

## 6. DISCUSSION

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The excavation of the Poorhouse site confirmed the presence of deep stratified soil deposits within the ‘backlands’ situated to the rear of the Canongate. These soils are a consistent feature of Edinburgh’s medieval ‘backlands’ and reflect the early and continued use of the area for cultivation from the 13th century onwards. Excavations within the vicinity, for example at the Waverley Vaults (Toolis & Sproat 2007) and on Calton Road (Jones & Holden 2003, Hatherley 2004, Gooder 2013, Huggett 2021) have all revealed a similar stratigraphic sequence of ‘imported garden soils’ (Carter 2001) in this part of the burgh, ranging from 0.8m to 3.0m in depth. However, these deposits become scarcer towards the south, where a combination of escarpment and intense early modern development appears to have removed them (Johnston 1992). This also appears to have been the case north of Calton Road, where excavations revealed no pre-19th-century deposits (Wilson 2008).

Given the absence of industrial or domestic activity and the recording of several narrow rig and furrows within the Phase 3 garden soils, Context [092], it would appear that the site was used for agriculture, horticulture or livestock until the end of the 17th century; clay pipes recovered from this soil provided dates ranging from 1620 to 1680. It is therefore possible that the formal gardens shown within the backlands on Gordon’s map of 1647 (Illus 4) and Slezer’s prospect of 1690–3 (Illus 5) are to an extent schematic and intended to present a favourable impression of the city. The evidence suggests that prior to the establishment of the kirk in 1688–90, the rears of the burgh plots, such as the area represented by the excavation, were used to grow food and potentially raise livestock for the occupants of the frontage dwellings.

Curiously, the furrows were found to overlie an earthen bank, Context [112]. This feature was interpreted as a medieval burgh plot boundary, which would suggest that some amalgamation of burgh plot boundaries occurred prior to the purchase of multiple plots for the construction of the kirk. Burgh plot boundaries appear to survive in many different forms within the archaeological

record, ranging from stone walls to post lines and midden heaps (Coleman 2005: 290). The earthen bank recorded at New Waverley appears to be formed from the Phase 2 garden/midden soils and reflects the solely agricultural nature of the area during the late medieval period.

Gordon’s 1647 map (Illus 4) and Slezer’s prospect of 1690–3 (Illus 5), both indicate that the site’s western boundary, along the eastern edge of Tolbooth Wynd, respects the original line of the burgh plot boundary. This would suggest that the plot width conforms to the general width of 9.49m for plot boundaries in the North Canongate area (Tait 2009: 234) and the common standard seen throughout Europe of between 8.62m and 9.85m (Brooks & Whittington 1977: 288).

The relatively high-status nature of elements of the small finds assemblage suggests the high status of the site’s occupants prior to 1603, when the royal court moved to London, ushering in a long period of decline for the burgh (Gooder 2013: 36). The Canongate before the 17th century appears to have been the burgh of choice for the wealthy, within a ‘city’ composed of the three burghs of the Canongate, the royal burgh of Edinburgh and the Port of Leith (Stronach et al 2008: 55). This is unsurprising given its close associations with both the Church and the royal court.

The capping of the Phase 3 garden/midden deposits in the late 17th century (Phase 4) likely reflects a change in use of the plot, though the purpose of this capping remains unclear – the subsequent garden/midden soil appears to have been largely imported, based on both documentary evidence and the associated mixed finds assemblage. As the capping deposit appears not to extend over the entire area, it is possible that it may represent a localised area of hard standing within the plot, potentially derived from natural deposits dug out during the excavation of building foundations elsewhere.

The status of the site following the establishment of the Canongate Kirk in 1688 is unclear. Research by Reed suggests that the northern end of the burgh plot within which it was located was not purchased for the kirk, suggesting that it was retained by its owners, the heirs of Robert Kerr (Reed 1997: 9). However, Canongate Kirk records from 1735 refer to the ‘new ground’ at the ‘foot of the Churchyard’,

used to cultivate turves, which would suggest that the kirk had at least acquired access to the land by this date. Subsequent references in the 1750s to 'black earth' being imported to cultivate the turves are potentially significant and could account for the garden/midden deposit (Phase 5), which covered the site to a depth of between 0.70 and 1.30m and is broadly contemporary with the depositions recorded in the Kirkyard Accounts. This would also account for the mixed nature of some of the artefact assemblages recovered from Context [003].

The seven burials (Phase 6) excavated on the site by AOC during 2013–14, and the additional burial excavated by CECAS in 1997 (Appendix 1), postdate the establishment of the Canongate Kirk in 1688–90 but pre-date the construction of the Poorhouse in 1761–2. This comparatively short time span could suggest that individuals buried there were of relatively low social status, perhaps with unmarked graves, as it is unlikely that the kirk elders would countenance the construction of a poorhouse over the recently dug graves of higher-status individuals, particularly if this involved the relocation or destruction of upstanding burial monuments. The location of the graves in the north-east corner of the kirkyard, at a distance from the Canongate Kirk, would also support this hypothesis.

Occasional artefacts were found in association with the burials, however, including a lead token and, most significantly, the remains of a composite copper alloy, animal hide and textile object that may represent a purse or early sporran (Appendices 5 & 6), found associated with an adult male (SK 067) in Grave [065]. This individual appears to have been interred fully clothed, unlike the other individuals, whose skeletal remains were marked by staining from possible copper alloy shroud pins (Appendix 1). The position of the copper alloy, animal hide and textile object by the left thigh of Grave [065] suggests a buckled hair purse, lying against a body wearing a woollen garment, though whether this is a purse or a sporran is unclear. It may have been carried in a pocket, as in the case of a knitted purse on the late 17th-century clothed body from Gunnister, Shetland (Henshall & Maxwell 1954: 38–9), or it could have been attached to a belt. Walton Rogers notes (Appendix 6) that this burial could represent an early example of the wearing of Scottish plaid together with a sporran.

Based on the excavated evidence, the construction and subsequent development of the Poorhouse during the 18th and 19th centuries corresponded almost exactly with the cartographic and documentary evidence. The discovery of the oak roundwood pinions and the associated foundation planking appears to reflect a construction technique common to the Canongate within the 17th and 18th centuries. Such features have been recorded at St Patrick's Church (Jones 2011: 20) and at 144–166 Cowgate (Dalland 2004 & 2017). This technique appears to have been an effective response to the problem of building upon the substantial medieval and early post-medieval midden/garden deposits which had built up around the burgh. Reused timbers were employed in the construction of the foundation; dendrochronological analysis indicates that the reused timbers came from a building (or buildings) built after AD 1707, and some time in the first half of the 18th century (Appendix 8). Dendrochronological analysis has also identified the source of the planks as the North American colonies, specifically the area around Boston, Massachusetts. Three planks were dated through correlation with a suite of East Coast American chronologies, and they appear to represent a rare instance of timber imported from the British colonies in North America to Britain prior to the American War of Independence. A lack of correlation between the dated timbers suggests they derive from imported cargo, comprising timber from multiple sources (Crone & Mills 2013: 343; Crone et al 2017: 30–1). Crone (Appendix 8) notes early instances of American timber imported to Britain, including timbers from 'The Granary' in Elie, Fife, where early-19th-century American oak is recorded, and a boat wrecked in Galmisdale Bay, Eigg, constructed with American oak probably in the late 18th century (Crone 2016).

The British North American colonies, in particular New England, quickly became a source of timber, though initially the trade focused on large white pines favoured by naval shipbuilders to provide masts for the British Navy, and wood for this purpose was a regular cargo in purpose-built 'mast ships' from the middle of the 17th century (Albion 1926: 237–8). However, due perhaps to high production costs, very little was making its way to England (Carroll 1973: 94) and therefore

the presence of American timber from the first half of the 18th century in the Poorhouse structure is unusual. Crone (Appendix 8) notes the paucity of research into the early trade in non-naval timber products between America and Britain and that the tree-ring data from the Poorhouse is significant in providing insight into this trade. The piles of the Poorhouse foundations appear to have been locally sourced native-grown oak, perhaps from different woodlands. Crone (Appendix 8) notes that the use of oak in building construction in the early modern period in Scotland was relatively unusual and that native-grown oak of 18th-century date has been identified in only two Scottish buildings (Hamilton Palace – Mills pers comm, and Stoneypath Tower, East Lothian – Crone unpublished).

The creation of the Poorhouse in the mid-18th

century sits in stark contrast to the burgh's apparent material prosperity of the 16th century. This prosperity is indicated through the presence of quantities of imported continental ceramics, exotic glassware and stove tiles. However, by the latter part of the 17th century the Canongate, as well as the royal burgh, had entered a period of relative social and economic decline in which the prosperity of Edinburgh's wealthy burgesses had been disrupted by a combination of the removal of the royal court to London, taxation, plague and disruption of trade (Lynch 1987: 17–18). The subsequent recovery observed in the 18th century came as a result of the expansion of central government and the onset of the Industrial Revolution, a process which led to the rapid building up of the Canongate 'backlands', which continued into the 20th century.