3   ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND *by Morag Cross & Elizabeth Jones*

3.1   Medieval development

The Cowgate lies in a valley to the south of the ridge on which the High Street stands. The valleys on either side of the High Street (Princes Street Gardens and Cowgate) were formed through glacial erosion and earlier writers have postulated the existence of two small streams running down both valleys, converging in the area of Holyrood Abbey (Makey 1988, 200). Previous work at the Scottish Parliament site suggested that there might be an infilled stream channel under Holyrood Road, possibly taking drainage from the Cowgate. The channel may have turned to the north-east and joined water flowing down the valley from what is now Calton Road (Carter *et al* 2008).

The site lay within the core of medieval Edinburgh from the 14th century onwards and would appear to form part of the rear backlands of a High Street plot or plots. The origins and early development of the High Street are poorly understood. Edinburgh is mentioned as a King's Burgh in a charter of David I in the 12th century and the High Street is thought to have existed in some form by then (Stevenson *et al* 1981, 2). One model for the development of Edinburgh suggests that the first settlement was around Lawnmarket with St Giles' and the frontage line to the east a later development (Duncan 1975, 466). This model suggests that the Netherbow Port, which marked the eastern edge of the burgh, was in existence by the mid-12th century but that it lay further west at this time (*ibid*). The separate burgh of Canongate was to the east, with development here concentrated on the street frontage. The site would therefore appear to lie on the very outskirts of medieval Edinburgh, away from development on the Canongate, and possibly outwith Duncan's early postulated east gate.

The Cowgate developed about 1330 and perhaps represented Edinburgh's first municipal extension (Stevenson *et al* 1981). Writing in 1937 Malcolm states that the original settlement on the Cowgate was concentrated on the south side because of a burn on the north (Malcolm 1937). He goes on to state that this burn was filled in around 1490 and that buildings were laid out with piles of oak and willows on levelled ground (*ibid*). Cowgate Port was erected in 1516 and stood at the junction with St Mary's Wynd.

3.2   Town boundary

Very few Scottish burghs were defended and the back of the rigs, defined by a back or heid dyke, often formed the burgh boundary. Access to the fields was through gates or gaps in the dyke, which led to a lane. As this gave access to grazing for livestock it was often called a 'cowgate' (Coleman 2004, 292). The back dyke was usually represented by a ditch and bank or a fence. Although each plot holder was responsible for the maintenance of the dyke, it was often in a state of disrepair (Torrie 1990, 56). The back dyke marked the limit of the burgh jurisdiction and privileges and also functioned as a first line of defence in times of war and pestilence (Coleman 2004, 292). Back dykes have rarely been identified in the archaeological record, although ditches marking the backs of plots have been identified recently on the Canongate (Gooder 2001; Stronach *et al* 2008).

Documentary references to west and east gates in the late 12th and early 13th centuries suggest that Edinburgh may have had some sort of defensive enclosure as early as the 12th century; other documentary evidence states that the gates of the town existed in 1369 (Duncan 1975). The wars of the 14th century had a marked effect on the town. Accounts describe the burgh as 'totally waste' and 'burned to the ground' in 1342 and 1385 (Stevenson *et al* 1981, 3). In a charter of 1450 James II gave licence to the burgesses to 'fosse, bulwark, wall, toure, turate and uther wais to strengthen our forsaid burgh'; a later James III charter of 1472 gave orders for the refurbishment of the town wall and the demolition of houses built adjoining it.[1] The exact course of this so-called 'King's Wall' is unclear, and earlier estimates placed it halfway down the slope between the south side of the High Street and the Cowgate (Miller 1887, 251–5). Masonry fragments, presumed to derive from the King's Wall, were recovered in the 19th century at Parliament House, south of the Advocates' Library and on the east side of the Old Parliament stairs, which have been taken as confirmation of the wall on this line (Stevenson *et al* 1981). The charter of 1450 ordered the inhabitants to join together the 'hede roumys', the ends of the burgage plots, which on the south side would imply that the wall ran along the Cowgate.

3.3   Other investigations in the area

Excavations on Blackfriars Street, to the west of the site, revealed substantial 15th-century midden deposits and backlands activity within late medieval burgage plots that included a well lined with a wooden barrel (Collard 1992; Will & Radley 2005, 2006). Excavations between Blackfriars Street and
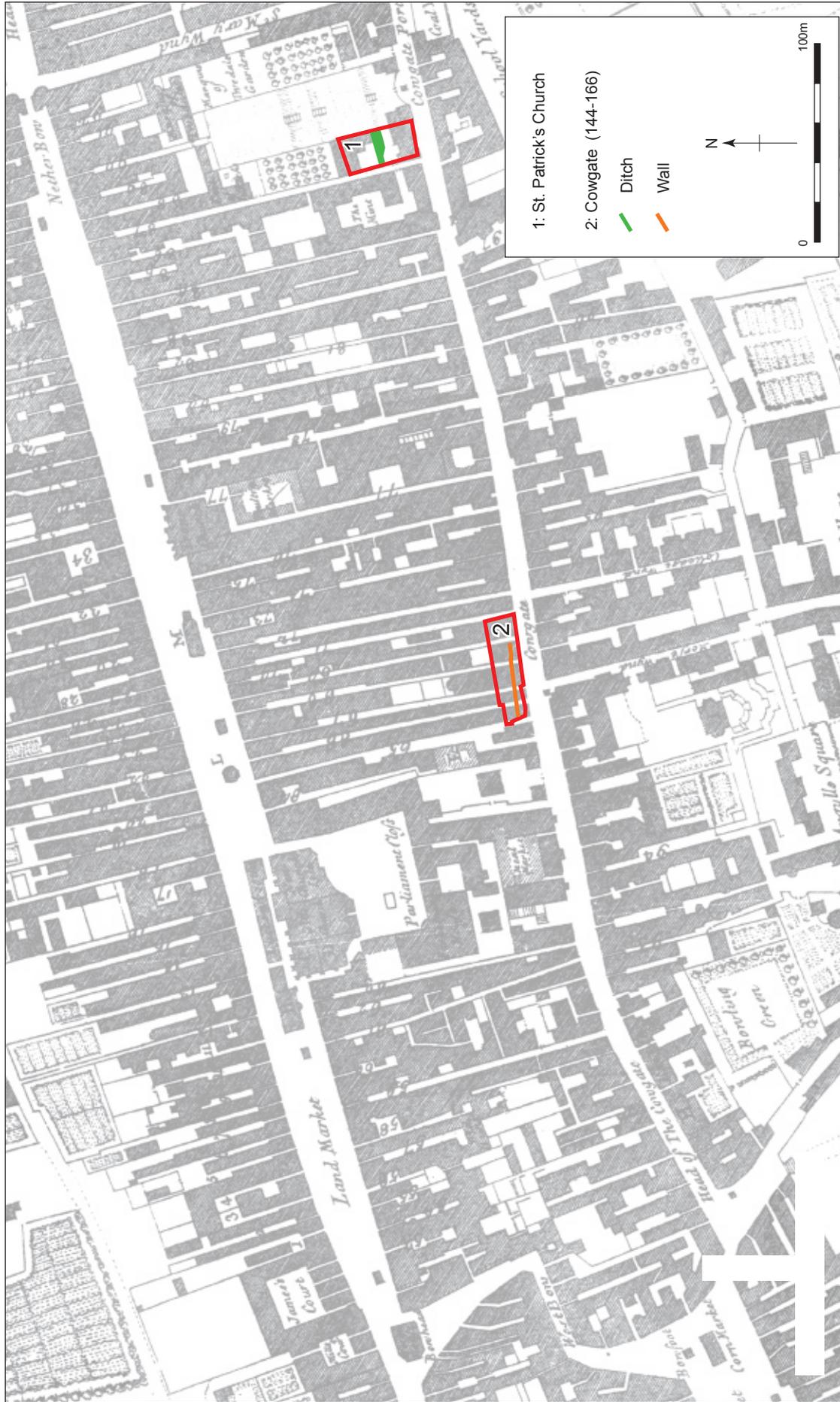
Illus 2   *Locations of recent excavations along the Cowgate, superimposed on Edgar's plan of 1742*

Niddry Street in 1975 also revealed a substantial midden, 3m in depth and 40m north of the Cowgate frontage (Schofield 1976).

Schofield's excavations also revealed a ditch approximately halfway up the slope, interpreted as an early version of the town defences, while the clay-bonded stone walls of a building to the north were interpreted as representing the King's Wall (Schofield 1976). This was partly based on an interpretation of a 1635 house maills description of 'a long rouynous waste, old wall southwards' (*ibid*, 164). On re-examination, the book says 'a long rouynous waiste old *walls* southwards', demoting the special status Schofield assigned to the singular 'old wall'.[2] 'Southwards' describes the circuit taken by a moving tax collector and implies the walls were south of the adjacent wasteland. More recently, excavations at 144–166 Cowgate (illus 2) revealed a 40m stretch of uninterrupted wall running 4m north of the present building line on the Cowgate, and this has been interpreted as the remains of the King's Wall (Dalland 2004 and forthcoming). The wall had been built up against the north side of a substantial ditch, also running parallel to the Cowgate (Magnar Dalland pers comm).

3.4 Properties and owners, by Morag Cross

Property deeds from 1503–31 indicate a linear strip of wasteground lying on the north side of the Cowgate and extending from St Giles' Cemetery eastwards.[3] This waste strip probably contained some feature, such as waterlogged ground, that made it unattractive to build on. When Archbishop James Beaton built his palace a short distance west of the site *c* 1509,[4] he also purchased much of this waste, including the site, possibly for some function in connection with his palace.[5]

Another linear division running east to west was the King's Wall, which is first mentioned in 1427.[6] The wall is recorded as running to the east of the site in 1456 (Wilson 1891, II, 65) and two plots west of the site in 1502.[7] The sasines suggest that the wall was about one or two properties north of the Cowgate, although the properties were not of a uniform length from north to south. This suggests that any wall may lie around the northern timber yard boundary on the first edition Ordnance Survey map (1849, illus 17). This line is continued in property boundaries and closes in tenements running westwards (eg south walls of closes in Beaton's palace and Dickson's Wynd).

The site covered a double-width burgage plot or tenement.[8] It is first mentioned in 1503 as a yard forming part of a single economic unit combined with a kiln and cellar on the western side of Gray's Close.[9] At least until the 1530s, the area was mostly open yards and outdoor workspaces, with three properties.[110]

The southern end of the site was a yard owned by Archbishop Beaton in 1526, and later by Mary, Queen of Scots' Italian servant Francisco de Busso,[11] (imprisoned for Darnley's murder in 1567; Fraser 1969, 236, 338). This became a wood yard in the mid-19th century.[12]

The northern end of the site was a mason's yard in 1526, belonging to Thomas Johnson, a 'paviour', or 'calsaymaker'.[13] In the late 16th to early 17th centuries it belonged to Dr John Naysmith, surgeon to James VI, and to his son-in-law, gentleman of the bedchamber to Charles I (Dingwall 2004).[14] The judge Sir James Elphinstone of Logie built 'Elphinstone Court' or Land here in the 1670s (MacRae 1929, 15).

The yard to the north of the site was owned by fleshers[15] and later by the Incorporation of Skinners, who owned several properties nearby in the late 16th and 17th centuries (including Skinners Close).[16] The 1635 house maills book mentions 'St Michael's Well', since 'lost'.[17] It appears in 19th-century church deeds as lying immediately east of St Patrick's grounds.[18] The skinners' deeds from 1638 include 'the bake hous . . . wall and wast yard lyand in foote of grays close',[19] 'wall' here being Scots for 'well'.[20] Before 1512, the skinners' yard had belonged to the baker John Grey, after whom the close may have been named.[21] Successive bakers owned the well until the 1630s.[22] Andrew Ainslie, a wealthy wine importer, bought the yard from the Incorporation in the 1630s. He joined it on to the garden of his house (which later belonged to the earls of Selkirk and Hyndford).[23] The Episcopal Congregation of the Cowgate Chapel bought the land to the east of the site in 1775.[24]

Notes

1   *Prot Bk Foular* I (contd), No. 26; III, Nos 56, 674.
2   ECA, HTB 1635, 393.
3   Eg *Prot Bk Foular* I, No. 279; I (contd), Nos 237, 895; IV, Nos 55, 126, 448.
4   NMRS No NT27SE 65.
5   *Prot Bk Foular* III, Nos 293, 296, 317, 754; IV, No. 453.
6   *St Giles' Reg* No. 34.
7   *Prot Bk Foular* I, No. 158.
8   *Prot Bk Foular* I (contd), No. 26; III, Nos 56, 674.
9   *Prot Bk Foular* I, Nos 88, 208.
10 *Prot Bk Foular* I (contd) No. 838; III, Nos 476 [for William Fauside, substitute Luke Young], 481.
11 NAS, CC8/8/4/285.
12 AA, M49/16, M49/17.
13 *Prot Bk Foular* III, 476, 481, 754.
14 AA, M46/1, M46/10.
15 *Prot Bk Foular* I (contd), No. 349, 666; III, No. 481, 476.
16 ECA, Acc 617, No. 13, Barclay's alias Skinner's Close Writs.
17 ECA, HTB 1635, 435; NMRS No. NT27SE 539.
18 AA, M49/6, pp 4, 5.
19 ECA, Acc 617, No. 3, f383r.

20 ECA, Acc 617, No. 3, f383r; Acc 617, No. 13, Bakehouse Writs.

21 *Prot Bk Foular* I (contd), No. 838; III, Nos 118, 754.

22 ECA, HTB 1635, 434.

23 AA, M46/1.

24 AA, M49/6, pp 3, 9–11; M49/10.