Urban morphology and medieval burgh development in Edinburgh and Elgin

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ABSTRACT

Presented here are the results of a study to assess the potential of urban morphology to make a continuing contribution to the understanding of urban development in the Scottish burghs and to provide helpful input to associated archaeological studies. Use is made of recent cartographically based evidence of the high degree of consistency and stability to be found in the configuration of the burgage plots and foreland lines in Scottish burghs.

To do this, four carefully selected aspects of the urban development, one in Edinburgh and three in Elgin, were examined. The two Scottish burghs were selected for their similarity of layout along a single main street, providing a relatively simple urban pattern. For Edinburgh, appropriate morphological information, which is available from earlier studies, is summarised. Similar information for Elgin was compiled as part of this study and the results are set out.

The case is made that urban morphology still has much to offer in the study of Scottish urban history and archaeology. In addition, having reviewed recent archaeological reports, it is suggested that archaeology has great potential to provide a strong contribution to the better understanding of the urban morphology of Scotland.

INTRODUCTION

The pioneering morphological study of Alnwick in Northumberland by geographer M R G Conzen stimulated the study of the subject in the UK (Conzen 1960). Town plan analysis, as it was termed, developed rapidly in subsequent years, as evidenced for example by the papers presented to celebrate Conzen's eightieth birthday (Slater, 1990). In Scotland studies were made of St Andrews and Perth (Brooks & Whittington 1977; Spearman 1988). During this period archaeology has made an increasingly important input to the study of burgh development in Scotland.

Coleman has published a comprehensive review of archaeological evidence concerning burgage plots in Scotland (Coleman 2004).

Recently a cartographic approach, utilising the First Edition Ordnance Survey (OS) Town Plans of Scottish burghs, has identified features having a high degree of consistency in the plot patterns from location to location within the burgh and from burgh to burgh (Tait 2006; Tait 2008). This in its turn implies a considerable persistence and stability of these patterns over the centuries. The Town Plans were selected as being the earliest maps having the necessary precision. Digitised versions, available from the National Library

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of Scotland (NLS) website were employed. Earlier maps and plans were also found to be useful in cases where more general information, such as the density of backland development, was sought.

The present paper reports on an investigation into the role of urban morphology as a support for current historical and archaeological studies. The investigation is based on five carefully chosen topics featuring the burghs of Edinburgh and Elgin. These burghs were selected because both were based on a single main street, providing a relatively uncomplicated town layout. The study brings together consideration of burgage plot width data, observations of street frontage patterns and plot access positions, combined with recent archaeological reports and a careful re-examination of a number of medieval charters in published form. The features chosen for attention, which concentrate on specific aspects of each burgh, are not intended to provide an overall review of the development of these burghs.

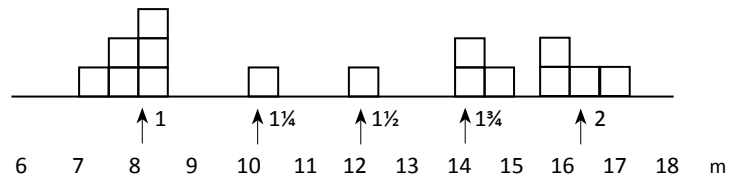## BURGAGE PLOT PATTERNS IN THE SCOTTISH BURGHS

A number of Scottish Burghs were formally established in the reign of David I (1124–53) as part of a systematic policy of creating centres of trade in Scotland, with the object of developing the economy of the country (MacQueen & Windram 1988: 208; Ewan 1990: 1; Dennison & Lynch 2005: 24). In order to attract suitable settlers to the burghs, each was offered one or more long narrow strips of land, tofts or burgage plots, extending back from the street.

The plots were laid out with care and the incomers were expected to build and occupy their dwelling house there, normally on the foreland, facing the street and conforming to a carefully defined street line. They then became burgesses of the burgh. Laws were developed regarding the governance of the burgh (MacQueen & Windram 1988: 208–27). These included the provision of Liners, officials who had the responsibility of ensuring that plot boundaries were accurately set and maintained (Ewan 1990: 49).

The four Scottish burghs featured in the recent study were Canongate, Edinburgh, Perth and St Andrews (Tait 2008). The results were clear and unambiguous. Plots in a particular part of a burgh were found to have more than one width, and one of these (termed the unit width) was in many cases the most frequently encountered. Other plots were of three-quarters, one and a quarter, one and a half (and so on) times this width. Thus, for example, with a unit plot width of 8m, plots would be 6m, 10m, 12m, 14m etc, as well as the standard 8m. It was suggested that the wider plots may have been set out and offered in order to attract incomers with particular abilities to settle in the burgh (ibid: 231). The presence of quarter plots was first reported by Conzen in Alnwick (Conzen 1960: 32–4). They also have been noted in Scotland at both St Andrews and Perth (Brooks & Whittington 1977: 288; Spearman 1988: 55–8).

The clearest way of demonstrating the reality of the quarter plot scheme is by means of a histogram. Illustration 1 is for Sector 2 in Elgin, as reported later in this study. The unit width for this sector was 8.1m. Plots of a single unit width are seen in this example, as are as others of 1¼, 1½, 1¾ and 2 units. The histogram indicates a spread of widths within each of these quarter groups. To some degree, this will have been the result of inaccuracies in the OS maps, as well as the initial setting out of the plots and from subsequent movement of the plot boundaries. In the early years, these boundaries tended to be insubstantial – ditches, stone markers or light fences (Ewan
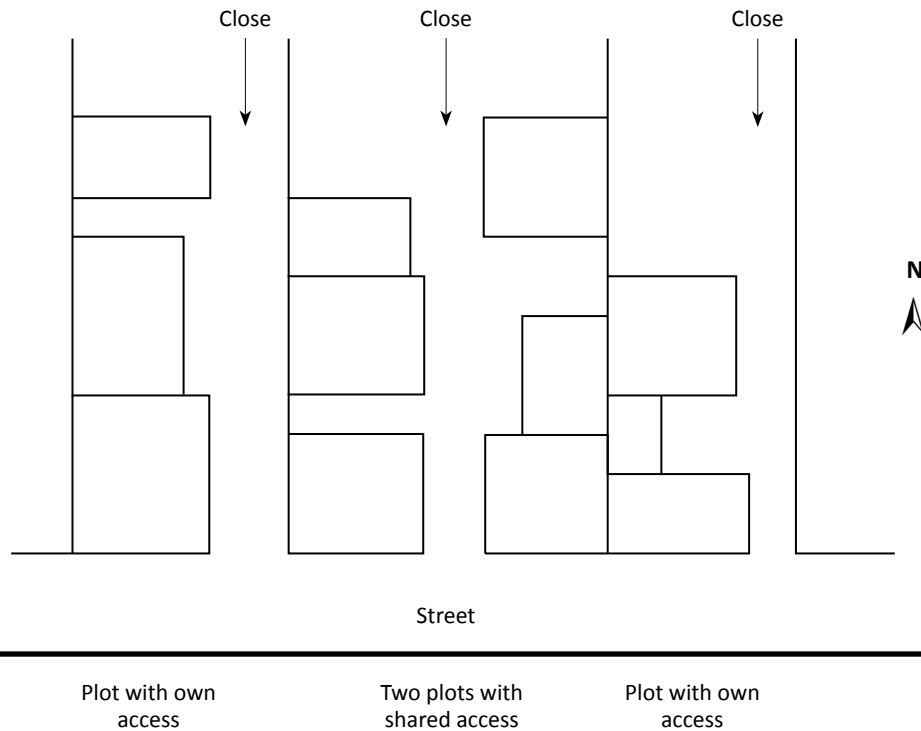
Illus 1   Histogram of the plot widths in Elgin Sector 2. The widths are displayed in 0.5m intervals. The unit plot width in this sector is 8.1m and the grouping of plots at quarter unit intervals is clear

1990: 14; Coleman 2004: 290–2). Some movement, accidental or deliberate, would have been inevitable in such circumstances.

A degree of consistency is seen in the positions of the paths, later to become the public closes, which provided access to the land and buildings on the backlands of the plots (Tait 2008: 231). Many plots had their own unshared access close. In other cases pairs of plots shared the same close, located along their common boundary (illus 2). In the latter case the position of the joint boundary cannot be determined, so the width measured encompass the two plots. These are the quarter

Illus 2   The plot access patterns. A pair of plots having shared access is located centrally in this example, with single plots each having its own access located on the east on either side. Several substantial backland buildings are shown on each plot

groupings of one and a half units or more, which may in fact have started as single large plots, later divided carefully into two (ibid: 231).
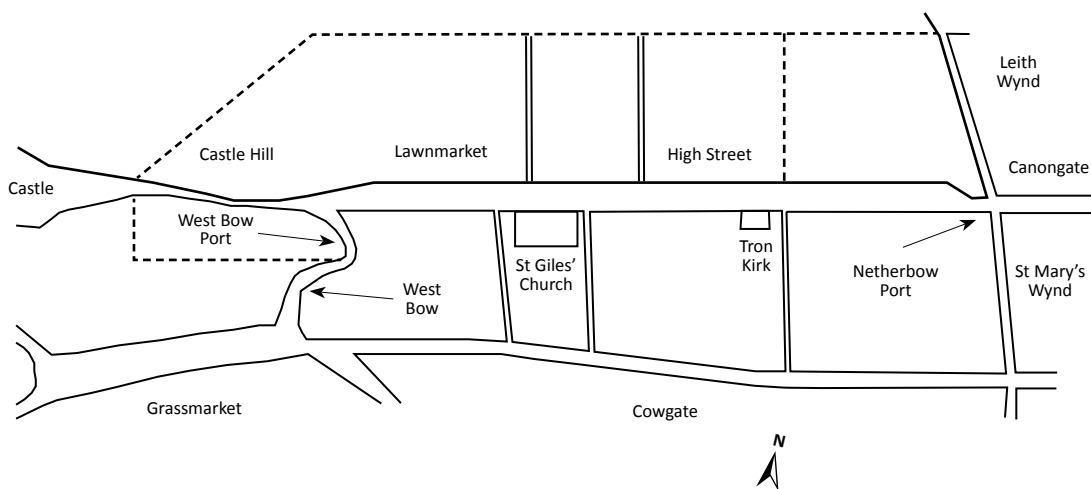
In Canongate, Edinburgh and St Andrews, with their streets having an east–west orientation, it was found that the unshared access was almost invariably on the east side of the plots. The reason for this is not known. In Perth, plots were accessed in a consistent way within each street block or sector.

The Town Plans indicate that street frontage lines vary in nature. In some burghs, Canongate and Perth for example, they present a relatively informal appearance. Others show indications of having been set out with great care, to lines that were subsequently closely controlled. Long sections are frequently found to be straight, with occasional small angular adjustments. Slight discontinuities in the frontage position are also encountered at times, perhaps indicating the commencement of a new phase of plot layout. In order to adjust the street width, the frontage necessarily changes direction. These adjustments can also in some circumstances provide useful information.
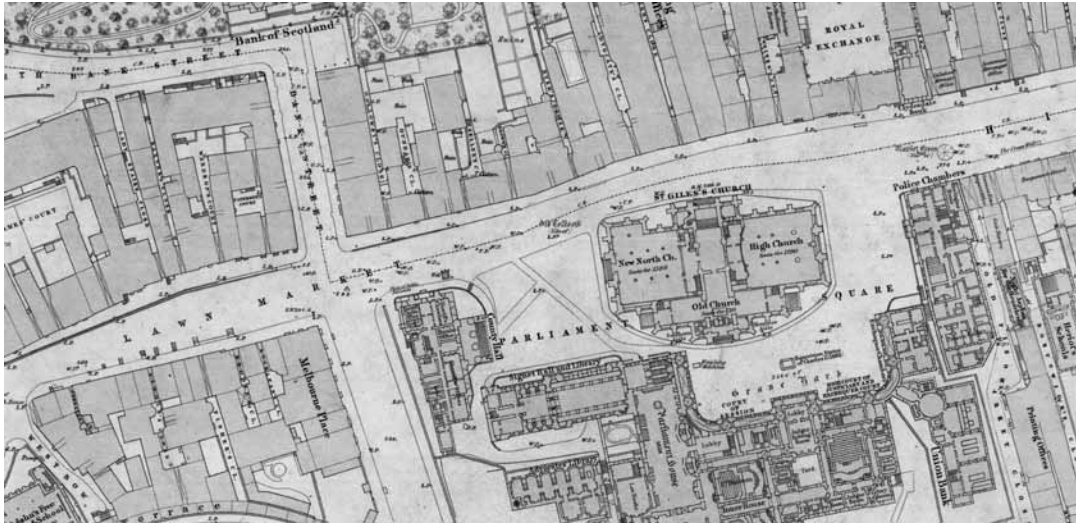
One pattern, encountered in several Scottish burghs, involves one side of the street remaining straight while the other provides necessary width variations. This is to be observed in Edinburgh (as discussed below), in the market area of St Andrews and at Kirkaldy in Fife (see the appropriate OS Town Plans: NLS Edinburgh 1849–53; NLS St Andrews 1854, NLS Kirkaldy 1855). With this layout method, the straight frontage line determines the position and direction of the street and provides a clearly defined baseline, easily extended, from which to set out the opposite frontage.

THE MEDIEVAL BURGH OF EDINBURGH

The King's Street in Edinburgh, consisting of Castle Hill, the Lawnmarket and the High Street, is about 780m in length (illus 3). It is located on the crown of a ridge which descends gently from the Castle, past the parish church of St Giles', the 17th-century Tron Kirk and onward to the lower end of the burgh, with the burgh of Canongate beyond to the east. The

ILLUS 3   The principal features of the burgh of Edinburgh shown in diagrammatic form

Illus 4
The west and central section of the main street of Edinburgh, from the OS Town Plan of 1849–53. The basic layout of the burgh is apparent but intrusion of later developments is extensive. The churchyard was located to the south of St Giles' (© *The Trustees of the National Library of Scotland*)

burgage plots slope steeply down to north and south on either side of the ridge, terminating in marshy ground.

To the south, as the burgh expanded, the land was drained and a new street, the Cowgate, was constructed. This opened at its west end into the Grassmarket which was also accessed from the Lawnmarket by means of the steeply inclined West Bow. A number of vennels or wynds, almost all parallel to the burgage plot sides, provided public access mainly to the south of the street, where burgh crofts were located, while there were two town gates or ports. The West Bow Port provided routes from west and south, the Netherbow Port to north and south along Leith Wynd and St Mary's Wynd (illus 3).

The topography, layout and development of Edinburgh have been discussed in detail in two recent papers (Dennison & Lynch 2005; Lynch 2008). The Old Town of Edinburgh in the 17th and 18th centuries has also been subject to detailed study (Bell 2008).

STREET FRONTAGE LINES AND PLOT WIDTHS IN EDINBURGH: A SUMMARY

This section mainly summarises, for convenience, the previous published findings on this topic (Tait 2006; Tait 2008). The westernmost section of the street, Castlehill, has a somewhat informal appearance. As the street proceeds eastward it widens in the Lawnmarket. As is evident in illus 4, all width adjustments are made at the north street frontage. For example, part way down the Lawnmarket the frontage is seen to start to turn inwards again, but Bank Street, of much later date, interrupts this process. Approaching St Giles' the frontage deviates

northwards, thus providing additional space as the street passes to the north of the church. As the street approaches its east termination at the Netherbow Port it narrows again. The frontage adjustments are found to be accompanied by corresponding changes in the direction of the side boundaries of the plots, strongly suggesting that the shaping of the street frontage was carefully planned and executed while the plots were being laid out (Tait 2006: 302).
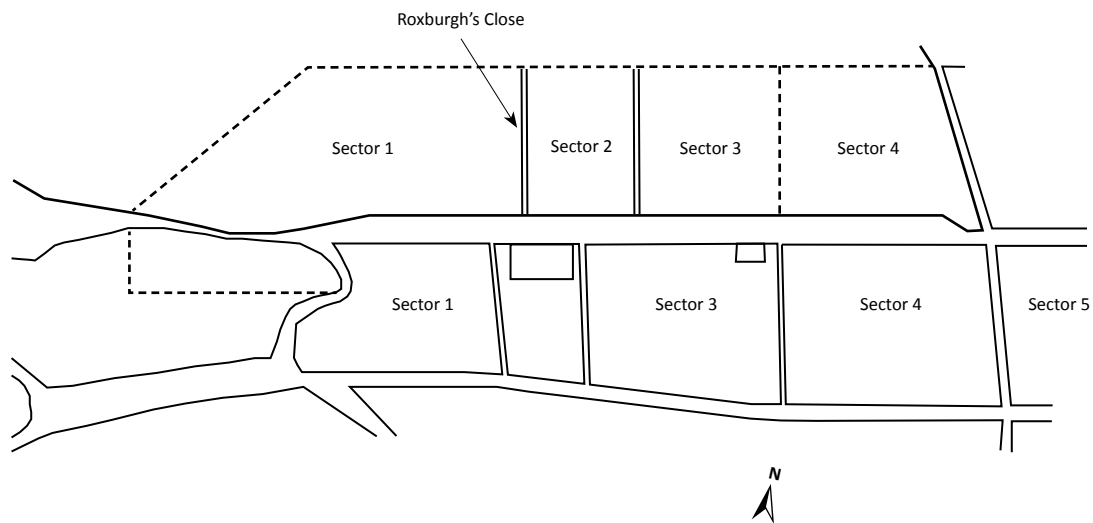
The south frontage follows a precise straight line from the top of the Lawnmarket down to the Netherbow with only a small change of direction of about one degree in the region of the Tron Kirk. This line is clearly visible in James Gordon's map of 1647 (NLS: Edinburgh 1647). The position and size of the early Romanesque church building is not known, but the present building clearly interrupts the street line.

The burgage plot width pattern in Edinburgh is relatively simple. Table 1 lists

TABLE 1
Unit plot widths for the five street sectors in Edinburgh in ascending order

Sector	Unit plot width (m)	Group average (m)
Edinburgh 1	6.5	6.5
Edinburgh 5	7.6	
Edinburgh 4	7.6	
Edinburgh 2 & 3	7.7	7.6

the unit widths in various parts of the street, their locations being displayed in illus 5. Within the limitations of the measurements, Sectors 2 to 5 have the same unit plot width (Tait 2008: 226–7). Thus the whole scheme appears to have been set out using only two unit widths. The transition on the north side of the street takes place at Byres' Close, but

Illus 5   Diagram indicating the positions and boundaries of the Edinburgh plot sectors referred to in Table 1

that on the south side cannot be located due to later developments to the west of St Giles' (illus 4). Note that a short section of the south side of the Canongate was part of the burgh of Edinburgh, Sector 5.

The observed patterns have been applied here to a discussion of the setting out and development of the burgh of Edinburgh. This combines observations of plot boundaries and frontage lines with evidence from archaeological excavations and with information from published cartulary texts.

MORPHOLOGY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MEDIEVAL EDINBURGH

There is evidence of human activity and habitation within what became Edinburgh many centuries before its formal foundation by David I (Dennison & Lynch 2005: 22–3). Excavations within the Castle of Edinburgh have shown that the site was occupied, though not necessarily continuously, from the late Bronze Age or early Iron Age onwards, while the castle had been established as a royal centre by the reign of Malcolm III (1058–93), prior to the royal burgh being formally founded (Driscoll & Yeoman 1997: 226–31). The presence of the castle will have attracted human settlement nearby, most likely on Castlehill and perhaps at the West Bow and the Lawnmarket. Farther down the street signs of backland agricultural activity, possibly of pre-burgal date, have been reported (Will & Radley 2006: 28).

David I created the Royal Burgh between 1124 and 1127 (Dennison & Lynch 2005: 24). A charter of David I to the Abbey of the Holy Rood, dated between 1143 and 1147 includes *unum toftum in burgo meo de Edwinesburgh*, suggesting that the work was at least under way at that time (Marwick 1870: 6). It seems likely that the layout of the royal burgh would

have started in the neighbourhood of the pre-burgal settlement and proceeded westwards (Dennison 2005: 262). Sector 1 of the Edinburgh plot layout covers the whole of this area, indicating a complete remodelling of the pre-burgal settlement.

The direction changes in the northern frontage line in the Lawnmarket are of particular interest. The first of these, now partly obscured by Bank Street, may well indicate that the market area terminated here at an early stage of burgh development. The second, as the street passes St Giles', is accompanied by the change of unit plot width at Byer's Close. Almost two-thirds of the burgh to the east of this close was set out to a single unit width. The combination of these features appears to strongly support an easterly development. It is appropriate in these circumstances to look for evidence as to how rapidly the development took place.

Within a century or so, pits, middens and 13th- to 14th-century pottery fragments provide clear archaeological evidence of backland activity well to the east of St Giles' in Sectors 3 and 4 (Holmes 1986: 298–9; Will & Radley 2006: 28; Kimber & Masser 2008:17). By contrast, no backland dwellings of early date were encountered.

Documentary evidence covering the early period of the development of Edinburgh is scarce, but by the 1300s the situation is greatly changed and there are indications that the burgh was expanding beyond the church. The position of the Mercat Cross (the *crucis fori*) at that time was to the east of the new St Giles' (Miller 1885/6). In 1365, the tollbooth (*praetorium*) was located nearby (Miller 1895: 4). In 1387, this was replaced by a new building (the *belhous*) in a central site in the High Street, to the north of St Giles' (RCAHMS 1996: 82).

Land ownership within the burgh has been studied by determining the location of

Table 2
Numbers and locations of properties in Edinburgh subject to St Giles' Reg or RMS charters quoted within two time intervals

Time interval	Source	All foreland properties	Those in a Wynd	Backland properties
1360–1400	St Giles'	45	2	0
	RMS	4	0	0
1450–1490	St Giles'	55	15	19
	RMS	25	11	17

properties which were subject of charters in *Registrum Cartarum Ecclesie Sancti Egidii de Edinburgh* (St Giles' Reg) and in *Registrum Magni Sigilii Regum Scotorum* (RMS). Two time periods were selected, 1360–1400 and 1450–90. The results are to be found in Table 2. There may be some errors in the locations as encountered in St Giles' Reg, as the wording in some instances was ambiguous. In the first period, relevant charters were only found in RMS in the range 1365–9.

In the earlier period 49 foreland properties were found, located at positions throughout the whole burgh from Castlehill to the Canongate, Sector 1 to Sector 5, and a small number elsewhere – four were in the West Bow, three in the Grassmarket and a one on the south side of the Cowgate. The table indicates two properties in a wynd. These were both in Kirkheugh, immediately to the west of the churchyard. Three crofts, located on the south side of the Cowgate, not included in the table, were mentioned as well. There were no backland properties.

Matters were very different 100 years later. Eleven of the 80 foreland properties were in the Grassmarket and nine on the south side of the Cowgate, with only one croft mentioned there. Land to the south of the Cowgate was now apparently being taken over for housing. Backland property development was also under way as well, with 36 examples, while 26 dwellings were located along the public wynds. The development of the Grassmarket and the Cowgate area has been discussed recently (Lynch 2008, 229–31).

Archaeological evidence also illuminates the scope of later medieval development in Edinburgh. This includes a house, dated by scraps of pottery to the 14th century, and associated with a shallow garderobe pit (Schofield 1975–6: 170). A substantial building dated to the last quarter of the 15th century has also been uncovered (Holmes 1980: 158–62). Another investigation revealed much clearly stratified evidence covering a wide range of phases of activity (Will & Radley 2006: 28–9). Coleman (2004: 294–6) has reviewed archaeological evidence regarding medieval building detail in the Scottish burghs.

THE MEDIEVAL BURGH OF ELGIN

Elgin is located on relatively flat land, having the river Lossie on three sides. The High Street of the burgh was about 940m long, with burgage plots to north and south. There were
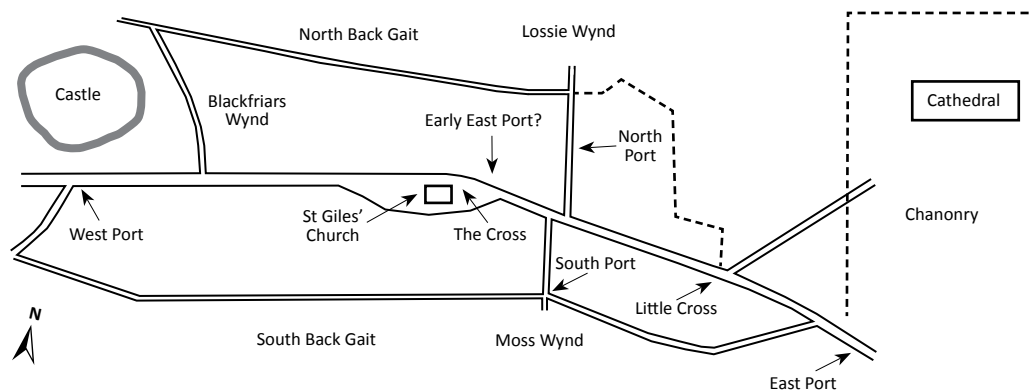
back lanes at the far ends of the plots, called North Back Gait and South Back Gait, with the burgh crofts beyond (illus 6). The Castle was located at the west end of the street on a natural hill immediately to the north. The parish church (dedicated to St Giles as in Edinburgh), is located approximately midway along the High Street, this time placed in the centre of the street (illus 7). The street deviates southwards to a new direction at the end of the central market area. Elgin – at least in later years – had four town gates: the West Port, located close to the Castle; the East Port beyond the Little Cross, near the boundary of the Chanonry; the South Port at the south end of Moss Wynd; and the North Port, part way up Lossie Wynd.

The history of Elgin has been discussed in two important papers. The first was in the Scottish Burgh Survey series (Simpson & Stevenson 1982). The second effectively updated that publication and included a report on important excavations undertaken in the central market area and on the backland to the north (Hall, Macdonald, Perry & Terry 1998). In addition, the architecture of important buildings within the burgh has been discussed (McKean 1987).

STREET FRONTAGE LINES AND PLOT WIDTHS IN ELGIN

In this new study, the OS Town Plan of Elgin was used (NLS: Elgin 1868). The street frontage lines are rather more complex than those in Edinburgh, partly due to the change of direction of the street beyond the market cross at the east of the central market area. The west section of the street varies in width from 11m to 15m, while the east section varies from 6m to 9m – though it broadens to 12m at the location of the Little Cross. In the market area with its centrally placed church, the street widens to an impressive 42m.

A clear frontage pattern can be discerned in and around the central area. The north street line is straight, right through to the widest section of the central area, although there is a clear outward offset of about 4m in the line in that area. A similar feature, which would provide additional space in the market area, is to be found in the St Andrews OS Town Plan (NLS: St Andrews 1854). At the east end of the market area, the north street line curves southwards to follow the new street direction. The southern street line is

ILLUS 6   The principal features of the burgh of Elgin shown in diagrammatic form

ILLUS 7   The central area of the main street of Elgin, from the OS Town Plan of 1868 (© *The Trustees of the National Library of Scotland*)

initially straight but curves southward and then northward to create the wider central area. These features are clearly visible in illus 7.

The unit plot width is more variable than was encountered in Edinburgh, with ten sectors identified (illus 8). The widths in the various sectors are listed in order of magnitude in Table 3. It is notable that those in Sectors 2 and 10 are equal (within the accuracy limitations of the measurements) as are Sectors 3 and 5 and Sectors 7 and 8. The latter two were possibly originally one continuous sector, now separated by more recent buildings. Access to unpaired plots was found to be on the east side.

In Elgin, three topics have been chosen for discussion: firstly, the order of setting out and development of the burgh; secondly, an examination of the central market area and the offset in that region of the north street frontage;

and thirdly, a consideration of the results of an archaeological dig on the backlands to the north of the central area. In all three cases, aspects of the burgh layout are involved.
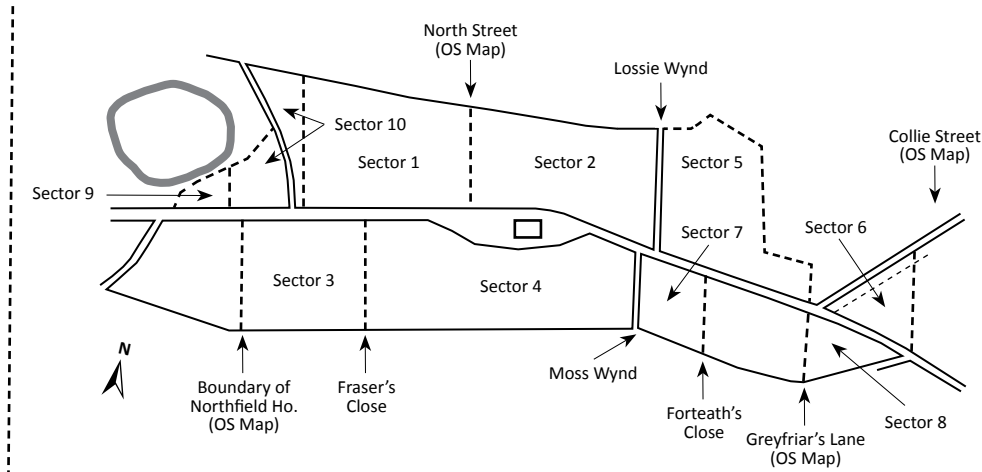
MORPHOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT OF MEDIEVAL ELGIN

It has been suggested that the development of the new burgh commenced along the section of the street between castle and church, with later extension eastwards from there (Simpson & Stevenson 1982: 5; Hall et al 1998: 756). An examination of the unit plot widths in Table 3 and illus 8 provides some support for this view. The closeness in unit width between Sectors 2 and 10 could suggest that they were perhaps both part of the same phase of plot layout. One might envisage these, together with Sectors 1 and 4, providing the plots associated with the early burgh. Sector 9 is most unusual, providing four short plots with particularly broad frontages to the street, accommodation perhaps for Castle officials.

Sector 3 may well have extended farther west than is apparent on the OS Town Plan. This is a possible location of the king's garden 'on the south side of the High Street extending from the foot of the (castle) hill almost to the Tolbooth' as described confidently by Mackintosh without quoting a source (Mackintosh 1914: 174). (The Tolbooth was in the central area to the west of the church.) Certainly there is reference in a 1261 charter to the king's garden (APS 99). One could envisage this land being converted to tofts at a later time. This, together with Sector 5 (which has a similar unit plot width), might well have been laid out as the burgh expanded eastwards. Sectors 7 and 8 were possibly set out as a single unit, now divided by relatively modern building developments.

TABLE 3
Unit plot widths for the ten street sectors in Elgin in ascending order

Sector	Unit plot width (m)	Group average (m)
Elgin 1	7.5	7.5
Elgin 2	8.1	
Elgin 10	8.2	8.2
Elgin 6	8.5	8.5
Elgin 4	8.9	8.9
Elgin 3	9.6	
Elgin 5	9.7	9.7
Elgin 8	10.5	
Elgin 7	10.6	10.6
Elgin 9	12.5	12.5

ILLUS 8   Diagram indicating the positions and boundaries of the Elgin plot sectors referred to in Table 3

The East Port may have been located in the vicinity of Moss Wynd and Lossie Wynd, later moved as the burgh developed to its new position far to the east of burgh centre, to the south of the Chanonry (Simpson & Stevenson 1982: 20; Hall et al 1998: 818). A possible indication of the date of easterly development comes from a charter of 1244 referring to a toft with associated croft located beyond the East Port (Moray Reg no. 98). There is no cartographic or other evidence to suggest that there were crofts and tofts to the east of the later location however, either from the OS Town Plan or from Wood's map of 1822 (NLS: Elgin 1822; 1868). The reference might however be referring to the earlier East Port.

One possible location for the earlier port may be indicated by a single building that can be seen projecting out from the north street frontage as the street narrows to the east of the central market area (illus 7). This most unusual feature, now removed, can be seen in a photograph dated 1884 (Mackintosh 1914: 218). No corresponding projection is apparent on the south side of the street, although this might have long since been removed. A feature close to the south frontage noted in the report of Hall et al (1998: 803) in Trench L might perhaps be related.

This position for the port, set back from what would then have been external roads to the north and south, would closely mirror the situation in Edinburgh at the Netherbow Port (compare illus 3 and illus 6).

This interpretation would suggest that plots had already been set out to the east of the market area (probably in Sector 5 or 7) by 1244, with the new East Port established at a later date than this. A systematic search of the published charters covering the 13th to the 15th centuries produced only seven charters referring to plots and properties. These appeared to add nothing significant to the understanding of the burgh development.
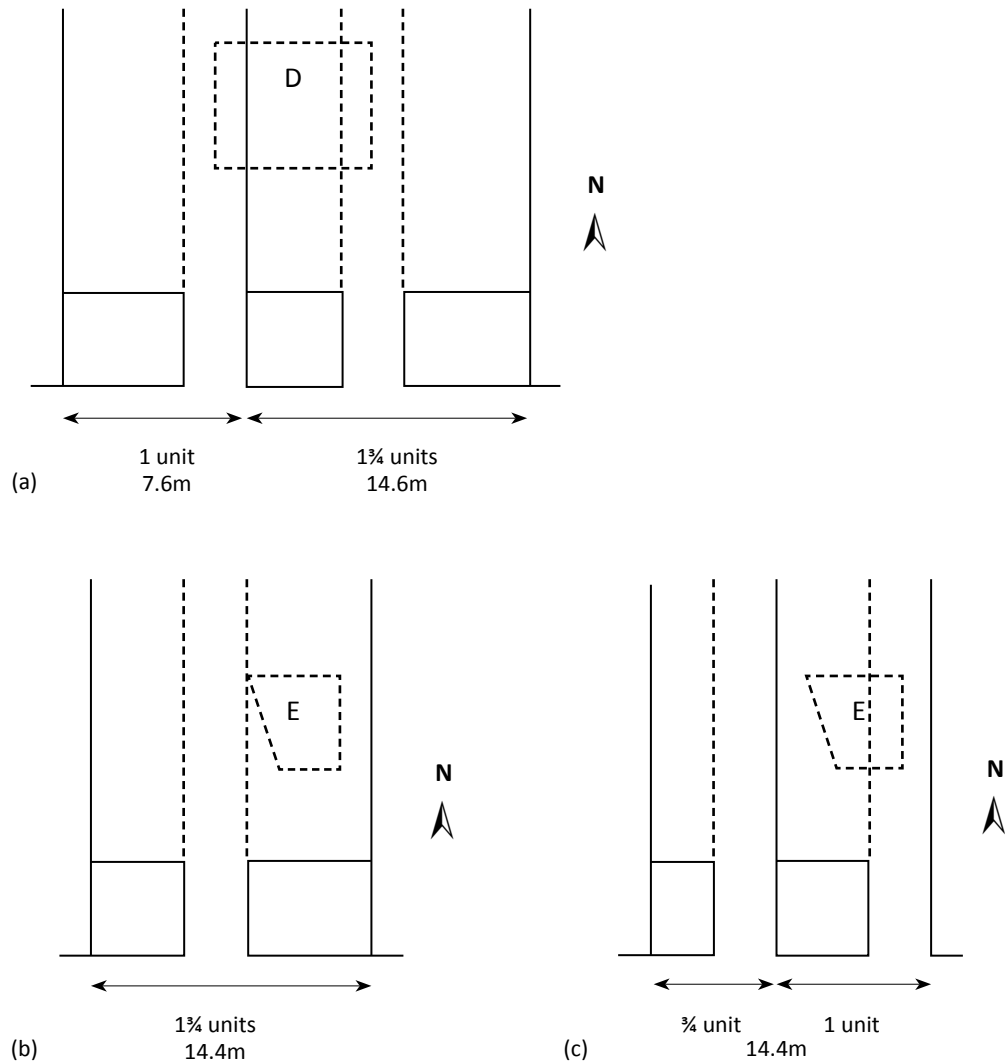
THE CENTRAL AREA AND THE RECESS IN THE NORTH FRONTAGE

The layout of the central area of the town is better understood as a result of archaeological

investigations (Hall et al 1998: 801–5). These indicate that the tollbooth was located close to the position of the present water fountain to the west of the church (ibid: 805). The market place and its cross, the Muckle Cross, were located to the east of the church, the market being held in the east section of the churchyard. The medieval church was replaced in 1827 by the present building. Archaeology shows that the churchyard extended 32m to the east and 56m to the west of this building (ibid: 814–16).

Booths in the market place (*forum*) feature in several mid-14th-century charters. They

ILLUS 9   The basic configuration of burgage plots in High Street, Elgin: (a) 123–33 High Street, (b) 115 High Street assuming a pair with shared access and (c) the same site assuming two single plots with their own access. The average unit plot width in this sector is 8.1m. The width of the access closes has been exaggerated for clarity

appeared to have been in fixed positions. One, in the 'centre of the town', had a land to the east and forum to the west (Moray Reg no 226). This appears to have been located towards the east end of the central area, with a foreland property to the east, perhaps where the street line curves inward (illus 7). A row of ten booths, also aligned east/west and possibly more centrally placed, had the common street to the east and forum to the west (Moray Reg no 242). Another four booths of similar alignment are described in the same charter, located near the cross, with forum to the east and, unexpectedly, a 'land' to the west. The property belonged to Andrew Femayster who seems likely from his name to have been the official collecting the tolls. To accommodate these rows of booths within the area discovered by the archaeologists, the market cross is likely to have been considerably to the west of the position shown in illus 7.

As regards the 5m offset in the north frontage, it seems possible that this was not part of the original layout but was added at a later time to provide more space in the market area. The frontage line is straight, but a building can be seen in illus 7 which interrupts the orderly progression near its east end, projecting into the public area by almost 2m. If this building pre-dated the frontage offset, it would have been set back somewhat from the original street line. The building, at least in its present state, known as The Tower, is in fact one of Elgin's oldest domestic buildings (McKean 1987: 22). Archaeology may eventually provide a better understanding of the situation here.

BACKLAND ARCHAEOLOGY

The paper of Hall and collaborators reports the findings of their excavations on backland sites at 123–33 and 115 High Street, to the

north of St Giles' (Hall et al 1998: 775–85). The first of these occupies three plots of total width 2¾ units (ibid: illus 7). On the east is a single plot of unit width. Here, the access close would be expected to be on the east side as elsewhere in Elgin. To the west of this plot is a pair of plots having an overall width of one and three quarter units and shared access (illus 9a). Trench D, approximately 8m × 8m and straddling the boundary line between the single plot and the pair of plots, revealed pottery, probably of late 12th-century date, but no evidence of a property boundary (ibid: 799–80). Evidence was found of a post-medieval boundary wall and cobbled areas which appear to occupy the positions to be expected for this boundary and for the access close. The early boundary might well have only been marked out at a later time, as suggested (ibid: 799). On the other hand, it may have been present, but defined by relatively widely spaced posts or other such features, none of which happened to be positioned within the area covered by Trench D.

The property at 115 High Street has a width of one and three quarter units (ibid: illus 7). Normally this might be expected to represent a pair of plots with shared access (illus 8b). At the time of the OS Town Plan, a single building occupied the whole frontage apart from a narrow passage approximately half a metre wide which passed along the east side of the building and extended about 30m close to the east boundary of the backland. This may suggest that the site was originally occupied by two single plots, each with their access to the east (illus 8c).

The archaeological evidence is at least partly supportive of this suggestion. In Trench E, a clay-bonded stone wall with a slot trench as a northern extension, interpreted as a possible property subdivision, was discovered. It was aligned parallel to the plot boundaries and was located approximately

1m to the west of the eastern edge of the trench. At a later phase of development, a pebble layer had been laid within this 1m area. Both phases were of medieval date. The pebble layer was overlaid with stones in the post medieval period (ibid: 780–5). This could well be interpreted as the access close for the east plot, the plot boundary being just to the east of Trench E. Trench E has a maximum width of 6m and the boundary to the west plot would not have been intercepted by this trench.

Such suggestions could well carry more weight following a full study involving accurate site plans rather than the published diagram.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is suggested that the examples discussed in this paper do provide support for the case that urban morphology can continue to make a significant contribution to historical and archaeological studies. 'Historical' should include architectural history, in that the survival of so much of the early burgh pattern suggests that building design and layout were carefully controlled over the centuries.

As regards archaeology, the Elgin excavation helps to make the case, but an examination of published literature provides further support. Coleman's summary of the archaeology of burgage plots in Scotland includes reports of such features as pathways overlying earlier fences, ditches and other features, the displacement of plot boundaries on the insertion of a vennel and the adjustments made to street frontages (Coleman 2004: 297–8). Bringing together archaeology and urban morphology in such cases has the potential to provide an interaction of mutual benefit to the two disciplines.

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