



Old Edinburgh History Detectives

Old Edinburgh in the time of Mary, Queen of Scots; a mile of murder, mobs, toilets and torture.

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WORLD
HERITAGE



Introduction

Mary, Queen of Scots, lived from 1542-1587 but she spent most of her life outside Scotland. However, much of the Edinburgh that she would have known is still there to be explored today – if you know where to look.

Edinburgh was often under threat of attack during this time. As a result it was defended on all four sides. The Nor' Loch ran along one side and city walls had been built to protect the rest of the town. Parts of the old city walls can still be seen today – see if you can find them if you are walking around the Old Town. As a result, most people in Edinburgh were crammed into a small area near the Castle, where it could feel safe.

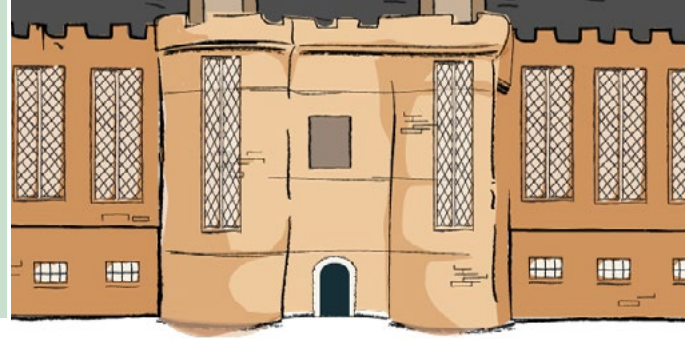
Mary's main home in Edinburgh would have been the Palace of Holyroodhouse – but that was outside the city walls. If she ever felt under threat and in danger (which was often!) the safety of the Castle would be her home.

In between these two royal homes runs what we now call the Royal Mile which is – you guessed it – pretty much a mile long (give or take a few royal paces). Leading off the Royal Mile, down the steep slopes on either side, ran numerous narrow streets – often called 'closes' or 'wynds'. All manner of life lived and worked in these cramped, overcrowded streets – from the very wealthy to the poorest of the poor. And they would have rubbed shoulders with each other – quite literally – as they went about their daily business.

Now, it's impossible to recreate what life would really have been like in the 1500s (unless you really want to eat sheep's head soup, have someone pour a bucket of toilet waste - or 'nastiness' - on your head then sleep in a flea-ridden bed with some rats). However, if you walk through the streets of the Old Town today and use your imagination just a little, you might still get an idea of what this old city would have looked like....

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Living in Old Edinburgh in the time of Mary, Queen of Scots.

If you had been a visitor to Edinburgh during the time of Mary, Queen of Scots, the sights, sounds and smells of the city might have been too much for you!

Here's how one Scottish poet at the time described his experience of Edinburgh:

*Your burgh is a nest of beggars,
Scroungers who never stop shouting;
They annoy all the honest folk,
With their crying and begging.
Nobody can get along the streets
For the cry of the crooked, blind and lame
For the stink of haddocks and skates,
For the cry of old women,
For the foul mouthed and abusive arguments.*

Okay – not a great poem, but you get the idea. If you were a visitor during this time, you can imagine it would be a pretty scary place to get lost in! And it would not have been easy to find your way around either, because the streets didn't even have names on them, making it very difficult to know where you were going.



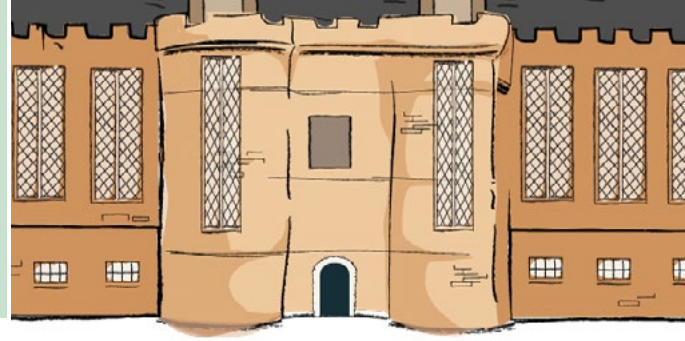
Bustling Businesses

During the day it was certainly a busy, noisy, smelly place, with humans and animals all mixing together in the streets. It would be alive with the sound of people talking and laughing, the cries of market stall holders, the pleading of beggars and the grunting, snuffling and braying of animals being brought to market.

Business of all sorts was carried out in the street, or in nearby coffee houses and pubs. The High Street and its closes were filled with market stalls and the workshops of various craftsmen - including butchers, fishmongers, tanners (leatherworkers) and candlemakers.

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Stinky Streets

As you can imagine, this would have led to a real mingling mixture of smells as many of these jobs were pretty stinky. For example;

- Tanners and dyers used urine to treat leather and dye cloth
- Candles were made from melted animal fat.
- Fishmongers would gut fish at their stalls
- Butchers (or 'fleshers' as they were known) would cut up animal flesh on their boards or hang their carcasses up to let the blood run onto the road

Add to that the manure from horses, cows, goats, pigs and sheep and you get a pretty pongy picture of life in Old Edinburgh!

And it wasn't just animal waste that would add to the smell... With no running water or flushing toilets, people simply emptied their 'nastiness' out into the street.

Scavengers (or 'scaffies') were employed by the council to clear up the mess and take it out of the city, but it very often ended up in the nearby Nor' Loch (now Princes Street Gardens – which might be why the flowers grow so well there...).

Dreadful Diseases

As a result the The Nor' Loch was a pretty horrible place, but it was also a water supply for many people. As you can imagine, Edinburgh wasn't the cleanest or safest place to live and all manner of diseases and illnesses were always a danger.

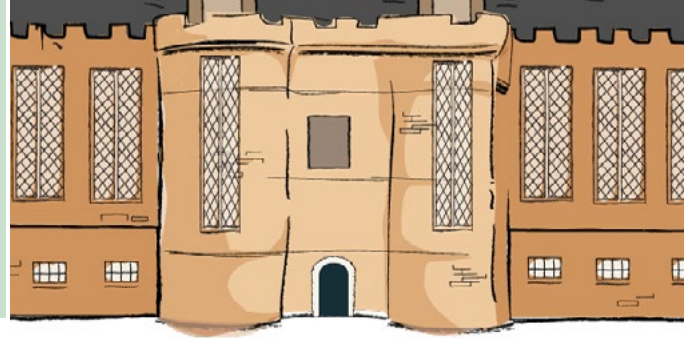
Common diseases that could affect the people of Edinburgh included typhus, typhoid and smallpox. These could all kill you and there was no cure.

The most feared disease of all, though, was the plague – the Black Death – which could result in an agonising end to your life and could spread very easily.

During the time of Mary, Queen of Scots there were several outbreaks of the plague and it was a constant threat for the people of the town – whether you were rich or poor.

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Painful Punishments

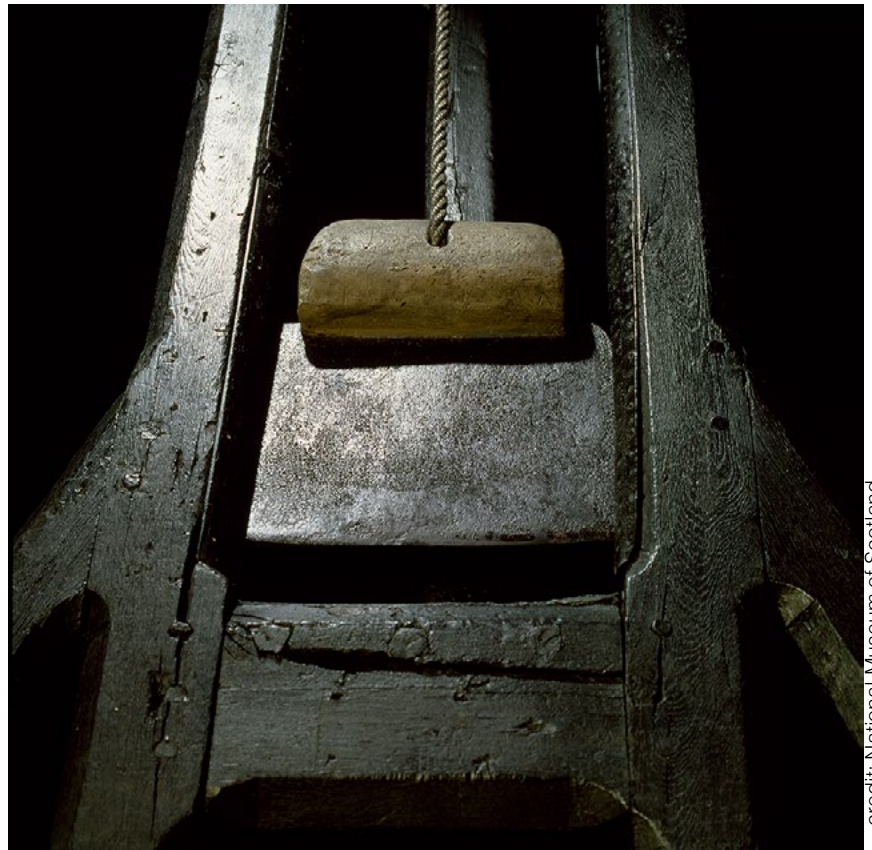
Despite all the trade that went on, many people were very poor and often turned to begging or stealing. However, you certainly wouldn't want to get caught, as punishments were horribly harsh.

The High Street would often be filled with the sounds of the cheering, jeering 'mob', who loved a good punishment at the Mercat (Market) Cross. (Remember, this was the days before internet, TV and PlayStation)

There were all sorts of punishments for different crimes – some of which were pretty gruesome. For example, for small crimes you might be dunked in the stinking Nor' Loch or have to spend time locked in the 'stocks' or 'pillory' while people pelted you with rotten vegetables (or worse!).

Or you might be unlucky enough to be nailed to a post by the ear – from which the only escape would be to rip yourself off.

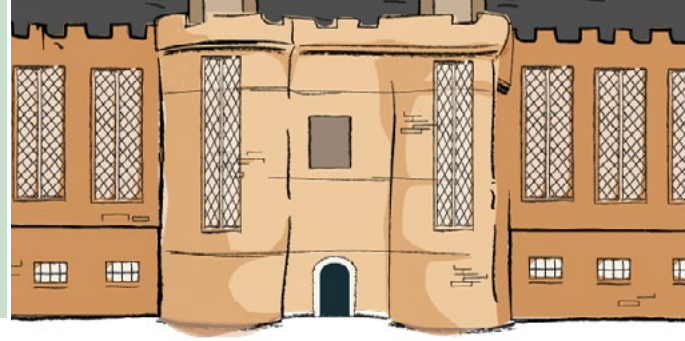
Executions were common. A public hanging, or even a beheading with the dreaded 'Maiden', was always a popular event.



credit: National Museum of Scotland

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Activity 1

An English traveller came to Edinburgh at the end of the 1500s – over 500 years ago. This is how he described the Old Town. Do you recognise the places he is talking about?

“ At the end, towards the east, is the King’s palace joining to the monastery. In a park of hares, rabbits and deer, a high mountain hangs, called the chair of Arthur.

From the King’s Palace the city rises higher and higher to the west, and consists mostly of one broad and very fair street, the rest of the side streets and alleys being of poor building and inhabited with very poor people. The length from east to west is about a mile.

At the furthest end towards the west is a very strong castle on a most steep rock, which the Scots think is undefeatable.

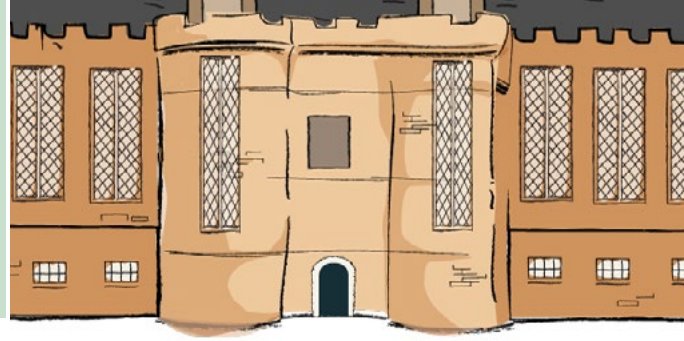
In the middle of the long street, the Cathedral is built, which is large and light, but not very grand or decorated.”



credit: National Library of Scotland

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Activity 1, continued

Look carefully at this map of Old Edinburgh. At first glance it looks quite odd compared to a modern map.

However, take a closer look (you could even use a magnifying glass). You might be able pick out some familiar sights, streets, buildings and landmarks that still exist today.

- Do you notice anything odd about the title? People didn't care too much about spelling back then!
- Can you see the Nor' Loch and the city walls that we mentioned earlier?
- Can you locate some other key locations on the map? You might need to do a wee bit of research for this.

Here are some suggestions of places to get you going, though. Can you find:

1. Edinburgh Castle.
 2. The Palace of Holyroodhouse.
 3. The High Kirk of Edinburgh (now known as St. Giles Cathedral)
 4. The Netherbow Port (a main gateway to the city)
 5. The Grassmarket - where animals were sold at market.
- Make a list of some of the places that you would recognise today and that still exist. You could compare it to a modern map to help, if you like.

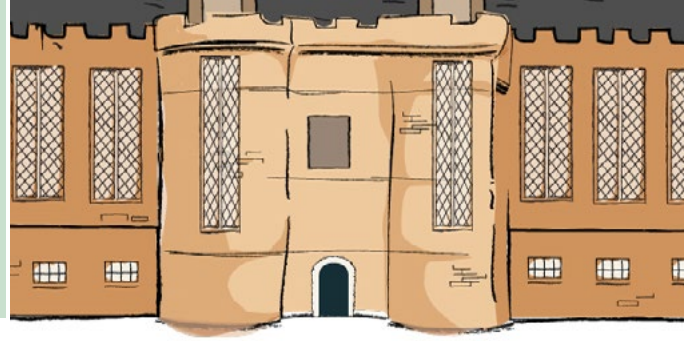
See if you can find as many as 10 familiar sights.

- Now compare it to a modern map of the same area. Obviously it's quite different today – but what would you say are the biggest changes?

See if you can list 5.

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Activity 2

The streets were usually named after a business or trade that went on there, or were named after a person who lived there. When you walk around the Old Town today, look out for some of these names which have stuck ever since.

- Here are some of the streets that you can still see in Old Edinburgh today. What do you think originally went on in these streets (you might have to do a wee bit of research for one or two of them):
 1. Old Fishmarket Close
 2. Fleshmarket Close
 3. Advocates Close
 4. Candlemaker Row
 5. Skinner's Close
 6. Old Assembly Close
- Imagine that you were a tradesman living in the Old Town of Edinburgh at this time.
 - What job might you have done?
 - What might your street have been called?
 - What would life have been like for you?

Think carefully about the sights, the sounds and the smells that would be all around you. See if you can create a piece of writing that describes what your life might have been like.

You could choose to write it in one of the following ways:

- A diary entry for a particular day.
- A letter to a friend who is thinking of visiting
- A short story about an event that happened

Alternatively, you could draw a picture of a street scene from Old Edinburgh that sums up what it might have been like.