
3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Musselburgh is situated on a raised beach at the mouth of the River Esk. Historically, Musselburgh proper is that part of the town that grew up on the east bank of the Esk, while the settlement on the west bank is known as Fisherrow. The small and affluent village of Inveresk occupies an area of higher ground overlooking Musselburgh from the south, and originally grew up along the road to the east of St Michael's parish church. Between Musselburgh and Inveresk lies the area known as Newbigging, originally a separate hamlet, but now subsumed within Musselburgh.

3.1 Roman Inveresk

The first major settlement around Musselburgh was the Antonine-period Roman fort and *vicus* at Inveresk. The development of the area around the parish church, which is in fact situated practically in the centre of the fort (Leslie 2002), has thrown up many examples of Roman remains over the past several centuries. For example, it was reported in the *Old Statistical Account* (OSA) for Inveresk that in the late 18th century, workmen in the grounds of Inveresk House uncovered the floors of several Roman buildings forming part of the civil settlement, including the remains of a bath-house, although at least some of these remains were later destroyed in the course of the work that uncovered them (OSA 1791–99, 4). However, the remains of a hypocausted building at the eastern edge of the grounds of Inveresk House survive today, and were re-excavated in the 1980s (Thomas 1988b), along with other parts of the civil settlement at Inveresk Gate, excavated in the 1970s (Thomas 1988a). Further investigations in this area in the 1990s produced finds that suggest occupation of the civil settlement continued past the end of Roman military occupation of the area (Bishop 2002, 34). Along with evidence for post-Roman activity in the field systems immediately south-east of Inveresk (Cook 2004), this offers clues that the area may have continued as a focus for settlement up until its emergence in historical records in the medieval period.

Information concerning the extent to which Roman settlement extended west of the Esk is almost completely lacking. The OSA mentions a tradition that the remains of Roman buildings were frequently uncovered in Fisherrow in the vicinity of the harbour (OSA 1791–99, 5). Evidence for the occurrence of Roman remains in this area has yet to be confirmed by modern work.

3.2 The medieval period and later

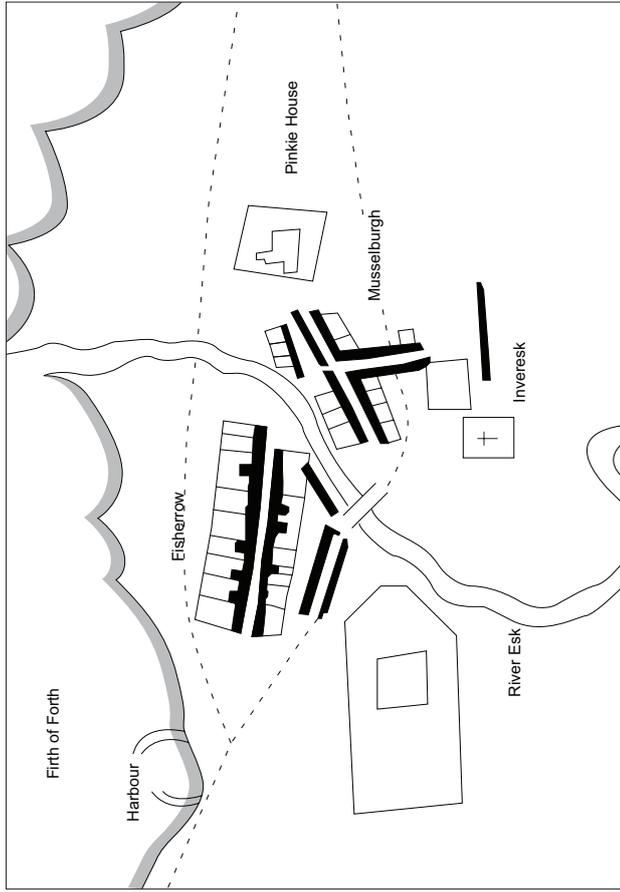
Modern-day Musselburgh has origins at least as early as the 11th century AD, as a possession of Dunfermline Abbey. The elevated position of the church overlooking Musselburgh – by no means unique for a Scottish burgh (Mair 1988, 59–60) – may relate to the burgh's original status. It is possible that a visible display of the Church's relationship to the inhabitants was felt desirable by the ecclesiastical authorities.

Indirect documentary evidence suggests that Musselburgh was granted burghal status in the later 12th century, but the first direct evidence of the special privileges associated with this status dates to the early 14th century (Dennison & Coleman 1996, 19). As the Scottish state grew through the medieval period and as its relationship with England waxed and waned, Musselburgh suffered from English military campaigns and was burnt at least once. The area was a target of raids during the 'rough wooing' and in 1547 the Battle of Pinkie was fought nearby. Among later military impositions was the occupation of Musselburgh by Oliver Cromwell in 1650 as his army pressed on Edinburgh following his victory at Dunbar.

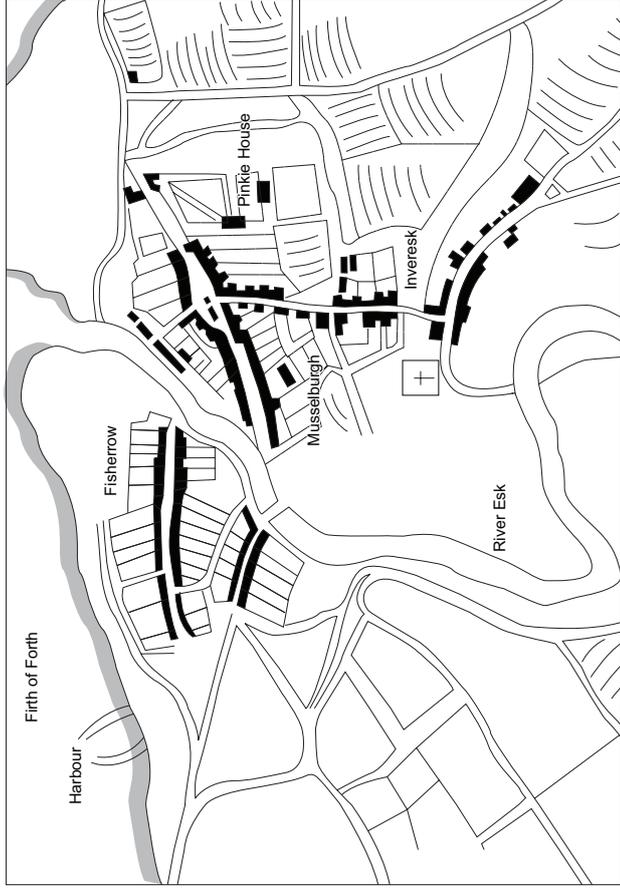
The burgh itself, while developing textile, leather-working and brewing industries from the 13th century onwards, seems not to have diversified further, or gained a native class of professionals (Dennison & Coleman 1996, 36). This undoubtedly relates to the distorting effect Edinburgh was having upon the markets and social structure of its smaller neighbours – for example, by the 16th century Edinburgh, through its port of Leith, was already beginning to dominate the export trade from the area, and its growing population was making it increasingly attractive to both importers and exporters (Lynch 1988, 279). The proximity of Musselburgh to Edinburgh and its markets brought benefits in the form of the settlement of the area by the gentrified elite and the Edinburgh literati in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the construction of new industries in the burgh, such as the Newbigging pottery and Brunton's Wire Works (Dennison & Coleman 1996, 41). The great expansion of housing in Musselburgh in the 20th century can in part be seen as the culmination of its success in becoming integrated with its dominant neighbour while retaining much of its distinct identity.

3.2.1 Morphology of the burgh

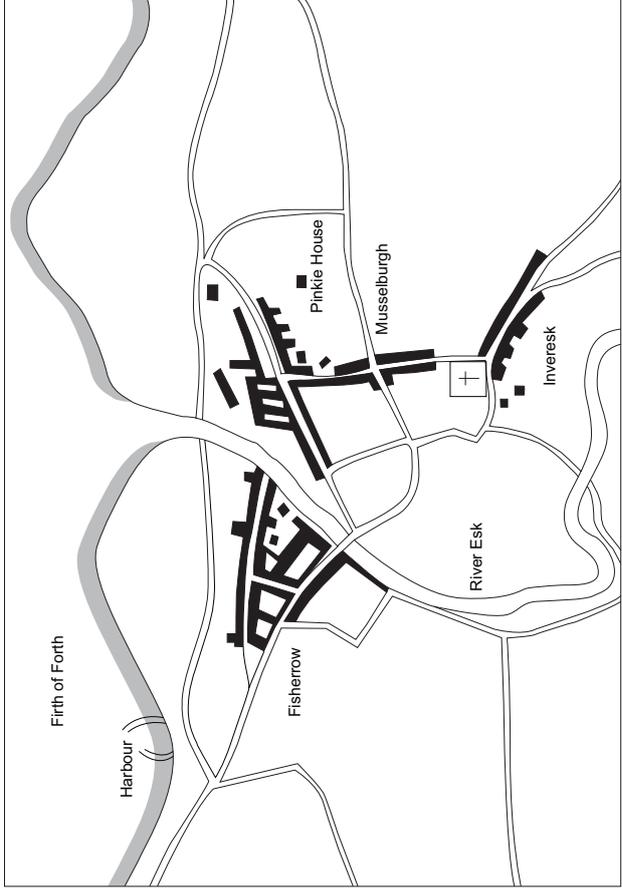
It has been suggested that the core of the medieval settlement was located near to the medieval or 'Old



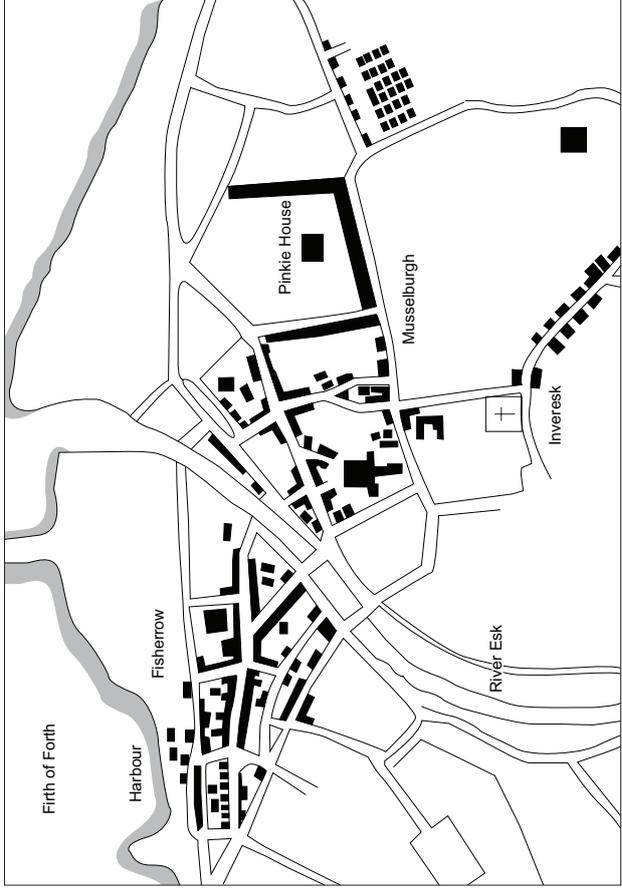
Adair 1682



Roy ca 1750



Laurie 1763



Knox 1816

Illus 2 The development of Musselburgh from 1682–1816



Illus 3 Musselburgh in the 1850s (source: Ordnance Survey 1854, sheets III & VII). Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.

Bridge' over the Esk, and then expanded eastwards along the line of the High Street throughout the medieval period (Dennison & Coleman 1996, 52). Excavations at Brunton's Wire Works, in the vicinity of the Old Bridge, recovered 13th- to 15th-century pottery from what have been described as 'agricultural deposits' (Ewart & Triscott 1993). Interventions around the High Street since the Burgh Survey was

published (for example Hastie 2001) have generally produced negative results, in part reflecting the modern development that has taken place in this area.

The first detailed map of Musselburgh, Fisherrow and Inveresk is Adair's 1682 map of Midlothian (illus 2). In general, the core street plan in existence then still forms the basis of the modern-day layout.

In Musselburgh, the High Street is aligned east-west, with Newbigging running south from the High Street, and the road to the Old Bridge bypassing the southern edge of the High Street backlands. The focus of settlement at this time appears to have been the intersection of the High Street and Newbigging, where the mercat cross is located today. Musselburgh Links is marked on the map to the north of the High Street. Settlement in Inveresk lies along the road running east from the parish church. In Fisherrow, the principal street is North High Street, with some settlement along Market Street, running down to the Old Bridge and along the west bank of the Esk. The harbour stands apart to the west. These two streets are separated by gardens or backlands.

This basic layout is confirmed, with more detail, on **Roy's** *Military Survey of Scotland* (1747–55), which also shows a small strip of settlement on the east side of the Esk to the north of Musselburgh's High Street, along the street that became Millhill. The High Street appears at the time of the survey to have lain along the route of a minor spur road that rejoined the main road from the Old Bridge further to the east. The town layout, as seen in the 17th and 18th centuries, suggests strongly that Musselburgh proper did not develop directly beside the Old Bridge, which appears to have been clear of buildings on the east side of the Esk, but was probably always focused on the area around the mercat cross and the High Street.

Laurie's map of 1763 shows the area in rather more detail, confirming the existence by this time of Hercus Loan, Lochend Road South and New Street in Fisherrow and Millhill in Musselburgh. One notable addition to the post-medieval street plan of Fisherrow is Bridge Street, first shown on **Knox's** map of 1816. This street connects North High Street in Fisherrow and High Street in Musselburgh, via the New Bridge which was built in 1806–07 and runs through what were formerly the backlands of the settlement along the North High Street.

Later additions to the street plan of Musselburgh proper, such as Mansfield Gardens and Kilwinning Terrace, appear to have been built on open gardens and backlands to the south of the town (**illus 3**). This area was largely undeveloped until the 20th century, with the exception of the Newbigging pottery and the narrow strip of housing that lay either side of the road south to Inveresk.

While the burgh has developed around its original street plan, the centre has seen some 20th-century development, particularly along the High Street west of Kilwinning Street, and in the plots to the rear of both frontages. The least affected area is the northern frontage east of Kilwinning Street, while in Fisherrow, the North High Street between Lochend Road North and Bridge Street appears to retain much of its 18th- and 19th-century character (**illus 2 & 3**).