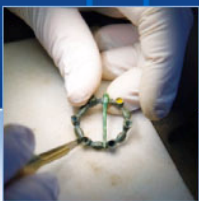


The Old Tolbooth of Edinburgh Rediscovered

Final Report

20508
March 2008



ARCHAEOLOGY

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The Old Tolbooth of Edinburgh Rediscovered

Final Report

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Abstract

An archaeological watching brief during resurfacing works along the High Street, Edinburgh revealed two walls, which can be identified as the foundations of the Old Tolbooth, at one time the home of the Scottish Parliament, attached to the Old Tolbooth.

Introduction

Between March and November 2006 AOC Archaeology Group carried out an archaeological watching brief along the High Street, Edinburgh (Figure 1). This was necessitated by the removal of the tarmac surface to allow for the reinstatement of cobbles between the George IV Bridge intersection (NT 257 736) and the Cockburn Street intersection (NT 259 736). The archaeological works were commissioned by the City of Edinburgh Council Planning Department under the terms of the National Planning Policy Guidelines and Notes (Ref NPPG 5 & PAN 42). While archaeological investigation was largely restricted to recording the archaeology exposed during the course of the resurfacing works, some further selective excavation was also carried out.

Description

An area 6.5 m wide along the length of the road was stripped to an average depth of 0.65 m below the existing road level, removing layers of road material and modern 'made ground'. The underlying natural subsoil was a brown sandy clay.

Two walls were exposed during the watching brief. Wall 1 was orientated east/west, along the line of the High Street (Figure 2). It was constructed of sandstone, clay and mortar, with the quantity and standard of each of these components varying along its length, suggesting various phases of building. Three separate segments of wall could thus be identified. The 8.5 m long western segment of the wall, Wall 1a, was defined by dressed sandstone blocks on its northern face. The maximum width of this segment was approximately 1 m but the southern face had not survived. The base of the wall was observed in section lying some 1.2 m below the road surface (Figure 3a).

The next segment, Wall 1b (Figure 2), which extended east for another 8.5 m, was made of the same rubble and clay construction as Wall 1a but did not display a dressed face on either side. Two shoe buckles of 18th century date and a Georgian farthing were found in deposits abutting the wall and a single fragment of Scottish White Gritty ware of 12th-15th century date was found within the matrix at the eastern end of Wall 1b.

Wall 1c was built of smaller, more regularly shaped blocks of sandstone set within a more compact binding mortar. A slight shift south in the orientation of this wall was also noted. Wall 1c could be traced for at least a further 8 m, beyond which the deposits were so heavily truncated that the wall line survived only as fragmentary patches of mortar and the occasional stone.

The second wall, Wall 2 (Figure 2), lay on a completely different orientation to Wall 1 and although only a short length was exposed it was clear that it was very well built. It was oriented north/south, perpendicular to Wall 1a. The base of this wall lay more than 1.3 m below the modern road surface and was 2.4 m wide (Figure 3b). The lower levels of the wall were constructed of large irregular blocks of stone but the upper levels consisted of at least six courses of larger rectangular blocks set in a very compact mortar. This wall was discovered as a result of the collapse of deposits into a cavity which had formed alongside the wall. The uppermost deposits in the cavity contained slipped earthenware pottery of 18th and 19th century date while the lower deposits contained fragments of Scottish post medieval oxidised and reduced wares dating from the 17th and 18th century.

Discussion

It is clear from cartographic evidence and primary sources that, from as early as 1386 (Kerr 1925, Fig 1) the only building formerly located in this area of the High Street in Edinburgh was the burgh's Tolbooth (Figure 4). It seems very unlikely that another building would have been located in this prestigious location without being documented so we can therefore be fairly confident that the remains uncovered along this stretch of the High Street are those of the Old Tolbooth.

The history of Edinburgh's Old Tolbooth has been exhaustively documented. One of the most important buildings in any early Scottish burgh was the tolbooth, where the burgh court and council met, and which also served as the municipal prison (Dunbar 1966, 200). As one of the places in which Edinburgh council's minuted business was enacted, the story of its physical fabric is also well recorded (eg Fairley 1911; RCAHMS 1996; Miller 1886; 1895).

Called the Old Tolbooth to distinguish it from the 'new' one to the south-west (Figure 5), it comprised two distinct parts. The eastern portion, built in the 14th century using coursed stone and decorated with canopied niches, was known as the 'belhous,' while the later western part, known as the 'Wairde Hous', was probably rebuilt in 1610-11 (Kerr 1925, 11-12; Oram 2004, 65-6; RCAHMS 1996, 82).

The 'belhous' consisted of four storeys and an attic, housed in a gable facing the street (Figure 2). The ground floor shops were let by the council to help defray municipal expenses. The ogee-arched main entrance was in the turnpike on the south front, and led up to a first-floor great hall, which had once served as meeting place for the College of Justice (courts) in the 1530s and various governmental committees (Oram 2004, 63). The tolbooth also housed the town council, but in 1561-2 the Mary Queen of Scots ordered the building of a new, larger tolbooth. From then on, the old building was used as a prison, with the late 14th century western portion being demolished and replaced around 1610 (*ibid*, 66).

The new western annexe consisted of what may have been a 'piazza' or open arcade of shops to the north, below four symmetrical floors of rooms linked by another turnpike on the south (*ibid*, 67). It lacked the architectural enrichment of the belhous, which had drip mouldings and elaborate window surrounds, but did contain the gibbet, projecting from the north wall, above the second-floor execution platform, which in turn somewhat incongruously housed more shops. After 1601, further new offices built within the nave of St Giles 'served as a court-room annexe to the old Tolbooth' (*ibid*, 66). 18th century descriptions of the debtors held in the tolbooth emphasise the smell, and the squalor (eg Arnot 1779, 178-181).

By the early 17th century, the tolbooth had developed into a complex group of buildings (MacKechnie 2004, 91). In 1809, the tolbooth was measured as 62 ft long x 33 ft wide (Reid 1809, 38) although its existing plans may well be retrospective and speculative, rather than surveyed from life. Daniel Wilson's plan (Kerr 1925, 13) is dated 1806-18, when he himself was born in 1816, and Chambers's plan was published in 1833, 16 years after the tolbooth's demolition (RCAHMS 1996, 83). Kerr attempted to reconcile the disparate views, but his scale reconstruction cannot help but be an educated guess (1925, 18-19; and see Figure 2).

There are numerous contemporary maps (Figure 4) depicting the Old Tolbooth. These include those of Edgar (1765), Ainslie (1780 and 1804), Kincaid (1784) and William Douglas' engraving (before 1829), all of which agree on the general location of the Old Tolbooth with its eastern gable aligned along the western end of St Giles Cathedral. However, these sources all disagree about the relative dispositions of the tolbooth and adjoining buildings, and this clearly makes difficult the task of correlating the surviving fragments with the documentary evidence.

Edgar (1742; Figure 4a), Ainslie (1780; Figure 4b) and Kincaid (1784) (Figure 4c) show the north walls of the Old Tolbooth and luckenbooths in a continuous straight line running east/west, while Wilson (Kerr 1925, 13) gives plans and measurements advancing the luckenbooths several feet north of the Tolbooth. Miller's street widths for this part of the High Street are probably based on Wilson's work (1886, 362-3, 368), and John Sime's plan of 1826 (*St Giles Reg*, lxxv) only shows the south walls of structures demolished a decade earlier. Sime's elevations of the north side of the whole block seem to be undated, and do not show whether the street frontages all accord to the same building line (Miller 1886, pls VI, VII). Finally, a municipal works office plan of 1894 superimposes the Old Tolbooth on the modern street, suggesting the luckenbooths did indeed project further north into the roadway (Miller 1895, pl II).

Kerr's attempt at a scale reconstruction was based on various sources (Figure 2). He depicted three phases of building on the south elevation of the Old Tolbooth; the earliest phase, dated *circa* 1430, was at the eastern end, with two further phases of rebuilding in 1610 and 1678 extending the building to the west. If we accept that the westernmost end of Wall 1 does indeed represent the corner of the 1678 building, and no evidence of any remains beyond that point was recovered during the watching brief, then it follows that we should be able to match Kerr's, albeit approximate, dimensions to those on the ground. The overall length of Wall 1 compares favourably with the combined measurements for all three phases in Kerr's elevation, 24.8 m on the ground in comparison with 23.3 m along the elevation. However, within this footprint the different building phases cannot be correlated with the divisions observed within Wall 1. The junction between 1b and 1c does appear to correlate with the junction between the 15th century building and the 1610 extension. Thus Wall 1c probably represents the original 14th/15th century 'belhous', the square sandstone blocks being all that remains of that building of 'polished ashlar' (Miller 1886, 367). The find of a 12th - 15th century potsherd at the junction between the two walls probably reflects the incorporation of debris during the building works.

Walls 1a and 1b probably represent the 17th century extension. This was described as being built of 'plain rubble,' and 'of coarser and ...more modern construction,' (Miller 1886, 367; Chambers 1824, 85). However, it is impossible to correlate the length of Wall 1a with the 1678 extension, the dressed stone which distinguishes it from Wall 1b extending far beyond the projected position of the gable end of the 1610 'Wairde Hous'. It seems likely therefore, that the distinction between Wall 1a and 1b is only a matter of survival not of original construction. Given that Sir Walter Scott is known to have removed dressed stone from the Old Tolbooth and incorporated them into his house at Abbotsford (Kerr 1925, 22) it is not surprising that all that remains of the walls is primarily the core material. Furthermore, the middle of the High Street has been the preferred route for most services since Victorian times. As a consequence the walls that were uncovered had suffered considerable truncation from a gas main running parallel to the north and a water main running parallel to the south.

The position of Wall 2 cannot be correlated with any features on the ground plans or elevations of the Tolbooth and its function remains unknown. Its substantial construction is suggestive of an external wall such as the western gable end of the 'Wairde Hous' but its position in relation to Wall 1 makes that unlikely. It could relate to the construction of the turnpike.

Finally, the continuation of the wall line east along the High St, as fragmentary patches of mortar and the occasional stone, suggests that the contemporary maps of Edgar (1742) and Ainslie (1780) (Figures 3a & b) were correct in showing the north walls of the Old Tolbooth and luckenbooths in a continuous straight line.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that the remains uncovered during the resurfacing works are indeed those of the Old Tolbooth. Yet, despite the numerous contemporary plans and drawings of this significant building it has proved challenging to reconcile them with the archaeological evidence.

The Old Tolbooth is without doubt Edinburgh's most iconic 'lost' building. It was one of Scotland's first purpose-built municipal buildings and featured strongly in the everyday life of Edinburgh for centuries; it housed the Town Council, the Law Courts and the Scottish Parliament, and latterly was the prison and the scene of public executions. The building was immortalised by Scott (Kerr 1925) and its passing lamented by Stevenson and it lives on the eponymous football club and the threshold stone. It now lives on in the brass cobbles laid along the line of the walls reported here (Figure 6).

Acknowledgments

This report is based on the work of the following specialists; Derek Hall (ceramics), Julie Franklin (metalwork) and Lynne Fouracre (mortar analysis) - their reports can be found in the site archive deposited in the National Monuments Record of Scotland. A complete version of the report on the documentary research carried out by Morag Cross can also be found in the site archive. The fieldwork was carried out with the help of Vicky Clements, Kim Robertson, Jim Knowles, David Simon, Vicky Mulville, Hamish Donald, Erlend Hindmarch, Martin Cook and Lindsay Dunbar. Murray Cook and Anne Crone provided help, information and enthusiasm during the excavation and subsequent report-writing. Lynne Fouracre, Douglas Park and Graeme Carruthers prepared the illustrations.

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Figures

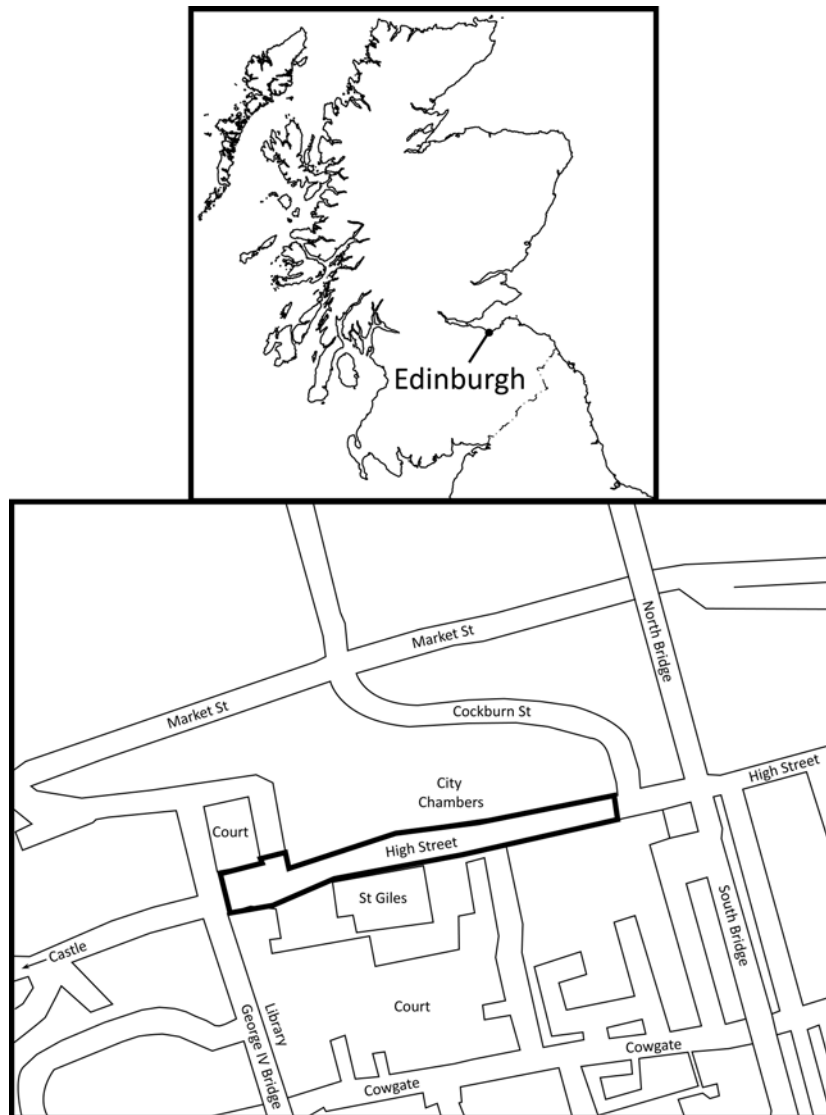


Figure 1: Site location: the extent of the High St covered by the watching brief works is highlighted in bold.

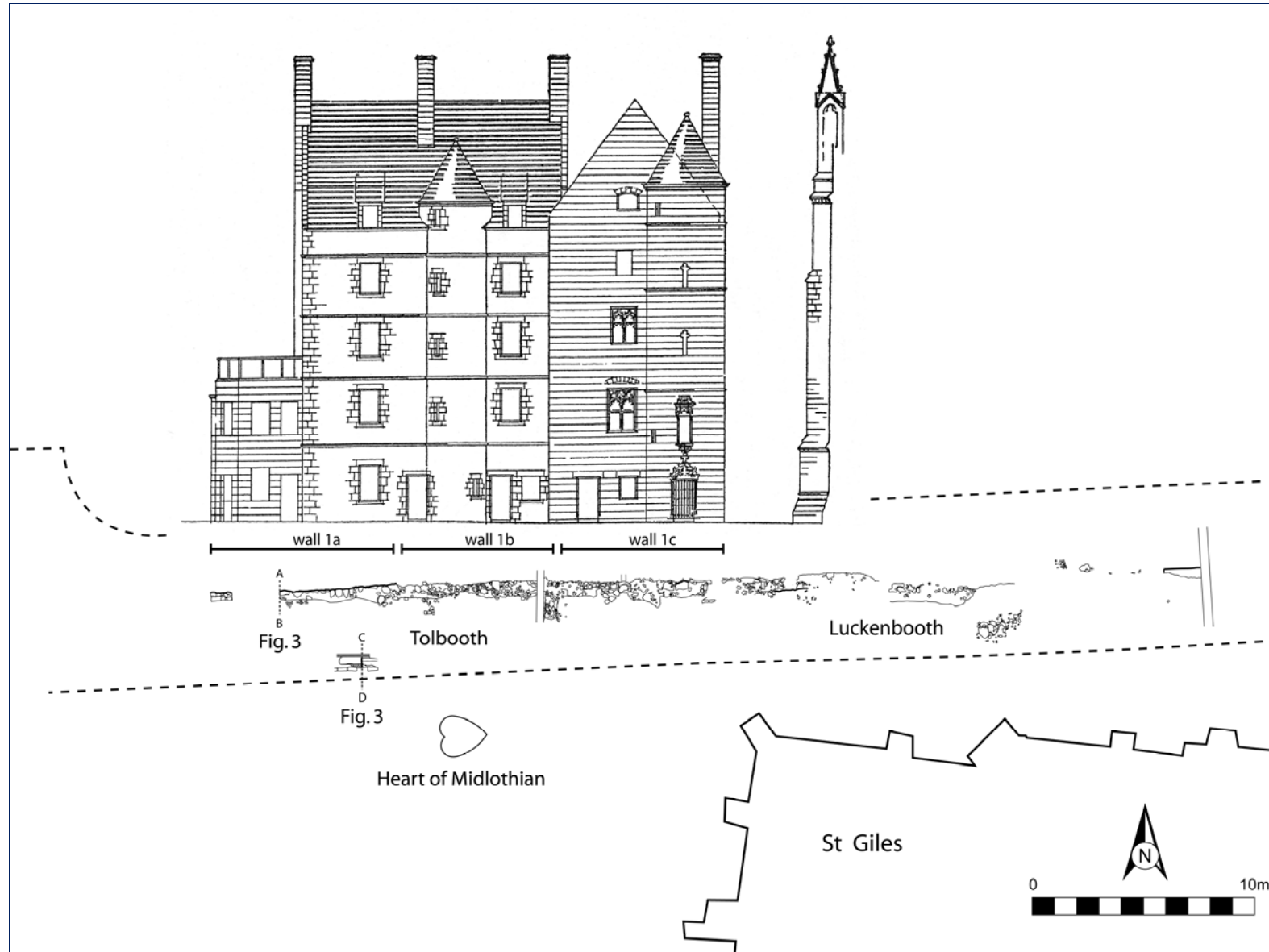


Figure 2: The excavated wall lines showing their approximate agreement with Kerr's (1925) reconstruction of the south elevation of the Tolbooth. The Heart of Midlothian supposedly marks the original entrance to the Tolbooth.

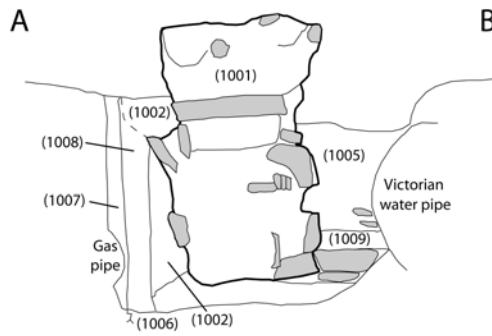


Figure 3a: section through Wall 1a

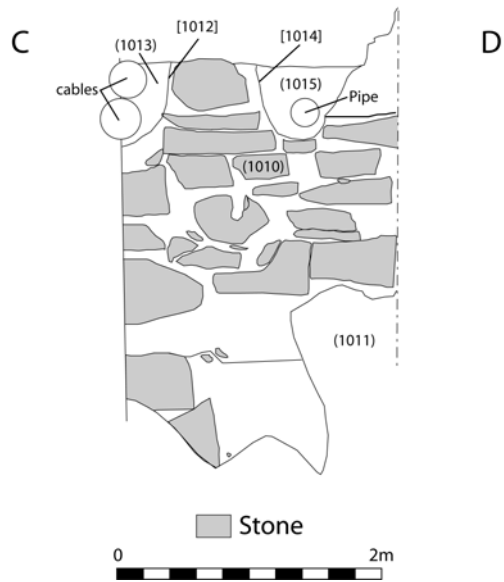


Figure 3b: section through Wall 2



Figure 4: Maps showing the relative positions of the Tolbooth, Luckenbooths and St Giles Cathedral. a) after Edgar (1765). b) after Ainslie (1780).c) after Kincaid (1784).d) after Ainslie (1804)

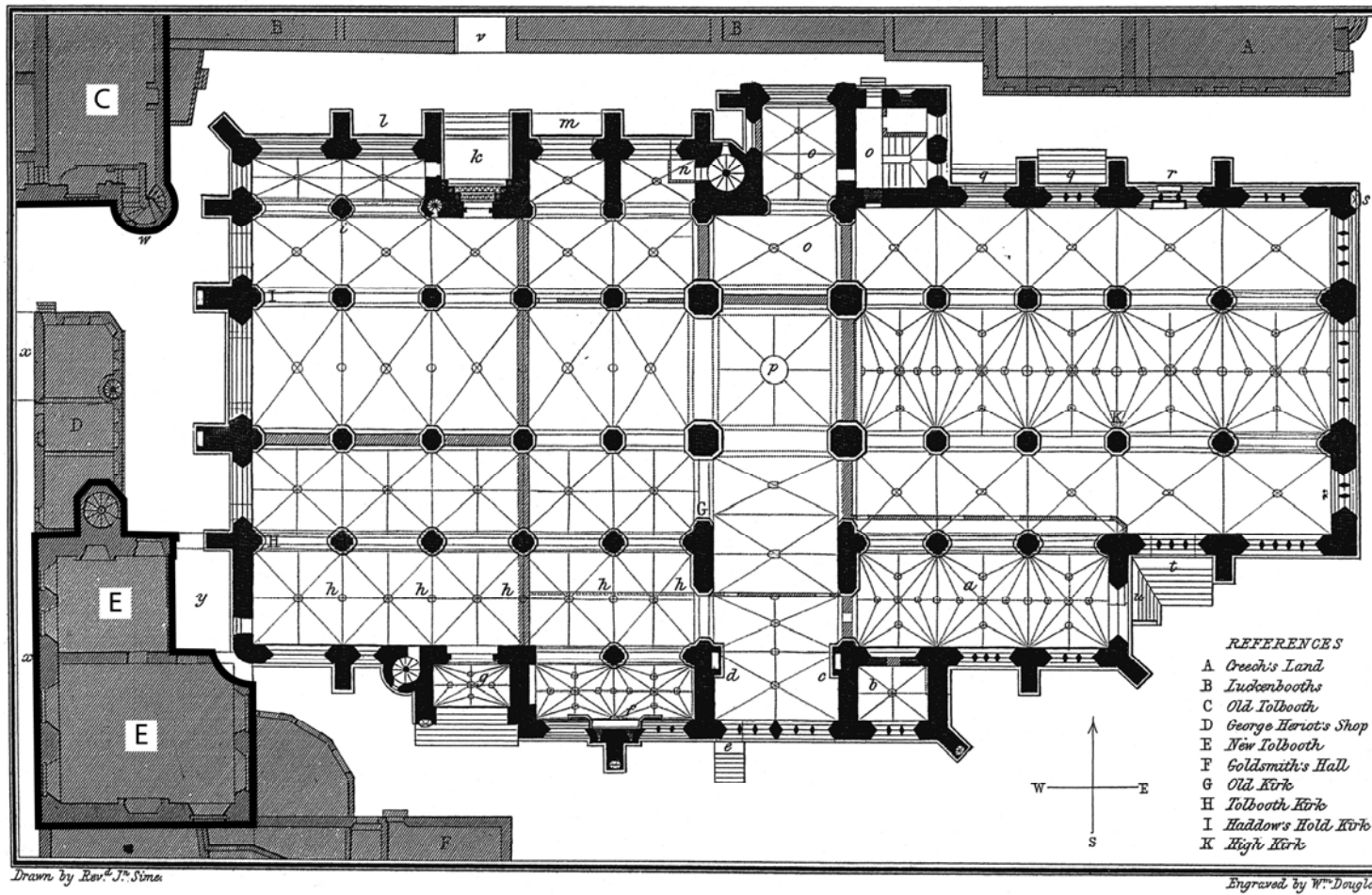
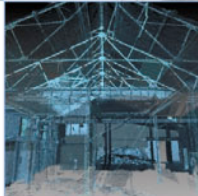
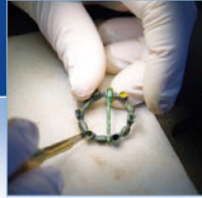


Figure 5. Plan of St Giles Cathedral showing location of the Old and New Tolbooths. From Wilson, D 1891 Memorials of Edinburgh in the Olden Time, (2nd edn), Edinburgh, 2 vols.

Plate



Plate 1: The brass cobbles inserted along the High St marking the line of Wall 1



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