

3. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

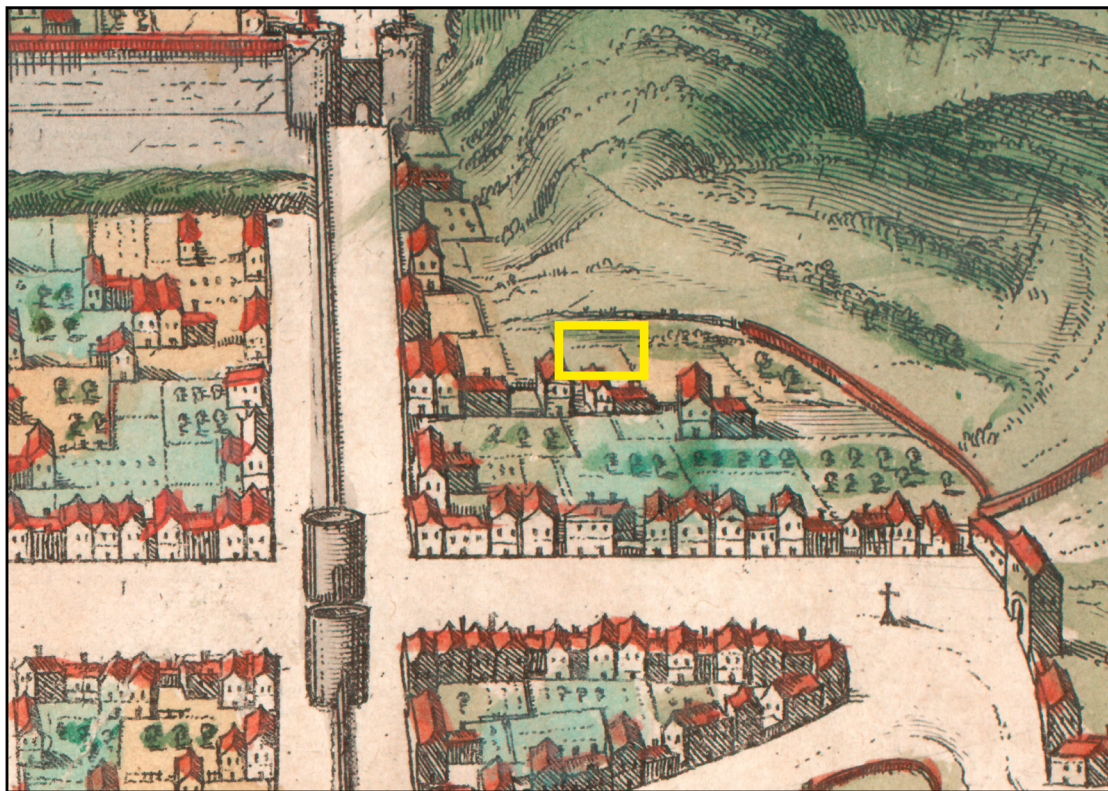
Thomas Bradley-Lovekin

The Canongate has its origins in David I's grant of a charter in 1128 to the Augustinian Canons for the establishment of an abbey at Holyrood, which made provision for the establishment of a burgh on the land between the abbey and the burgh of Edinburgh. This charter is traditionally seen as the start of the settlement, although it has been noted that as the abbey was built upon the site of an earlier church, the possibility of earlier occupation within the Canongate cannot be discounted (Carter, Dennison & Tipping 2008: 13). In the 16th century the Palace of Holyroodhouse developed around the cloister precinct of the abbey (Dennison & Lowrey 2008a: 69). The proximity of the Canongate to the abbey and later the Palace of Holyroodhouse brought great prosperity to the area. From the late medieval period the burgh was occupied by private residences, the homes of the wealthy and privileged (Dennison 2008c: 63). The significance of the Canongate was demonstrated by its designation

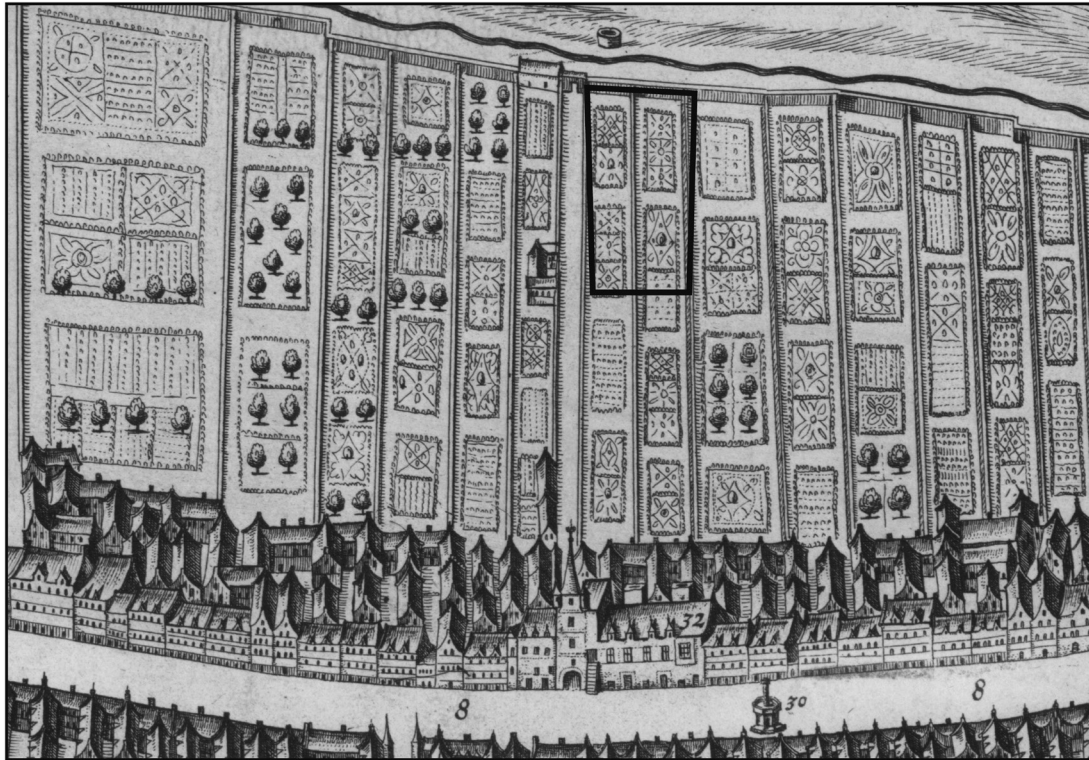
as a burgh of regality in 1587 and its subsequent incorporation into the City of Edinburgh in 1636 (Pryde 1965: 60). However, the burgh's importance diminished following the Union of 1707 (Dennison & Lowrey 2008b: 225–7) and following the exodus of the upper classes to the New Town, the poor came to dominate the area (ibid: 225–7), and in the 19th century many of the burgh's formerly grand residences were reduced to little more than slums (Dennison 2008b: 270–1). This is the context within which the Canongate Charity Poorhouse was constructed.

Maps from the 16th and 17th centuries suggest that the backlands to the north of the Canongate were largely open ground, although buildings are shown to the rear of the Canongate on Braun and Hogenburg's map of c 1582 (Illus 3). This map is largely schematic and it is difficult to locate the site, although it is shown as formal gardens on James Gordon's subsequent more detailed map of 1647 (Illus 4).

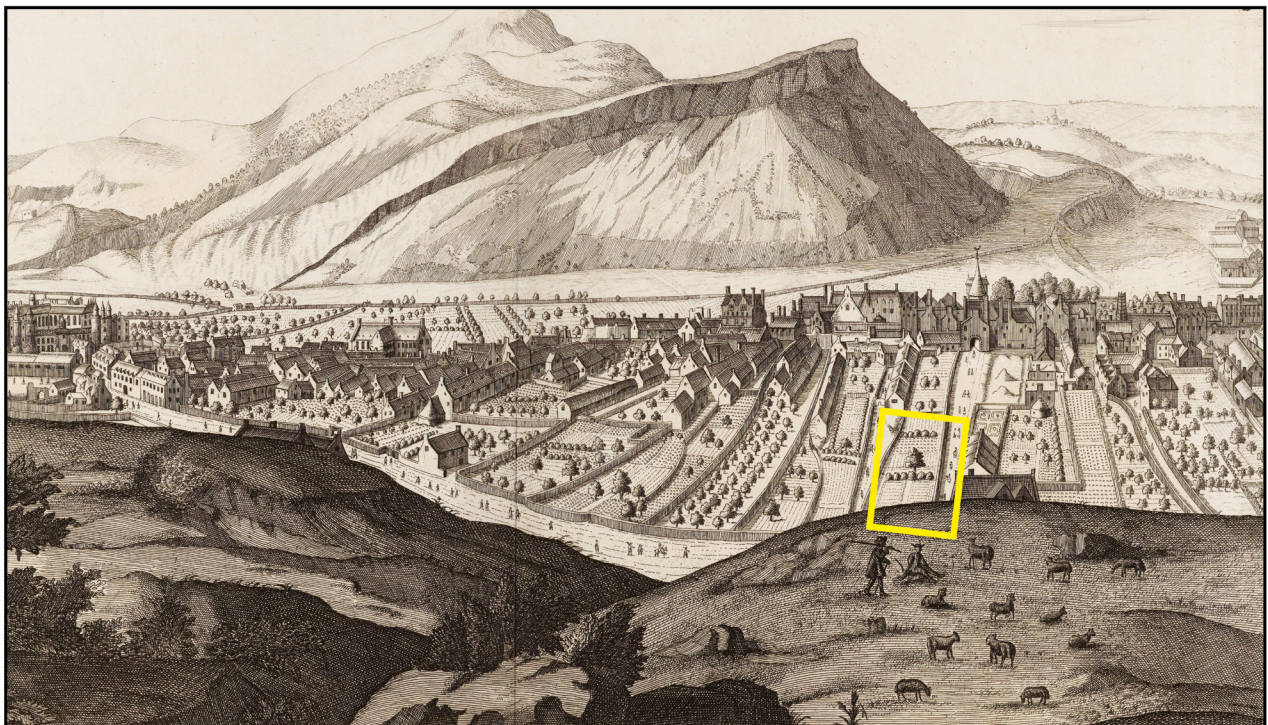
In 1687, James VII ordered that the nave of the abbey church at Holyrood, the 'Chapel Royal' for



Illus 3 Extract from Braun and Hogenburg's *Edenburgum, Scotiae Metropolis* (c 1582) showing Canongate Burgh extending east. (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland and under Creative Commons (CC BY 4.0): <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)



Illus 4 Extract from Gordon's *Edinodunensis* (1647) showing the site within a formal garden. (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland and under Creative Commons (CC BY 4.0): <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)



Illus 5 Extract from John Slezer's *North Prospect of the City of Edinburgh* (1690-3), showing the site as open ground. (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland and under Creative Commons (CC BY 4.0): <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)



Illus 6 Extract from William Edgar's *Plan of the City and Castle of Edinburgh* (1765) showing the newly constructed Poorhouse. (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland and under Creative Commons (CC BY 4.0): <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

the use of his family and court, should be converted for Roman Catholic worship and into a chapel for the Knights of the Order of the Thistle. This led to a need for a new parish church to serve the population of the Canongate. With the assistance of a legacy of Sir Thomas Moodie of Saughtonhall the new church, Canongate Kirk, was completed (Dennison 2008a: 100). Two adjacent properties, north of the Canongate, were purchased to provide a site for the church (NRS SC39/116/1).

John Slezer's 1690 'North Prospect of the City of Edinburgh' (Illus 5), drawn from Calton Hill, depicts the gardens and grounds to the rear of the Canongate as open gardens. Although construction of the Canongate Kirk was under way by 1690,

Slezer's depiction pre-dates it, with both the properties purchased for the church discernible, although it appears that neither extended as far back as the Poorhouse site, which is shown as open ground.

Detailed research undertaken by the City of Edinburgh Council Archaeology Service (CECAS) following the discovery of a single burial on the current development in 1997 (Reed 1997) suggests that the Poorhouse site lay within the 'Tolbooth trans and Vennell lands' (NRS SC39/116/1) belonging to the heirs of Robert Kerr, the owners of one of the plots purchased for the church in 1688. Notably, the northern part of the plot, likely covering the current development area where the

burials were encountered, remained in the hands of the Kerr family and was not sold. The Kirk Session records have no record of land being released for the 1761 Charity Poorhouse (NRS CH2/122/13c: 226, 254). While this suggests that the burial discovered in 1997 and the further burials excavated on the site in 2013–14, were interred on land outwith the church's property, other documents from 1735 suggest the Canongate Kirk at least had informal use of the land. 'New ground' at 'the foot of the Churchyard' is first referenced in the 1735 Kirkyard Accounts (ECA McLeod Bundle 17 item 10, Bay D Shelf 11), though while these records are detailed there is no reference to any interments being made

at this location. Later, the Kirk Accounts from 1754 refer to the site as, 'the ground for the turves', documenting the importation of between 20 and 40 cartloads of 'black earth' each year onto the site in replacement of turves removed to cover interments within the kirkyard. In 1759, 18 cartloads of sand were imported (NRS CH2/122/41). Given the importation of soil, it is possible that some of the 18th-century deposits identified during the excavation contain material redeposited from elsewhere.

An early parish register for the Canongate held by the National Records of Scotland, the 'Register of Persones Interred in the Canongate Kirk and



Illus 7 Extract from John Ainslie's *Old and New Towns of Edinburgh and Leith* (1804). (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland and under Creative Commons (CC BY 4.0): <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Churchyard theirin' records burials within the kirkyard from 1718 onwards (NRS OPR 685/3/21). However, few of the entries include references to the locations of individual burials, and where grave positions are recorded, the references tend to be vague. The Canongate had a diverse population. Writing of the later medieval period, Bain (1999: 1054) suggested that 'inhabitants of Canongate included labourers and soldiers, farmers and

butchers, artisans and merchants, as well as millers, scribes and bureaucrats'. Analysis of the Canongate Kirk Register of 1718–22 found that while members of the aristocracy or professional classes were interred in the kirkyard, the majority of the burials were of tradesmen and their families (NRS OPR 685/3/21). Although the burials excavated at the Poorhouse site were in all probability slightly later, it is likely that the individuals interred there



Illus 8 Extract from 1st Edition Ordnance Survey Town Plan (1854). (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland and under Creative Commons (CC BY 4.0): <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

were drawn from the same social balance. Archival research undertaken both for the present project and by Reed (1997) identified no reference to burials within the development site.

The first reference to the Poorhouse occurs in the Canongate Kirk Session Minutes of 4 December 1759, when the kirk's first minister spoke of a proposed 'Charity Workhouse in this part', and in August 1761 the Session appointed members to a management committee to supervise its construction (NRS CH2/122/13c). The Poorhouse opened on 26 April 1762 (ECA SL 11/1/4/1) and is shown as a north/south-aligned rectangular building, marked 'P', attached to the western exterior wall of the kirkyard on William Edgar's map of 1765 (Illus 6).

Subsequent maps trace in increasing detail the development of the Poorhouse buildings. Later 18th-century maps, including Armstrong and Armstrong's map of 1773 (not illustrated) indicate that the Poorhouse precincts originally stretched up to the northern street frontage. Kincaid's map of 1784 (not illustrated) depicts a small outbuilding in the north-west corner of the site west of the main Poorhouse building that has been extended northwards since Edgar's map. This outbuilding

had been amalgamated with the main Poorhouse structure by the time of John Ainslie's 1804 map (Illus 7) to create a single L-shaped building.

The 1st Edition Ordnance Survey Town Plan of 1854 (Illus 8), records the 'Canongate Poor House' in considerable detail, revealing its internal layout and fenestration. The north/south range was positioned down the centre of the site, with open ground within the property to both its east and west. Nine rooms occupied the ground floor, the presence of an upper floor being indicated by a staircase within the central hallway. A kitchen is shown occupying the large room at the northern end of the range, its chimney and stove being positioned in the north-east corner of the room. Circular objects shown within the room immediately south of the kitchen suggest that it may have been a workroom, a laundry or a pantry.

The Poorhouse was converted into an epidemic hospital in 1871 (Lothian Health Services Archives) and was subsequently expanded. This is visible in the Ordnance Survey map of 1895 (not illustrated) and was demolished between the compilation of the 1920 and the 1935 Ordnance Survey maps (not illustrated).