

7. NARRATIVE OF THE BUILDING'S HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DEVELOPMENT

There was no archaeological evidence for earlier buildings on the site of Riddle's Court and what scant building remains were found within the Close were certainly related to later development of the site. However, dendrochronology dates for one of the roof rafters within the Turnpike Stair roof of the South Block indicated a felling date in the spring of 1534, a much older timber than the other timber used in the roof, which may have been recycled from earlier buildings on the site, demolished to make way for the new tenement.

Archaeological excavation undertaken by AOC Archaeology between 2018 and 2019 at the nearby site of India Buildings, Cowgate, uncovered a sequence of occupation, with buildings pre-dating the formation of the burgh in the mid-12th century through to modern times. Discoveries included early medieval wattle and daub buildings, early Edinburgh boundary markers, extensive evidence of burgage plot industry, medieval stone buildings and later 17th- to 20th-century buildings. An interesting and important point is that these burgage plots were established in the mid-12th century and had very rigid property boundaries, and it is a matter of conjecture what form of division was used between them and the formal gardens (Illus 8) under the curtilage of Riddle's Court.

The historical documentary research, in conjunction with the architectural/archaeological investigations, has produced a broad narrative of the building's development up to the early 18th century, divided into five phases (Illus 26). One of the problems encountered in the documentary research was that the name of the building changed several times, as did that of the close. Although known as (Ninian) McMorran's house (or Great Tenement), in the 1660s it was still called the Chancellor's House after Seton's occupation of half a century earlier, and in the 1750s the close was called Royston's Close. Therefore, there may be further documentary information concealed beneath different titles.

In light of the historical evidence that Riddle's Close was part of a much larger building called the Chancellor's House under the tenure of Alexander Seton during the 1610s, the whole concept of the

building complex being solely a merchant's house needs to be revised. The term 'Great Tenement' is rare, and implies something very distinctive. This historical documentary evidence now affords the building a much higher status than was hitherto known. There are almost no surviving comparable courtyard houses in Edinburgh or Leith, and they may always have been rare. The nearest obvious parallel is with the Great Lodging of David Hunter in Dundee's Overgate (demolished 1860s), which was set around a courtyard with a spacious four-windowed hall on the first floor. Hunter's mansion was completed in the early 17th century and was finished with fine furnishings and elaborately carved wooden panelling (McKean et al 2009: 23).

New material found during the historical research is quite explicit that while the tenements between the High Street and the façade of the great gate to McMorran's Court may have run in a north/south direction, the two tenements below them which were conjoined to form the 'Great Tenement' of land ran on an east/west axis, perpendicular to the others. This crucial information is repeated in three different documents of 1616, 1630 and 1684.³⁸ A reference to the removal of thatch by Sir John Clerk post-1663 to fireproof the properties could account for the very steep roofline present at the east end of the existing gable. This and the presence of thackstones on the chimneys at the west end of the block support the common use of thatch until the early 17th century.

The discovery that the Buccleuch family were the owners of the upper lodging between 1714 and 1749 now explains who commissioned the famous Norie panel artwork. Perhaps even more significant is the tenure of the upper lodging by Duchess Anne, which the late Alasdair Ross argued might help explain the plaster ceiling rose that contains the initials of King Charles II and the date 1684. As Ross recalled, her first husband was the illegitimate son of King Charles II, the Duke of Monmouth, who was executed for treason in July 1685. Although her father-in-law died on 6 February 1685, this is according to new-style dating – as far as the duchess was concerned King Charles would have died on 6 February 1684, according to old-style dating. If this suggestion has any merit it means that the ornate plaster ceiling's date should be revised to the period 1714–32 rather than to the late 17th century.

The 18th-century accounts record the costs of the huge amount of refurbishment works to all parts of the building complex. The references to the alterations to the roof spaces and the fenestration show that a great deal of remodelling work was undertaken. The wealth of information also provides an insight on the internal decor of the period (see 3.4 ‘Back tenement post-1702’ above).

The combination of the historic building survey and historical research has revealed that there have been consistent misunderstandings in the earlier interpretations of the development of the site, largely a consequence of the assumption that it developed from two north/south L-shaped blocks in the 16th century. The building has undergone an exceptional level of alteration and adaptation, but, even so, detailed examination revealed too many oddities or inconsistencies for that narrative to be accepted at face value. From the beginning, it was evident that the surviving turnpike was unusual, did not suit various floors and indeed cut across earlier circulation. There was substantial built evidence for a separate turnpike stair towards the southern end of the west wall, and that was then confirmed by the historical research – when the house was sold in 1616 it was described as having two turnpike stairs (see 3.2 ‘Splitting the Great Tenement 1616–30’ above). Equally, a turnpike stair in that location was a more rational explanation for the differing floor levels than the assumption of later alteration for which little evidence could be found.

Once historical research described the property in terms of an east/west layout, and the Edgar 1743 map of Edinburgh confirmed the existence of a close running from the West Bow, the curiosities on the west side of the building began to make more sense. Moreover, once historical research indicated a north-west turnpike, an examination of the fabric indicated that what had been taken for windows could once have been doors (west façade, north-west block).

The crucial issue was whether a horizontal circulation at first-floor level in order to create the Great Tenement made sense of some of the architectural anomalies – and it did, once historical evidence supported the conclusion that the east wing chimney stack was a 17th-century addition.

Analysis of the building helped to develop a better understanding of the early evolution of the

building and, importantly, highlighted the many changes to the complex that were carried out in the 18th to 20th centuries. For instance, the external north-facing elevation on the North Block and the west-facing elevation on the west block have several relieving arches above square-headed windows that are either too narrow or in the wrong position entirely. It is clear from this evidence that the present windows installed mainly in the 19th century are much larger than the ones they probably replaced.

One of the questions raised at the outset of the study was how the residents circulated through the building, given the lack of staircases today, and why so many of the floors did not share the same level. Importantly, when did the lack of formal access between the blocks occur and was this compartmentalisation of the blocks due to the historic sale of different parts of the complex? For example, the 19th-century demolition of the tenement that fronted the Royal Mile effectively removed the turnpike staircase that linked this building with the North Block. Once removed the only access between the first and second floors was by an extramural wooden pentice-roofed staircase (an external timber staircase covered with a sloped roof projecting from the outer wall, to provide some cover), a replica of which still stands today (Illus 22).

The survey confirmed that there was a much earlier entrance into the North Block from the south side at first-floor level that pre-dated the construction of the East Block. This entrance is of historical importance, and it could only have been accessed either by a wooden forestair rising from within the inner courtyard or along a timber gallery that ran along a curtain wall that the East Block was later built against. Early historical accounts mention the presence of ‘waste ground’ or more likely ground that had yet to be fully developed. Later this became Fisher’s Close. It was confirmed that the curtain wall had a door at ground level, which was corroborated by the remains of a *c* 16th-century blocked courtyard entrance with moulded surrounds (found inside the East Block).

From the 17th century onwards there were no adjoining features which linked the West and North Blocks or the South and East Blocks except at the ground level. This discontinuity in circulation on the upper floors was brought about by the historic removal of external turnpike staircases that allowed

access into the main apartments of the three blocks. When the north/south aligned tenement fronting the Lawnmarket was removed it resulted in the removal of the common stair on the north side of the North Block. The aforementioned historical

sketch (Illus 10) of a tenement building flanking Riddle's Close shows the corbelled-out diagonal common entry. The remains of the door jamb and the corbelled-out stonework of the doorway are still present today (Illus 22).