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AFTERLIFE IN THE NEW TOWN: EDINBURGH WESTERN
CEMETERY, A PICTURESQUE PLACE OF REST IN THE
VALLEY OF THE WATER OF LEITH

Edinburgh Western Cemetery 'a steep wooded bank now crowned by the serried monuments and mausoleums of the Dean Cemetery – The New Town's Père Lachaise. A place of pilgrimage for such as remember and honour what has been the brightest and best in the last half century of the life and society of the New Town'. Thus wrote John Geddie in The Water of Leith from Source to Sea (1896). The cemetery, which became known as Dean Cemetery because of its location across the foundations and gardens of Dean House, lies beside the Water of Leith on the west side of Edinburgh. It was developed across two sites between 1845 and 1910: the nineteenth-century cemetery of 1845–46 and its extension of 1871–77 lie between the Water of Leith and Ravelston Terrace (Back Dean). The twentieth-century cemetery between Ravelston Terrace and Queensferry Road occupies the site of the former Edgehill Nursery. This paper concerns itself with the origins and development of the first Dean Cemetery, 1845–47.

The burial of the dead in a special place is an ancient practice, but when James Craig submitted his plans for the New Town in Edinburgh in 1768 he provided for places of worship at either end of George Street, but no place for the interment of the dead.¹ In itself this was not remarkable. Notable architects and thinkers, such as Sir John Vanbrugh, Sir Christopher Wren and John Evelyn, prompted by the destruction wrought by the Great Fire of London a century earlier, had campaigned for new cemeteries to be located on the edge of the city. Harking back to the burial practices of ancient Rome, Wren wrote in 1711:

It will be enquired, where then shall be the Burials? I answer, in Cemeteries seated in the Out-skirts of the Town. [...] This being inclosed with a strong Brick Wall, and having a Walk round, and two cross Walks, decently planted with Yew-trees, the four Quarters may serve four Parishes, where the Dead need not be disturbed at the Pleasure of the Sexton, or piled four or five upon one another, or Bones thrown out to gain Room.²

The migration of the population from the countryside to the town during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to insanitary and dangerous living conditions that are well documented. Burial of the dead became a public health hazard with the stacking of coffins under inadequate soil cover and removal of corpses before they had fully decomposed becoming common practice. The traditional parish churchyard was simply not big enough to accommodate the burgeoning urban population and, as Wren alluded to in his letter of 1711, an alternative route to paradise was needed away from the overpopulated centres, where the dead could remain undisturbed and the health of the living protected.

During the early decades of the nineteenth century European cities, increasingly aware of the public health risks, created edge-of-town cemeteries, but it was far to the east in India that the first recognizable garden cemetery was opened in 1767 to relieve the pressure on the old burial ground in the heart of Calcutta.³ The South Park Street Cemetery might be described as an earthly paradise. Constructed on a marsh, the burials were necessarily above ground within raised tombs situated on lawns or imposing stone mausoleums set beside tree-lined routes to provide shaded walks for the living. The similarity to Père Lachaise, the Parisian cemetery, opened in 1804 is notable.

In 1831 the Massachusetts Horticultural Society purchased seventy-two acres of mature woodland situated in Watertown and Cambridge for the creation of a 'rural cemetery' and experimental garden based on the traditions of the 'English Picturesque Landscape'.⁴ In the same year John Strang, Chamberlain at the Merchants' House, Glasgow, wrote:

The Fir Park appears admirably adapted for a Père Lachaise, which would harmonise beautifully with the adjacent scenery, and [...] would at the same time convert an unproductive property into a general and lucrative source of profit, to a charitable institution. It was to be 'respectful to the dead, safe and sanitary to the living, dedicated to the Genius of Memory and to extend religious and moral feeling'.⁵

Thus, the rocky undevelopable portion of the Wester Craigs estate was converted into the Glasgow Necropolis with the first burial in 1832. In London, cemeteries on the edge of the city were opened at Kensal Green (1832), West Norwood (1837), Highgate (1839) and Abney Park (1840).

In Edinburgh, despite the Cemeteries Act of 1832 that allowed burial for profit and an expanding population, the practice of stacking coffins and disinterring the remains too quickly continued; impervious to what was happening as far away as Calcutta and just down the road in Glasgow. A simple explanation for Edinburgh persisting with the old ways was that much of the New Town population had simply moved across the city and had family vaults in the graveyards of the Old Town or on their country estates. Another factor was that improvements to the Leith docks brought Edinburgh to the verge of bankruptcy in 1833 and for around a decade there was 'little question of civic developments'.⁶ However, after ten years in the doldrums the Edinburgh economy began to recover and amid the worsening living conditions for the majority of the population the town council began the process of approving sites for new cemeteries.

The first, a field at Warriston, was laid out in 1842–43 for the Edinburgh Cemetery Company by David Cousin, Edinburgh Superintendent of Work. An address by the directors of the Edinburgh Cemetery Company to the 'Inhabitants of Edinburgh, Leith and the Vicinity' provides an insight into the cultural changes that were taking place in respect of the dignified burial of the dead and the health of the living in Scotland's capital in the middle years of the nineteenth century:

Public attention has been of late years forcibly directed to the evils and inconveniences attending the practice of burying the dead within the populous precincts of large towns; and whether regarded in point of taste and feeling, or of safety to health of the inhabitants it is now generally admitted that the custom should be discontinued whenever practicable.

The spread of education, and the dissemination of works of art and science have engendered in the public mind a quicker perception and higher appreciation of what is beautiful and appropriate and have led all classes to desire that the style, the situation and the whole arrangements of public burial grounds should be greatly improved.⁷

THE OLD DEAN

In 1844 the Edinburgh Western Cemetery Company was incorporated and the directors identified the picturesque gardens surrounding Dean House as the preferred site for their proposed cemetery. Dean House belonged to John Learmonth Esq. who had acquired the titles to the Dean Estate from the builder John Paton, who had bought them from John Nisbet of Dean in 1825.⁸

The Nisbets, a wealthy merchant family, had risen to prominence in the early seventeenth century. In 1609 William Nisbet purchased the Barony of Dean and a year later he purchased the Poultry Lands of Dean, which included a stretch of the west bank of the Water of Leith and the title Poulterer to the King. An existing dwelling on a terrace above the Water of Leith was refashioned into a large Scottish castellated manor house with its principal access from Dean Path, then the main route out of Edinburgh to the Queensferry. Dean Village, no longer extant, stood opposite the main gate and the grain milling and brewing Village of Water of Leith lay down in the valley.⁹ A gateway onto Ravelston Terrace acted as a service entrance and there was a third point of access from Bell's Ford, the predecessor of the modern day Belford Bridge (Figure 1).

Dean House was notable for its sculptured stones, which were added to over the generations in celebration of the Nisbet family's successful alliances through marriage (Figure 2).¹⁰ It was later one of several dwellings on the outskirts of Edinburgh that influenced Sir Walter Scott in his creation of Tully-veolan in the novel *Waverley* (1814). The earliest surviving image of Dean House is a sketch by Paul Sandby, undated but no later than 1752, showing the north elevation from Ravelston Terrace set within its walled enclosures. With the Drumsheugh Estate undeveloped, Dean House commanded a magnificent and unobstructed view of Edinburgh Castle and the Old Town (Figure 3).

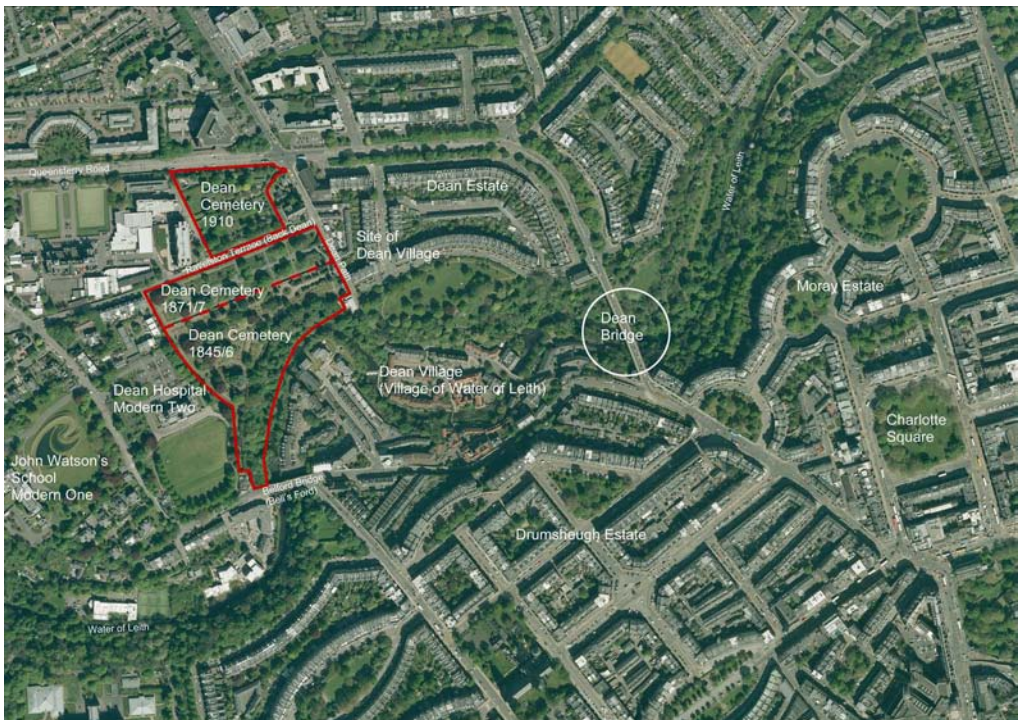


Figure 1. Plan showing the location of the cemetery and surrounding area.
Courtesy: © Getmapping (2009)



Figure 2. Sculptured stones set into the great retaining wall of Dean Cemetery, 1845–46. Photo: Nick Haynes, 2014



Figure 3. Paul Sandby, *The Dean House, Edinburgh* (date unknown, but before 1752)

From the mid-eighteenth century the Nisbet family resided mostly in America and Dean House was let to notable Edinburgh families. Lord Swinton was a tenant until his death in 1799, and through his family and legal connections with the Swintons, Henry Lord Cockburn was a frequent visitor there. Cockburn's journal entries provide descriptions of Dean House and gardens at the end of the eighteenth century:

The place was so heavy with wood that it was all that winter could do to make the house visible. There was an old garden and a good deal of shrubbery, chiefly evergreens [...]

In the days when what is now the New Town was all open fields, and there was nothing but rusticity between the mansion and the Castle, the House of Dean must have been one of the best gentleman's residences in the immediate neighbourhood of Edinburgh [...]

A high position, well sheltered, the Water of Leith, then pure, foliaged banks, and magnificent views – what else could be required?¹¹

Kirkwood and Son's 'This plan of the City of Edinburgh and its environs' (dated 1817)¹² depicts Dean House lying off Dean Path at the end of a short drive, lined with trees that terminate in a carriage turning circle at the principal entrance. The second entrance, off Ravelston Terrace, passes between walled gardens and orchards, while a third entrance leads up from Belford Bridge through open parkland.

In May 1826 John Learmonth (*c.*1789–1858), a successful Edinburgh coach-maker, acquired Dean Estate with the object of extending residential development westwards from the New Town. His immediate problem was to connect his proposed high-value residences to Princes Street and the New Town, avoiding the industrial Water of Leith Village and circuitous detours round Stockbridge and Belford Bridge. Learmonth proposed a new bridge across the Water of Leith and to pay for it from his own pocket. The Cramond Road trustees agreed to part-fund the work on the understanding that there would be no toll and that it would be designed and the build overseen by Thomas Telford; Dean Bridge was completed in 1831. However, in 1833, amid four hundred thousand pounds of debt and alleged 'goings on' in the town council, Edinburgh faced bankruptcy and Learmonth's westward expansion of the New Town was put on hold.¹³

THE EDINBURGH WESTERN CEMETERY

In 1841 Learmonth's tenant, James Forbes, left Dean House and thereafter the building stood empty.¹⁴ It is not difficult to imagine having bought the Dean Estate in 1826 and funded most of the Dean Bridge in 1831 that, with no return on his investments, Learmonth was quite happy to sell Dean House to the directors of the Western Cemetery Company when they came calling in 1844.¹⁵ For the directors, the site had everything they needed: historical importance, romantic associations with Scott, connections with Edinburgh's great and good, a mature leafy setting, excellent access to the New Town across Dean Bridge, and a huge pile of stone salvage in the form of Dean House.

Once Dean House and gardens had been secured, the directors turned to the man with established credentials for laying out cemeteries, the Edinburgh Superintendent of Work, David Cousin. Unlike at Warriston, which had been an open field, Cousin's task at Dean was to lay out a new cemetery in an established, heavily wooded garden with an irregular shape. Cousin's great skill, as depicted on a plan of the first cemetery (Figure 4), was:

- To retain those elements of the gardens that could be retained, the semicircular entrance, the short carriage drive, avenue and turning circle.
- To build upon the existing elements that could be enhanced for the good of the cemetery: using dressed stone salvaged from Dean House to extend and increase the height of an existing retaining wall, thereby building up the ground to the north to create an extensive level burial area, and to provide a strip for those all too valuable lairs (a Scots' term for burial plots/graves) against the south-facing wall.
- To set out the cemetery in a way that maximized the number of lairs, in what was an awkward shaped site, with a great circuit walk around the walls and a series of interconnected paths that formed elegant curves amidst the lairs.
- The imaginative use of the carved stones that had adorned Dean House, building them and the history of the site with all its romantic associations into the Great Retaining Wall (Figure 2).
- To use the aged salvaged stone to form the north and west boundary walls to give the cemetery a sense of antiquity.

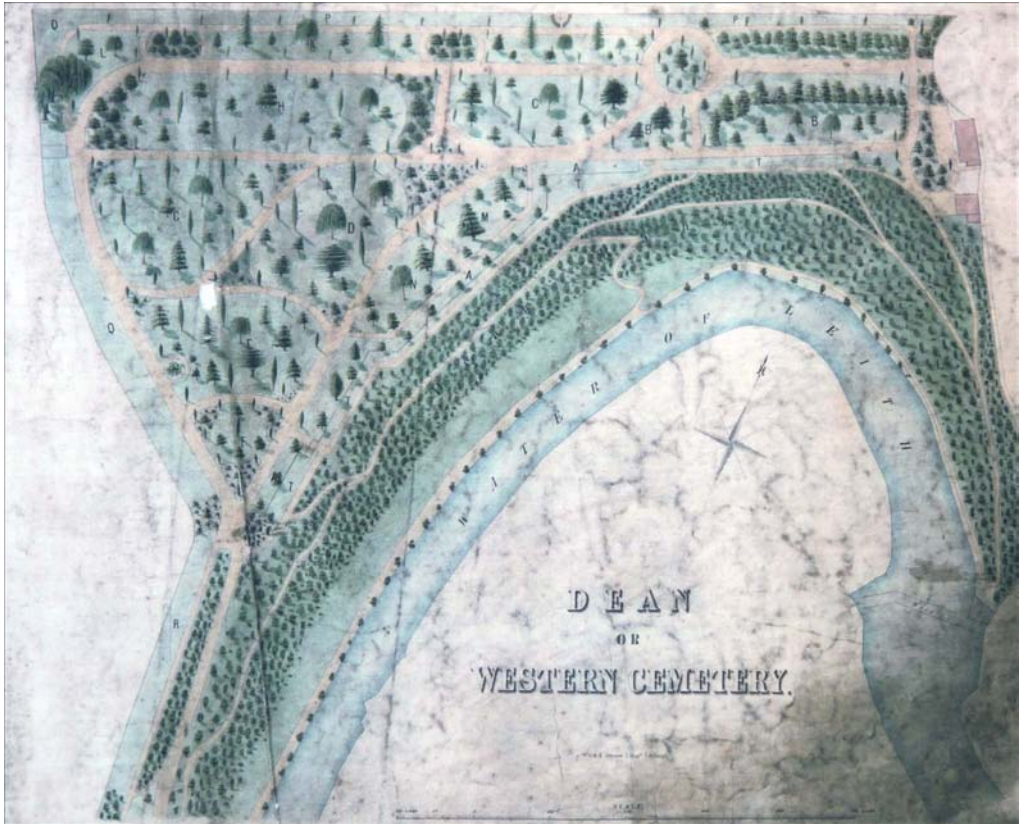


Figure 4. Plan of 'Dean or Western Cemetery.' (c.1846) by an unknown author

- To retain connections with the city through the retention of views from above the retaining wall to the Old Town and Edinburgh Castle.
- The creation, at great expense to the shareholders, of winding walks down through the wooded valley to the Water of Leith that drew on ideas of classical mythology, Hades and the River Styx, the journey of life, and, at its simplest, a leisurely walk for private reflection having paid respects to one's relatives and ancestors.

In June 1846 works to the upper ground were complete and the cemetery was advertised as being open for business.

The *Prospectus for the Edinburgh Western Cemetery* (1846) stressed that in the preparation of the grounds for sepulchres the directors had been 'most studious to preserve all the natural beauties and attractions of the grounds, notwithstanding the extent of the operations; the cemetery still continues to have all the appearance of venerable antiquity'.¹⁶ The Directors' Minutes of 1846 encouraged their shareholders to visit the cemetery and noted that 'the foliage of stately trees are not to be discovered elsewhere in the neighbourhood'.¹⁷

PLANTS WITHIN THE CEMETERY

Notwithstanding the claims of the directors, a question that has been raised on occasion has been 'what became of the heavily wooded gardens described by Cockburn and the trees which were part of the attraction of the site to the directors in the first place?'. In other words, what was the character of Dean Cemetery when it opened in 1847? In his last visit to Dean in December 1846, Forbes noted:



Figure 5. Plate from the Edinburgh Western Cemetery Company 1846 prospectus; Edinburgh Scottish Collection, City Library

the Old Dean is now a grass plot. I looked in the other day – the gateway, bell and all as it was. The beech avenue and holly hedges are there; but instead of terminating in the tall pile of masonry it opens in a flat turf, soon to be full of graves.¹⁸

The 1846 prospectus included descriptions and images of graves within a wooded setting (Figure 5) so from Forbes's account and the prospectus images one can conclude that at least some of the original trees and shrubs survived the cemetery works. However, reading between the lines of the directors' notes, there is a suggestion that in demolishing Dean House, sorting and storing the stone, setting out the north and west boundary walls, and building up the ground behind the new retaining wall, most of the mature trees were removed. It is also likely that the reference to foliage and stately trees was to vegetation borrowed from the wooded river bank to the south and the ancient Scotch planes within the grounds of Dean Hospital (Dean Gallery/Modern Two) to the west.

Minutes from the directors' board meetings refer to the cemetery being embellished with lime, thorn and crab apple; to trees and shrubs 'carefully arranged and planted by a gardener of great experience'; and also to rare herbaceous species and annual bedding plants.¹⁹ Research by Pat Dennison has revealed that the 'roses surpassed any in the kingdom, treble hollyhocks were decided in colour, rhododendrons, verbinas and geraniums were purchased'.²⁰ As every good gardener knows, these plants need light and would not thrive in a heavily wooded site. Furthermore; the influence of John Claudius Loudon on cemetery design in the mid-1840s is an important factor when considering the fate of the heavily wooded gardens. Loudon's treatise *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries* was published in 1843. A practical guide in every sense, Loudon established a series of templates for creating a place of solemnity and peace for the interment of the dead that was neither too cheerful, nor too cheerless, for the living. His advice on vegetation could not be clearer: 'trees and shrubs are not an effective use of

space'.²¹ David Cousin had become acquainted with Loudon in 1831 and would almost certainly have been aware of his advice on the design of cemeteries.

Taking account of the practicalities of forming the great retaining wall and upper terrace, the utilization of light-loving herbaceous plants and the need for the efficient use of space, the likelihood is that with the exception of the beech avenue that created a mature and magnificent approach, the grounds were cleared of trees so that the organization of the lairs and paths could take place without having to negotiate mature trees. Cockburn's journal entry, written in horror at the savagery of the construction gangs, adds weight to the conclusion that the gardens were largely clear felled:

I thought that venerable trees and undying evergreens were exactly what a burial ground would long for. Here they are in perfection – plenty hollies and yews apparently a century old and how did I see these treated? As a drove of hogs would treat a bed of hyacinths.²²

Finally, the arboriculturist Donald Rodger, an expert on veteran trees, was consulted for this paper to determine whether there were any trees surviving from the days of Dean House.²³ His considered view was that there is nothing that would date from before the 1840s and, more significantly, that the oldest specimens are in the region of one hundred and fifty to one hundred and sixty years, i.e. they were planted at around the time Dean Cemetery opened.

So, during the 1840s–60s, the character of Dean Cemetery was quite different to the one with which we have become familiar. There was a wooded setting borrowed from the valley of the Water of Leith and Dean Hospital and a stately beech avenue, but otherwise the relationship between the dead, their monuments, the sky and the heavens would have been much stronger and the planting would have been at a much lower level. Donald Rodger also noted that as recently as the 1970s the trees were pollarded to keep the crowns low and compact. Meantime, the needs of the living were catered for in the colourful plantings and picturesque walks down to the Water



Figure 6. Lachrymose trees envelope graves and monuments severing the relationship between the tombs and the dead and the heavens. Photo: author, 2014

of Leith. Little wonder that the directors advertised Dean as a ‘Cemetery unsurpassed by any in Scotland’.

The cemetery gardener, for all his experience, would appear to have been unfamiliar with the opinion of Loudon who advocated needled conifers for a cemetery and dark evergreens like yew that do not drop their leaves and make a mess that requires clearing



Figure 7. Dean Cemetery sculptured tomb.
Photo: Nick Haynes, 2014



Figure 8. The Celebrated West Wall with the tomb of Henry, Lord Cockburn.
Photo: Nick Haynes, 2014

up. On close inspection, Cousin's plan (Figure 4) suggests that columnar cypress and cedar should dominate the planting with only occasional broadleaves. Instead the gardener selected broad-headed, lachrymose species: beech, ash, lime and elm, of which Loudon would not have approved. Over time these trees have developed into splendid specimens but their roots have put many of the monuments at risk. Furthermore the pendulous branches now envelop the stones such that the relationship with the dead and the sky has been severed (Figure 6).

Dean Cemetery was and remains celebrated for its spectacular array of monuments (Figure 7), among which lie several of the protagonists of this story: Forbes, the last tenant of Dean House; Cousin; and beside the celebrated west wall amid his peers and beneath the heavy boughs of the Scotch plane that still reach across from the Dean Hospital is Henry, Lord Cockburn (Figure 8), at peace in Dean Cemetery, which is once again 'so heavily wooded that it is all that winter can do to make the monuments visible'.

REFERENCES

¹ Modern place names have been used throughout with historical names, where different, in the first instance in parentheses after.

² Christopher Wren, *Letter of advice to the Commissioners for Building fifty new City Churches in London* (1711).

³ Sarah Rutherford, *The Victorian Cemetery* (Oxford: Shire Library, 2008).

⁴ Blanche M. G. Linden, *Silent City on a Hill. Picturesque Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press Library, 2007).

⁵ *The Friends of Glasgow Necropolis* (available at: <http://www.glasgow-necropolis.org/history>) (accessed January 2015).

⁶ 'John Learmonth of Dean 1831-33', in Thomas B. Whitson, *Lord Provosts of Edinburgh 1296-1932* (Edinburgh: T. A. Constable, 1932).

⁷ *Edinburgh Cemetery Company Prospectus 1845*; National Library of Scotland (NLS), George IV Bridge Special Collections.

⁸ Richard Rodger, *The Transformation of Edinburgh: Land, Property and Trust in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Sir James Steel's Papers, Inventory of Writs and Title Deeds of the Lands and Barony of Dean (1850), lists the forty-two transactions detailing the transfer of titles from Sir John Nisbett (*sic*) to John Paton, builder (13 October 1825), and by Paton to John Learmonth (30 May 1826).

⁹ Renamed Dean Village; the precise date is not established for this paper but the map record suggests that between 1950 and 1960 the Village of the Water of Leith became known as Dean Village. The original Dean Village was squeezed out of existence by the development of Buckingham Terrace and Belgrave Place from 1865.

¹⁰ David MacGibbon and Thomas Ross, *Castellated and Domestic Architecture of Scotland* (Edinburgh: D. Douglas, 1887).

¹¹ *Journal of Henry Cockburn: Being a Continuation of the Memorials of His Time. 1831-1854*, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Edmonston & Douglas, 1874).

¹² NLS, Digital Resources: Map Images: Town Plans and Views 1580-1919 (available at: <http://www.nls.uk>).

¹³ The near bankruptcy of Edinburgh occurred on Learmonth's watch as Lord Provost of Edinburgh. A pamphlet held by the National Library of Scotland, ABS.10.203.01(108)), pours scorn on his fitness for public office after his performance in the town council and apparent opposition to the Reform Act of 1832. In his favour the city was to benefit from his actions twice over; in addition to funding most of the cost of the Dean Bridge, he purchased the Colzium & Harperrig Estate to secure the water supply for Edinburgh; he would later sell the estate to the city at cost.

¹⁴ James David Forbes, a Scottish physicist noted for his research on heat conduction and glaciers, resided at Dean House between 1835 and 1841.

¹⁵ In the first instance the Western Cemetery Company purchased Dean House and the gardens to the south down to the Water of Leith. The walled enclosures between Dean House and Ravelston Terrace were retained by Learmonth.

¹⁶ *Prospectus for the Edinburgh Western Cemetery* (1846); Edinburgh Scottish Collection, City Library.

¹⁷ Directors' Minutes (1846), cited in Turnbull Jeffrey Partnership, *Dean Cemetery Landscape Management Plan* (commissioned by the Dean Cemetery Trust Ltd, 1995).

¹⁸ Turnbull Jeffrey Partnership, 'Dean Cemetery Landscape Management Plan' (1995), an unpublished report commissioned by Dean Cemetery Trust Ltd.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ John Claudius Loudon, *On the Laying Out, Planting and Managing of Cemeteries*

(London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1843).

²² Michael R. B. Turnbull, *The Revised and Updated Edinburgh Graveyard Guide* (Dalkeith: Scottish Cultural Press, 2006).

²³ John Stokes with Donald Rodger, *Heritage*

Trees of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (London: Constable & Robinson, 2004); John Stokes, Donald Rodger and James Ogilvie, *Heritage Trees of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Forestry Commission for Scotland, 2006).