

III.

NOTES ON THE NETHER BOW PORT, EDINBURGH.

BY HENRY F. KERR, A.R.I.B.A., F.S.A.Scot.

When Edinburgh was first enclosed in a stone wall of defence there were only two gates to the city, the West Bow Port and the Nether Bow Port. We hear of the Castle Barrier at the head of Castlehill, to separate the military from burghal interests; there is, however, no record of its appearance, either in the early map of 1544 nor in Gordon's of 1647. In a view of the siege of the Castle in 1753 there is shown a high erection about that place, but it looks more like a protection for the assault than a permanent barrier.

Of the acknowledged city gates the West Bow Port was no great distance from the Lawnmarket and Castlehill, as it was at the foot of the uppermost stretch of the Bow in descending, and is shown as a small archway in a cross-wall.

Of the Nether Bow Port there is more known, although the actual position of the first gateway there is conjectural. Possibly it was like that in the West Bow, a simple archway, probably protected by shot-holes.

During the construction of the Flodden Wall, after 1513, the number of gateways was increased to six. The West Port superseded the West Bow Port, and the others were Greyfriars (or Bristo Port), Kirk of Field (or Potterrow Port), Cowgate Port, Nether Bow Port, and St Andrew's Port at the foot of Leith Wynd. The Flodden Wall enclosed a large area of ground, which had partly been built upon, beyond the limits of the earlier city wall, usually called that of 1450. So far as old prints inform us, these gates or ports were merely large gateways in the Flodden Wall, with the exception of the Nether Bow Port which was a fortified gateway, a military asset for the protection of the town.

In the locality of the Nether Bow there was, in connection with the "1450" wall, and in the immediate neighbourhood of Fountain Close, a port or gateway, where the old wall turned northwards to meet the High Street. Some persons think that there was a second port just slightly east of that, but there does not appear to be any evidence in support of that. There is some confusion in tradition about these ports, and it is more likely that there were only the two ports in succession, one at Fountain Close and one at the junction of Nether Bow and St Mary's and Leith Wynds.

Sir Daniel Wilson in his *Memorials of Edinburgh* (vol. i. p. 114),

referring to the latter port, says, "It was by far the most conspicuous and important of the six gates which gave access to the ancient capital, and was regarded as an object in the maintenance and protection of which the honour of the city was so deeply involved that . . . its demolition was one of the penalties by which the Government sought to revenge the slight put upon the royal prerogative by the Porteous mob. . . . When the destruction of this, the main port of the city, was averted by the strenuous patriotic exertions of the Scottish peers and members of Parliament, it was regarded as a national triumph; but, unhappily, towards the middle of the last century, a perfect mania seized the civic rulers throughout the kingdom for sweeping away the old rubbish, as the ancient fabrics that adorned the principal towns were contemptuously styled. The Common Council of London set the example by obtaining an Act of Parliament in 1760 to remove their city gates; and only four years later the Town Council of Edinburgh demolished the Nether Bow, one of the chief ornaments of the city, which, had it been preserved, would have been now regarded as a peculiarly interesting relic of the olden time." And we may add to these words of Wilson, that architecturally its value as a specimen of Scottish military architecture is supremely valuable.

In Maitland's *History of Edinburgh* (p. 140) we get our earliest printed information about this structure: "A short way to the northward of the Cowgate is situated the Nether Bow, so called from its position at the eastern and lower end of the city. The first gate of this name stood about fifty yards higher in the street . . . and, standing so far in an area within the wall, was not so fit for defence; wherefore a new gate was erected in 1571 by the Loyalists, adherents to Queen Mary, which being since pulled down, the present beautiful gate was built anno 1606, a little be-east the former."

Since Maitland's day Wilson and others accepted that record; but we shall see there is very grave doubt as to 1606 being the date of its erection.

Let us first look at some evidence as to the appearance of this old port, and endeavour to elicit the truth.

1. The earliest drawing extant seems to be the map or view which is in the British Museum, of date May 1544, a good copy of which is in the library of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society (fig. 1). May 1544 is the month and year of Hertford's invasion of the town. This 1544 view shows a high wall (the Flodden Wall), with a large archway and two circular flanking towers—an arrangement frequently met with in Scottish design. There is, however, no sign of a central tower, as is shown on all later drawings. As we shall see, there is reason to know

that the central tower was a later addition. But the most interesting detail of this view is that the gateway and its flanking towers are on the line of the west face or front of St Mary's and Leith Wynds, that is practically conforming to the line of the Flodden Wall. Further, the site of this gateway, according to this drawing, is the site from which the Nether Bow Port was removed in 1764. There is no need to doubt

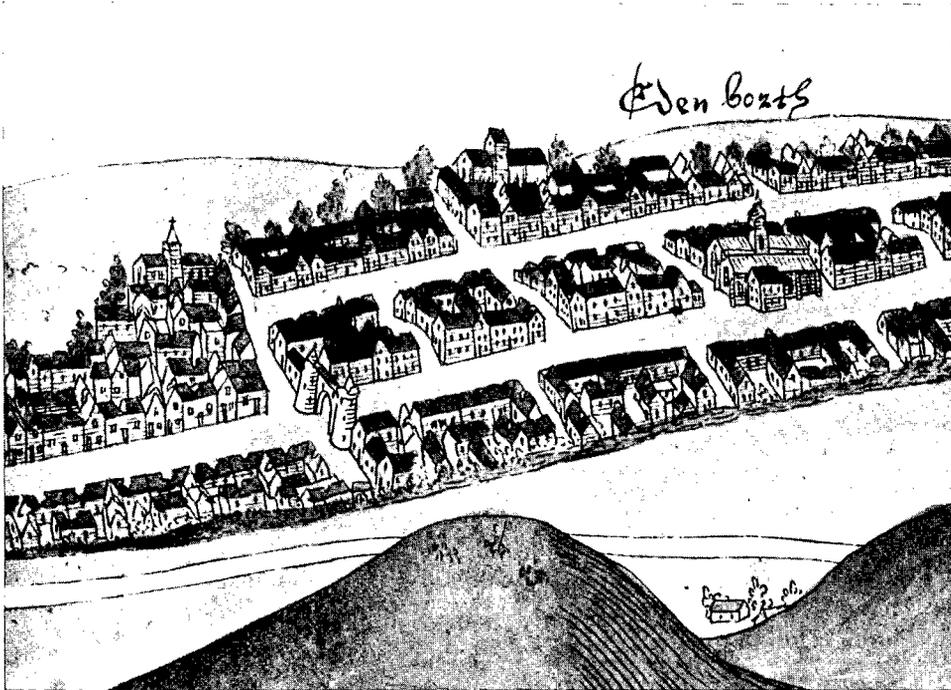


Fig. 1. View of Edinburgh, 1544.

the testimony of this old sketch, and therefore we may be assured that this gateway with its flanking towers was built before 1544.

2. The next drawing in point of date is an engraving in Maitland's *History* (p. 140). It is an elevation, but without a scale. It bears the name P. Fourdrinier. It is of the east front as in the 1544 map, but besides the two flanking towers it has a central tower with an octagonal stone spire above the gateway, and also lesser spiral-stair turrets leading to an upper floor. As Maitland's *History* bears the date 1753, it may be assumed to be the latest phase of this building.

3. There is in the City Museum an engraving of the east front dated August 1764, evidently before the demolishing of the structure. No name of artist nor engraver appears.

4. Another drawing is by J. Runciman, showing the port with men actually removing the stones of the stone spire (fig. 2). This is the

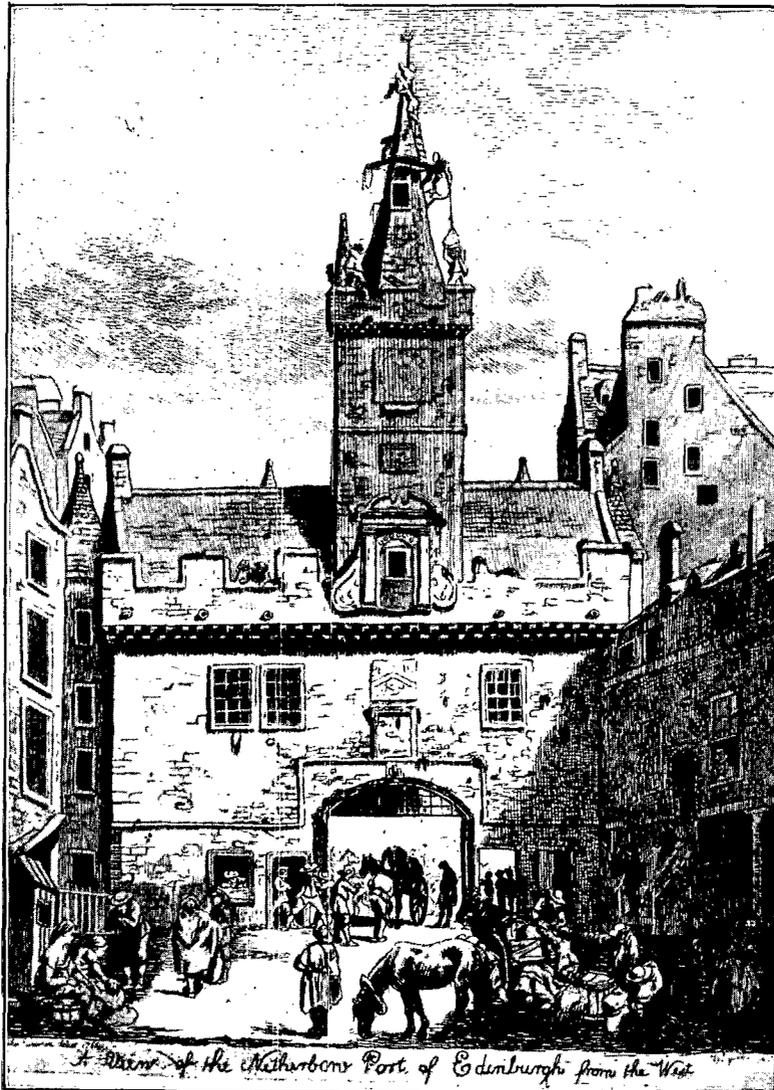


Fig. 2. West view.

earliest drawing we have of the west side, the interior elevation, of the gateway.

5. There is in the British Museum a view very similar to this of Runciman, but no men are shown removing the spire.

6 and 7. There are in the *Scots Magazine* for 1764 two engravings, one of the east front and one of the west front (p. 432).

These drawings and prints fairly represent what we can know of the appearance of this ancient fortified gateway. It may be said that in the main these drawings fairly agree, although there are now and again differences in details. Take, for example, in Maitland's elevation of the west front (1753) the city arms do not appear in the storey under the clock. These are shown in the *Scots Magazine* view (1764).

Again, in this *Scots Magazine* sketch of the west front the renaissance feature in front of the tower at the level of the battlements appears as a classical segmental pediment with straight ornamental supports at the base, whereas in Runciman's sketch the treatment of this feature is in more free classic, the pediment being broken, and the supporting wings are in the form of scrolls. The latter seems more like what we would expect at that date.

After the removal of this interesting building many artists delighted to represent it, although they had never seen it. Their drawings must have been founded upon such prints as we have been examining, and perhaps others of which now there is no record. James Skene of Rubislaw sketched the eastern front; Sir Daniel Wilson gave us another of this front; William Hole has drawings of both frontages in the *Book of Old Edinburgh* by Bailie J. C. and Miss Alison Dunlop (1886). There is also in Sir Daniel Wilson's *Memorials of Auld Reekie*—a two-volume scrap-book in the Society of Antiquaries' Library—the photograph of a wash drawing, to a small scale; but whether the drawing was previous or subsequent to the removal of the building there is no record. In this photograph there are no angle pinnacles on the tower at the base of the spire, whereas all the other drawings show these pinnacles.

With these various representations of this fine building before us, we can perceive that the architectural forms and details appear to be of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in date (fig. 3). The circular towers might well have been of early sixteenth century, the central tower and spire being of later date. So that, so far as appearances go, there is no evidence against the date of 1544, or earlier, for the circular towers, while there is no likelihood of the work being so late as 1606.

So much for the building; now what can we deduce from its history? Maitland declares (p. 140) that it was erected in 1606, and this date was generally believed until the Rev. R. S. Mylne read a paper before the Society of Antiquaries which appeared in their *Proceedings*, 1911-12 (p. 385). Mr Mylne demonstrates from extracts from the Town Council

minutes that in 1606 only repairs on the old port were made. These will be referred to later. Mr Mylne further was of opinion that in 1571 a substantial part of the port was built.



Fig. 3. East view.

If we turn to James Grant's *Old and New Edinburgh* (vol. i. p. 217) we find him saying: "The last gate was built in the time of James VI.; what was the character of its predecessor we have no means of

ascertaining; but to repair it in 1538, as the city cash had run low, the Magistrates were compelled to mortgage its northern vault for 100 merks Scots; and this was the gate which the English, under Lord Hertford, blew open with cannon-shot in 1544, ere advancing against the castle." Notwithstanding some confusion in that statement we shall be able to trace the fact that this was the gate portrayed in Hertford's map of 1544.

Grant quotes from the *Diurnal of Occurrents* an item of date 27th August 1571. "The Lords and Captains of the Castle cause big a new port at the Netherbow port within the auld part of the same." This extract is a great help to us in the elucidation of the problem.

When we come to the years 1606 to 1616 we find numerous entries in the accounts of repairs to the structure, but no items to suggest a new gateway being erected at that time.

In order to sum up the whole history of the building let us consider the probabilities chronologically.

1514. It is understood that the city fathers, immediately after the disaster of Flodden, started in anxious haste to build a wall to protect the various properties outwith the old city wall. This new wall was called the Flodden Wall, and was, it is said, partly new and partly composed of such strong boundary walls that existed, which were heightened, strengthened, and prepared for defence. New gateways or ports were formed in due course, and this is the question before us: Was the Nether Bow Port at, or about, that time erected on the site it stood upon in 1764 when it was removed?

1540. We have evidence that the Flodden Wall was needing repair in its weakest part, where the walls of houses and their boundaries had been utilised. In Wilson's *Memorials* (vol. i. p. 44) it is written: "It was ordained that the provost, bailies and council . . . warn all manner of persons that has ony landes, biggins and wastes upon the west side of Leith Wynd, that they within zier and day big and repare honestlie their said wastes and ruinous houses . . . from the Port of the Netherbow to the Trinity College."

It is certain that unless these walls, forming part of the Flodden Wall, were kept in repair the effectiveness of the fortified port would be endangered.

1544. In the drawing or map showing Hertford's advance upon the city in 1544 we have the Nether Bow Port shown on the line of St Mary Wynd. That was the site it stood upon in 1764 when it was demolished. The flanking circular towers are plainly shown.

1569. We now come to an entry which seems to overturn this. In preparing these notes I have been greatly helped by the kindness of Mr Charles Boog Watson and Miss Marguerite Wood, for extracts from minutes and accounts of the Burgh.

The earliest note from the minutes records the granting of a feu to Adam Fullerton of "land beyond the Netherbow Port." If this description applies to the year 1569, then the port could not have been at

St Mary's Wynd, because the feu would have been beyond the city. Moreover, we know that Fullarton's house was built at Fountain Close. Does this indicate that at that date the port was also at Fountain Close?

There is, however, an answer to that seeming discrepancy. Those who deal with feu charters and dispositions of property often come across descriptions of boundaries which have been copied from earlier deeds, and which were accurate at their date of execution. But, if a landmark is subsequently removed, as for example if the "port" in question, which existed at the date of the charter, were removed, although the description was good before the port was removed, it did not, at a later date, fit in with the description originally in the title. The identification is accurate if the former position is remembered, but does not conform to the new conditions. There may have been some clause in the disposition to make the alteration clear, but such is not in evidence. If, then, this feu charter is considered as affected by such somewhat frequent accidents, the difficulty vanishes. More than that, the other known evidences are upheld.

1571. The first intimation of great works on the Nether Bow is in 1571. On 27th August it is noted "The Lords and captains of the Castle caused big a new port at the Nether Bow Port within the auld part of the same of ashlar work in the most strengthie way, taking the stones gathered . . . from Restalrig Church."

Doubtless after the port was blown in by Hertford in 1544 the gateway was repaired; but this note tells us that the military authorities were not satisfied with the strength of this defensive gateway, and caused extensive improvements "within the auld part of the same." In 1571, then, there was existing the "aulder part" of a gateway there. We cannot fail to recognise that the "auld part" was the port as shown in the 1544 map or view, and that the Lords and Captains rebuilt the central portion, containing the embattled tower and spire. If the tower and spire were added to the port of 1544 we have the later appearance of this gateway as portrayed in the later views, such as that of Gordon in 1647.

1606. Maitland gives the date 1606 for the erection of the structure, but the Rev. R. S. Mylne, in a communication to the Society of Antiquaries (1911-12, p. 385), gives extracts from the Town Council Minutes which point only to repairs in that year: On 24th January an order for inspection of the port was made. On 28th March payment for repairs is noted. On 4th April an overseer of works was appointed. On 7th November the rebuilding of the north turnpike stair is reported, and other lesser repairs are referred to until the year 1616.

With these proofs before him Mr Mylne inclines to the view, as mentioned above, that it was in 1571 that a substantial part of the port was executed, but, to quote him, "part must have been earlier than that date, and probably belongs to the prosperous and peaceful reign of James V., when so much building went on in Scotland and there was a distinct French influence at the royal court." This agrees with the argument we used under date 1571, when the military authorities ordered a new port to be built.

1647. In Gordon of Rothemay's map of 1647 the port is shown on the eastern site at St Mary's Wynd, with the flanking towers and the central tower and spire, thus uniting the work as shown in the 1544 view and the later work of 1571.

This practically completes our argument, but some further extracts from the Minutes of Council are of value:

1663. The statue of James VI. was broken and the Nether Bow defaced.
1673. The horologe of the Nether Bow was ordered to be repainted and gilded, the hours being unreadable.
1702. The magistrates approved of the doors of the port being chained back in the daytime.
1724. The steeple was ordered to be repaired.
1725. Further repairs are noted, and the "north lodge" was turned into a postern. Here is possibly an error, or a change made, as in all subsequent drawings it is the south lodge that is formed into a postern, not the "north."
- 1731-33. The west side of the steeple is reported to be in disrepair.
1734. A new copper weathercock was supplied, and the "globe" mended.
1736. A wicker gate was ordered in the north leaf of the door.
1742. There appears an item for repair of doors.
1760. In this year the steeple was noted to be in great disrepair.

From the frequent records to repairs urgently wanted, the city of Edinburgh seems to have had an unfortunate knack of keeping its buildings in poorest repair. The city fathers did not seem to believe in the old motto "A stitch in time saves nine." Probably the fact was that they were always short of cash, and the result was that their buildings failed early, and amongst others this wonderful old city gate.

1762. The Nether Bow Port fell into a semi-ruinous condition, and perhaps its state of disrepair suggested that it was a cumberer of the ground. Anyhow, the magistrates and the Court of Session has under consideration its presence as a stumbling-block to traffic.
1764. The evil day has come. The hour has struck. The old port was voted to demolition. The steeple was reported upon by Messrs Adam, Mylne, and Brown, and declared to be too shattered for repair, and hazardous to be left standing.

Thus, mainly due to the neglect with which it was treated, this building was doomed; articles of roup were prepared; the tenants were warned out.

The bell which hung in the steeple was given to Trinity College Church.

Such is the end of an Old Song.

From these scanty records we are enabled to fill up the history of this interesting building from its inception at the time of the erection of the Flodden Wall, through the years when, being damaged, it was eventually partly rebuilt, and the central tower and spire erected with an extra storey in 1571, until in 1764 it was removed from its site.

The drawings we have been considering give an indication of its exterior, but we have no real record of its plan, as we had in the case of the Old Tolbooth in the High Street. We can only strive to construct

advance of the line of St Mary's Wynd—that is, the front walls of the houses. But these house walls with their openings were vulnerable, and probably the back walls were scarcely better, and the whole would not form a good defence. But if it were the continuous walls forming the garden boundaries—they, if strong enough, would be a better defence—the question arises, Why was the port built so far east? The answer may be that the garden walls and the return gables to the front wall would form a better defence, and hence the ultimate position of the Nether Bow Port.

It may be noted that in the sketch of the siege of the Castle, in 1573, the Nether Bow Port is shown without its central tower and spire, as ordered in 1571. Of course, this drawing cannot be considered as absolutely reliable, but may be merely a sketch showing generally the defences of the city. On the other hand, it may be that the new works ordered in 1571 were delayed by the siege of 1573, and maybe were a few years later in being executed; but executed they were. It is also possible that the 1573 sketch might be made from an earlier sketch, and the arrangements for the siege shown on it in 1573.

The arguments submitted as based upon contemporary drawings and historical records lead to the declaration that the later Nether Bow Port was erected on the eastern site at the time of, or shortly after, the building of the Flodden Wall, and the new port “within the auld part of the same” in or shortly after 1571.