

## THE EDINBURGH SHOP

The earliest method that traders had of selling merchandise in Edinburgh was from roughly organised stalls in one of the market places of the medieval city.



Artisans and craftsmen soon started to require a more permanent base for their specialised workshops, and in 1440 a number of timber fronted two-storey buildings, called the 'buih-raw', were erected adjoining St Giles. The buih-raw incorporated an early form of unglazed shop which formed an integral part of the ground floor.

These were probably the first fixed shops in Scotland. It is about this time that the word 'shop' first appears in medieval documents, and the first use of the term 'shop-window' in the Oxford English Dictionary dates from 1447.



Part of the street facade of the 'buih-raw' would *have* consisted of *heavy* hinged boarding divided laterally across the centre so that the upper half could be raised during trading hours to form an overhang for the protection of stock, while the lower half was lowered to form a counter board and loaded with goods for sale. The 'clumsy' doors were also parted in the centre; the lower half was kept shut, and called the half match. A reconstruction of this form of shopfront can be seen at Gladstore's Land in the Lawnmarket.

Over the years the 'buih-raw' was extended and heightened until it consisted of *seven* tenement buildings of *varying* height, date and form, stretching the full length of St Giles. At some point the group of buildings was renamed the 'luckenbooths', derived from the fact that the building contained lockable booths. The 'luckenbooths' were the focus of trade, shopping and business for centuries in Edinburgh.



The ground floors of the 'luckenbooths' had a recognisable form of shopfront with enlarged windows, bottle glass taking the place of primitive boarding. The sashes were exceedingly thick, and the windows in small square panes. The arrival of glass allowed for display which was both permanent and protected.

The early stalls had no need for advertising, as stallkeepers would simply 'bark their wares'. From early times, however, publicans were compelled to display a bush or ale stake (a bunch of ivy hung on a pole). As few people could read, signs were generally a representation of goods sold or services



provided: the barber's red and white striped pole, the three balls of the pawnbroker, the chemist's mortar and pestle and the carved wooden fish of the fishmonger are all good examples of this kind of advertising. The 'luckenbooths' had painted signboards over the frontages and the names of proprietors appeared 'amidst a profusion of painted scroll work'.

"But first," quod he, "here at this ale-stake  
I wol both drinke, and eten of a cake.  
Chaucer

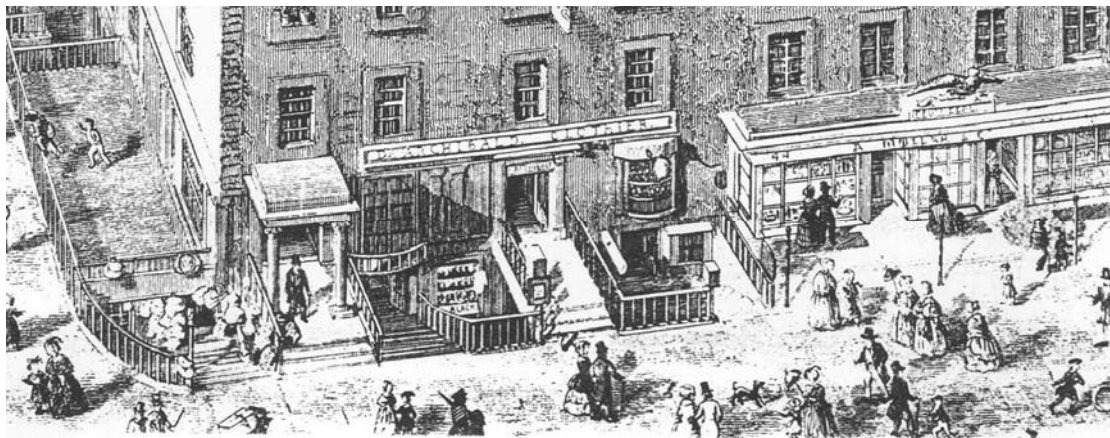


The basic elements of the shopfront consist of: an entrance door, a sign indicating the name and business of proprietor, and a glazed display area fronting on the street, which will entice potential customers into the premises. All of these features appear in the

'luckenbooths' and the basic shopfront form has persisted for centuries. Once established, the essential architectural elements were changed only in minor fashionable detail and the form of shopfront found in the 'luckenbooths' became common throughout the Old Town of Edinburgh.

At the beginning of the 19th century, shopping was still mainly done in the Old Town markets; the Georgian New Town had been developed primarily as a residential area according to James Craig's plan of 1767. The first shops in the New Town were established in the ground floor flats of tenements in Rose Street and Thistle Street. The normal way of doing this was by simply enlarging the window openings and perhaps adding a timber surround to the door to emphasise the entrance. By the 1830s the ground floors of the main residential streets in the New Town were being converted into shops. The New Town, with its grand streets and salubrious environment, fast became a fashionable shopping area to the detriment of shops in the Old Town, and the 'luckenbooths' were demolished in 1817.

The domestic buildings of the New Town were normally built with basement areas between the building and the street, with a stone entrance platt 'to bridge the gap and provide access to the building. The gap between the pavement and the frontage made window shopping difficult even when the windows were enlarged. This problem was at first solved by fitting iron balconies in front of the windows. The next stage involved the addition of a completely new shop front, standing only a little way forward of the original wall and paving over the basement area. Later in the 19th century shop fronts could be extended right out to the edge of the pavement, thus providing additional shopping space and more prominent display windows.



The shopfronts were normally constructed of wood and were attached to the building like a free standing book case. The robust joinery work of earlier years was greatly refined during this neo-classical period, to give a rich texture of finely detailed shop front elements. The different parts of the shop front were constructed on Classical design principles and were often painted to imitate marble or richly grained wood.

In the later New Town developments shopfronts were included as an integral and unified part of the original design for the complete building. Many of these were inspired by Renaissance architecture in Italy. This Classical concept incorporated the shop front in a dignified manner as a logical part of the overall elevation. A distinctive type of shop front also developed with large windows separated by stone pilasters forming a flat colonnade with an unbroken fascia and cornice above.

The regular intervals between the glazing bars of early 19 century shopfronts are a guide to the maximum size of glass available at the time of building, in the 1820s the average size of a pane of glass was less than four feet. The regular sizes of glass, in small squarish panes, gave the early 19th century shopfront its intimate fenestration pattern, and modest and elegant scale.

The introduction of plate glass was slow at first mainly due to cost, however, the repeal of excise duty on plate glass in 1845 removed serious constraints to its use and its popularity advanced rapidly. The introduction of plate glass did not result in a violent break with traditional shopfront design; but the fronts increased in height and the window panes in size.

The size of the standard pane of plate glass became the influential factor in shop front design. In 1852, the largest sheet obtainable was 14' x 8', and the usual size was a strip 8' to 7' by 4' to 3'. These strips with their heavy glazing bars of wood or metal gave a strong vertical emphasis to the shop front, in contrast to the crisscrossing of the glazing bars of the early 18th century shop fronts.

As the 19th century advanced, plate glass became cheaper and available in larger sheets. These very large sheets of glass resulted in 'an extravagance of commercial opulence' and the shopkeeper would 'count the inches of plate glass with as much eagerness as a farmer does his acres of land, and consider them productive in much the same manner'.

During the Victorian period shopfront additions to New Town buildings were projected out to the edge of the pavement. There was also a break with the classical tradition, although it was deeply ingrained and persisted until the orders degenerated into debased ornament.

The shop front elements were coarsened as the delicate designs of the early 19th century became heavier and more elaborate, with larger lettering, cornices and console brackets on fascias which assumed increased importance.

The First World War saw the breaking down of the traditional pattern of shop front design as new materials were introduced and the shop front was required to proclaim itself above the din and rush of modern traffic. The early shop fronts were charming and well mannered, and in view of their relative rarity they should be valued and retained.

Jack Gillon

*It is impossible to live opposite an ill-painted shop front without being morally the worst for it*

*(Chambers Edinburgh Journal Vol 16 p256 1852*

**HEART OF MIDLOTHIAN BY SIR WALTER SCOTT**  
**(Extract describing the Luckenbooths)**

He stood now before the Gothic entrance of the ancient prison, which, as is well known to all men, rears its ancient front in the very middle of the High Street, forming, as it were, the termination to a huge pile of buildings called the Luckenbooths, which, for some inconceivable reason, our ancestors had jammed into the midst of the principal street of the town, leaving for passage a narrow street on the north; and on the south, into which the prison opens, a narrow crooked lane, winding betwixt the high and sombre walls of the Tolbooth and the adjacent houses on the one side, and the buttresses and projections of the old Cathedral upon the other. To give some gaiety to this sombre passage (well known by the name of the Krames), a number of little booths, or shops, after the fashion of cobblers' stalls, are plastered, as it were, against the Gothic projections and abutments, so that it seemed as if the traders had occupied with nests, bearing the same proportion to the building, every buttress and coign of vantage, as the martlett did in Macbeth's Castle. Of later years these booths have degenerated into mere toy-shops, where the little loiterers chiefly interested in such wares are tempted to linger, enchanted by the rich display of hobby-horses, babies, and Dutch toys, arranged in artful and gay confusion; yet half-scared by the cross looks of the withered pantaloon, or spectacled old lady, by whom these tempting stores are watched and superintended. But, in the times we write of, the hosiers, the glovers, the hatters, the mercers, the milliners, and all who dealt in the miscellaneous wares now termed haberdasher's goods, were to be found in this narrow alley.