

3. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The city of Edinburgh's origins reach back to the prehistoric period, with known settlements recorded on Arthur's Seat (Ritchie & Ritchie 1981; Stevenson 1947) and Blackford Hill (RCAHMS 1929). By the early Iron Age, Castle Rock had been established as an enclosed settlement which began to grow in stature from this period. By the late Iron Age, it had become a regional power (Driscoll & Yeoman 1997).

Medieval Edinburgh emerged from these early beginnings with gradual piecemeal settlement developing along the High Street. It was a royal burgh in the early 12th century, though no foundation charter survives and its exact date is unknown (Stevenson et al 1981: 2). The Canongate, immediately to the east, held its own burgh status. The foundation charter for Holyrood Abbey (1128 × 1136) grants the abbey the right to build and enclose a burgh between the abbey and Edinburgh (Donaldson 1970: 20–3).

3.1 The development of the Cowgate

Cowgate, the street that runs parallel and to the south of the eastern part of Edinburgh's High Street and western part of the Canongate, was developed from around 1330, though probably existed prior to this as a route for droving cattle out of the town to pasture (Harris 2002: 185). Its development perhaps represented the town's first municipal extension (Stevenson et al 1981: 11). It is thought this development was concentrated on the south side of the road because of the burn to the north (Malcolm 1937: 8). The burn was filled in, probably around 1490, with buildings laid out with piles of oak and willows on the levelled ground (ibid).

The Old High School site is situated on raised ground to the south of the Cowgate. The earliest known town boundary was the 14th-century ditch identified to the north side of the Cowgate at the site of St Patrick's Church (Jones 2011). This may have been superseded by a late 14th-century defensive wall (The King's Wall), identified during recent excavations in the area (Dalland 2017). Thus, in the 13th century the site was outside the confines and defences of the town but in an area that would have provided a good outlook over, and easy access to, the emerging burgh.

The site was eventually enclosed within the limits of the burgh after the construction of the Flodden Wall in the early 16th century. The existing eastern boundary wall of the friary at this time may even have been incorporated into the wall (Bryce 1909a: 71). It has been suggested that stone from the demolished friary was used in a later reconstruction (1561) of the Flodden Wall (ibid: 71).

3.2 Establishment of the friary

The mendicant houses of friar preachers emerged in the 13th century, thanks in large part, in Scotland, to the patronage of King Alexander II (1214–49). The mendicant houses differed from monasteries in that their purpose was not removal from the world, but to work within it, administering to the spiritual needs of the local populace. The Dominican order was founded at Toulouse in 1215 by the Spaniard Dominic de Guzmán (later St Dominic) (Cowan & Easson 1976: 114). They spread rapidly in early 13th-century Europe due to their attractiveness to potential patrons. Their rule was austere, they were relatively cheap to establish, being sustained largely on alms, and were highly visible in their urban settings (Oram 2012: 219). They became known as the Blackfriars after the colour of their cloaks.

They were invited to Scotland by Alexander II in 1230; he helped them as a patron and founded friaries for them (Bower 1990: vol 5, book IX, 145). Though no foundation charters survive, it is possible that Alexander founded Dominican friaries in Aberdeen, Ayr, Berwick, Edinburgh, Elgin, Inverness, Perth and Stirling during the 1230s (Oram 2012: 219). Edinburgh's seems to have been one of the first, probably founded *c.* 1230 (Bryce 1910: 16; Cowan & Easson 1976: 118), granted the land of one of Alexander's own manor estates (ibid). Rulers' interest in religious orders was generally driven by their need for intercession on their behalf before God. Oram (2012: 220) suggests Alexander's interest in the more austere orders in the 1230s was driven by a period of excommunication and by his need to produce a legitimate male heir, a feat he achieved in 1241. More houses followed over the successive decades and centuries. There were probably

16 houses in total, 13 of which were still in existence at the Reformation (Cowan & Easson 1976: 116–8).

The site donated by the king was outside the town at the time of the friary's establishment (see section 3.1 above). This extramural location was normal, though not universal, in the siting of friaries and does not seem to have been solely related to availability of space, as it seemed to occur even where there was available land within the town walls and where there was distinct threat of military unrest (Schofield & Vince 1994: 166). All the 13th-century Dominican friary foundations in Scotland were suburban. At Perth the Blackfriars were located just outside the northern perimeter (Spearman 1988: 49; Simpson & Stevenson 1982b: 31; Canmore ID [28428](#)). In Berwick it was at the north-western edge of the town, just to the east of the castle, though it was enclosed within the town walls there within a few decades (NCC 2009: 24–5). In Stirling it was to the north-east of the burgh (Gourlay & Turner 1978: 10; Page & Page 1996; Page & Page 1997; Canmore ID [46223](#)); Inverness, outside the northern end (Gourlay & Turner 1977b; Canmore ID [13333](#)); Aberdeen, to the south-west (Dennison & Stones 1997: 37; Canmore ID [20147](#)); Ayr, immediately to the east (Gourlay & Turner 1977a: 10; Canmore ID [41853](#)); and in Elgin it was to the north-west of the burgh, north of the castle (Simpson & Stevenson 1982a: 30–1; Canmore ID [16673](#)).

Bryce, rather poetically, notes that the friars 'loved to dwell amid sweet meadows and flowers' (Bryce 1910: 16) though there were no doubt various practical considerations, such as water supply, as well (Greene 1992: 168). The location close to, but apart from, the population to whom they administered seems to have been the ideal.

The size of the Blackfriars site in Edinburgh is not known and it may well have grown over time. Bryce depicts the friary precinct in the early 15th-century (after the erection of the Flodden Wall) extending south and east as far as the wall itself, along present-day Drummond Street and just west of the Pleasance. To the north it had some plots on the Cowgate frontage and to the west it fell short of Nicolson Street. It also shows a large piece of land to the south, outside the wall, of roughly equal area to the precinct itself termed 'Croft of the Black Friars' (Bryce 1910: 97).

The Dominicans followed a rule based on that of the Augustinian Canons, of which Dominic himself had been a member. St Dominic had a mission to train a special body of public evangelists to preach the tenets of religion in the towns and cities across Europe (Bryce 1910: 6). The order renounced worldly goods, embracing absolute poverty, and were dependent on voluntary alms for their housing and subsistence.

The friars preached in Edinburgh and the surrounding villages and towns, travelling up to 30 miles away. They were only permitted to travel on foot and always preached in the vernacular (Bryce 1910: 23). They also acted as confessors, ministered to the poor, sick and dying, said prayers for the dead and collected alms (Ross 1981; Foggie 2003: 55).

Teaching and education were of vital importance to their work. They were the first in Europe to devise and implement a complete and systematic course of education for their students in theology, philosophy and art which ended in a university degree (Bryce 1910: 26). To become qualified to preach, a brother had to be examined by inspectors (Bryce 1910: 23). The leading Scottish Dominican School was considered to have been in Perth (Page & Page 1996: 2). There are no records of a school in Edinburgh, although it is likely that one existed. This is of note, given the later use of the site as a school, though the Dominican schools were for their own novices not for the local laity (Foggie 2003: 104). Somewhat ironic is the later establishment of the nearby medical school near the site, given that the practice and teaching of medicine and surgery were absolutely forbidden by the Blackfriars in the 15th century (Bryce 1910: 27).

While the first generation of friars were probably incomers, by the 14th century they were probably largely drawn from the local urban population (Foggie 2003: 58–9). The number of friars at Edinburgh is unknown. Ross (1981: 3) suggests that a Dominican community would have consisted of at least eight priest brothers. A document of 1479 names 13 friars, but this only notes those who had attended the chapter and were thereby enabled to sign the document and thus there may have been more (Cowan & Easson 1976: 118). The community would also have included a sizeable number of lay people who would help with the day-to-day activities of the friary.

The friary subsisted on income and property from many different sources. While its records were lost during the Reformation (Cowan & Easson 1976: 31), some historical records survive of sums paid to the friary and other sources can be surmised based on historical records at other friaries. Bryce (1910: 80–96) records various annuities and other endowments, including 10 merks from the Royal Exchequer which seems to have been paid yearly from the friary's foundation up until the Reformation. There are others from various gentry, burgesses and clergy, some for a specific purpose, such as the maintenance of lamps in the church or to sing masses for the souls of departed relatives. People would also have paid for the privilege of being buried within the friary graveyard or, more prestigiously, within the church or cloister.

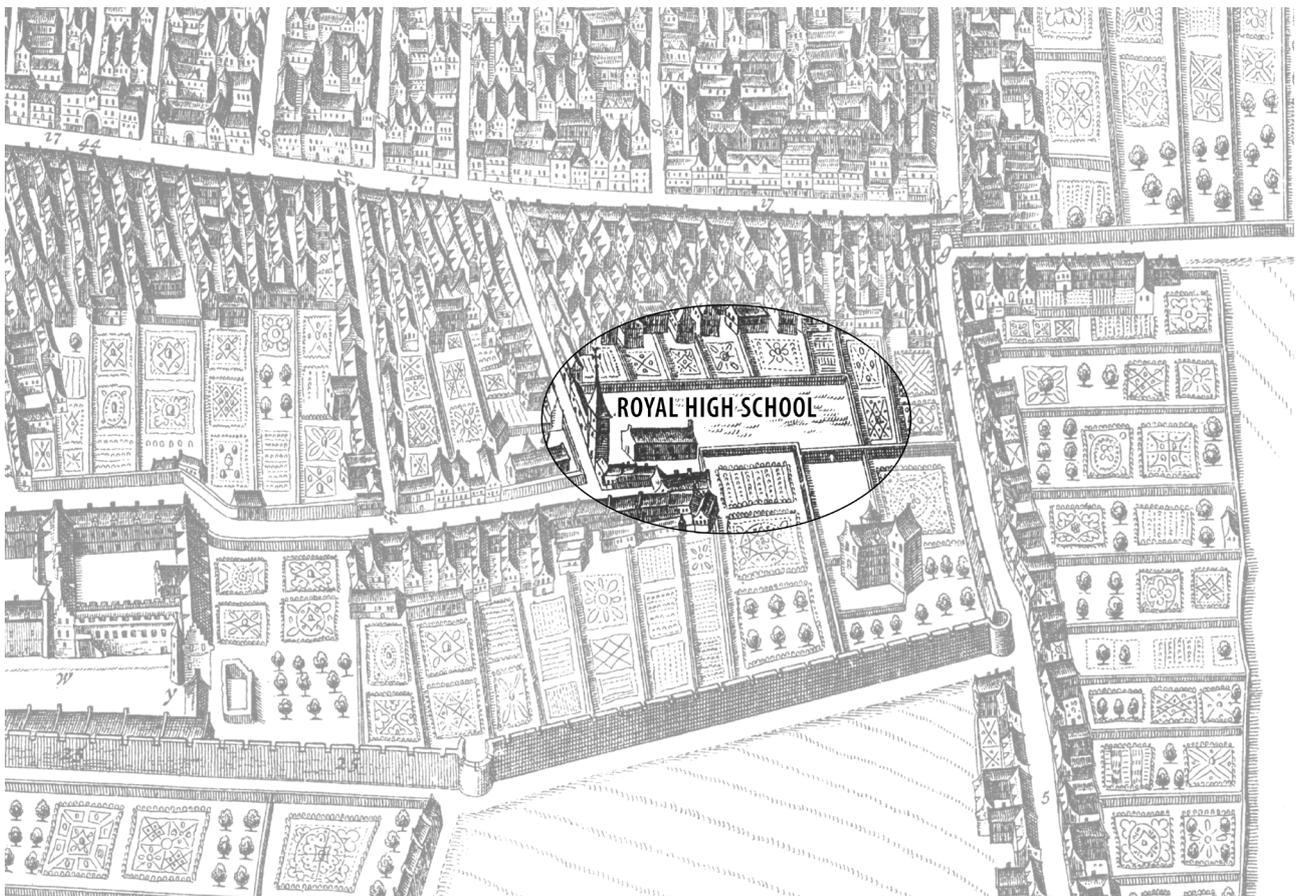
Other documents grant lands and other property, mostly local, to the friary or note collection of rentals for such lands. Some endowments were in kind rather than money, such as an annual grant by the

magistrates of Edinburgh of six barrels of beer (*ibid*: 23). Some friars inherited property from relatives which under Dominican rule became friary property. Endowments could also be forthcoming for specific causes such as repairs to the church (*ibid*: 20). The Edinburgh Blackfriars also maintained royal favour (and remuneration) by providing confessors for the king in the 14th and 15th centuries (*ibid*: 24).

The friary would also have received income from other services provided by their brethren, including gardening, fishing and whisky distilling (Foggie 2003: 86–9). As learned men, their services could be much in demand. Some taught at universities (*ibid*: 101) and friars skilled in clock repair and even gun-making were noted (*ibid*: 86–9).

3.3 The Reformation and the destruction of the friary

The friaries across Scotland suffered particularly badly during the Reformation. Their acquisition of



Illus 2 Extract from Gordon's 1647 Edinodunensis Tabula map, with approximate excavation area highlighted. Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland

property in the burghs they served meant it was easy to paint them as harsh landlords and while they would have had familial links to the local population, by the 16th century they lacked powerful friends. Their proximity to the towns also made them easy targets (Foggie 2003: 231–2).

The Burgh of Dundee was the great stronghold of the reformers, and on 31 August 1543 they gave a practical hint of their intentions by sacking both the Dominican and Franciscan friaries in that burgh (Bryce 1910: 49). Four days later reformers intended to wreck the friaries in Edinburgh. The burghers, however, assembled at the sound of the common bell and drove them outside the walls of the town. This remarkable demonstration in favour of the friars drew from John Knox, a key proponent of the Reformation, the curt comment that ‘the towne of Edinburgh, for the most parte was drowned in superstition’ (ibid: 49).

In May 1544 the English army under the command of the Earl of Hertford destroyed the city of Edinburgh by fire. The Dominican friary did not escape this destruction although the church, being built of stone, may have suffered little from the fire raising (Bryce 1910: 59). The attack may have only damaged the roof and spire, which were probably repaired within a year or two.

The records indicate that the last appearance of the Blackfriars in public in Edinburgh was at the procession on St Giles’ day, 1 September 1558, which ended in a violent assault by the reformers that in turn led to the procession being broken up (Bryce 1910: 62). The Reformation eventually attacked the friary in June 1559, leading ultimately to its complete destruction and its lands and possessions being granted to the magistrates and town council of Edinburgh (Cowan & Easson 1976: 118).

3.4 The development of the Royal and Old High Schools

In March 1566 the magistrates of Edinburgh received, as a gift from Queen Mary, the lands belonging to the Grey and Blackfriars of Edinburgh. Initially the town council agreed to build a hospital on the site of the Dominican friary, but this never came to fruition (Cowan 1912: 68). It was not until January 1577 that it was resolved to build a suitable school house in the gardens of the site. This

was constructed in 1578 at a cost of £250 (Steven 1849: 14). It is unclear at this point how much, if any, of the friary still existed. Gordon’s 1647 map of the area (Illus 2) is misleading as it depicts the school slightly misplaced. However, it does show a spire fronting the road to the west side of the school building. Could this be the remains of the Dominican church? The Royal High School on this map is depicted within a large area of garden, suggesting very little of the friary still existed by the mid-17th century. Edgar’s 1765 map (Illus 3) continues to depict the Royal High School (now approximately in the correct location).

By the late 17th century the school was becoming too small for the number of scholars and a subscription was raised in March 1777 to enable the construction of a new High School (latterly, and somewhat confusingly, known as the Old High School). Over £2,000 was raised, although the eventual cost was closer to double that figure (Steven 1849: 123). The school was built in 1777 to the design of Alexander Laing (d 1823) with the foundation stone laid in June of that year by Sir William Forbes. The alignment of the new school building was perpendicular to the Royal High School (as noted on Ainslie’s 1780 map; Illus 4) with the eastern foundation of the original school being overlain by the new building.

The new school was constructed in the classical design idiom popular in Edinburgh in the 18th century and survives to this day as The Old High School. It is a Category B Listed building (Historic Environment Scotland (HES): [LB-27999](#)) and has an entry in the National Record of the Historic Environment (Canmore ID [118777](#)). In 1829, the High School moved to Calton Hill and the building was subsequently converted to a surgical hospital as part of the Royal Infirmary in 1832. It was later joined to the new Surgical Hospital (now the University Geography Department) when that was built in 1853. A central block containing an operating theatre was added to the rear of the building at this time and the interior of the high school was drastically altered. The infirmary moved to a new site on the Meadows in 1879. From 1879 to 1903 the building was used as part of the City Hospital for Infectious Diseases.

In 1904, the building was purchased by Edinburgh University and refurbished to the

designs of R. Rowland Anderson & Balfour Paul to accommodate the Engineering and Science Departments. It may have been at this point that the building became known as the Old High School. As part of the refurbishment all interior walls were knocked out of the front block of the building and its tower was heightened and given an ogee shaped roof. The Old High School was

then occupied by the Department of Geography from 1932 to 1984 and was subsequently refurbished for use by the University Dental School, when most of the original internal features were removed or covered up (Gittings & Morrison 2015). Since 1995 the building has been occupied by the University of Edinburgh Department of Archaeology.