

# BONHAM



**History of our Home**





As our guests enter The Bonham through the front door at 34 Drumsheugh Gardens, they follow in the footsteps of Robert Cox of Gorgie and his family, who moved into the house when it was completed to their specifications in 1882.

In these pages we will introduce you to this remarkable family, and to the people who bought and first occupied the other three houses that have come together to form The Bonham. We will place the construction of these

historic buildings in the context of the development of Edinburgh, capital of Scotland.

Drumsheugh Gardens, built between 1874 and 1893, was one of the last pieces of Edinburgh's famous 'New Town' to be completed. The story of these magnificent houses, and the route by which they became a luxury hotel, is the story of one and a half centuries of social change in the United Kingdom and in one of its great cities.

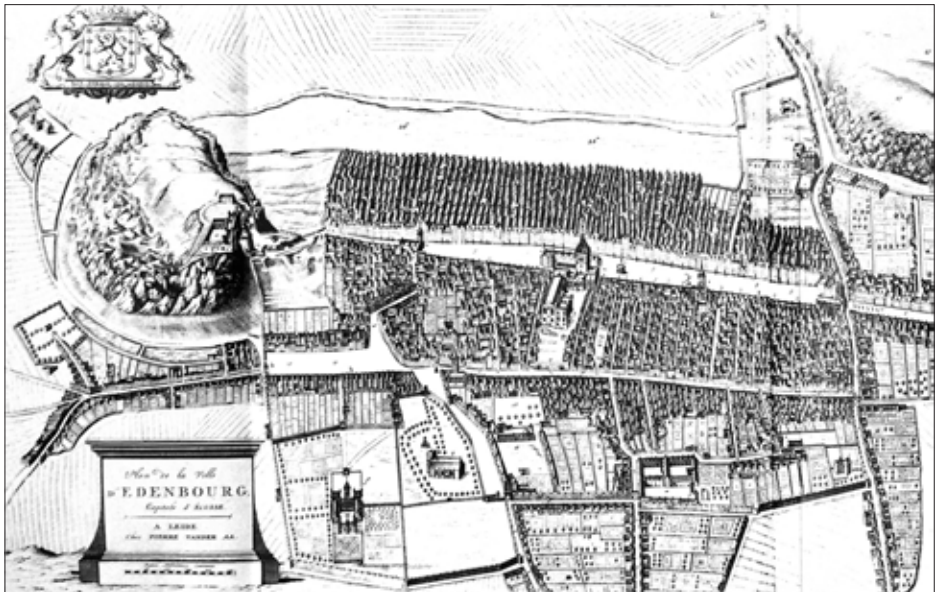
# Edinburgh: the development of Scotland's capital city

Edinburgh is built on the remains of a prehistoric volcano, the centre of which is marked by the hills of Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crags in the city's Holyrood Park.

As the glacial flow of the Ice Age moved from west to east, it was parted by the plug of hard volcanic rock on which Edinburgh Castle now stands; and as it re-formed downstream, it left a sloping ridge about a mile in length with deep valleys on either side. Just as a drop of water is shaped by the air as it falls, so, over a period of many thousands of years, the basic 'crag and tail' topography of Edinburgh came into being.

The upper part of this ridge became the broad high street ("Hie Gait") of the town that grew up beside the castle fortress; its lower part linked the hill town via the "Canon Gait" to the abbey, and later the royal palace, of Holyrood.

This drawing by James Gordon of Rothiemay, commissioned by the Town Council in 1647, shows the town that, over approximately a thousand years, had grown up below the fortress of Edinburgh Castle. The population, 20,000, had doubled in the last hundred years; it would double again to 40,000 by the mid-eighteenth century.



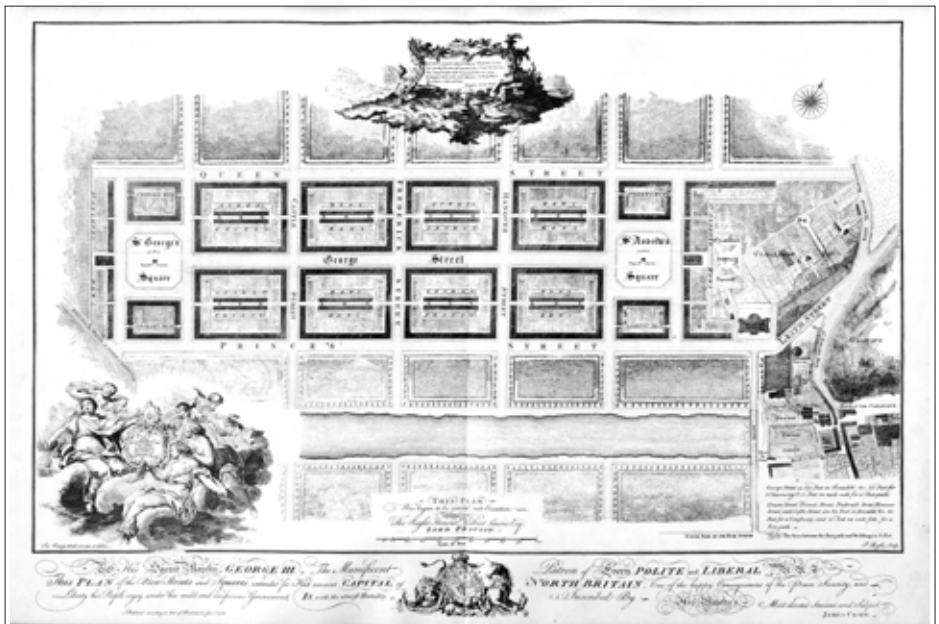
Edinburgh, James Gordon of Rothiemay, 1647. (With permission from the WS Society)

It was walled, it was defensible, and it was increasingly cramped. The density of population did have its positive aspects: in these hothouse conditions germinated the seeds of the Scottish Enlightenment, one of the greatest flowerings of intellectual activity the world has ever seen. A visitor to the city in the 1750's famously said that standing at the Mercat Cross he 'could in a few minutes take fifty men of genius and learning by the hand'.

But as the population continued to rise, constrained as if on a tiny island, the density became unsustainable. Led by Lord Provost George Drummond, the city council resolved on an expansion to the north. In 1766 they launched an architectural competition for a residential suburb.

The winner was James Craig, and this is his plan, published in July 1767. The arrangement symbolises and celebrates the union of England and Scotland: St George's Church to the west, St Andrew's to the east, were dedicated to the patron saints of England and Scotland. They are joined together by George Street, named after King George III; he is flanked by his Queen and his Princes. The smaller streets would be named Thistle and Rose, after the national emblems.

This "First New Town" was built over a period of around fifty years, starting in St Andrew Square in the late 1760's and finishing with Charlotte Square, designed in 1790 but not completed until 1820.



*Plan for the New Town of Edinburgh, James Craig, 1767.  
(With permission from the WS Society)*

# Later Phases of the New Town

From the early 1800's, the New Town was expanding to the east, north and west. Much of the land on which these later phases were built belonged to George Heriot's Trust, a charitable foundation established in the 1620's by a silversmith who had been banker to King James VI of Scotland. Heriot had moved to London with the royal court when James became King James I of Great Britain after the Union of the Crowns in 1603. This plan dates from around 1790, and shows the Trust's land interests to the west end of the New Town.

Two large areas of green are labelled "Lord Moray's Feu" and "Lord Colville's Feu", where the Earl of Moray and Lord Colville of Culross lived. In 1823 the Earl of Moray would begin developing the crescents - Randolph Crescent, Ainslie Place and Moray Place - that now occupy the parkland that surrounded his house. Lord Colville's Feu forms part of a large area of ground, most of which was owned by the Walker family ("Mr William Walker's Feu"), with other packages belonging to Lord Alva and John Cockburn Ross of Shandwick. It was developed between 1820 and the 1890's in a co-ordinated way masterminded by the Walker family and George Heriot's Trust. The Bonham now stands in what was Lord Colville's garden.

At the time of the plan, the property was occupied by the 8th Lord Colville of Culross, a trustee of George Heriot's. His predecessor the 7th Lord Colville had retired to Drumsheugh after a distinguished career in the Royal Navy, stationed mainly in Canada as Commander-in-Chief at Halifax, Nova Scotia. He supervised the rebuilding and expansion of the dockyards at Halifax in the early 1760's, and participated in the ceremony of the 'Burying of the Hatchet' in the garden of the Governor's residence, which brought to an end many decades of war between the Mi'kmaq people and the British.

*Land to the north west of the New Town, George Heriot's Trust, c1790.  
(Copyright: George Heriot's Trust)*



St Dunstons  
St Dunstons

Road from Quaker's to St  
Dunstons

THE PROPERTY OF THE HOSPITAL

THE EARL OF MERVAY'S ESTATE  
 in Moss, Strawberry Walks &c. 3,651  
 in Lushmore includes Stock of Trees 17,482  
 in Strawberry Walk and Planting 3,822  
 Total 24,955

THE INCORPORATION OF BARNUM'S ESTATE  
 a. Land, houses, woods, north side of Canal 4,170  
 b. 17 17 17, north do. do. 2,220  
 c. Ground planted 1st to Lord Brough 400  
 Total 6,790

B

Land, Trees, etc.  
 in Moss &c. 1,200  
 in Strawberry Walk 1,000  
 in Lushmore 1,000  
 in Planting 500  
 in Moss &c. 500  
 in Strawberry Walk 500  
 in Lushmore 500  
 in Planting 500  
 in Moss &c. 500  
 in Strawberry Walk 500  
 in Lushmore 500  
 in Planting 500

QUEEN ST  
 CHARLOTTE SQUARE

St Dunstons  
 in Moss &c. 1,200  
 in Strawberry Walk 1,000  
 in Lushmore 1,000  
 in Planting 500  
 in Moss &c. 500  
 in Strawberry Walk 500  
 in Lushmore 500  
 in Planting 500  
 in Moss &c. 500  
 in Strawberry Walk 500  
 in Lushmore 500  
 in Planting 500

St Dunstons  
 in Moss &c. 1,200  
 in Strawberry Walk 1,000  
 in Lushmore 1,000  
 in Planting 500  
 in Moss &c. 500  
 in Strawberry Walk 500  
 in Lushmore 500  
 in Planting 500  
 in Moss &c. 500  
 in Strawberry Walk 500  
 in Lushmore 500  
 in Planting 500

St Dunstons  
 in Moss &c. 1,200  
 in Strawberry Walk 1,000  
 in Lushmore 1,000  
 in Planting 500  
 in Moss &c. 500  
 in Strawberry Walk 500  
 in Lushmore 500  
 in Planting 500  
 in Moss &c. 500  
 in Strawberry Walk 500  
 in Lushmore 500  
 in Planting 500

SCALES OF  
 Imperial Chains, 66 feet each  
 Scotch Chains, 66 feet each  
 Feet



The first phase of the Walker Estate development is shown in the extract from James Knox's plan of 1821: Melville Street, Coates Street (now Walker Street) and Alva Street, with Shandwick Place and Coates Crescent to the south. The Colville property, and that of Sir Patrick Walker (William's son) remain as private houses surrounded by extensive grounds. As the grid of the city grew, it was intended that Melville Street should be extended to link to further proposed development to the south-west. But Sir Patrick Walker's two daughters left their entire fortune to the Episcopal Church, and dedicated this site for a cathedral instead. St Mary's Cathedral was built between 1874 and 1917 to the designs of George Gilbert Scott.

Drumsheugh Gardens and Rothesay Terrace were the last piece of the Walker Estate to be built. In this map from 1891, although Rothesay Terrace remains to be completed, we see the whole neighbourhood of The Bonham in a form that can be recognised today.

Drumsheugh Gardens was designed by John Lessels, architect to the Walker Estate, and the houses were built by John Watherston & Sons. Each house was reserved by its new owner before construction, and the internal finishing was tailored to the owner's specification. The price of £8,000 was paid in stages through the

construction period, with the final balance due on completion. Each owner would spend an additional 20-25% on furniture and finishes, taking the total to £10,000 (equivalent to approximately £1,500,000 today). Watherston applied for permission to build groups of adjacent houses, which would take approximately two years to construct and to fit out. Each group required a commitment from six or eight individuals with the means to pay this kind of sum over the construction period.

The owners of the houses jointly owned the triangular garden enclosed by the terraces, and shared responsibility for its upkeep. There were rules determining who could use the garden, just as there are today. But in those days things were more complicated: servants were not allowed in the garden, with the exception of nurserymaids looking after their employers' children.

So who bought these houses? Edinburgh's status as a centre of banking, insurance and professional services grew during the nineteenth century, and by the 1880's there was still a market for grand houses which had not been satisfied by nearly 120 years of continuous construction of the New Town. Our four houses were bought by a banker, an insurance executive, an engineer and the proprietor of an old-established manufacturing business.





*Detail from Plan of Edinburgh, James Knox, 1821.  
(With permission from the WS Society)*



*Detail from Plan of Edinburgh & Leith, John Bartholomew, 1891.  
(With permission from the WS Society)*

# Number 34: Robert Cox of Gorgie and family

No.34 was bought by Robert Cox of Gorgie, owner of his family's long-established gelatine and glue manufacturing business at Gorgie Mills on the western outskirts of Edinburgh. He was to become a Liberal politician and Member of Parliament.

The business had been established in 1725, and had opened an office and warehouse at Hudson Street, Greenwich, in New York City in 1845; Cox's Gelatine was a well-known brand on both sides of the Atlantic until the 1950's.

Cox and his wife Harriet had six children. Their son Robert Ferdinand de Lesseps Cox was a successful conductor and composer for musical theatre in London. He had been named after his French godfather Ferdinand de Lesseps, who after leading the construction of the Suez Canal, began the project to build the Panama Canal in 1881. As leader of the Franco-American Union, de Lesseps officiated at the presentation of the Statue of Liberty in 1886.

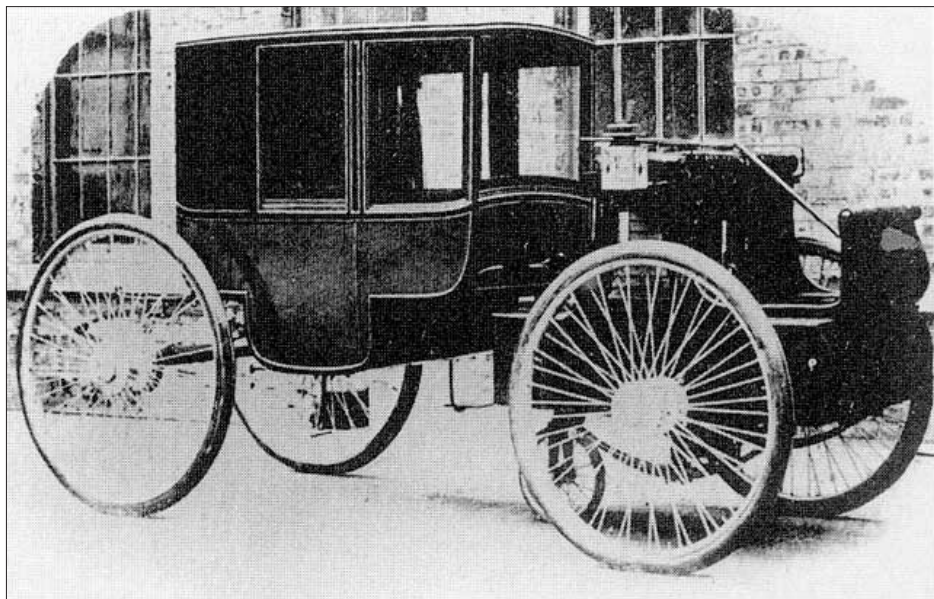
Robert Cox was fascinated by scientific matters, and created a private observatory in Murrayfield. This was run by William Peck, an employee from the glue factory, who later became a renowned astronomer



*Robert Cox, MP, outside the Houses of Parliament, Westminster, 1897.*

An advertisement for Cox's Gelatine. The central image shows a woman in a dark dress and a child in a white dress sitting in a room with a fireplace. The advertisement is framed by a distinctive checkerboard border. Text at the bottom reads: "See, Grandma, what I have made for you with the package of COX'S GELATINE. Yes, dear, I made jelly Grandpa's GELATINE when I was your age. I ate it as just the same to day." The word "GELATINE" is written in large, bold letters at the bottom right. To the right of the main image, there is a small box with the text: "COX'S 'Checkerboard' package only. A package of Gelatine, and treated by United States Patent Office, will be found in every store selling chewing gum, and in every store selling 'Checkerboard' and 'Cox's Gelatine'." Below this, it says "L. B. COX, S.F.A., 100 West Street, New York."

*Cox's Gelatine advertisement, with its distinctive checkerboard branding, 1930's.*



*A Madelvic Brougham EV, 1898*

and Director of the Edinburgh City Observatory before being knighted in 1917.

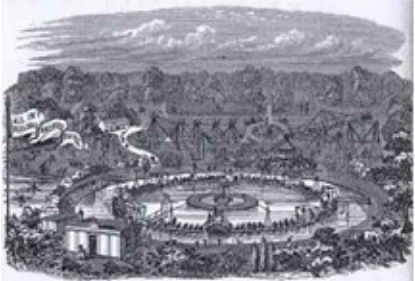
Another Peck venture was the opening in 1898 of the Madelvic Motor Carriage Company, of which Robert Cox was Chairman. This made electric cars and a three-wheeled electric tractor which could be hitched to a normal carriage in place of horses. Unfortunately, despite supplying vehicles to the Post Office for transporting mail between the city centre and Leith, the company failed to recoup the costs of its establishment and went into voluntary liquidation in 1900. The Madelvic building - in Granton, north Edinburgh - is the oldest surviving purpose-built car factory in the UK.

When Robert inherited the family firm it was known as J & G Cox Ltd - his uncle was John and his father was George. John was an inventor, who had transformed production processes in the business, developing the gelatine side in addition to the glue which had previously been its mainstay. Besides its culinary uses, this would turn out to be a valuable property as photography took off, as from about 1845 it was a key ingredient in the photographic printing process: gelatin silver prints are still the preferred medium of many art photographers.

John Cox patented numerous inventions, including an early typewriter. But his most amazing achievement was an exercise and amusement park called the Royal Patent Gymnasium, which he opened in 1865 on land below Royal Crescent at the northern edge of the New Town. He designed (and patented) the appliances, including: a circular boat which rotated in a pond, propelled by up to 600 seated oarsmen; a see-saw 100 feet long and 7 feet wide, on which up to 200 people would be lifted 50 feet in the air; a Ferris wheel “Planetarium Swing” was proposed - 25 years before Ferris supposedly invented it for the Chicago World Fair - in which cages representing Earth, Neptune, Jupiter and Saturn rose nearly 300 feet in the air, but it was not built.

Entry to the park cost sixpence (2.5 modern pence), half price for children, and up to 15,000 people a day would come. Although it was to close in the 1890’s, the Royal Patent Gymnasium was still in its heyday when the Cox family moved into Drumsheugh Gardens.

*Advertisements for  
the Royal Patent  
Gymnasium,  
Edinburgh,  
1860’s.*



**THE  
ROYAL PATENT GYMNASIUM,  
THE NEW AND INCREASING WONDER OF EDINBURGH,  
ROYAL CRESCENT PARK, adjoining Scotland Street Station.**

<p><small>THE PATENT ROTARY BOAT.</small> <b>'GREAT SEA SERPENT.'</b> Is suited for 600 Rowers, embarking and disembarking Passengers at Four different Piers, at opposite sides of the Island, at the same time (1).</p> <p><small>THE PATENT VELOCIPEDE.</small> <b>PADDLE MERRY-GO-ROUND</b> Is 100 feet in circumference, and can accommodate 200 Persons.</p> <p><small>THE PATENT</small> <b>Giant's Sea-Saw 'CHIANG'</b> Is 100 feet long by 7 feet broad, and can accommodate 200 Persons, elevating them to a height of 50 feet.</p> <p><small>The Giant's Hoists, Giant's Leap or Aerial Cage, Horizontal and Rotary Ladders, Parallel Bars, Twisting Pole, Slipping-Sliding Ropesway, Sails, Quoin, Balls, Hammock, &amp;c. &amp;c.</small> <b>Admission, 6d.; Children under 12, 3d. Season Tickets at moderate prices.</b> <small>By Schools and Institutions, on terms. Half price.</small> <b>A MILITARY or other BAND on Saturday or Holiday Afternoon, Weather Permitting.</b></p>	<p><small>THE PATENT</small> <b>SELF-ADJUSTING TRAPEZE</b> Enables Gymnasts to Swing by the hands a distance of 150 feet from one Trapeze to the other.</p> <p><small>THE PATENT</small> <b>COMPOUND PENDULUM SWING</b> Holds about 100 persons, and is kept in motion by steam upon it. There are also numerous varieties of Small Boats and Canoes on the Ponds. Propelled by various novel methods.</p> <p><b>THE PRINCE ALFRED WHEEL ESCAPE.</b> Also to be seen, Specimens of <b>LANTERNS, SPECTACLES, STILES, &amp;c. &amp;c.</b></p>
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**ROYAL GYMNASIUM,  
Royal Crescent Park, Edinburgh.  
OPEN DAILY.**

**The Patent Rotary Boat 'Great Sea Serpent'**  
Is Seated for 600 Rowers, embarking and disembarking Passengers at Four different Piers, at opposite sides of the Island, at the same time.



The PATENT VELOCIPEDE-PADDLE MERRY-GO-ROUND is 100 feet in circumference, and can accommodate 200 persons.

ROTARY SKATING HALL OPEN DAILY.

**THE GRAND PLANETARIUM SWING**  
Represents FOUR PLANETS, viz: THE EARTH, NEPTUNE, JUPITER, and SATURN. It is placed descriptive of a Vertical Circle of nearly 300 feet, and can accommodate from eight to twenty individuals at a time.  
**ADMISSION, 6d. Children under Twelve, 3d.**  
J. M. D. BROWN, (Care)

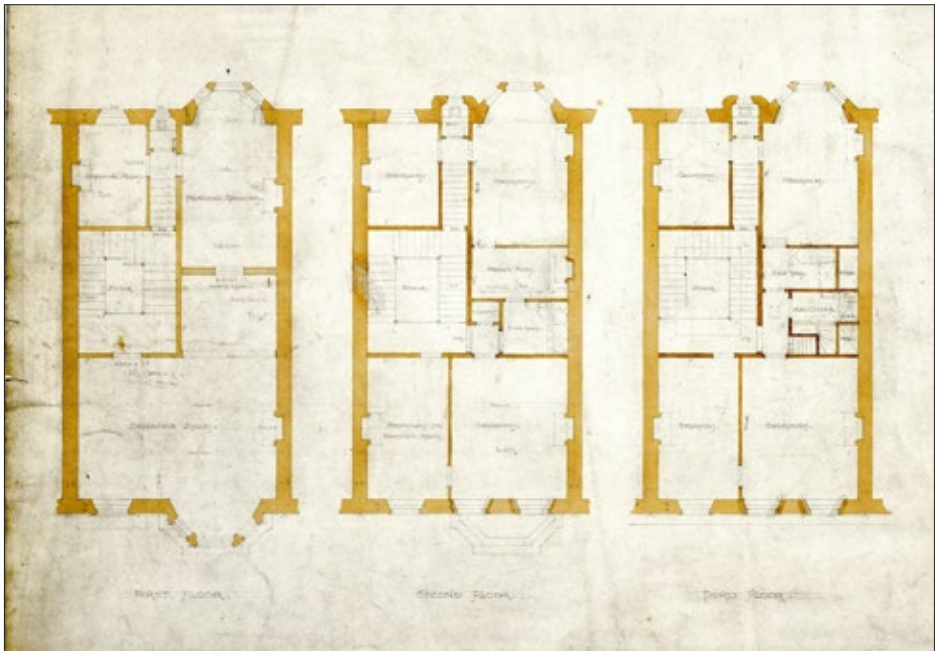
# Number 35: Adam Gillies-Smith and family

No.35 belonged to Adam Gillies-Smith, a chartered accountant and General Manager of the North British & Mercantile Insurance Company. Founded in Edinburgh in 1809, the company had offices all over the world by the 1860's, and would eventually become part of the Commercial Union group in 1959. He and his wife lived at Drumsheugh with their son and three daughters.

Alongside his business career, Gillies-Smith followed intellectual pursuits, being Treasurer of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, a

learned institution established in the 18th-century heyday of the Scottish Enlightenment and still flourishing today. He donated to the National Library of Scotland a 13th-century Italian manuscript copy of the 'Digestum Vetus' of Justinian, an essential source of European law.

The original plan of the First, Second and Third floors of no.35 Drumsheugh Gardens survives in the archives of the Watherston company, and is preserved in the library of Historic Environment Scotland.

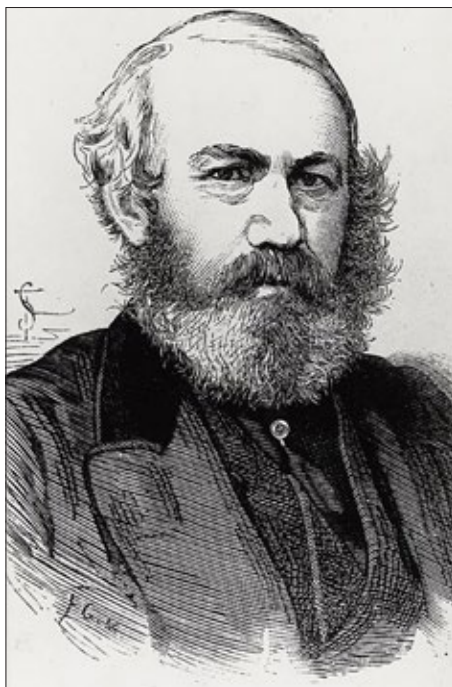


*Plans of First, Second and Third floors, 35 Drumsheugh Gardens for Adam Gillies-Smith, 1879. (Courtesy of HES, Records of John Watherston and Sons, builders, Edinburgh, Scotland)*

## Number 36: Sir Thomas and Lady Bouch, Mrs Helen Scott Fleming

£6,000 of the £8,000 purchase price for no.36 had been paid by Sir Thomas Bouch, engineer, but he died before the house was completed and ownership was taken over by Mrs Helen Scott Fleming, widow of a Dundee merchant. Mrs Fleming paid the balance of the purchase price to the builders, and reimbursed Lady Bouch for the sum that had been paid.

Thomas Bouch had had a successful career as a civil engineer and railway designer, becoming Sir Thomas when he was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1879. Among his other achievements, he designed the first roll-on roll-off train ferries in the world, which operated across the Firth of Forth before the construction of the Forth Bridge. He had proposed a suspension bridge to take over this function, and work had begun on the project. But disaster was to strike with the collapse of the Tay Bridge, which he had designed. His Forth Bridge project was abandoned - to be superseded by Herbert Baker's sensational cantilever bridge - and after being heavily criticised in the public inquiry into the Tay Bridge disaster he died at his country house at Moffat.



*Sir Thomas Bouch*

Mrs Fleming moved from a house in George Square, which had been built in the 1760's at the very start of Edinburgh's Georgian expansion and was still a fashionable address.

# Number 33: Thomas Hector Smith and family

No.33 was the home of Thomas Hector Smith, 38-year-old General Manager (the old Scottish term effectively means Chief Executive) of the National Bank of Scotland. While Cox, who had been born in the same year, was the sole owner of his family's long-established business, Smith had climbed the ladder of the banking hierarchy. He had started aged sixteen as an apprentice at the Bank of Scotland in his native Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire, moving to Edinburgh at nineteen and working initially as a junior teller in George Street. Before he was thirty he was promoted to the important post of assistant manager at the bank's London branch.

In 1881 the National Bank of Scotland's General Manager announced his intention to retire at the end of the year. Smith was appointed joint General Manager alongside him, before taking over as sole General Manager. His move to Drumsheugh Gardens in 1882 was a mark of his success, and he and his wife Lucy brought up two sons here.

So in the first owners of these houses, we have links to the great banking institutions of Britain, a worldwide insurance business based in Edinburgh, a gelatine manufacturer that had been exporting to the US since the 1840's, the invention of the Ferris Wheel, and - more tenuously - the Suez Canal, the Panama Canal, the Statue of Liberty, and the ill-fated first Tay Bridge.



## Domestic Staff

Life in a fine house, in Edinburgh as elsewhere, would have depended on a well-managed team of servants. Every ten years in the UK, a national census is taken, and details are recorded of the people in every property at the time. Information from the 1891 Census shows who was in the properties on the night of 5 April 1891, nine years after they were built.

Thomas Smith was at no.33 with his wife Lucy, their two sons, three visitors including Smith's sister, and seven servants. At no.35, Adam Gillies-Smith was joined by his son, three daughters and seven servants including a German governess. Mrs Fleming at no.36, whose occupation is given as "Living on Private Means", had her daughter and her doctor son in the house, with a visitor and four servants. The Cox family were not at home, but their house was being looked after by the butler, housemaid and laundrymaid.

## Social Evolution in the early 20th Century

Following the watershed of the First World War of 1914-18, as increasing employment gave young people wider choices, domestic service became a less attractive option. For a prosperous Edinburgh family the cost of running a fully staffed townhouse became harder to sustain, and from the early 1920's many houses were converted to office or institutional use, often as private schools or small hospitals. In many cases a number of terraced houses would be combined, producing suites of medical consulting rooms attached to small surgical facilities, or larger offices where up to 150 people might work. Those larger houses that were not converted into places of work were frequently subdivided into smaller residential units.

Number 33 was divided in 1927 to form four separate residences, of which the one on the top two floors is now part of The Bonham. Three garages were built on the garden ground behind to accommodate the residents' cars. The changes to 34, 35 and 36 were to be more radical.



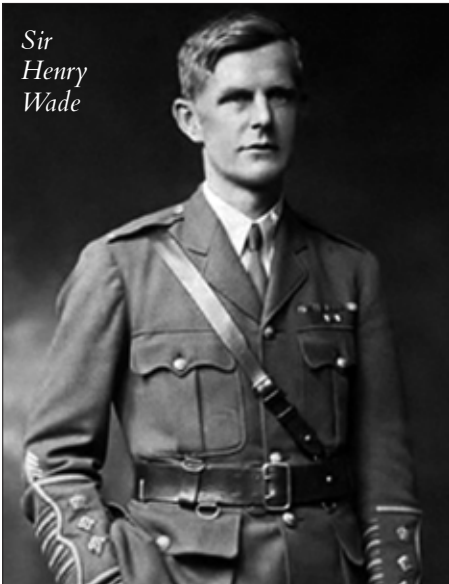
# The Private Clinic

In 1923 numbers 35 and 36 were bought by surgeons Henry Wade and David Wilkie, and converted into a hospital known as The Private Clinic. Mr and Mrs Gillies-Smith's fine bedroom became an operating theatre, their drawing room a radiology room. The clinic was extended to include no.34 - and a second operating theatre - in 1928.

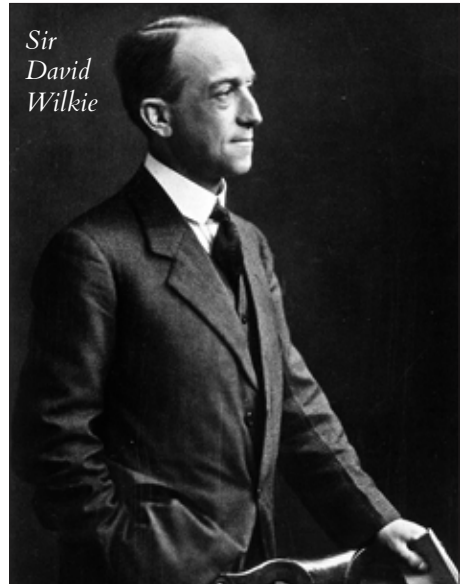
As an army surgeon before and during the 1914-18 war, observing that many fatalities resulted from the long journeys wounded soldiers had to make to field hospitals, Wade had developed a mobile operating car and pioneered its use in the Gallipoli campaign. By the time he and Wilkie established The Private

Clinic, Wade was specialising in urology and formed a close collaboration with Professor Hugh H Young of Baltimore. His partner Wilkie specialised in cancer, but sadly succumbed to cancer himself in 1938. Both Sir Henry Wade and Sir David Wilkie were knighted for their distinguished medical service.

Following Wilkie's death, Sir Henry retired from surgical practice, though he continued to perform surgery during the 1939-45 war at the city's emergency hospital at Bangour. The Private Clinic became a maternity hospital, and over the next twelve years many babies were born here: the hotel celebrates its relationship with these "Bonham Babies".



*Sir  
Henry  
Wade*



*Sir  
David  
Wilkie*

# Muir Hall of Residence

Following the creation of the UK's National Health Service in 1948 the nature of medical care provision began to change, and The Private Clinic was one of the many hospitals and "nursing homes" to close down in the 1950's. The buildings were sold to Edinburgh University, and in January 1955 the university court applied for permission to form a new link between no.34 and the upper part of no.33, and to convert the four linked properties to form "Hostel Accommodation for Women Students". What had been the Gillies-Smith's bedroom now became a shared bathroom, with baths and washbasins in separate cubicles.

Muir Hall was planned for 60 residents, with first-year students sharing rooms before progressing to single rooms thereafter. Seven staff lived in: the Warden, a Housekeeper, a Porter-cum-security guard, a Cook and three Maids.

Jane Davie lived in Muir Hall for the first three years of her training in medicine, from 1961 to 1964. She tells us that the all-female hostel was laughingly referred to as "Muir for the pure and demure".

"The downstairs dining room was much the same as the Bonham layout but the drawing room was reserved for those who wished to

play the awful piano, and for the entertainment of 'gentlemen' on Sunday afternoons between 3 and 6 pm, strictly by prior invitation and with the names given to the Warden in advance."

"We ate breakfast and evening meals in hall and the highlight of the year was the black tie Christmas Hall Ball when boyfriends could join us for dancing and supper after formal introduction to the Warden - I remember it all with horror!"

The door was locked at 11.00pm, and students had to apply to the Warden for a late key, recording the reason in a book. "Needless to say there was much abuse of this privilege, and in second year I had the misfortune to have the room immediately above the door of no.36, which was the late entrance, and had to come down to let miscreants in when gravel was thrown at my window. At least one



*The First floor Bathroom, Muir Hall of Residence. (photo: Peter Taylor)*



*Jane Davie, Jane Neville and Dee Shepherd reminiscing over lunch at No.35.*

got to know who the latest boyfriends were as there were usually couples entwined together on the doorstep.

“I left as soon as possible for a shared flat in Marchmont, but a hard core of women stayed for the whole of the six-year medical course.”

When Jane Neville and Dee Shepherd arrived at Muir Hall in the mid-1970’s, things had become rather less strict. It was no longer the preserve of medical students: Jane studied Engineering and Dee studied History. The coin-operated telephones on either side of the front

door at no.35 (now coat-hanging space for the Restaurant) were still the primary means of communication with the outside world, along with mail delivered to the hall table. All students had their own keys, and the 11 o’clock curfew was no longer enforced with the same rigour. There were stories of sunbathing on the roof and drinking gin in the bath, and the residents led full and active social lives: it is telling that Jane and Dee met the men who were to become their husbands during their time at Muir Hall, and fifty years later they are both still happily married.

# The Bonham

By the end of the twentieth century, university accommodation had moved on from the hostel model, with its shared bedrooms and communal bathrooms. The Muir Hall buildings were put on the market in 1997 and generated great interest, with nine competing purchasers submitting bids at the closing date.

As Edinburgh's hotel sector gravitated towards the rather impersonal 3/4-star business market, hotelier Peter Taylor was concentrating on a more guest-focused profile. Having effectively pioneered the boutique hotel concept in Edinburgh with Channings (1989) and The Howard (1995), he was actively looking for a building in which he could create a Town House hotel that would be seen by guests as their personal 'Club in Town'. The size, location and inherent style of the Drumsheugh Gardens buildings were perfect, and he successfully completed the purchase in August 1997.

There followed a high-speed programme, led on site by Peter Taylor himself, to transform Muir Hall into a luxury hotel: the communal bathroom (an operating theatre in Private Clinic days) reverted to being a beautiful bedroom, as it had been for the Gillies-Smiths; 550 new oak balusters were made by a specialist woodworker to restore the stair balustrades, which had been boarded over; great care was invested in the

lighting, decoration and technology. The result was magnificent.

Named after a competition among colleagues and friends of the Taylors, The Bonham opened in the early summer of 1998 to great critical acclaim - Condé Nast Traveler included it in their list of the twenty best new hotels in the world. Its combination of leafy peacefulness with a superbly central location made it a favourite with discerning guests. The fine restaurant attracted non-residents in a way that is unusual in a boutique hotel, bringing visitors to the capital into contact with its citizens.

In 2018 The Bonham was acquired by Chicago-born investor, philanthropist and collector Richard H Driehaus. One of the most brilliant investors of the twentieth century, Richard Driehaus is regarded as the father of momentum investing. His philanthropy is focused on the preservation of the environment and the promotion of classical architecture. His initiatives include the Driehaus Prize, awarded annually to an architect whose work embodies the highest ideals of traditional and classical architecture in contemporary society. The buildings he chose for his hotel collection - two in Georgian Dublin and one in the neo-classical New Town of Edinburgh - reflect this deep interest in classical urbanism.

The houses that make up The Bonham are almost exactly contemporary with the 1883 Nickerson Mansion in Chicago, which had been restored between 2003 and 2008 as the Driehaus Museum to make available to the citizens of Chicago the extraordinary collection of art and artefacts he had collected, and to act as a public museum and educational outreach facility. Works from his personal art collection, which concentrates on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century heyday of these houses, are displayed throughout The Bonham. In addition to many delightful paintings, the Tiffany floor lamp with Nasturtium shade was restored by Richard Driehaus and installed in the hotel's Reception lobby, where the wall lamps are also by Tiffany.

Mr Driehaus felt an affinity for Scotland going back to his school days in Chicago. He credited the nuns who taught him at the St Margaret of Scotland Catholic School with instilling the values he lived by: "In addition to reading, writing and arithmetic," he told Chicago magazine, "they taught me three things: you have to continue to learn your whole life, you have to be responsible for your own actions, and you have to give something



*Richard H Driehaus at The Bonham with the Tiffany Nasturtium lamp after its restoration.*

back to society." Richard H Driehaus was the living embodiment of these ideals.

After extensive upgrading and an internal redesign, The Bonham was reborn as a full luxury hotel in 2019. These magnificent houses once again provide a stylish and luxurious environment for discerning people, as they did for the Smith, Cox, Gillies-Smith and Fleming families.



*Aerial view over Edinburgh from the west, with The Bonham centre stage.  
(Copyright Chris Close Photography)*

The American historian Lewis Mumford wrote that a great city was “the best organ of memory man has yet created”. We have looked at these houses as an element of that ‘organ of memory’, playing their part in an evolving metropolis. In this photograph we see them in the context of Edinburgh as a whole: the great sweeps of the neo-classical New Town across the centre of the picture, the Castle and the Old Town behind.

If we imagine the picture with fields in the foreground instead of buildings,

we can conjure up a memory of what Gordon of Rothiemay drew nearly four centuries ago [page 2]: the Castle on its rock – even then a thousand years old – with the medieval Old Town stepping down the ridge behind it.

And behind that, the distinctive profile of Arthur’s Seat and Salisbury Crags tells the story of the ancient volcano that – millions of years ago – gave this land its form.

Researched and written by Simon Laird,  
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