

3. HISTORY OF OCCUPANCY AND KEY EVENTS

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While a great deal of previous research has been undertaken on the history and architecture of Riddle's Court, very little work had been done systematically. This was particularly noticeable in relation to the period encompassed by the late 16th and 17th centuries, for which very few hard facts had been established in relation to the property (prior to at least the mid-18th century, the buildings were known as McMorran's/Smith's Court, reflecting the ownership of the building in the 16th and 17th centuries). An unpublished report by Robin Tait (2012), which in turn was reliant upon an anonymous early 20th-century manuscript about the property in Edinburgh Library (Wright 2009: 16), underpinned all previous information available about the structure, and Tait established a development plan for the site, showing how it had been developed by various owners during the 16th and 17th centuries. Supporting this plan was the logical assumption that the various tenements of land in and around Riddle's Court ran on a north/south axis from the High Street downhill to the feature known as the King's Wall and the Cowgate (Wright 2009: appendix 7.2). However, new research demonstrates that while the tenements between the High Street and the façade of the great gate to McMorran's Court may have run in that direction, the two tenements below them which were conjoined to form the 'Great Tenement' ran on a east/west axis perpendicular to the others. These two east/west running tenements were referred to as the 'fore land' (the one nearest to the High Street) and the 'back land' (being the tenement closest to the King's Wall). Although the Great Tenement was subsequently subdivided again and again, and the fabric repeatedly altered, it retained large apartments still occupied by major and minor aristocracy and wealthy merchants until the mid-18th century at least.

As part of the works for the refurbishment, new research looked at the period for the initial and subsequent development of the property between *c* 1590 and *c* 1710 and was almost wholly based upon hitherto unpublished documentation. A timeline of the key events including occupancy and

related alterations as a result is listed in the Appendix at the end of this report.

3.1 McMorran's Court – the Great Tenement

John McMorran was the creator of the 'Great Tenement', lending his name to the complex of buildings which would later be known as Riddle's Court. McMorran was a merchant burghess (property-owning merchant) and baillie of Edinburgh (a civic officer, similar to an alderman or magistrate, in the burghs of Scotland; baillies appointed the high constables), and on his death he was listed as owning shares in nine ships with additional goods scattered in warehouses across Europe; these included wine in Dieppe, unspecified goods in Bordeaux, wax, salmon and pistols (Sanderson 1983). He, therefore, was a man of some importance in the town, and is referred to here as Baillie McMorran.

From a later (1630) list of writs relating to that property¹ it is clear that Baillie McMorran purchased his first piece of real estate on the south side of the High Street, a piece of waste ground, in 1580 from the Henrysone family. This was followed in 1586 by a second purchase of a larger piece of property from the same family which included backlands, houses, buildings, closes, yards and other 'pertinents'. He subsequently created his 'Great Tenement' post-1590 from a number of disparate buildings and structures lying to the south of the Lawnmarket on either side of what later became known as Riddle's Court which, originally, appears to have extended downhill south as far as the Cowgate.

Unlike its immensely tall and vertical neighbours facing the Lawnmarket and along Fisher's Close, the Great Tenement was much lower and greater in extent than the tenements facing the Lawnmarket and their immediate rear extensions – probably three and a half storeys at maximum above the inner court. However, McMorran's Court still remained the tallest building this far back down-slope of these closes. New evidence of there being blocked windows and stairs looking east on the second floor of both the North and South Blocks appears to confirm this, as these would have provided open views originally. At first-floor level, there was a horizontally planned suite of interconnecting apartments, some of which

overlooked fine yards/gardens on the slopes to the south; the essence of the Great Tenement was the provision of a continuous circulation of state and private chambers around the court at first-floor level, and improved circulation at ground level. The principal entrance seems to have been from the west, accessed by a close from the Upper Bow.

John McMorrان was shot and killed in September 1595 by a young boy when sent, in his role as baillie, to break up a sit-in at the Royal High School (then located near Drummond Street), where scholars were disputing the length of their holidays (Dalyell 1798: 34–5; Grant 1882, vol 2: 289). Following his death, an inventory of his ‘goods and chattels’ describes the contents of the various rooms at McMorrان’s Court

(MacPhail 1924: 226–30), indicating six separate rooms on either two or three levels, which cannot have comprised the entirety of the structure as currently understood. Accordingly, in 1595 Baillie McMorrان can only have occupied a part of the Great Tenement building, which might indicate that it had been designed to be a property investment, perhaps with the family (his wife Katherine Hutcheson and their children James, John, George and Ninian) only occupying a proportion of it and the rest available for commercial leasing. Baillie McMorrان had two brothers: George and Ninian (referred to here as the elder Ninian).

In 1598 the property hosted two banquets in quick succession for the Duke of Holstein, the son



Illus 3 Portrait of the Duke of Holstein. (Courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#))

of King Frederick II of Denmark (Illus 3), and his entourage.² The duke was the brother of Anne of Denmark, wife to King James VI of Scotland (Illus 4 & 5). The duke was visiting Edinburgh on an official visit, intending to depart with a Scottish embassy to Denmark and the Holy Roman Empire to secure support for James's accession to the throne of England. The lack of a grand town hall in the city meant officials hosted events in their homes, and this event was hosted at the late Baillie McMorrans' house, one of the finest in Edinburgh, to honour the duke as well as the king and queen as guests at the second banquet. The painted beam ceiling is considered likely to have been commissioned as part of the work to either host the duke or

commemorate the event (Pearce 2012).

Alexander Seton, Earl of Dunfermline, began renting the south part of the Great Tenement at some point during this period, prior to his death in 1622, including the courtyard floor, the whole of the back tenement and parts of the fore tenement. Seton was the most significant cultural patron of his day and was Great Chancellor of Scotland from 1609 until his death, at which point the Earl of Lauderdale took over as tenant of those lodgings. This part of the property was termed 'the Chancellor's House' due to Seton's occupancy (Wood 1940: 318), and it seems to have acted as his town house. The Chancellor's House also had its own brewhouse, stables and woman house.³



Illus 4 Portrait of Anne of Denmark (c 1605–10). (© National Portrait Gallery, London)



Illus 5 Portrait of King James VI of Scotland (1621). (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

3.2 Splitting the Great Tenement 1616–30

The period 1616–30 saw the sale of the entire Great Tenement. It was split into two properties by Baillie McMorran's son Ninian: one was sold outside the McMorran family; the other was purchased by his uncle, the elder Ninian.

In 1616 McMorran's son Ninian sold the fore tenement (the one closest to the High Street and described as an L-shaped building with two turnpikes at that time) and a smaller tenement (to the right of the great gate) to his brother George McMorran⁴ (the 'neighbour from hell', see below). The fore tenement was occupied by the elder Ninian in the upper dwelling, and by Alexander Seton, and

then Patrick Whitelaw, in the lower dwelling, and included a brewhouse used as a stable by the Earl of Dunfermline along with another dwelling.⁵ The 'great gate', by which the court was accessed from the Lawnmarket and comprised lodgings above a pend, remained part of the back tenement property; this may have been a deliberate choice by the son Ninian to ensure freedom of access to the back tenement from the High Street, which he occupied at that time. This change required alteration to the circulation, and greater strictures on privacy. It is arguable, therefore, that it was at this stage that the north part of the South Block underwent its most major changes.

In 1630 the son Ninian McMorran sold the back tenement (the tenement furthest away from the High Street) and great gate to Sir John Smith.⁶ At the date of sale the tenant was John, first Earl of Lauderdale, who appears to have leased the entire back tenement from the McMorran family.⁷ Sir John Smith subsequently evicted the Earl of Lauderdale. In 1630 the back tenement covered four floor levels in total, which means that unless the 1596 description missed out describing a substantial part of the back tenement block, one or possibly two storeys could have been added between 1596 and 1630.

The historical documents around this time pertaining to ownership and tenancies are peppered with cases of fractious neighbour disputes. It seems one of the sons of Baillie McMorran, George, was the typical ‘neighbour from hell’. There are two serious complaints recorded against him in the burgh records. In the first of these, on 25 July 1631, he had created a hole on a side wall of his tenement to the detriment of one of his neighbours. Ordered by the Dean of the Goldsmiths’ Guild to repair this hole with ‘stane and lyme’, George had instead dressed it, inserted a glass case, and turned it into a window. The Guild court subsequently ordered George to remove the glass and fill the hole in his wall.⁸ Here we have an early example of enforcement in action relating to unauthorised property changes.

The second case against him occurred on 15 August 1638 when owner Sir John Smith complained that George had built a new ‘ravel of wood’ (perhaps a stockpile of construction materials or firewood) adjacent to the exterior of the great gate, so big that it prevented horses with loads of coal and other cargoes from entering the gate and accessing the courtyard within, contrary to the good order of the neighbourhood. Interestingly, in the same complaint Smith also mentioned that George had not yet closed up the three entrances in the great gate and the courtyard which he had promised to do in 1616. The Dean of Guild and his council subsequently visited the site with Smith and McMorran and found in favour of Smith. George McMorran was ordered to remove the wood from outside the gate and close up the three entrances with stone and lime forthwith.⁹ No further complaints are recorded against him in these respects by Smith so it must be presumed that George complied with

the order from the Guild. The only gate or opening capable of allowing entrance of a cart must have been a blocked doorway with iron hangers recorded on the ground floor of the East Block during the refurbishment works. Arguably this feature is a strong contender for the position of the so-called ‘great gate’.

A year later George became embroiled in another row with his neighbours. On 25 September 1639 he accused Adame Bartane, merchant burghess, Patrick Thomsons, merchant and tenant, and Jonat Eistoun, widow of the late Alexander Stewart, merchant burghess, of washing their pots and throwing filth and excrement out of one of their windows into a gutter running above George’s laiche (low) gallery, polluting his property. In this instance the court found for George and ordered his neighbours to glaze their windows next to the guttering.¹⁰

3.3 Back tenement 1630–1702

Sources suggest Sir John Smith was something of a rogue, particularly in relation to his international business affairs, which eventually resulted in him losing the back tenement of Riddle’s Court to Sir John Clerk of Penicuik (first baronet, 1649–1722) in 1676. Essentially, between 1658 and 1675 Smith and his sons borrowed various sums of money for their business dealings, all of which were secured against various properties that they owned. Sir John Clerk of Penicuik eventually took action after his father’s death in 1674, foreclosing on the loans to Smith and his sons and ending up in possession of the south-most tenement in 1676.¹¹

Sir John Clerk seems to have kept the back tenement until 1684 when he sold the property to Roderick Mackenzie of Prestonhall, brother of George Mackenzie (the future first Earl of Cromartie).¹² The date 1684 on the plaster rose bearing the royal cipher and ‘CR2’ in the fore tenement (Room S03) (Illus 6), was most likely inserted by Roderick Mackenzie to signify the date of his acquisition of the property, and the support given by his family to the monarch following the Restoration in 1660.

Changes to the structure in this period include the addition of three new jambs (extensions) at some point before 1702.¹³ These extensions appear to have been undertaken during the period that



Illus 6 Plaster rose in Room S03. (© David Morris)

Roderick Mackenzie owned the tenement and were subsequently demolished during the construction of Victoria Street. A contemporary view of the buildings was produced by Slezer in 1693 (Illus 7).

By 1702 Roderick Mackenzie of Prestonhall had sold part of the back tenement (the upper lodging) to his brother George Mackenzie and his wife Margaret, Countess of Wemyss. Roderick Mackenzie had previously sold the other part of the same back tenement (the lower lodging) to Sir Thomas Stewart of Balcashie who, in turn, sold it to Sir Archibald Mure, ex-provost of Edinburgh.¹⁴ This information is important because it is the first time in the historical record that ownership of the back tenement is known to have been split between different people. Splitting the back tenement between different owners would mean any subsequent alterations made to the internal fabric of the tenement block would not be made across the entire structure. This may account for the now noticeable differences in floor levels between the various sections of the tenement.

The other point of interest during this period is the mention of the broad stair to the east of the

tenement which led to a garden, and confirmation of a garden in the back yard of the back tenement.¹⁵ The property had extensive formal gardens, which were a rarity then in this part of Edinburgh. An extract from James Gordon's Plan of 1647 shows the extent of the gardens at that time, reaching into an area which later became part the Cowgate as it expanded (Illus 8).

3.4 Back tenement post-1702

3.4.1 Upper lodging

In 1702 both the upper lodging and the great gate were in the possession of Countess Margaret of Wemyss. She died in 1705 and her husband on 17 August 1714 (Kidd 2004). The subsequent owner of the upper lodging was Duchess Anne of Buccleuch (1651–1732) (Nicholson 2004), who was related through marriage to Margaret (Sorensen 2004).

Duchess Anne had not previously been recognised as an owner and tenant of the upper lodging, since there are no references to the name Riddle's Court (or any of its other incarnations) in the Buccleuch muniments. The property is, however, described



Illus 7 Extract from John Slezer's 1693 depiction of 'The southside of the Castle of Edinburgh'. (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland)

as being 'in the Lawn Mercat on the south side of the High Street at the foot of that close or vennall entering on the west side of Fisher's Land'.¹⁶ And after purchasing the upper lodging, the duchess installed Sir James Mackenzie of Royston as her long-term tenant, one of the senators of the College of Justice, and a son of the first Earl of Cromartie.¹⁷ This explains why the court was known as Royston's Court in 1730.¹⁸ Later renovation accounts would suggest that Duchess Anne was also the owner of the wing of the side tenement bordered on the east by Fisher's Close and occupied by James Mackenzie of Royston and William Carmichael. A timeline of the key events including occupancy and related alterations as a result is listed in the Appendix.

The duchess kept receipts for all the renovations carried out by the various local trades and her accounts show that a great sum of money was spent

during her ownership. Beginning in 1714 and lasting until 1730 she embarked upon an almost annual campaign of remediation and alteration of the upper lodging, and her legacy includes very ornate Italian marble fireplaces and a plaster ceiling (Illus 9). In the upper lodging the number of rooms was reduced, indicating the enlargement of living spaces, and cosmetic work such as wood panelling and painting were undertaken. The roof was also repaired and strengthened, perhaps a consequence of a change from thatch to slate, and the account specifies the use of Swedish, Bergen and Druntain (Trondheim) 'dales' (pine planks) in the renovations.¹⁹ There are at least three other occasions, in August 1714, June 1720 and September 1722, when large quantities of dales from Trondheim and Bergen were required, but those accounts do not specify what they were used for and in which part of the structure they



Illus 8 Extract from James Gordon's Plan of 1647 showing extent of Riddle's Court and its formal gardens to the south. (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland)



Illus 9 Italian marble fireplace purchased by Duchess Anne of Buccleuch. (© CFA Archaeology Ltd)

were employed. The accounts also provide excellent evidence that wood was occasionally recycled during the various renovation processes.²⁰

After Duchess Anne's death in 1732 the upper lodging and other parts of the tenement remained in the family as the property of Duke Francis until 1749, when he sold the property to Baillie William Alexander.²¹ After 1749 the upper lodging disappears from the historical records. This may be a reflection of the fact that the tenement was no longer owned by aristocracy, the people whose papers are more likely to survive, which may also go hand-in-hand with the construction of the New Town of Edinburgh later in the second half of the 18th century, as living in the New Town may have been considered to have been more desirable to a certain class of people (McKean 2013: 262).

3.4.2 Lower lodging

Sir Archibald Mure did not enjoy the lower lodging for long. He was dead by 1708, at which time his

three daughters, Margaret, Jean and Isobel, jointly inherited the lodging. There are few surviving records relating to the lower lodging but it seems likely that there had been a dispute among the three sisters and their respective spouses over their joint legacy. The subsequent owner of the lower tenement, Sir Robert Stewart of Tillicoultry, a Lord of Session, purchased the lodging in 1708.²²

3.5 Fore tenement

There are far fewer records relating to the fore tenement than the back tenement. This can probably be accounted for by the simple fact that while the back tenement continued to be owned by aristocrats, the fore tenement did not attract such clientele: this makes the latter much harder to trace in the historical record. From 1639 to the late 18th century records for the tenement become patchy, but occasional records appear which allow insights into ownership for brief windows of time.

In 1639 the fore tenement still belonged to the

son George McMorran, but it disappears from the historical record thereafter until it reappears in 1709, when Gabriel Rankin of Orchardhead inherited it (or part of it) from his father Walter, an Edinburgh burgess.²³ At that time the fore tenement was still split into two different properties, belonging to Catherine Hutchison (the lower lodging) and Patrick Graham (the upper lodging). The fore tenement does not obviously appear again.

The discovery that the Buccleuch family and James Mackenzie of Royston were the owners and tenants of sections of McMorran's Court between 1714 and 1749 perhaps explains who commissioned the Norie panel artwork in the fore tenement. Removal of a blocked window revealed the 18th-century painted panel in Room S03, part of the so-called Norie panels that were painted by the landscape artist James Norie around 1730 (see section 4.1.2 'External elevations' below). A sasine of 1730 seems to locate Royston there, and his main country residence at Royston House (now Caroline Park) near Granton also contained Norie artwork. The tenure of this fore tenement lodging by Royston could also help explain the plaster ceiling rose that contains the initials of King Charles II and the date 1684. That was the year of King Charles's death according to the Julian calendar which started the new year from the 25th of March. Royston's wife, Elizabeth Mackenzie, was the daughter of the famous supporter of royalism and avid prosecutor of Covenanters, George Mackenzie of Rosehaugh (Jackson 2007).

3.6 Riddel's Land

In 1727 the fore tenement property fronting onto the Lawnmarket was acquired and redeveloped into a new tenement by Captain George Riddel. Following this, it appears that the new tenement was known as Riddel's Land and the entire structure surrounding the courtyard was known as Riddel's Court. A property referred to as Riddel's Land enters the official Edinburgh sasine record in 1753 shortly after the death of Captain Riddel.²⁴ However, it is clear from this entry and subsequent entries that all of these records refer to the new tenement built by Riddel which faced onto the Lawnmarket.²⁵ None of these records make any reference to the other structures which comprised Riddel's Court. It is possible this is when the name of the Court changed

(from McMorran's/Smith's Court to Riddel's Court), as a reflection of the magnificence of Riddel's new property on the Lawnmarket.

The year 1727 is also the probable date of the paintings, commissioned for the panelled room (Room S03) with the 1684 ceiling, by James Norie Senior (1684–1757) and his sons; paintings by the Norie family can also be found at Royston House (now Caroline Park). See the gazetteer of Bryan & Bruce (2008) for a detailed account of the panels.

Between 1751 and 1763, David Hume, philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment, lived in Riddel's Land, probably in part of the fore tenement (Wright 2009: 22–9).

3.7 19th and 20th centuries

By the time of the 1841 census, the majority of the dwellings at Riddel's Court were populated by shopkeepers, artisans and labourers, with some of the rooms including a bookbinder's workshop and public theatre (Bryan & Bruce 2008). The Riddel's Court properties were under multiple occupancy and fell into decline and disrepair, with only ad hoc repairs undertaken (based on observations of the building as it survives). A historic drawing by Drummond in 1854 captured the sense of 19th-century dilapidation of the building (Illus 10).

Radical changes took place during the 19th century (Wright 2009), occasioned by three disastrous fires that raged between the Tron church and Parliament Square. An ambitious improvement scheme to provide access to the Old Town from the west, and between the Old and New Towns led to the creation of Victoria Street between 1829 and 1834, which required the removal of a large proportion of the backland of the properties behind Riddel's Court and those at the Castle Hill and West Bow (Illus 11). The principal architects behind Victoria Street were William Burn (1789–1870) and Thomas Hamilton (1784–1858). While they saw merit in conserving the 'antiquities' of the High Street as found at the Lawnmarket, the properties at West Bow (and presumably those leading to what is now the Grassmarket) were described as wooden tenements crowded together and in a ruined state. The Victoria Street works resulted in the removal of two back jamps (outshot buildings) from Riddel's Court, and the garden and



Illus 10 Sketch of Riddle's Close by Drummond in 1854 of the demolished tenement on the left-hand side and the still surviving corbelled doorway and arch into Riddle's Court. (© [City of Edinburgh Council - Edinburgh Libraries](#))

backlands were redeveloped with brick industrial buildings.

In the 1850s the Mechanics' Subscription Library was relocated from James Court and occupied the whole of the building, using the ground floor as the library and renting out the tenements above. The Library owned all of the rear property, including the tenements at the upper levels, which were rented out. These tenants included W Robert Glass, a merchant, W Daniel McInnes, a picture dealer, and a Miss Sarah Banner.²⁶ The Library benefited from many associations with the leading printers and

publishing houses of the city, who donated works to it. Patrick Geddes purchased the back tenement from the Mechanics' Subscription Library in 1889 and over the next few years acquired the remaining parts of the quadrangle formed by Riddle's Court in a piecemeal fashion as they became available.²⁷

3.7.1 Patrick Geddes and the creation of the first University Halls

The purchase of Riddle's Court by Geddes in the late 19th century put an end to the building's use as housing by private domestic tenants and began



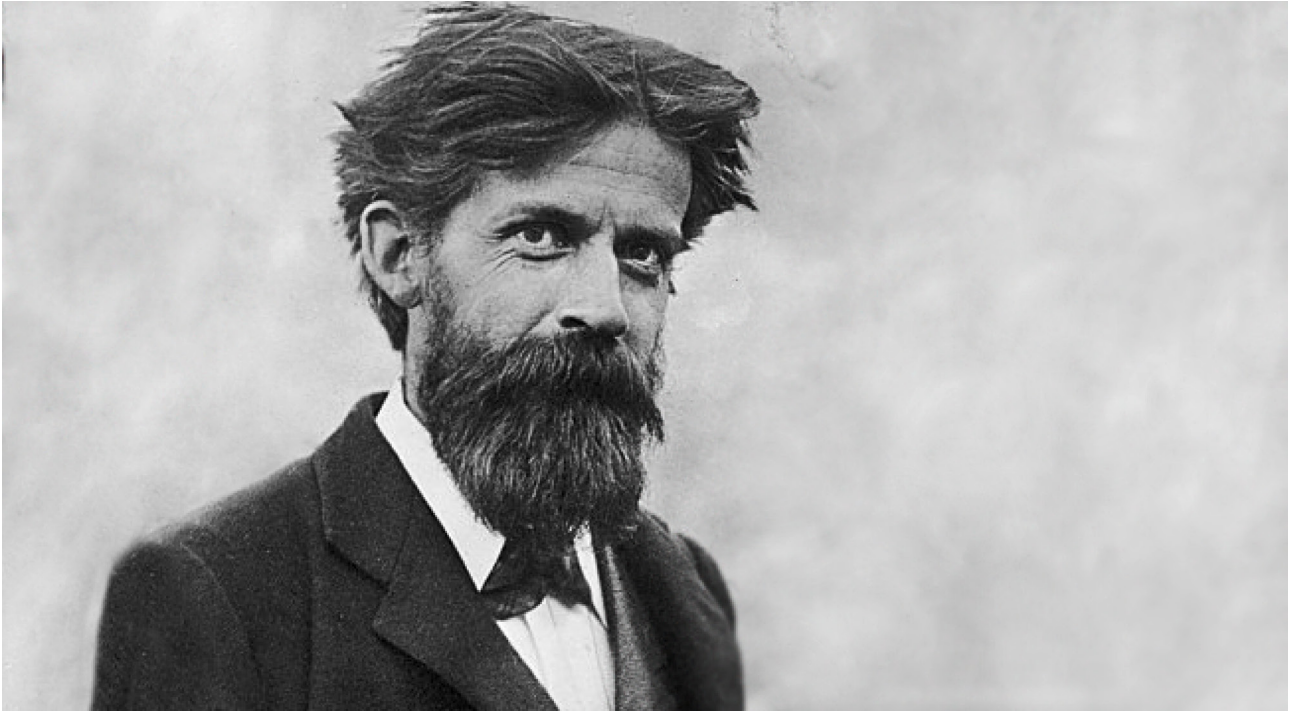
Illus 11 View of the new rear façade of Riddle's Court onto Victoria Street following demolition of the backland properties. (© Scottish Historic Buildings Trust)

its conversion into student accommodation. Patrick Geddes (1854–1931) was a Scottish biologist, sociologist, geographer and philanthropist, who was best known for his innovative thinking in the field of urban planning (Illus 12).

He wanted to encourage a mixture of people from different backgrounds and professions to settle in the Old Town to create a mixed, vibrant community. Geddes was also greatly concerned with the lack of accommodation for university undergraduates in Edinburgh.²⁸ He founded University Hall, the first Hall of Residence in Edinburgh. The Hall was set up in renovated properties around the Lawnmarket,

including in Riddle's Court, and the motto of one of his summer schools, *Vivendo discimus* ('By living we learn'), is incised into the voussoirs of the pend leading to the inner court (see Illus 22 and 4.1.2 'Room G12' below).

By 1889, Geddes had secured part of Riddle's Court and refurbished the back tenement, which housed students, most of whom were medical students from overseas within the British Empire (from places such as Madras and Mauritius). However, to increase the property further Geddes needed to clear the adjoining slums and convert the front buildings. By 1892 he had acquired three sides



Illus 12 Portrait of Patrick Geddes. (© Scottish Historic Buildings Trust)

of Riddle's Court and the fore tenement.²⁹ Geddes then approached the city authorities to determine whether the properties flanking Riddle's Close could be removed in order to 'largely increase the area, light and breathing space of the outer court [now Riddle's Close] and remove some very undesirable tenants'.³⁰ The same record also states that this would allow for the number of students to be increased from 14 to 24 which would prove 'desirable alike for grounds of economy and sociability'.³¹ It is clear that nearly doubling the number of students would allow more income for further improvements and pave the way to opening up the claustrophobic outer close, which was merely a passage flanked by tall dilapidated buildings, and Geddes's application in this regard was successful.

3.7.2 20th century

By the turn of the 20th century, Riddle's Court was in a state of decline and ceased as a university hall. By 1905 it was mainly owned by the Town & Gown Association Ltd and it continued to house domestic tenants as well as the High United Free Church. It was purchased by Edinburgh Council in 1946 and the courtyard complex remained in domestic occupation up until the late 1950s and early 1960s, when it was converted into a public meeting space and Fringe venue for the Edinburgh Festival (Bryan & Bruce 2008). The North Block was occupied by the Workers' Educational Association from 1975, with the rest of the blocks occupied by the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust from 2011.