

IV.

WAS THE TOWN OF EDINBURGH AN OPEN AND DEFENCELESS ONE PREVIOUS TO 1450? BY PETER MILLER, F.S.A. Scot.

It is known for certain from David I.'s charter of Holyrood, 1147, that the burgh or town of Edinburgh extended downwards from the Castle as far as the head of the Canongate. What its boundary was on the south and north is uncertain, as there is no evidence on this point of a very early date. Two centuries and a half after David's time, however, there is evidence showing that on the south side of the town there was a line of defence in the shape of a "King's Wall," that must have existed from a very early period, the time usually assigned as that at which the town was first protected by a city wall. It is abundantly evident, from a great many charters of houses prior to even 1369, that the town had been extended southward far beyond its original limits. That boundary is referred to in old charters of a later date defining the boundaries of houses situated on the south side of the

¹ Burton, *History of Scotland*, vol. iii.

High Street as being bounded by the King's Wall,"¹ which appears to have extended from the Castle Hill, and was situated about half-way down the slope between the Cowgate and the south side of the High Street until it reached the Nether-bow Port, a short distance above St Mary's Wynd. Maitland, in his *History of Edinburgh*, asserts that the town having for many ages existed as an open and defenceless one up to 1450, it then became necessary to erect a wall of defence on the south side of the town, and subsequent to the same date the North Loch was formed as a defence on that side instead of a wall. Maitland gives the King's Charter (James II.) :—"To the Provost and Community of the burgh to fosse, bulwark, wall, toure, turate, and otherwise to strength our burgh against the dreid, the evil, and the skeith of our auld enemy of England." The King at the same time gave them a charter, with full powers to tax themselves for effecting that purpose. Maitland further alleges that the city wall, portions of which existed in his time, and extended from the lower end of the esplanade half-way down the slope between the High Street and the Cowgate, was only erected after 1450. Most writers on Old Edinburgh seem to have adopted the conclusions that Maitland arrived at on this subject, but while there is no evidence to show what was done in improving the defences of the city between 1450 and the battle of Flodden-field, in 1513, more than sixty years after, there is abundant evidence proving beyond question that there was a wall on the south side of the High Street long prior to King James II.'s charter, and that charter clearly proves the same thing. In those charters, with one exception, the wall is designated the "Kings Wall."² In a sasine of modern date, of a tenement at the head of Todrig's Wynd, on the south side of the High Street, below Blackfriars Street, the house is described "as having of auld belonged to Archibald Todrig, and was bounded by the wall of old called 'the Kings wall' on the south, and the High Street on the north part."

John Forester of Corstorphin, in 1427, feus to "John Brown Clerc,

¹ The charters of houses situated on both sides of the wall describe them as bounded by the King's Wall, and the dates of them are conclusive evidence not only as to the existence of the wall before the date in question, but also as to the existence of the North Loch as well.

² *St Giles Church*, p. 150.

burghess of Edinburgh, the upper half of his orchard or garden belonging to his tenement, with the exception of a partiale of land reserved to Thomas Berwic, commencing at the King's Wall (*a muro regio*) inclusive on the north side, and extending unto the land of the said Thomas on the south side, and lying between the land of William of Liberton on the west side and the Common Vennel, usually called Forester's Wynd, on the east side, which tenement lies on the south side of the High Street, between the tenement of Master John Forester on the west side and the said Common Vennel on the east side." The date of this Charter is twenty-three years before the King's charter of 1450. It shows that the King's Wall existed long before the date assigned by Maitland for the erection of the city wall. Forester's Wynd no longer exists, but its precise position south of the High Street can be readily ascertained from the existence of Liberton's Wynd on the west side of the County Hall, Forester's Wynd having been the next wynd to it on the east. The details of this charter are given, because they enable us to realise the exact condition of that portion of the "King's Auld Wall," and how it divided the garden from the tenement occupying the space between the High Street and the wall, with the garden belonging to it situated on its south side towards the Cowgate.

Then the charter of 1450 "gives powers and charges the Sheriff and his deputies of Edinburgh, our Provost and Bailies of the same, that they cast down and remove whatsomever houses biggit upon our wall, or uncouth, the quhilk are needful to be casten doune for the strenthing of the said town and defences thereof." The terms of this charter clearly imply that the powers conferred by it were not given to erect defences for the first time, but only to improve those previously existing. In addition to the evidence of the charters already quoted, there is the fact that other charters in existence in 1369 state that the gates of the town—the Nether-bow and the Ovir-bow Ports—were then in existence, the Arcum Inferiorem and Superiorem Arcum. These were not the only gates of the town at that early period, for the Blackfriars' Vennel appears to have also had an arch or gateway prior to that time.

Maitland is equally at fault with the date of the origin of the North Loch. In 1437 a land lying in the upper part of the burgh, on the

north side of the High Street, is let in feufarm with the liberty of entry and exit by the anterior and posterior entrances *usque ad lacum*—the North Loch. This date is thirteen years before the charter of 1450. It is abundantly obvious from these charters that the wall and defences on the south side of the High Street were in existence long before the time of James II. How long they existed prior to 1369 it is impossible to say.

The exact course of the King's Wall may yet be traced with considerable accuracy, and there is no reason for doubting but that it and the wall described by Maitland as having been built subsequent to 1450 are one and the same. Maitland and Arnot have supplied us also with more recent evidence of unquestionable authority, whereby the line of the wall can be traced from the lower end of the Esplanade down to the Nether-bow Port, which existed previous to 1369. Commencing on the south side of the Castle Hill, it crossed the straight portion of the old West Bow Street half-way down, where stood the Ovir-bow Port, and it is found again at Forester's Wynd in 1427, with only one tenement between it and the High Street. So late as 1832, when digging for the foundation of a new lock-up house, about 10 feet south from the Advocates' Library, a fragment of this wall, measuring about 50 feet in length and 20 feet in height, was found. And in 1845 another portion of considerable extent was discovered to the east, on the site of the Old Parliament Stairs, in making the recent additions to the Court of Session buildings. The former of these remains of the old wall is only a few yards to the east of Forester's Wynd, where the King's Wall was in existence so early as 1427—and the second portion appears to have been in line with the south boundary of the cemetery of St Giles, as it existed about the same period of time. Lower down, at Todrig's Wynd, the same wall ("The King's Auld Wall") presents itself at a very early period, and here again, as at Forester's Wynd, the property was bounded on the south by the said wall, and the High Street on the north. None of the charters have any reference to any wall of defence on the north side of the High Street previous to 1540. The North Loch did not always exist as a line of defence on that side of the town. The exact time of its formation is uncertain, but it

was prior to 1437. Maitland says that it was formed subsequent to 1450.

It is highly improbable that the town, protected on the south by the King's Wall and its ports at the upper and lower entrances, was left defenceless on its north side. To assume that that was the case is out of the question. It is manifest that in early times the town must have been as well protected on its north side as it was on the south side; and, although the exact time at which the North Loch was first formed is uncertain, there is no evidence of its existence until the first half of the fifteenth century. The natural defence that appears to have protected the town on this side will be noticed further on, and in passing it may be remarked that the very small area or space included within the line of the southern defence implies that the population of the town must have been comparatively small when that line of defence was first erected for their protection from enemies without. This is an additional argument in support of the very great antiquity of the King's Wall.

The great extension of the town, that appears to have begun early in the fourteenth century, outside the King's Wall, down to the Cowgate and up the slope towards the Kirk of Field, as well as westward in what is now the Grassmarket, and was known at that early period as the New biggings under the castle (sub Castro), and the Newgait towards St Leonard's, sufficiently accounts for the effacing of the King's Wall and the formation of the common vennels which ran straight down to the Cowgate by openings made through the wall. At this very early period there appears to have been only two or at most three of them—the Blackfriars and the Common Vennel leading to the cemetery and parish church of St Giles. The most casual observer of the Edinburgh closes cannot fail to observe the short distances that intervene between any two of them, either on the south or north sides of the High Street. This disposition of the closes must have existed from the very origin of the town, the closes forming originally the entrance to the back gardens of each house, and ultimately the only access to the houses built upon the small gardens behind and the tenements erected on the south side of the King's Wall. As a rule, the closes range between 20 and 35 feet apart,

very much the same as the frontages of self-contained houses at the present time.

Gordon of Rothiemay's plan of the city in 1647 shows a wall on the north side of the Castle Hill, stretching from the Well-house Tower along the margin of the North Loch, as far as a line coming down by the west end of Ramsay Lodge. Maitland asserts that this was part of the city wall built after 1450; possibly it may have been repaired after that time. The information contained in the Exchequer Rolls so early as 1361-62 establishes the fact, however, that the Well-house Tower and some of its defences were erected at that early period by King David the Second, who then had his chief residence in the Castle. In those years considerable sums were paid to "Roger Hog, burges of Edinbrugh, and Sir John Preston, for the construction and reparation of the Well-house Tower of the Castle of Edinbrugh." The only deduction from those payments is that the defences of the Well-house existed at the time referred to if not before. The extension of the wall along the margin of the North Loch and up to the lower end of the Castle Hill, most probably existed at an early date, and may have been improved after 1450.

It is rather a remarkable circumstance that none of the charters of property on the north side of the High Street in the St Giles' Chartulary give any indication of a wall or other defence on that side of the street. That there was some defensive rampart on the north side of the town as well as on the south side need not be questioned.

The question arises then, What was its form? From various circumstances, which will be stated shortly, I am disposed to think that the original physical configuration of the north side of the ridge on which the town stood formed of itself a sufficiently strong defensive rampart against attacks from the north, of much greater strength than even the King's Wall on the south did.

There are certain facts patent to us respecting the original configuration of the hill, before houses were planted on the slope from the Castle Hill downwards to the Nether-bow Port, which, taken into account, may explain the absence of a wall. Observation shows that originally the lower portion of the ridge towards the Cowgate was less precipitate than

on the north in almost its entire length. All the houses and closes below the Tron Church are founded upon the solid, and there are no sunk stories down to St Mary's Wynd ; and from the Castle downwards to that church there are comparatively few with sunk stories, except at the Parliament House and the buildings connected with it, and that change, we know, originated about 1632.

On the north side of the High Street it is altogether different, for, from the Castle, all the way down to the old Leith Wynd, in early times, before houses were planted there, that side of the ridge must have presented a bold and precipitate cliff towards the north, and that cliff, in some parts at least of the line, came close up to the present line of the High Street. A survey of the huge masses of buildings, piled high above each other on the north side, indicates, in a somewhat unmistakeable manner, the original physical configuration that existed on the north side of old Dunedin long before Malcolm Canmore's time. Several other well-known facts present themselves in corroboration of this view of the matter. The very great differences of the levels between the front and back walls of the houses on the north side of the street, extending to four stories in some instances, is evidence of the original configuration. This is well shown at the Free Church College, the back of St James' Court, the Bank of Scotland, the Council Chambers, and all along to Leith Wynd.

There is another important factor bearing upon the question. During the last thirty years extensive excavations have been made on the north side of the street, which reveal a state of matters showing conclusively that the north slope, from the line of the High Street down to the margin of the North Loch, is in a great measure an artificial formation, produced in the course of many centuries from travelled soil, and is in point of fact nothing else than what geologists call "a Kitchen Midden" on a vast scale. The recent formation of St Giles Street revealed the fact that only a few yards from the line of the High Street the ground sank down to a considerable depth, which was occupied with honeycombed cellars several stories below the level of the street ; and immediately below that again, where the Imperial Hotel now stands, before a foundation could be obtained, over 30 feet in

depth of a "Kitchen Midden" had to be excavated and removed. In 1860, when Cockburn Street was formed, a similar accumulation of travelled soil had to be removed to the depth of 30 feet, near the lower end of that street, immediately behind the Writer's Court buildings and Mary King's Close. The operations of the City Improvement Trust in the vicinity of Leith Wynd, and where the Trinity College Church stands, revealed a similar state of matters. The depth of the "Kitchen Midden"¹ in that locality was measured for me by the late Dr James M'Bain, R.N. He ascertained by actual measurement that the depth was 31 feet. On this foundation stood many of the large old tenements in that locality, and notably the large old mansion used as a training school by the Scottish Episcopal Church. That mansion was built by Lord Panmure early in the last century. In the building of Trinity College Church, in 1871, they had to go to a great depth in order to find a suitable foundation on the north-east corner of that erection, although on the west and south sides there was a rocky formation. There is evidence, moreover, of an earlier age regarding the original formation

¹ This huge mass of travelled soil occupied some weeks in its removal. It was in a great measure composed of kitchen refuse. There was a very large quantity of bones mixed up with it, chiefly sheep bones, with a sparing admixture of ox bones of a small size. Large numbers of small copper coins were picked up by the workmen, chiefly Scotch bodles and halfpennies, the thistle being a prominent feature when there was anything legible upon them; they were, however, so much corroded and rusted that out of scores of them that came under my observation only a very few were of any value as specimens. A considerable number of them belonged to Queen Mary's time. The only one of any interest that I have is a silver groat of James IV. in good condition, and a silver foreign coin. In the lower beds of the material the old coins were mere round bits of copper with nothing that was legible upon them. The more bulky articles that were found consisted of cannon balls, bits of iron chains, and a great quantity of fragments of iron gear, of which no one could divine the purposes.

In order to procure a foundation for the piers on which the arches of Jeffrey Street stand they had to go down into the rock. All the soil that rested upon it was travelled, and portions of the rock formation were very hard, running into whinstone. The travelled soil on which some of the detached old houses stood was exceedingly hard, and was easily distinguished from the till. The only inference that could be drawn from the appearance of this large mass of débris was that it must have been for centuries, before houses were erected upon it, a common dépôt for the refuse of the town.

on the north side. Dr Wilson, in his *Reminiscences of Old Edinburgh*, says that in 1850, when operations were going on at the water reservoir below the Castle Hill, they came on a portion of the foundation of the old wall, alleged by Maitland to have been constructed after 1450. This foundation rested on a bed of clay, under which were found two human skeletons in wooden cists, and a coin of the Emperor Constantine, clearly demonstrating the cliff formation at a period of time when the early Picts were the only inhabitants of "Dinyeiden." It appears to me that all this evidence goes to prove that in early times the precipitate and rugged formation on the north side of the High Street was a sufficient defence of itself for the protection of the town, without anything in the shape of a continuous wall.

Curiously enough, the Register of Charters in the chartulary of St Giles up to 1369 strongly corroborates the idea that up to that time there were on the north side of the High Street a very small number of houses or tenements compared with those on the south side of the street. For up to that time nearly all the dotations to St Giles and its altarages were from lands and tenements situated on the south side of the High Street and the extension of the town to the south and west outside the King's Wall, while only a small number, eight or so, are described as from houses situated on the north side. But, from the beginning of the fifteenth century the number of dotations from houses on the north side greatly increases, clearly implying that houses were being erected on the north side in greater numbers than before that date.

In 1540, by an Act of the Scottish Parliament, the provost, bailies, and council of the city were to have all the waste land and biggings on the west side of Leith Wynd repaired and put in order, and if that was not done by the owners of the properties, they were authorised to sell them, and if there were no purchasers the authorities were to cast down said waste lands and biggings, and to build an honest and substantial wall from the Nether-bow Port down to the Trinity College¹ with the

¹ On examining several of the title deeds of old houses situated above John Knox's corner, on the north side of the High Street, I found that the lands in question were bounded on the south by the High Street, and on the north side by the Kirkyard dike of Trinity College Church.

stuff and stones which composed the old tenements. The last section of this Act gives us some information concerning the kind and quality of the materials that were used in the formation of the slope on the north side of the High Street:—

“And because the east side of the Leith Wynd pertains to the Abbot and Convent of Holyroodhouse, it is ordanit that the Bailies of the Canongate gar sick like be done upon the said east side. And as because of the Vilitie (vileness) that comes of the slaying of flesh be the fleshours dwelland on the east side, and teming of entrails of beistis generating corruptions, it is therefore ordanit that the same be forbidden be the Provost and Bailies of Edinburgh and Canongate under the pain of confiscation of all such flesh slain by them in manner foresaid.”
