

### 3. HISTORICAL DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE

Beaverbank Tannery was located in the Canonmills district. The origins of the name of the district lie in the mills of the medieval period on the Water of Leith in this area which belonged to the monastic community at Holyrood (Canons’

Mills; Grant 1880, vol V: 86). The area only began to be developed in the 19th century as various locations along the Water of Leith began to be used for tannery sites. Residential expansion soon followed, with tenement buildings being erected in the vicinity throughout the later 19th century.



Illus 2 a- Site Location, Ordnance Survey 1852; b- Site Location, Ordnance Survey 1877; c- Site Location, Ordnance Survey 1894; d- Site Location, Ordnance Survey 1931 (© National Library of Scotland)

Mapping from the mid-18th century (Roy's Map, 1752–55, not illustrated) indicates the presence of a mill lade running from Canon Loch through the general vicinity of the development and then on to the Water of Leith to the north. A building is shown on the south side of the mill lade at the point the lade turns to the north. This is thought to be Logie Mill, but the specific location of the structure cannot be accurately located from Roy's map. On Robert Kirkwood's plan from 1817 (not illustrated) it was labelled as 'CLARKS MILL BLEACHFIELD. Mr HAY'S PROPERTY' (Kirkwood 1817).

By the mid-19th century, the mapping, being more accurate, shows that Logie Mill and the mill lade lie outside the development area to the south-east (Ordnance Survey 1852; Illus 2a). The land to the north of the mill is depicted on the 1852 map as a sub-rectangular field bounded to the south and east by the mill lade and to the west by a road lined by trees.

By the time of the second edition of the Ordnance Survey (OS) in 1877 a tannery and skinnery had been built in the southern half of the development (Illus 2b), joined by further buildings in the north of the site by the publication of the 1894 OS map (Illus 2c).

The site where the tannery was originally located was absorbed into Robert Lamb's sawmill at Logie Green during WW1 and later became a vehicle repair shop. During the first decade of the 20th century the structures at the north end of the area were demolished and replaced by a garage, first depicted in the 1931 OS survey (Illus 2d).

### 3.1 Brief history of the Scottish leather trade, 18th–19th centuries

The manufacture of leather, albeit ancient, had a boom from the mid-18th century onwards and played a significant role in the country's economy and trade. Scotland had an abundance of raw materials required for tanning. The primary source of hides and skins came from livestock farming, particularly cattle and sheep. These animals were raised for meat, but their hides were valuable byproducts. The extra production of tannin – essential to turning untreated hides and skins into workable leather – from stripped bark, a by-product of the charcoal and ironworks industry, as well as

easy access to water contributed to the expansion of this trade, although the final push was very likely given by the increased demand due to demographic expansion and industrialisation.

Scottish leather was highly regarded for its quality, and a significant portion of the leather produced in Scotland was exported to the rest of the UK and to the United States, Canada and other countries. It was used in various industries, including the production of shoes, belts, saddles and upholstery. Edinburgh was considered the 'chief seat of the leather manufacture in Scotland' and as early as 1778 '...there were several tanneries in the outskirts of the city, and that skinners were well employed' (Bremner 1869/1969 ed: 352).

The 19th century witnessed significant changes in the tanning industry. Technological advancements, such as the invention of new tanning machinery, improved the efficiency of the tanning process. The use of steam power and mechanised equipment allowed tanneries to scale up production, aided by the introduction of 'new' tanning agents such as sumac, valonia and gambier (SLT 1882: 48, 1886: 16), imported from Asia and the Americas, which drastically reduced the length of the tanning process. Chrome tanning also became popular due to its faster processing time. It used chemicals containing chromium to tan the hides, reducing the time required compared to traditional bark tanning (Church 1971: 550). The expansion of the British Empire and the inclusion of territories such as Canada, for example, contributed to the further development of this industry. More exotic animals' skins such as porpoise and seal skins were advertised (SLT 1894: 2): 'Ladies will be interested that for ... their comfortable winter jackets ... 736,336 seal skins were imported' (Morn Post 1871).

The tanning process involves several stages, including cleaning, soaking, de-hairing, tanning and finishing. Specifically, tanning or curing skins involved steeping fresh (and therefore putrefying) hides for months in pits of lime solution to soften. This enabled workers to 'unhair' or depilate them on a convex surface (SLT 1897: 17). The best hides, and those for splitting into thinner slices, could be further cleaned by 'bateing' with animal dung. One description had '4 bushels' (c 200lbs) of hen or pigeon droppings and water heated to 90°F (32°C) before 30–50 hides were added (SLT 1897: 17).

Dog excrement collected from kennels or streets was also used (Procter 1914: 61). Tanning pits were the next stage, filled with 'liquor' of tanbark or, by the 1890s, artificial tanning substitutes.

Currying was a secondary stage, mostly done by hand, inducing flexibility and waterproofing by 'smoothing the surface and then working in a mixture of cod oil and tallow, called dubbin' (Church 1971: 549). Wet skins were draped on a flat beam where the currier used a sharp knife for 'skiving' (loosening putrescent flesh) and then 'shaving' the skin (SLT 1896: 392). With a sharp blade, a skilled worker obtained an even, clean surface and consistent thickness of the hide.

Tanneries were often located near water sources for the tanning process and transportation. The earliest and more rural tanneries would often be located near 'slaughter houses and cattle market' (Donnachie 1971: 48). In an urban context, 'the skinning process was carried out in a separate plant, and hides often went directly to the tannery' (*ibid*).

This led to the growth of towns and cities in areas with active tanning industries. For example, places like Dumfries, Glasgow, Paisley and Dundee became prominent tanning centres (Waterer 1944: 171). This became such a profitable business that as early as the mid-19th century, Leeds leather manufactories employed more than 100 workers each (Gomersall 2000). Around 1870, 500 tanneries in Britain (120 of which were located in Scotland) gave 'employment, directly or indirectly, to nearly 400,000 persons', of whom 32,000 worked in Scotland (Bremner 1869: 353; Bir DP 1871).

The figures for 1896, taken from the census, record over 27,000 horse-gear makers, 10,300 tanners and above 25,500 curriers, totalling 55,000. Although the number of UK tanning firms fell from 708 in 1880 to 576 by 1900, and 390 in 1911, likely due to consolidation and industrialisation of formerly smaller-scale processes, leather dressing companies (for example dyeing, graining and varnishing) greatly increased (Church 1971: 548).

The use of leather became more specialised, though the range of trades lessened during the 19th century (SLT 1882: 52, 88, 1886: 377, 1896: 331) as new materials were substituted for it,

particularly rubber. The Leather Trades Directory for 1896 shows 279 different specialised trades (increasing to 314 in 1911), ranging from currier's knife dealers to gaiter and closed-shoe upper manufacturers, bristle merchants, depilating fluid suppliers, cap-lining cutters and leather gilders (Kelly & Co 1896: xxvii–xxviii; 1911: xxviii–xxx).

The tanning industry was notorious for its environmental impact during this period. The tanning process produced a lot of waste, including chemicals and effluents that were often discharged into nearby rivers, causing pollution and environmental concerns. Over time, there were attempts to regulate and improve these practices.

The Alkali Act of 1863 (Great Britain. Parliament 1847–1876) was one of the earliest pieces of legislation in the United Kingdom that aimed to control pollution from industrial processes, including tanning. This act required industries, including tanneries, to install condensing chambers and other equipment to reduce emissions of noxious gases, such as sulphur dioxide. In addition to national legislation, many local authorities in Scotland implemented their own bylaws and regulations to control tanning pollution. These regulations often addressed issues like the disposal of tannery waste and the construction of tannery buildings to minimise the impact on nearby residents. Tanneries were significant sources of river pollution due to the chemicals and waste products generated during the tanning process. In response to concerns about river pollution, some local authorities and the central government introduced regulations to limit the discharge of tannery effluents into rivers and streams. Government inspectors were appointed to ensure compliance with pollution control regulations. Tanneries were subject to regular inspections to assess their adherence to the law. Non-compliance could result in fines or even the closure of a tannery. As the understanding of public health improved in the 19th century, there was growing awareness of the potential health risks associated with tanning pollution. Foul odours, contaminated water and air pollution were all concerns for nearby communities, and this led to increased pressure on authorities to enforce pollution control measures. Some tanneries adopted new technologies and

processes that were less polluting. For example, the introduction of the chrome tanning method in the latter half of the 19th century was seen as a cleaner and more efficient alternative to traditional bark tanning.

Several 19th-century tanneries played important roles in the city's tanning industry. While it is difficult to single out a definitive list of the 'most important' tanneries, as the prominence of specific establishments may have varied over time, there were notable tanneries that made significant contributions to the industry. The Caledonian Tannery, located in the Grassmarket area of Edinburgh, was one of the largest and most well-known tanneries in the city during the 19th century. It was known for producing high-quality leather and had a reputation for innovation in tanning processes. The tannery's location in the heart of the city made it easily accessible to both suppliers of raw materials and markets for its finished leather goods. J. & W. Howden's Tannery, situated in the Canongate area of Edinburgh, was known for its production of leather for harnesses, saddles and related equestrian equipment. The Howden family had a long history in the tanning business in Edinburgh, and their tannery was a respected establishment in the industry. William Henry & Co. Tannery was known for its production of curried leather, a type of leather used for making bookbinding and other high-end leather goods. The tannery was located on the High Street in Edinburgh and was one of the more specialised establishments in the city. Tanners' Hall, located on Canongate, served as a significant hub for the city's tanners and leatherworkers. It was not a tannery itself, but rather a gathering place for members of the trade, where business transactions and interactions among tanners took place. The establishment reflected the importance of the tanning industry in Edinburgh's economic and social life.

By the end of the 19th century, the tanning industry in Edinburgh, as in other parts of the UK, faced increasing competition from other regions and countries. Technological advancements and changes in the leather industry led to the decline of traditional tanning methods and some consolidation of the industry (Singer 1954).

## 3.2 The Johnstons (1830s–1881)

### 3.2.1 David Johnston's Tannery in the Old Town, 1830s–1868

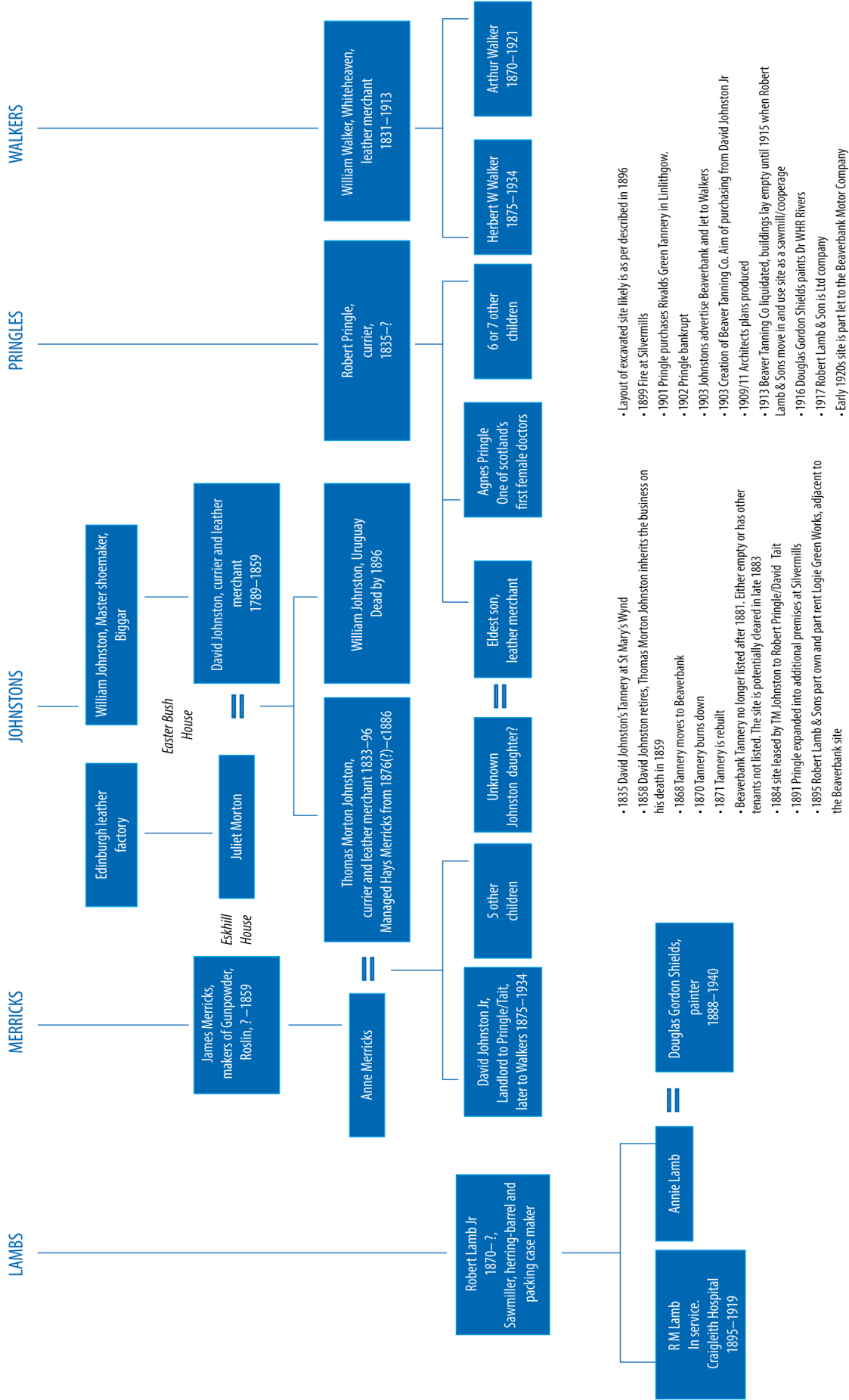
The Beaverbank Tannery, dating from *c* 1868, represented a late addition to the Edinburgh tannery infrastructure and its trade started with the Johnston family (Illus 3).

David Johnston (1798–1859) was one of nine children of William Johnston, a master shoemaker from Biggar (Census 1841; NRS, Johnston 1859). He followed the family leatherworking tradition and was a 'currier and leather merchant' when in 1825 he married Juliet Morton, daughter of an Edinburgh leather factor (Blackwood 1825). The couple had five children, and by the mid-1830s, David and one 'Adam Johnston, currier' (probably related, but not brothers) were established in St Mary's Wynd. David lived off the Canongate and could afford two live-in servants (Census 1841). His brother James, another currier, appears in later directories, next door to David's tannery (for example Dir 1855: 263, 1860: 355, at Nos 68, 70).

In the absence of any of Johnston's company archives, the tannery's history must be reconstructed from other records. In 1851, as a tanner, currier and leather merchant, David Johnston employed 11 men (Census 1851). Around 1858 (age 61 and a year before his death), he retired and moved from the impoverished Old Town to the lavish Easter Bush House at Roslin (Dir 1857: 375, 1858: 400), a large Adam-designed mansion. On his death in 1859, his son Thomas Morton Johnston (1833–96), inherited the business (NRS, Johnston 1833; NRS, Johnston 1859) and by 1861, the workforce employed by the business had doubled to 22 and records confirm that the firm was producing some shoe leather for a local wholesale boot manufacturer (Census 1861; Ed Gaz 1866). T M Johnston was by now living in affluent suburban Newington (Census 1861; Ed Gaz 1866).

### 3.2.2 City Improvement Act, slum clearance and fires 1867–8

The Johnstons moved to Beaverbank between May and December 1868 (Dir 1868: 337, 1869: 410; Fleet & MacCannell 2014: 182). They were probably prompted by the knowledge of the



Illus 3 Timeline of owners and businesses at Beaverbank

approaching redevelopment of St Mary's Wynd, which began in May 1868.

Due to the sheer size of the leather industry in Edinburgh, some areas of the city saw an increased number of tanneries developing alongside slums. St Mary's Wynd and West Port were two of these areas. According to Dr Henry Littlejohn's famous sanitary improvement report of 1865, St Mary's Wynd was notoriously among the most overcrowded areas in Europe, with 646 persons per acre (Laxton & Rodger 2013: 169, Report 113). Tanning removed putrefying flesh from dead animal skins, which were stored on-site before being processed, and various processes emitted ammonia. In addition, the foul-smelling 'flesh and refuse' from cleaning hides in St Mary's Wynd was sold to gluemakers (SLT 1880: 25), adding to 'the stink industries' (Adamson et al 2016: 195).

Throughout the 1860s, opinions both municipal and public, coalesced to tackle the grotesque overcrowding and filth of the city's slums. Major fires, building collapses and disease prompted the proactive Lord Provost, William Chambers, to promote large-scale clearance of congested areas, and the City Improvement Trust was formed in 1867 (Rodger 2001: 430–47; Johnson 2010: 23, 38–45; Fleet & MacCannell 2014: 181–6). These measures were required to prevent incidents such as the large fire at Hewit's Tannery in North Gray's Close in October 1867, and another at a 'small' fireworks factory in Canongate. The tannery was hemmed in by tenements:

being within 15 or 16 ft of the [fire] ... towering in all directions to most unwieldy heights ... the fire burst into the bark store [holding] a great quantity of oil and pitch ... the open windows of the [houses] were crowded [with spectators. The tannery appeared] in glowing perspective, shooting out solid sheets of flame (Scotsman 1867a).

This was not the first tanworks fire, their 'highly inflammatory material' being 'open invitations ... to calamity' (Scotsman 1867b). New Council legislation decreed 'no new tanworks shall be set up in town', but used the 'noxious and offensive' stench, rather than fire-safety, as their justification (ibid).

The ground from the south-eastern side of the Wynd had been cleared by January 1869, including Brown's and Johnston's tanneries, whose grids of pits appeared on the 1st edition OS map (OS 1852: 36; Dir 1868: 243; Scotsman 1869). This suggests construction probably began at the Beaverbank site in late 1867, or early 1868, in advance of the firm's arrival. David's brother, the currier James Johnston (born 1801), also moved to Beaverbank Cottage, near the new site, with his son William, an upholsterer (NRS, Johnston 1801; Dir 1869: 250; Census 1871a; VR 1875a, No 8).

The business moved from St Mary's Wynd to enhance fire-safety and permit expansion, but probably also due to market forces. From the 1850s, ever-larger tanneries were needed to process increasing imports (especially from South America where one Johnston son emigrated) and to fulfil growing demand for leather. Rising production costs also saw relocation to cheaper areas, with space for 'vats, drying rooms and storage ... [supplies of] huge volumes of water', and access to ports (Church 1971: 551). Traditional oak bark continued in use, so reliable, constant bark supplies were vital, but its bulk made transport and storage expensive, making good roads and larger warehouses essential.

### 3.2.3 David Johnston's Tannery moves to Beaverbank: Post-1868

Unlike St Mary's Wynd, the tannery's new site off Lower Broughton Road offered all of the above facilities. It was beside the Water of Leith, a watercourse which skinners had used from 'time immemorial' (Colston 1891: 87; Canmore ID [161690](#)), and the tannery could be connected to a folklore reference that Beaverbank allegedly derived its name from an 18th-century felted beaver-hat factory (Harris 1996: 84). Folklore aside, the location was essential as 'The Water o'Leith, though only a wimpling bairn compared with some of our rivers', once powered over 70 mills, 'in full whirl' (Walker 1797: 590; SLT 1889: 426).

The tannery's new location was originally known as Clerk's or Clarke's Mill, after a former owner (NLS, Ainslie 1804; RoS MID1858, MID5930). An alternative historical name, Logie Mill, continues to be in use today.

In 1807, Clerk's was advertised as 'a bark-mill and for dressing chamoy leather', with a 3-storey dwelling house (Cal Merc 1807). By 1814, it was a bleachfield, with a pump well and spring water reservoir, and tenants included linen-bleachers James Duncan & Co, and in the 1820s, David Horn's firm, who also undertook domestic laundry (Cal Merc 1814, 1817, 1822; Scotsman 1824).

Before the acquisition of the site by the Johnstons, in the mid-1860s, Beaverbank was owned by Col William MacDonald of Powderhall (VR 1865a, Items 27–31). Beaverhall House and outbuildings, part of the site, were rented by Bernard O'Connell, a whip and gut manufacturer. It is possible that the Johnstons had learned of the site's availability through business links with O'Connell. In 1866, MacDonald advertised 'Clark's or Logie Mill, and 3 arable acres, for sale at £1700' (Scotsman 1866). From sasine search sheets consulted, the Johnstons' purchase was probably recorded in early 1868, with a further bond or feu in 1869 (RoS, MID1858: 620–22).

The firm was established at Beaverbank late in 1868, and then suffered a devastating fire on 10 December 1870. There are no Dean of Guild plans for any period of the tannery, so the newspapers give the only description of the premises. The firm of 'J Johnstone [sic] & Sons ... was entirely destroyed' (Scotsman 1870a, 1870b). The site covered  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an acre, the leather-processing plant being 150ft x 45ft, partly rented to tanner Robert Smith. 'The office and warehouse of Johnstone & Sons [sic] were ... in a detached block fronting Bonnington Road' and were undamaged (Scotsman 1870a, 1870b). The bark mill began smouldering, and six reels of [leather!] hoses and four fire engines were summoned by telegraph:

Water [was] pumped from the mill-race ... Whenever [oil, tallow and dubbin] caught fire, the flames spread with great fierceness, curling out of the open spaces always found in a currier's workshop ... the roof fell in with a crash ... illuminating the whole of Canonmills ... a copious supply of water from the lade' preserved the main offices facing the street to the south, though their windows cracked. Worker's housing, along with 40 cows in a wooden byre, all lying

eastwards, were saved (Inv Cour 1870; Scotsman 1870a, 1870b).

There was a large brick building:

120ft long by 86 broad. The gables were ... two storeys [with] a slanting roof ... formed a third flat in the middle ... The ground floor ... was partly covered with tanpits, and ... heavy machinery, two steam boilers, and a bark mill. On the second floor ... for currying was ... lighter machinery and ten tons of oil and tallow. The upper floor ... for drying, contained ... prepared leather (Scotsman 1870a, 1870b).

Damage was placed at £10,000, all covered by insurance. The improved water supply and leather hoses were at least useful, and the compensation enabled Johnston to rapidly rebuild, again without official plans.

In 1871, Thomas M Johnston had fewer employees than in his previous tannery (22 in 1861, 15 in 1871) but whether this was due to mechanisation or the continuing recovery from the fire, is unknown. Thomas had married Anne Merricks in 1860, and by 1871, they lived at 6 Inverleith Row with five (later six) children (NRS, Merricks 1860; Census 1871b). This was one of the most affluent areas in Edinburgh, showing Johnston's wealthy status. William Johnston, brother of Thomas, had emigrated before 1870, to north-west Uruguay, famous for cattle-raising. Living around Salto city on the border with Argentina, he was probably sourcing and exporting leather for British customers like his brother (RoS, MID1858, 621–23, MID5930: 593). Salto faced its twin port, Concordia (in Argentina) across the Rio Uruguay, this being the highest navigable point on the river. For several decades from the 1880s–1920s, there was a large Argentinian (and lesser Uruguayan) trade in beef (and hides), which were exported downstream to meat packing plants in Buenos Aires, and thence worldwide.

#### 3.2.4 Johnston and Roslin Gunpowder mills; 1876 onwards

It is ironic that having traded from Powderhall's grounds, named after an explosive chemical,

Johnston should find himself making gunpowder. His in-laws, the Merricks, had owned Roslin gunpowder mills from around 1804, but advertised the foundation of their company as '1790' (Field 1880; *Dal Adv* 1886; Meighan 2012: 42). They had built the nearby Eskhill House (HES, LB13846; HES, NT26SE 137).

T M Johnston's father-in-law, James Merricks, had died in 1859, and his firm of Hay, Merricks & Co was restructured in 1876 (NRS, Merricks 1859, 1860; *Lon Gaz* 1870; VR 1874; *Ed Gaz* 1876). 'Hay, Merricks' became a limited company managed by Thomas, while his wife's cousins probably still held shares (NRS, BT2/715; *Dal Adv* 1882). Thomas ran Beaverbank and Roslin simultaneously until around 1886. He made Eskhill the principal family residence from 1877, possibly to better supervise the mills (*Dir* 1876: 504; 1877: 108, 561; 1878: 111; VR 1884). As a major local employer (employing a total of 98 men and eight girls in 1881), Thomas adopted the traditional role of philanthropic laird around Roslin and Lasswade (Census 1881a; *Dal Adv* 1886, 1896) thus completing his social ascent which produced amateur odes in his honour: 'Johnston yet, in his official den ... He'll bless or ban by telephone at the auld pooder mills ... He hangs his hopes on tramway ropes ... When commerce spurns the earth beneath' (*Dal Adv* 1885; 1886; *Port Adv* 1896).

Meanwhile, the Canonmills area was fast-developing, and various leather works there changed hands. Boyce & Johnston, iron founders, appears in 1876 and may have involved one of currier James Johnston's relations (though this is unconfirmed by research; *Dir* 1875: 256). Currier Archibald Donaldson was sequestered in 1877 (*Ed Gaz* 1877b), and the rented premises of leather merchants J L Currie were later sold (*Ed Gaz* 1877a; *Scotsman* 1879). Adam Dean's tannery was established before 1880, when mat-maker James Easton erected a skinnery (*Dir* 1879: 274; *Scotsman* 1880). Local builder John McAnsh erected speculative tenements along Beaverbank Place in the early 1880s, some of them co-financed by Thomas Johnston (*Ed Ev* 1881; VR 1885). In 1882, the Council formally 'adopted' the street for maintenance, improving local transport (*Scotsman* 1882).

In the early 1880s, the Scottish tanners' trade was booming and advertising became more commercially

relevant. The 'Scottish Leather Trader', an industrial review, started in July 1880 and was densely packed with reports on new machinery and techniques. However, Beaverbank is hardly mentioned, and presumably advertised elsewhere, if at all.

Johnston's eponymous firm was no longer listed at Beaverbank after 1881 (although he continued in ownership) and the works either stood empty or hosted short-term tenants (*Dir* 1881: 289, 477, 1882: 291). Engine ashes and iron-bound oil casks remaining from the tannery were advertised in late 1883, as if the premises were being cleared to make way for new occupants (*Ed Ev* 1883).

### 3.3 The Pringles (1884–1902)

#### 3.3.1 Robert Pringle at Beaverbank and Silvermills Tanneries

From early 1884, Johnston leased the works to Robert Pringle – currier – and David Tait, a waterproof cover-maker (*Dir* 1884: 303; VR 1885). Pringle (born Peebles, *c* 1835) had been a currier for Andrew Isles & Son, and then rented their Pleasance workshop on his own account (SLT 1882: 59). In the mid-1870s he was trading from Silvermills, which already housed upholsterers, cabinet makers and associated crafts (*Dir* 1873: 397, 1880: 467; VR 1875b). He employed 23 people in 1881, and by the time he was a Beaverbank tenant, Pringle was a well-established, middle-class father of 10 (Census 1881b). His motive for transferring business in 1884 is unknown, but with such a large family, it was possibly driven by financial necessity.

The grid of tanpits uncovered at Beaverbank must resemble those described for liming skins in 1896: 'The pits are ... of stone or brick, covered with cement to make them waterproof. A pit to hold 50 hides of medium weight should be about 6ft x 5ft x 6ft ... so that four or six pits lie together' (SLT 1896: 392–3). Hides were manually rotated within each pit, and also passed, successively, along this chain of pools of increasingly concentrated de-hairing 'liquor'.

There were various banks of pits for different soaking-processes. Hugh Brown's town-centre tannery used mains water, and drained into the common sewers (SLT, 1880: 25). His steam engine saved money by using spent tanbark as fuel, mixed with coal. In Glasgow, covered tanpits ensured



that rainwater did not dilute the ‘liquor’, while steam-power enabled water-changes ‘in a few minutes’, using hoses, while more mechanised works had hot steam pipes under the tanks to heat the liquid (SLT 1882: 53, 89). Vivid snippets convey the atmosphere: Legget’s ‘modern skinnery’ on the Water of Leith still involved:

navigat[ing] ... across soaks [pits] and over limes [liming pits] where the pathway was very narrow and ... under joists where the headroom was very scant, a dent on our new hat being the only damage’ (SLT 1889: 426). At Andrew Isles & Son, ‘the air is filled with hanging hides so close that we have to open up a path through them with our hands, as if ... through the thick foliage of a wood (SLT 1882: 59).

Pringle exhibited his products at the Edinburgh International Exhibition of 1886, held in a temporary domed pavilion on the Meadows, visited by up to 14,000 people each day (Scotsman 1886; SLT 1886: 265). This left a rare Beaverbank products review:

The grain hides and grain butts exhibited are masterpieces in the art of currying and perfect in workmanship. The fine calf skins for linings are good. A Glasgow leather merchant, attracted by the rich grain[ed] hides ... bought them out (SLT 1886: 265).

Pringle expanded into further premises at Silvermills in 1891 (Dir 1891: 585, 1892: 516, 591; VR 1895a). This additional tan yard could produce ‘400 to 500 hides per week’ (SLT 1890: 387). The census shows him living in a spacious tenement, midway between his two workshops (Census 1891). Two adult sons living at home are each vaguely described as ‘tanner’s son’, probably indicating they worked for him.

The lime-pits, drying sheds and tannery at Silvermills were advertised to let in 1894, but Pringle remained there for several more years (Ed Ev 1894; VR 1895a). The Beaverbank proprietor, Thomas M Johnston, died in 1896, and his son, David Johnston Jr, became landlord to both Pringle and longstanding renter David Tate, waterproof cover-maker (VR 1895b, 1905). Pringle’s trade

seems to have continued without incident until 1899 when a fire broke out in the four-storey wooden drying shed at Silvermills (Ed Ev 1899; Scotsman 1899). The stored flammable oils fed the flames but, counteracting this, the plentiful water supply helped quench the blaze. The smoke, fire and water damage to the skins was only partly insured.

Pringle’s eldest son followed his father as a ‘leather merchant’, and in 1899, he married one of the Johnstons, the daughter of the founder of Beaverbank tannery in 1868 (Census 1901; NRS, Pringle 1899). This union shows the continuing importance of informal business and kinship networks and the extent to which Edinburgh’s mercantile society revolved around these.

Further afield, Pringle purchased Rival[d]s Green Tannery, at Linlithgow in 1901, possibly to provide for his sons’ futures and for them, ‘The new firm ... are to have the works improved and extended’ (Ed Ev 1901). Unfortunately, this major investment soon failed, potentially due to the ongoing challenge from the rubber industry, and Pringle’s assets were seized barely 18 months later (Ed Gaz 1902). Bankruptcy was both socially humiliating and personally ruinous – the ‘whole stock in trade, plant and machinery’ of Silvermills and Beaverbank were sold in September 1902 (Yorks Ev 1902a, 1902b). The sheer volume of goods meant that the original auction was postponed and publicised as far afield as Yorkshire. The 6.5-acre grounds and fixed machinery of Rivald’s Green were slow to sell, despite a price reduction from £3,000 to £2,750 (Scotsman 1902a, 1902b).

### 3.4 The Walkers (1903–1913)

#### 3.4.1 The Walkers of Whitehaven and some unbuilt architecture

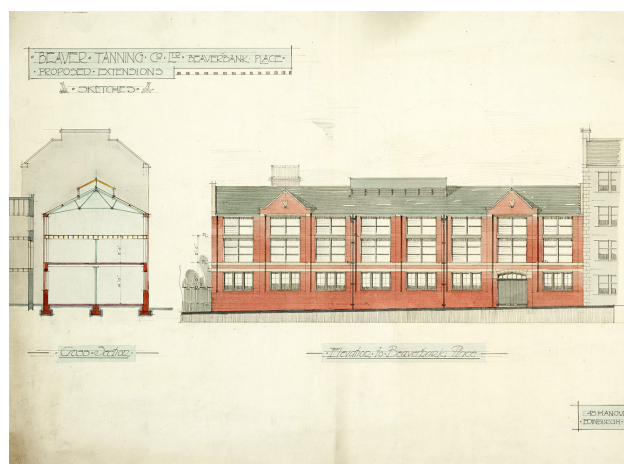
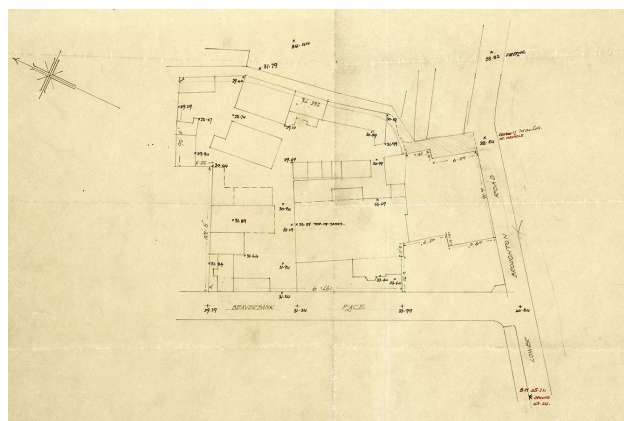
The Johnstons advertised Beaverbank tannery to let in early 1903, along with the adjoining byres apparently ‘capable of accommodating 70-80 cows’ (Scotsman 1903). The last leatherworkers at the site were the Walkers, from Whitehaven in Cumbria. It is unclear why long-established and wealthy leather merchants from England would extend into eastern Scotland. Their tannery, an offshoot of a Bolton concern, was run by William Walker (1831–1913) and his sons, Herbert W (1875–1934) and Arthur (1870–1921). They had interests in collieries and were generous local Cumbrian philanthropists,

funding scholarships, churches and hospitals (Whit Par 2019).

On 20 May 1903, the Beaver Tanning Co Ltd was formally registered as a joint stock company with shareholders including William, Herbert W and Arthur Walker, and various relatives based in Liverpool (NRS, BT2/5354). Their Edinburgh manager/secretary was a cousin, William Walker Wigfield, but apart from a local leather factor/director, Thomas MacPherson, everyone else was England based. Their stated aims were to purchase from David Johnston Jr (Thomas M's son) and run the Beaverbank tannery, sheds, pits and boilers as a leather factory. As with previous occupants, there is almost no trace of the Beaver Tanning Co's activities. The 'skinworks' at 26 Beaverbank Place, belonging to T G White, were a separate, unrelated concern (VR 1905, No 17).

The Walkers never did purchase the tannery from Johnston, although they made serious plans to extend and rebuild it. In 1909–10, well-known Edinburgh architect James B Dunn (1861–1930), one of the co-designers of The Scotsman buildings on North Bridge, was asked to produce plans for new street-front offices and workshops (DSA 2019; HES, EDD/818/1–10). This was a potentially expensive project as the proposed elegant red-brick building would have been an entirely new-build (for example HES, EDD/818/4, 8). Fronting Beaverbank Place, it would have adjoined the neighbouring tenement's gable and infilled the existing tannery's front yard (HES, EDD/818/5). A sketch shows that many of the existing structures were single-storey timber sheds and Dunn has marked one as being in 'bad repair' (HES, EDD/818/2) (see Illus 4).

These drawings span a period between December 1909 and January 1911, but no contemporary 'planning permission' was either sought or granted by the Dean of Guild Court (ECA, DoG Index; ECC, Plan Index). Map regressions show that Dunn's design was never implemented, but the 14-month date range indicates that it was under prolonged and serious consideration (Dalland 2018: 45). For unspecified reasons, the Beaver Tanning Co was wound up in Liverpool in August 1912, and finally liquidated in April 1913 (NRS, BT2/5354). William Walker died in late 1913 at the age of 82 years, leaving a colossal sum of £405,783 (Scotsman 1914) to his heir.



**Illus 4** Historic drawings by Dunn (1909–11)  
(© National Library of Scotland)

### 3.5 The Lambs (1915–1940s)

#### 3.5.1 'Shell(s) for Leather': Robert Lamb, munitions crates and WW1

The demand for leather belts, boots and other military equipment soared during the First World War, but Beaverbank lay empty until 1915 when Robert Lamb & Sons moved in and used the site as a sawmill/cooperage. David Johnston still owned the disused office, workshop and tan pits, but there is no evidence of him trading despite his neighbouring competitors, leather-dressers T G White, continuing in operation during this period at Nos 25–6 (Dir 1915: 485; VR 1915a: Item 14).

The original Logie Mill to the south-east was now part of Logie Green Works, lying further to the east, owned by Robert Lamb Jr (born 1870), sawmiller, packing case- and 'herring barrel-maker' (Dir 1915: 210). The working life of this company is well documented, from WW1 through to a 1990s photographic record compiled by local historian Peter Stubbs (Stubbs 1991–2003).

Beaverbank lay west of the mill-lade whereas Logie Green Works lay to the south-east, before the channel re-entered the river at St Mark's Bridge (Cadell 1984: 52–3; Dalland 2018: illus 2). The lade began at Dean Village, and powered both Silvermills and Canonmills, with Logie as the last in the chain of waterwheels. Logie Mill's earlier history as a snuff mill, and then a jewellers' grindery is not discussed in this report, but Johnston let it to various trades in the 1880s and 90s (VR 1865b, 1885, 1895b; Priestley 2001: 71). By 1895, Robert Lamb & Sons, builders and joiners, part-owned and part-rented Logie Green Works immediately adjacent to Beaverbank (VR 1895b: Items 17–19). The Lambs had absorbed the mill into their factory before 1915 (VR 1915b: Items 8–10). Beaverhall Cooperage, a near-neighbour, was run by William Lindsay, of Canonmills Cooperage, who, like the Lambs, was probably kept busy supplying the military with containers.

Military Service Tribunals show how deeply the war affected the plant. Lamb had 85 employees (HH30/10/5/5), and after conscription began in 1916, he struggled unsuccessfully to retain skilled workers. His cashier (the 'only male representative

in my office'), besides two clerkesses, a sawyer and a boxmaker were only granted temporary deferments from enlistment in 1916–17 (NRS, HH30/10/5/5; HH30/13/6/15; HH30/15/3/35).

The war affected Lamb even further as his 20 years old son, a sub-lieutenant in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (NA, ADM 339/9/998), had fallen ill with 'trench fever' and influenza while with the British Expeditionary Force in France. After his first hospitalisation, he was declared 'Unfit for General Service' in mid-1917 and, in 1919, readmitted to Craighleith Hospital, Edinburgh. Tragically, he died of 'influenza-pneumonia', two months later.

Robert Lamb's daughter, Annie had married the portrait artist Douglas Gordon Shields in 1918, and he also became a shareholder in the sawmill.

Although Robert Lamb's limited company was dissolved in 1925, the work carried on under other titles and continued to produce boxes and packing-cases, with maps from the 1940s labelling the building as a cooperage. Lamb made various alterations and additions to the Logie Green/Beaverbank complex; he extended his workshops eastwards in 1922, installed a petrol tank in 1923, and added sheds in the late 1930s–40s (ECC, Plan Index).

#### 3.5.2 Beaverbank Motor Works (1928–1959)

Part of the property was let to Beaverbank Motor Works ('Ltd' from 1928) in the early 1920s (Dir 1923: 606; VR 1925: Items 16–18), and this arrangement would have prompted the installation of the petrol tank and possible inspection pits.

The engineering company was owned by 'Gilbert' Blyth (born 'Gillanders' in 1888) and two colleagues (NRS, BT2/1967/280; Dir 1927: 679, 1930: 715). Blyth began as an 'engineer's fitter', but he and a relative, William Blyth (born 1905), eventually became the only shareholders (Census 1911). They ran Beaverbank Motor Works until it closed in 1959, and Gilbert/Gillanders died in 1960 (NRS, BT2/1967/280; NRS, Blyth 1960). It had been a successful business, as the assets at the final winding-up in 1967 were over £12,000 (NRS, BT2/1967/280: Liquidator's Account, 22 Nov 1967).