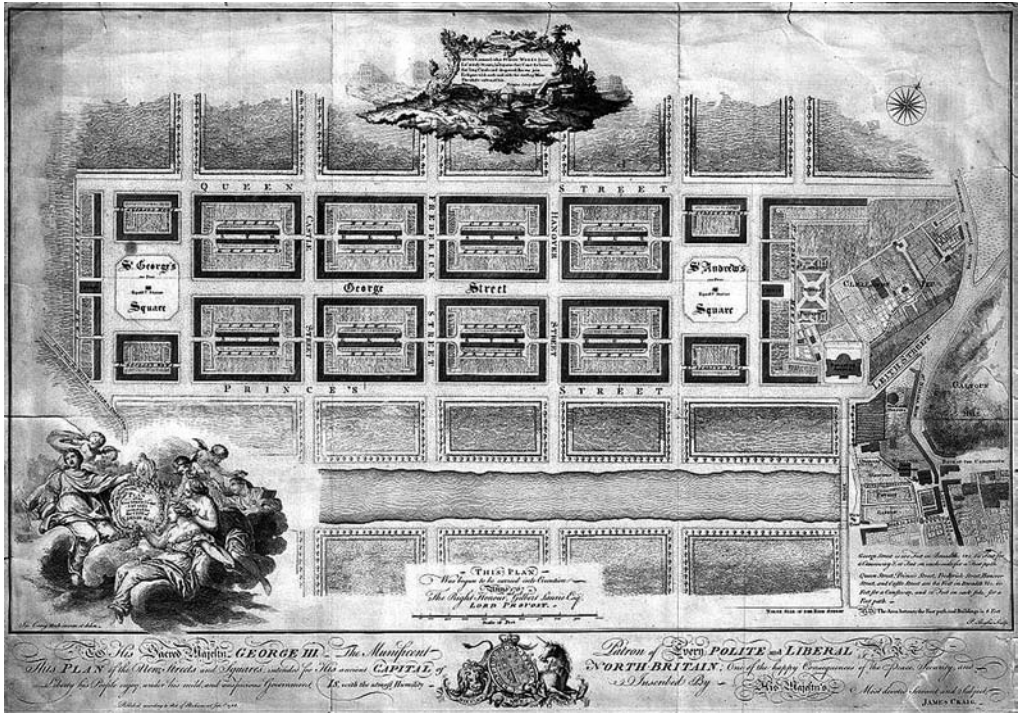


Figure 3. James Craig's plan of the New Town of Edinburgh 1768. Courtesy: By permission of the National Library of Scotland, EMS.s.647

project extolled in verse in 1751 by the Scots poet Allan Ramsay in his 'Address to the Rt. Hon. George Drummond', then Lord Provost of Edinburgh:

Most wisely did our city move
 When Hope, who judges well and nice,
 Was chosen fittest to improve
 From rushy tufts the pleasing grove,
 From bogs a rising paradise.
 Since Earth's foundations, to our present day
 The beautiful plain in mud neglected lay.
 Now evenly planted, hedg'd and drain'd
 Its verdures please the scent and sight.
 And here the fair may walk unpain'd,
 Her flowing silks and shoes unstain'd
 Round the green circus of delight:
 Which shall by ripening time still sweeter grow,
 And hope be fam'd while Scotsmen draw the bow.⁴

With such attractions close at hand, compared with the bleak emptiness of Bearford's Parks, it was not surprising that the first modern suburban development in Edinburgh's history occurred next to The Meadows with the formation of George's Square and Buccleuch Place. This speculative development was begun by the Edinburgh builder James Brown in 1766, a year or so before the first publication and subsequent implementation of James Craig's celebrated plan of the New Town (Figure 3). Indeed, Brown Square, near Bristo Port, had been built by Brown in the early 1760s, though on such a small scale, and so close to the Old Town, that it could hardly be described as suburban development. As Alexander Youngson observed in *The Making of Classical Edinburgh* (1966):

George Square, formed on a plan more than six times as spacious as Brown Square, and in a superior style, both as to size and accommodation, was [...] the first truly modern house-building project in Edinburgh, and the first true square.⁵

Robert Chambers, in *Traditions of Edinburgh* (1825), observed that the development of Edinburgh's New Town might well have taken place to the south, rather than to the north of the city, had the magistrates been more astute when offered a piece of ground to the south of the city for twelve hundred pounds. Instead, he noted:

It was purchased by a builder, named James Brown, a most enterprising individual, who immediately prepared to erect houses upon it, of suitable elegance to meet the rising taste for fine mansions. [...] The magistrates soon repented of their neglect, and offered Mr. Brown £2,000 for the ground; but he, being now well aware of the goodness of his bargain, demanded £20,000.⁶

– a price which they were unwilling to pay.

The subsequent laying out of George's Square (or George Square, as it soon came to be known) as a pleasure ground is attributed to the garden designer and seedsman John Hay, better known for his designs for flower and kitchen gardens at places such as Archerfield by Dirleton in East Lothian, at Dalmeny by South Queensferry, and at Lundie (later renamed Camperdown) House near Dundee (Figure 4).⁷ Hay was a close friend of the horticulturist Patrick Neill, who was founding secretary of the Caledonian Horticultural Society, and who went on to influence the development of the Princes Street and Queen Street Gardens. As Chambers observed, Brown's scheme soon succeeded in attracting a number of prominent aristocratic residents such as the Duchess of Gordon, the Countess of Sutherland, the Lords Melville and Braxfield, and Viscount Duncan, to name but a few. In Chambers' words:

It was formerly considered a great affair to go out to George's Square to dinner; and on such an occasion a gentleman would stand for half an hour at the Cross, in his full dress, with powdered and bagged hair, sword and cane, in order to tell his friends with whom and where he was going to dine.⁸

Also among the residents of George Square was the young Walter Scott, who lived there with his parents from the age of eight until his marriage in 1797 at the age of twenty-



Figure 4. George Square garden as laid out by John Hay; from James Kirkwood's *Plan of the City of Edinburgh* 1821. Courtesy: By permission of the National Library of Scotland, EMS.s.668

six. Plagued with ill-health through much of his early life, Scott recalled a childhood spell when he was confined to his bed for a time, playing mock-battles with shells, seeds and pebbles. As Scott himself recalled later in life:

other moments of these weary weeks were spent in looking at the Meadow Walks, by the assistance of a combination of mirrors, so arranged that, while lying in bed, I could see the troops march out to exercise, or any other incident which occurred on that promenade.⁹

Developed in stages over thirteen years, George Square lacked the architectural unity and sophistication that was to characterize the later New Town developments, as can be seen from contemporary pictures and from the few original buildings that still survive on the eastern and western sides of the square (Figure 5). Though still hosting a number of aristocratic residents at the end of the eighteenth century and in the early part of the nineteenth century, George Square began to lose out to the superior charms of Charlotte Square and Moray Place as the nobility and gentry moved further north, and as upwardly mobile merchants, tradesmen and manufacturers began to move in. In spite of this, Henry Lord Cockburn was able to observe in *Memorials of His Time* (1856) that ‘the old square, with its pleasant trim-kept gardens, has still an air of antiquated grandeur about it, and retains not a few traces of its former dignity and seclusion’.¹⁰

Although Bearford’s Parks, depicted in views by artists such as John Slezer and Paul Sandby,¹¹ had been acquired by the City Council as early as 1717, it was to be more than half a century before what we now think of as Edinburgh’s New Town became a reality. Nonetheless, by the end of the eighteenth century, the initial southward expansion of the city towards George Square and The Meadows had been superseded by a northward expansion, first across the Nor’ Loch onto Bearford’s Parks and later across the Moray Feus towards the Dean.

While we are inclined to think and speak about the development of the New Town as a single event in the history of the city, we should remember that it was both long in its gestation and even longer in its execution, spanning nearly fifty years from the initial formation of St Andrew Square in 1772 to the final completion of Charlotte Square in 1820. Indeed, it was to be another fifteen years before the development of the neighbouring Moray Estate was completed under the supervision of James Gillespie Graham c.1836. This westward expansion of the city was encouraged by the building of

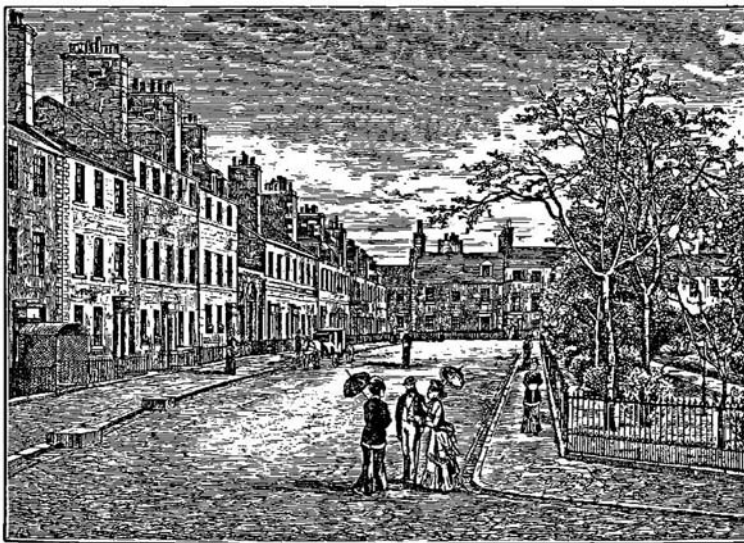


Figure 5. View of George Square; from Cassell’s *Old and New Edinburgh*, ed. James Grant (London: Cassell & Co., c.1880), IV, ch. 40, p. 341

Thomas Telford's Dean Bridge in 1833, and the subsequent expansion of the Queensferry Road, flanked by Clarendon Crescent and Buckingham Terrace, as a grand tree-lined approach to the city – a development comparable with Glasgow's Great Western Road, also conceived in the 1830s.

In celebrating the remarkable architectural and social achievement, recognized in today's status of Edinburgh's New Town as a World Heritage Site, we should not forget the wider historical context in which it was created, or the pioneering work of Brown in breaking away from the Old Town to create George Square and Buccleuch Place in the 1760s. His was the first move in the flight from the Old Town 'in search of free air and an agreeable prospect'. Sad to say, while the garden ground in George Square still survives much as first laid out by Hay, the surrounding buildings have fared less well against the tide of redevelopment unleashed by the University of Edinburgh in the 1950s and 1960s, in spite of the strenuous efforts of Edinburgh's Cockburn Society. Thus it is that, while Craig is rightly celebrated for his contribution to Edinburgh's extraordinary urban landscape, Brown's name has been allowed to fade from memory.

REFERENCES

¹ See, for example, the drawing *The Old City from Salisbury Crags* in Robert Louis Stevenson, *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes*, 4th edn (London: Seeley & Co., 1895), p. 3.

² John Adair, *Map of Midlothian*, National Library of Scotland, Adv.MS.70.2.11 (Adair 9) c.1682; and William Roy, *The Military Survey of Scotland (1747–55)*, original map now in the collections at the British Library, London.

³ Sir Gilbert Elliot, *Proposals for Carrying on Certain Public Works in the City of Edinburgh* (probably c.1752).

⁴ Allan Ramsay, 'The Address of the Muse to the Right Hon. George Drummond Esq. Lord Provost, and Council of Edinburgh', in *Poems by Allan Ramsay* (London: A. Millar *et al.*, 1761), II, pp. 160–5.

⁵ Alexander J. Youngson, *The Making of Classical Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), p. 68. Incidentally, it is amusing to reflect on the fact that, unlike Craig's overt tribute to the monarchy and the Union, Brown's square was named after James's brother, George.

⁶ Robert Chambers, *Tradition of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: W. & C. Tait, 1825), II, p. 38.

⁷ For information on other gardens designed by Hay, see Alan A. Tait, *The Landscape Garden in Scotland 1735–1835* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1980), p. 255.

⁸ Chambers, *Tradition of Edinburgh*, p. 38, n.

⁹ Sir Walter Scott, 'Memoir of the early life of Sir Walter Scott, written by himself', in J. G. Lockhart, *Life of Sir Walter Scott* (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell, 1848), I, p. 67.

¹⁰ Cassell's *Old and New Edinburgh*, ed. James Grant (London: Cassell & Co., c.1880), IV, ch. 40, p. 339, also includes a picture of George Square on p. 341 (see Figure 5).

¹¹ See especially 'The Prospect of Edinburgh from ye north', an engraving from John Slezer, *Theatrum Scotiae* (1718); and Paul Sandby, 'Edinburgh panorama looking out to the Firth of Forth from Castle Bank, with Allan Ramsay's House c.1750', an original watercolour in the British Library, K.Top.50.96.b.