

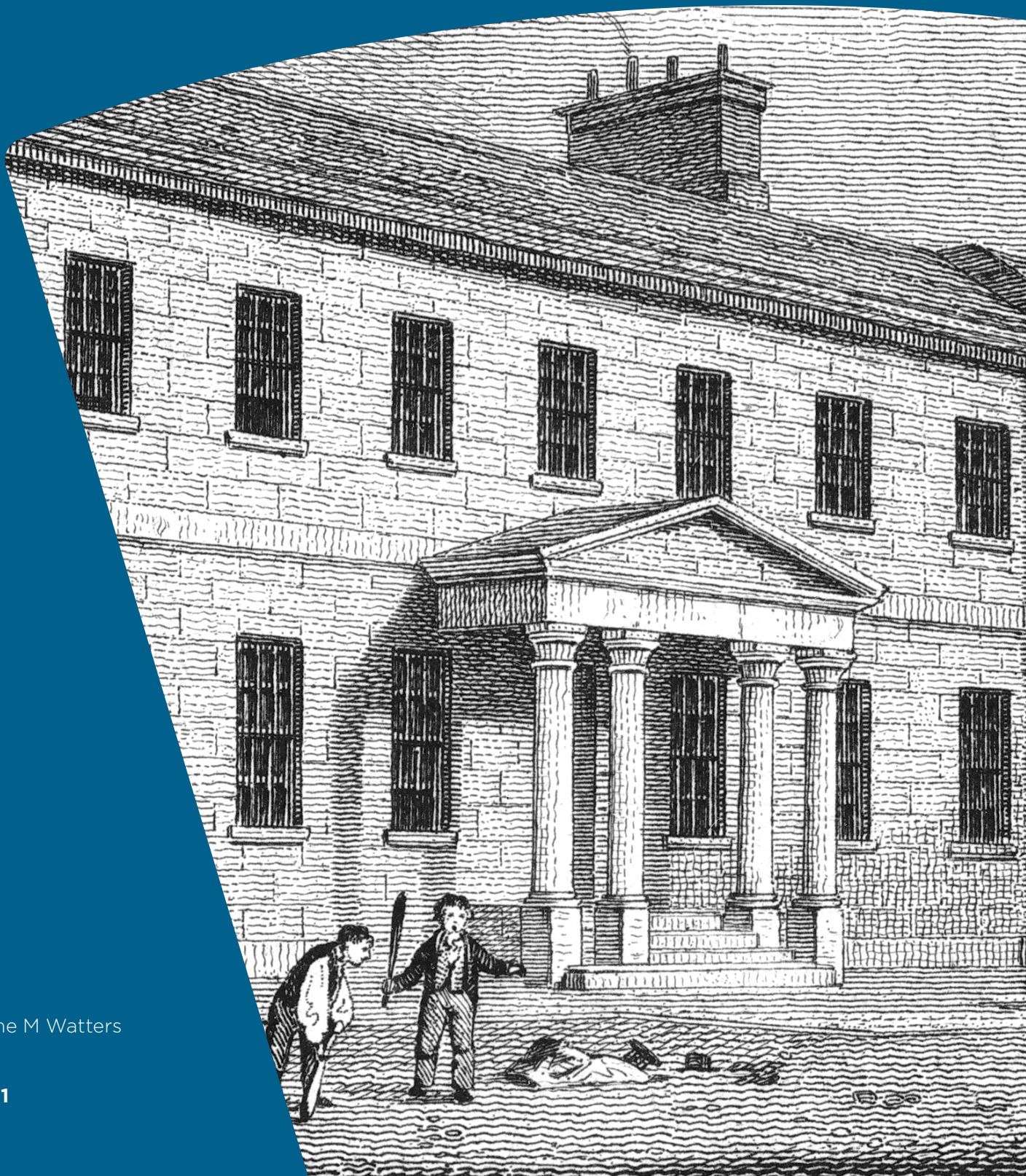


HISTORIC
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EDINBURGH HIGH SCHOOL (FORMER)

SCOTLAND'S HISTORIC TOWN SCHOOLS



Diane M Watters

2021



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COVER IMAGE

1819 engraving by J Storer and H S Storer of new High School, showing boys playing cricket.

from Views in Edinburgh and its vicinity, exhibiting remains of antiquity, public buildings, and picturesque scenery, 1820).

Courtesy of HES [SC1244782](#)

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EDINBURGH HIGH SCHOOL (Former)

HIGH SCHOOL WYND, EDINBURGH



Introduction

The former Edinburgh High School, designed by local architect and mason Alexander Laing in 1777 and opened in 1780, is a long and uniform neo-classical two-storey block with shallow advanced end-bays and a pedimented tetrastyle Tuscan portico. It runs north-south on the high ground of High School Wynd (a narrow lane of medieval origin) and faces west up the late-eighteenth century Infirmary Street towards Old College. Its south end is now linked to the adjacent five-storey north wing of the former nineteenth century Surgical Hospital. The school's north end occupies the site of the east end of its predecessor High School building of 1578-9, which was demolished to enable construction.

Edinburgh's grammar school (later known as the High School) originated in the twelfth century, and by the late sixteenth century it had become one of the country's leading post-reformation educational establishments.¹ The existing 1578-9 building was altered in the mid eighteenth century to accommodate the growth of the school, which accelerated under Alexander Adam (rector, 1768-1809), celebrated alike for his humanity and his classical scholarship. The new and larger 1777 building expressed the High School's status as the most important school in Edinburgh, and its pre-eminence in late eighteenth century classical education in Scotland.

Administered by the town council, it was funded by public subscription under an independent committee headed by banker Sir William Forbes 1774-9. It was a project of great civic and national pride, and in the eighteenth century it exemplified a Scottish democratic education system where boys of the local landed gentry attended school alongside the middle classes.² Architecturally, Laing's flat-fronted piend roof design, 'void of all superfluous ornament' became an important prototype for Scotland's late-eighteenth and early nineteenth century burgh schools and academies.³ Despite a grammar school occupying this Old Town site for over 250 years, the 1777 building only functioned as the High School for just short

of fifty years. Pupil numbers grew to a peak of 890 in 1820, despite the inconvenient situation of the school in relation to the New Town, but overcrowding ultimately led to the school's closure, with the opening of a new Royal High School of Edinburgh on the Calton Hill in 1829. In that year the old school was bought by the then Royal Infirmary and converted to a surgical hospital in 1832. In 1881, the town council bought back the old school and adjacent buildings for use as a fever hospital. In 1903, it was acquired

by Edinburgh University, and since 1905 it has been occupied successively by the departments of engineering, geography, and archaeology. Whilst the interior has been repeatedly reconstructed for hospital and university use, with even the principal flue-bearing cross-walls having been removed, the exterior and its site remain surprisingly intact. In 2013, the university building was converted by Malcolm Fraser Architects to house the Edinburgh Centre for Carbon Innovation.



top:

FIGURE 1

View of former Edinburgh High School in 2000.

HES [SC1300046](#)

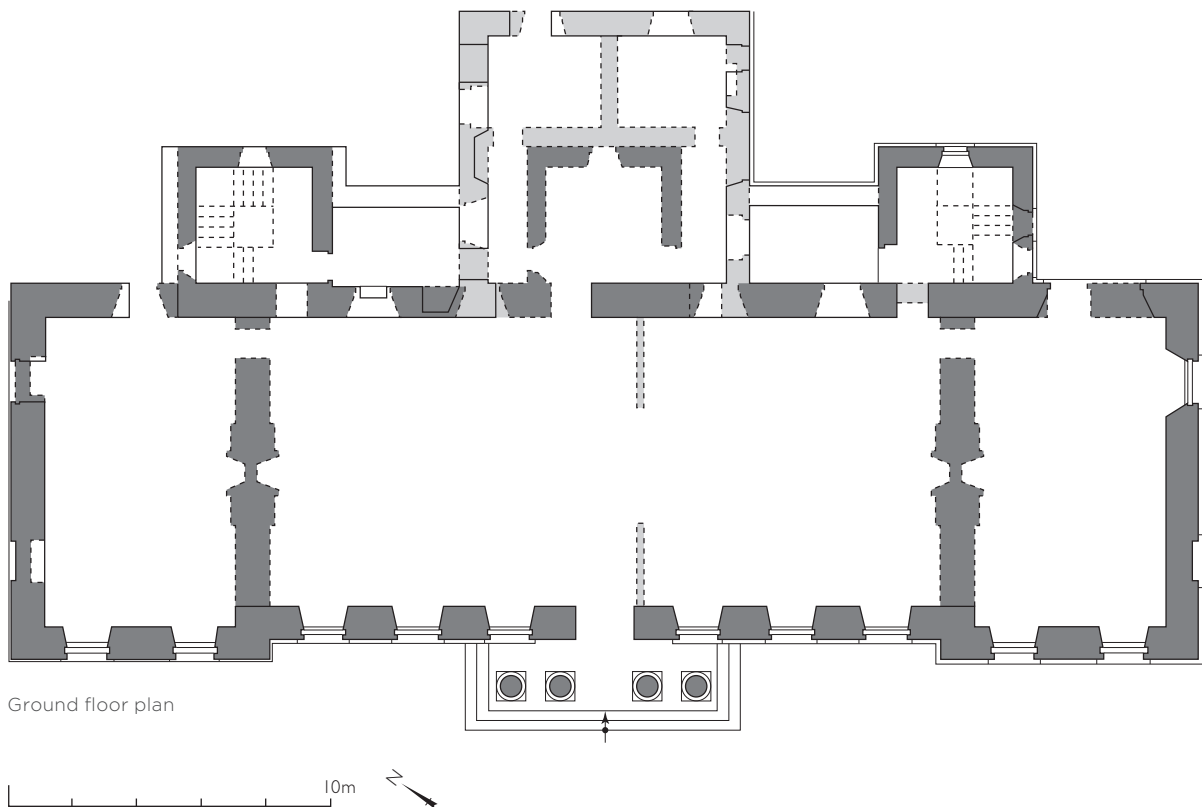
FIGURE 2

View of portico in 2000.

HES [SC1300047](#)



Elevation



Ground floor plan

FIGURE 3

2001 HES digital drawing of the former Edinburgh High School. Elevation, and reconstructed plan showing original U-plan building of 1834, and the later rear extensions to the original pavilion: west (1853-40) and east (1867-9). Drawing based on 1997 measured survey.

HES [GV007459](#)

**FIGURE 4**

'Vignette' of High School erected in 1578, by H Dudley, 1849.

Courtesy of HES (copied from W Steven, *The History of the High School of Edinburgh*, 1849) [DP387051](#)

**FIGURE 5**

Detail of 1817 facsimile of Gordon of Rothiemay's Bird's eye view taken in 1647, showing the predecessor High School of 1578 (centre) and the entrance block with clock-tower at the head of High School Wynd.

Courtesy of HES (copied from J Slezer, *Theatrum Scotiae*) [DP101340](#)

Foundation and Design

As early as 1709, the pre-existing sixteenth century building was proving inadequate, when a committee including the ministers and college professors considered 'the great decay of the high school', which the masters attributed to the number of competing private schools. Despite refurbishment in 1723, the master complained in 1770 that his colleagues, when 'pinched for room', were able to add their closets to their classrooms, and the council arranged for the transfer of the books to a rented room.⁴ By 1771, there was a roll of about 350 pupils, 90 of them in Alexander Adam's class, and he complained that 'our apartments for teaching are so small', and that the windows were ill-designed for ventilation. Three years later the rector and his masters petitioned the town council for a new school, since 'the decay'd state of the building' rendered it 'very unfit' for 'the great number of boys now resorting thither'.⁵ A public meeting in August 1774 agreed to raise subscriptions to replace the building.⁶ Forbes (1739-1806), was an enlightened benefactor and money-raiser, and his committee, consulted regularly with the school staff and the town council. In March 1775, the council offered 300 guineas, while generous contributions came from the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch and many others including David Hume and Alexander Wedderburn, then Solicitor General of England and afterwards Lord Chancellor. Two architects competed for the job. Alexander Laing supplied prices for masonry work in August 1776, while Robert Adam, himself a former pupil of the school, produced his first

design in October 1776, and his reduced and modified one in March 1777. A month later, however, Forbes reported that the subscribers had adopted the modest design by 'the architect, Laing', with a plan, 'the simplest and the best contrived that can be'.⁷

Adam's acceptance of financial limitations in producing a reduced second design may indicate he had contact with the committee of subscribers, but the council record makes no mention of his involvement.⁸ Adam's commanding neo-classical design had the main grand front facing north, and the school was probably intended to occupy the site of the 1578-9 building although it was to be much deeper. The first scheme consisted of seven bays: a three-bay centrepiece, and five-bay end-walls with slightly advanced centres. The upper storey was to be the principal one, with pillars and Venetian windows in the centrepiece and end-bays of the north front and with a similar window in the pedimented centre of each elevation. The blocking-courses above the north end-bays were to carry a reclining maiden and a stag, the supporters of the city arms, and at the centre of the hipped roof was to rise a four-stage 30-metre-high tower with a circular pillared belfry and small cupola. In Adam's second design the tower was retained, but the five central bays of the original north elevation were reduced to three, with no pillars or pediment, and the advanced end-bays lost their transverse roof-hips.

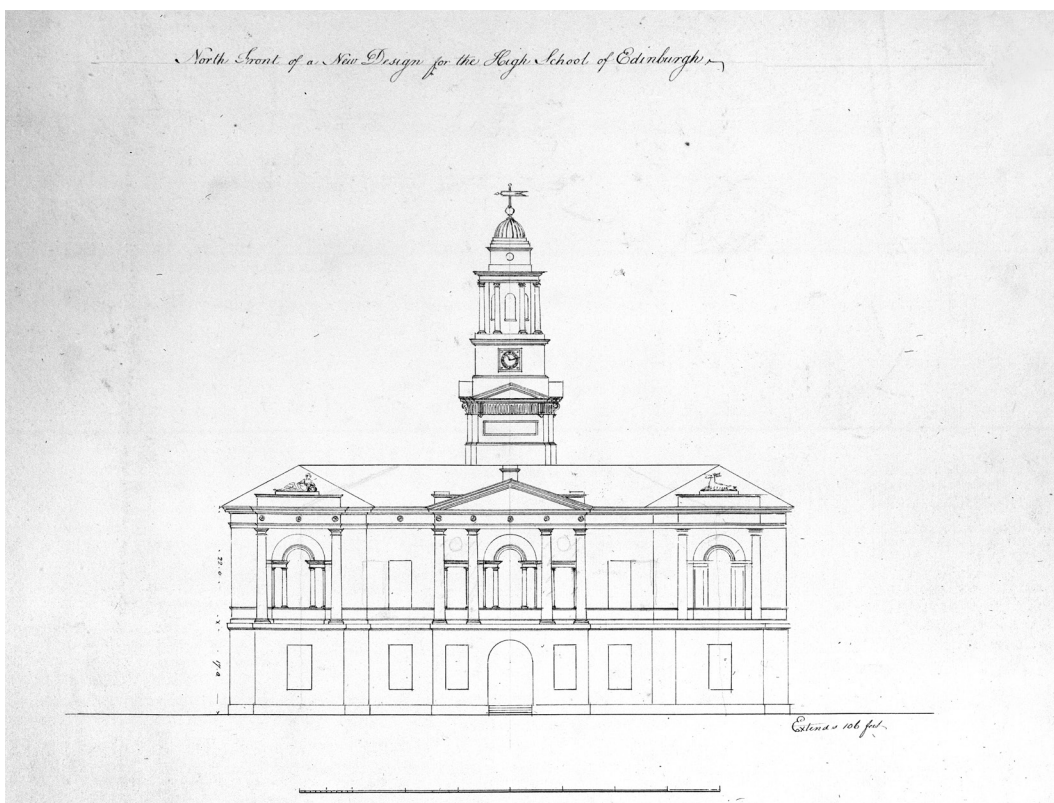


FIGURE 6

Proposed north elevation for Robert Adam's first design for the new High School of October 1776.

© Sir John Soane's Museum, London, Courtesy of HES [SC2219964](#)

In sharp contrast, Laing's adopted design accorded with the subscribers' wishes to avoid 'all unnecessary expensive ornament'.⁹ Permission was granted by the council for the demolition of the east end of the old school, and the foundation stone was laid by Forbes himself, as Grand Master Mason, in an elaborate civic ceremony on 24 June 1777, when 'all the public bodies turned out on this auspicious day, and an in-numerable crowd of spectators'.¹⁰ Forbes thanked 'all those persons of distinction in both kingdoms, who have already so generously contributed to the erecting of this school-house' whilst stressing the public function and fitting design restraint of such an institution: 'As good citizens we are glad in the prospect of not only promoting that most important of all objects, the public education

of youth, but of adding somewhat to the grandeur of the city by a building which, though meant to be void of all superfluous ornament, will, we trust, exhibit a decency of appearance well suited to the purpose it is intended to serve.'¹¹ He concluded with a request for more funds to complete 'this important - I may even say national - work, which we have now begun.' By late 1778 the funds were 'almost totally exhausted' and the town council agreed to a further subscription, to which they contributed £200.¹²

The built design was only modified slightly from Laing's published elevation of 1777, which showed a wall-head balustrade in the central block and proposed pedimented gables with urns in the end-wings: the balustrade was expressly excluded

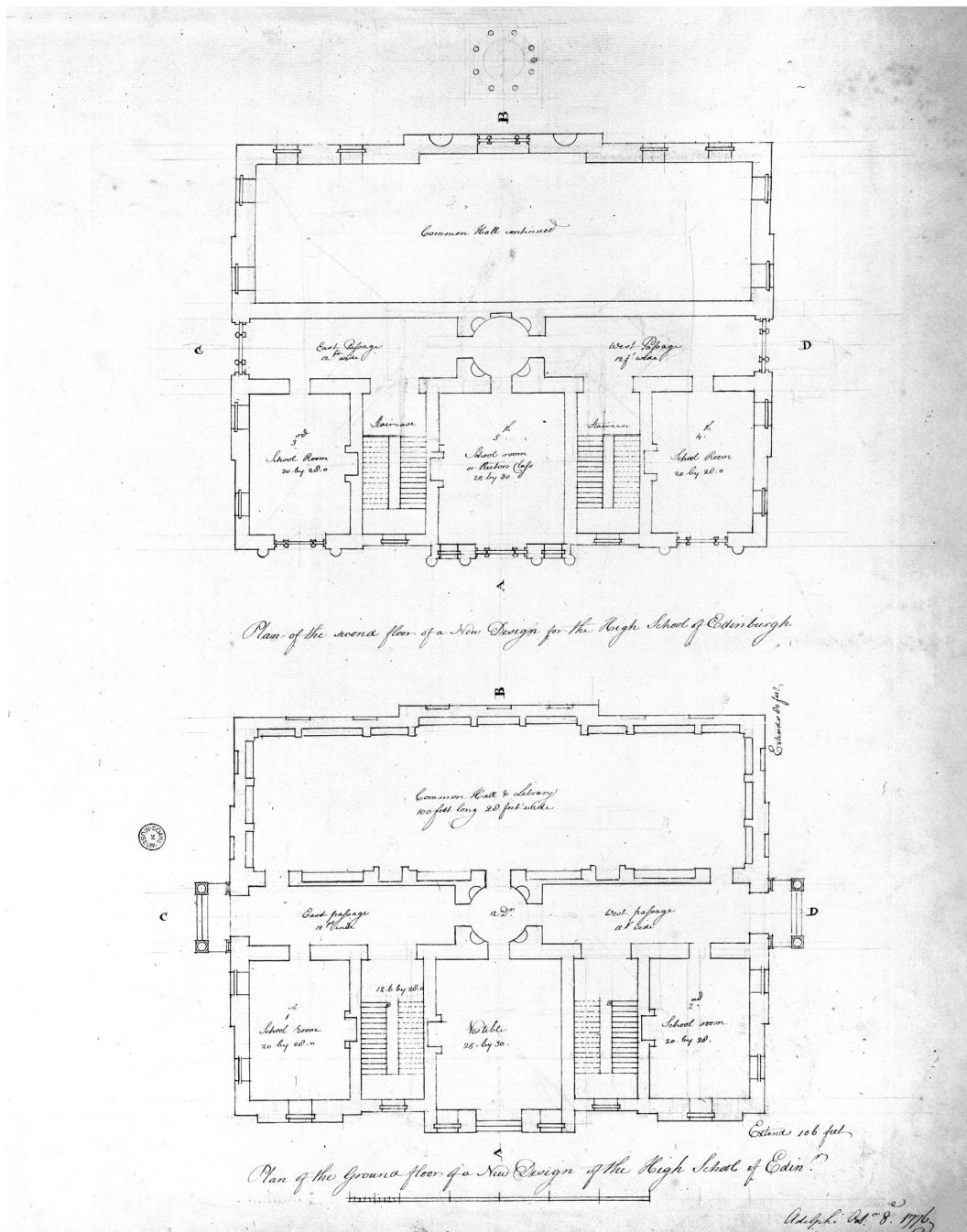


FIGURE 7
Proposed ground and first floor plan for Robert Adam's first design for the new High School of October 1776.

© Sir John Soane's Museum, London, Courtesy of HES [SC2219966](https://www.hes.ed.ac.uk/SC2219966)

from Laing's estimate of that year and the eaves received a simple moulded cornice.¹³ The two-storeyed block (36.8m from north to south by 10m across), with a seven-bay centre and minimal two-bay end-wings projecting (0.6m) to the west, had three stair towers on the rear-wall (each 4.7m by 4.2m; the outer ones survive although heightened and adapted to other uses). The principal front and the end-walls are built of grey droved ashlar, for which Laing specified the Redhall quarry, and the pined and slated roofs originally carried rectangular chimneystacks above the inner walls of the end-wings.¹⁴ The windows had plain narrow-tooled surrounds with projecting sills and the simple wall-treatment was relieved only by a base-plinth and projecting bands at first-floor and cornice-level. The end-walls were of two bays, most of the windows being dummies, but some were subsequently opened and others in-filled.

Laing's detailed accounts chronicle the progress of the work from May 1777, with site-clearance and enclosure of the newly acquired ground.¹⁵ The walls stood 4.6m high by December, when they were

covered with straw for the winter break, and by September 1778 the wall-head was being prepared to receive the roof-timbers. In the first months of 1779 the stairs were being installed, and in May Laing consulted Forbes about the portico and other works that required to be 'executed before the new Schools are possess'. Laing's first proposal was for a doorcase with free-standing Corinthian pillars and a modillioned pediment, but he reported that the portico remained unbuilt, giving 'an unfinished look' to the façade.¹⁶ A tetrastyle Tuscan portico with a moulded pediment was then added, the outer pillars obscuring the windows behind. Although lacking the civic grandeur of Adam's design, Laing's uniform, flat-fronted Georgian block with shallow advanced end-bays and piend roof became a significant prototype for Scotland's late eighteenth and early nineteenth century burgh schools and academies. His own 1787 design for Inverness Royal Academy was modelled on Edinburgh High School, and John Craig's Glasgow High School, George Street, of 1782 (demolished) followed a strikingly similar architectural pattern.

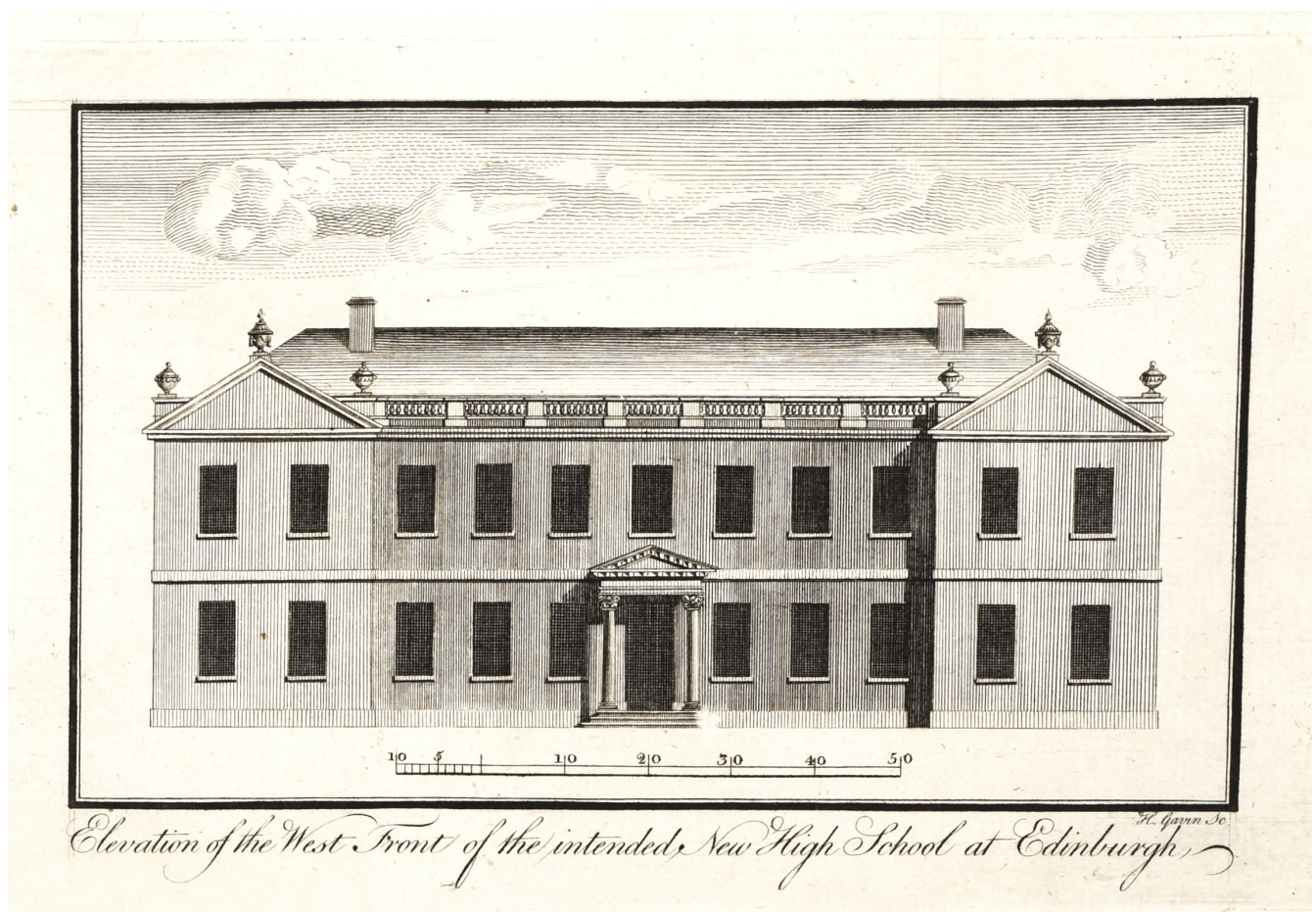


FIGURE 8

Elevation drawing by Alexander Laing of the west front of the new High School, illustrated in the printed subscription pamphlet of 1777.

National Records of Scotland, © Crown copyright, 2020

Laing's main account closed in June, although some minor items were to follow and carpenter work continued for some time. The full account as settled in February 1780 was for £3,247, of which Laing received £1,553 16s and the carpenter William Wright £1,362 12s.¹⁷ In 1794 plans were drawn up by William Sibbald, the town's superintendent of works, to fit up the hall for the public examination. This work, which included the provision of new furniture, was carried out by the wright Thomas Hamilton at an estimated cost of £51 10s, and may have been completed by the painting of the city arms and 'sundry inscriptions in gold letters'. Only minor repairs were required in the next twenty years, but the steady growth of the rector's class led to the enlargement in 1814 of the central stair tower combining the stair and additional teaching space. This was designed by the town superintendent Thomas Bonnar, and executed by David Whyte, wright, for £365.¹⁸

The original interior arrangements and the new rear addition of 1814 were recorded on survey plans of about 1815.¹⁹ Interestingly it retained much of the layout of the 1578 building. On the ground floor was a central 'common hall' (examination hall) and additional ground-floor rooms in the end-wings (each 9.8m by 6m), intended for the library and the writing

class — although the latter was used as such only from 1793.²⁰ Above, five first-floor schoolrooms including the rector's room at the centre were served by the three stair-towers.²¹ This ground-floor layout, although increasingly larger in scale, was in fact adopted for the sixteenth century grammar school, and the eighteenth and nineteenth century Edinburgh High Schools.²²

No public opening ceremony is recorded, but Sir William Forbes reported in February 1780 that the boys had taken possession of the school 'at the commencement of the winter session', probably in October 1779.²³ The enrolment in this session was about 430, including 110 in Alexander Adam's rectorial class. Among those who entered the new building was the eight-year-old Walter Scott, in his second year in Luke Fraser's class. Others who followed Scott as pupils in Adam's class were to be eminent in literary and legal circles, including Lord Chancellor Henry Brougham, Henry Cockburn, Francis and Leonard Horner, and Francis Jeffrey. Scott, Cockburn and George Borrow left brief but vivid accounts of their schooldays. Some of the masters became well known through their friendships with Robert Burns, but William Nicol left to found his own seminary after a violent attack on the rector.

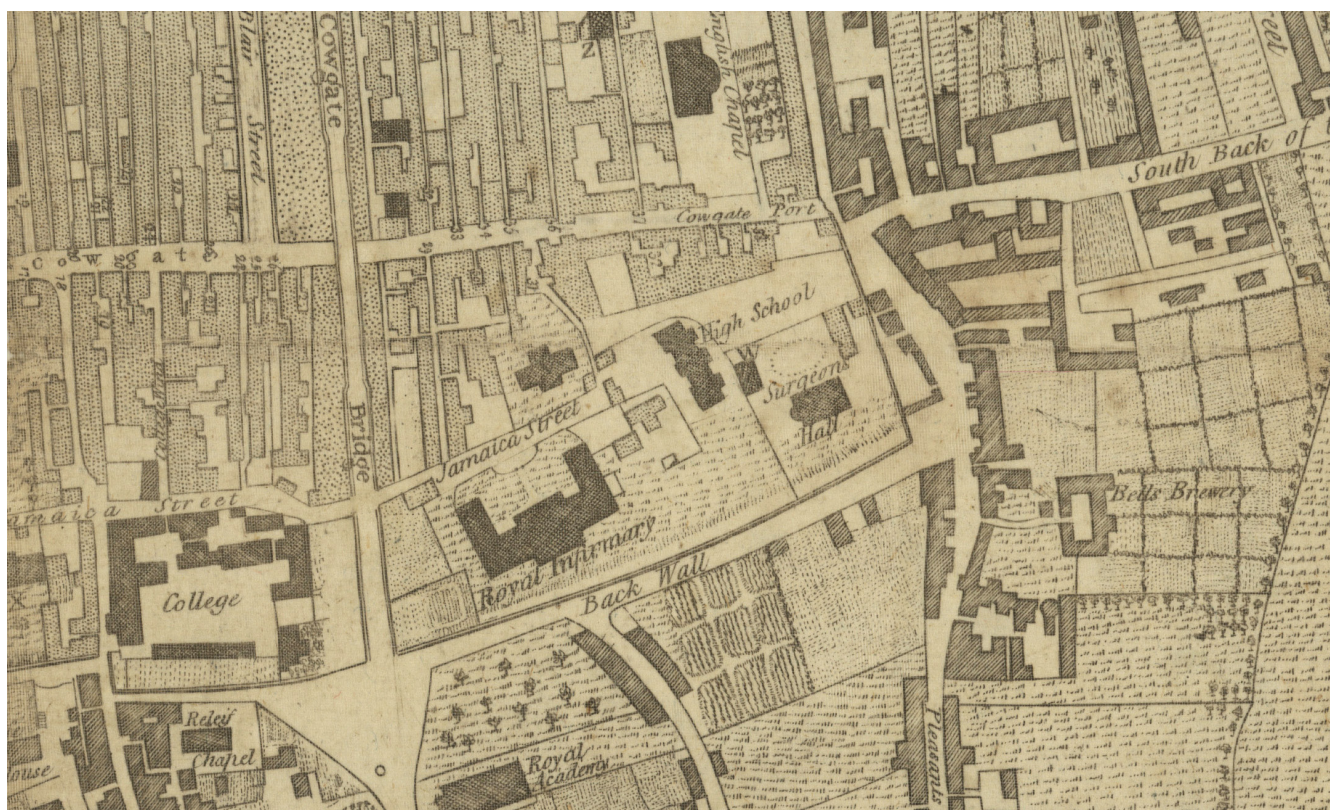


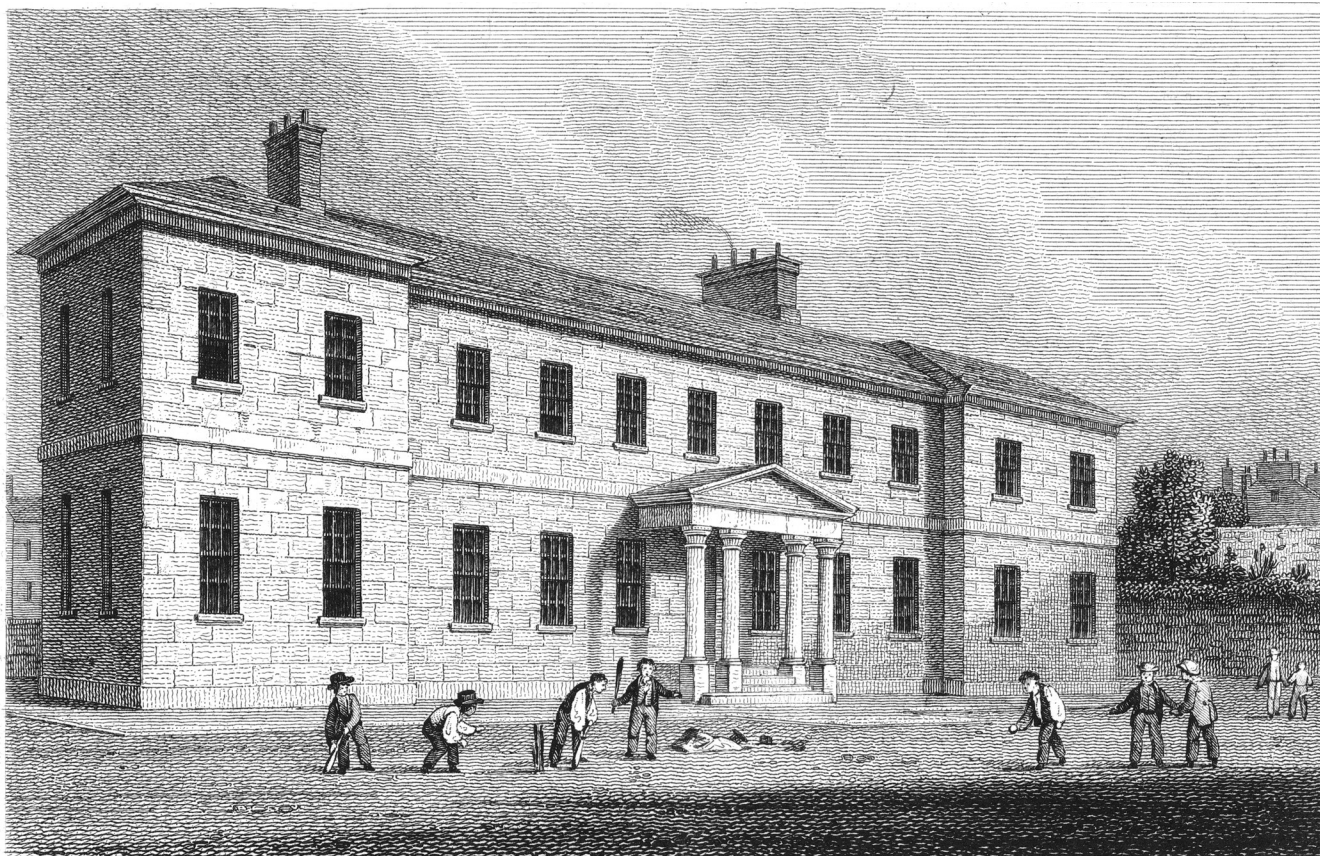
FIGURE 9

New High School as shown on John Ainslie's Plan of the City of Edinburgh, c1780.

Reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland

The alterations of 1794 marked a more formal annual examination, and coincided with the establishment of a medal for Latin. By the nineteenth century, the celebrated social mix in the eighteenth century High School was 'lost' to the more humble scholars, discouraged by the highest burgh school fees in Scotland, but the diversity of school provision in Edinburgh allowed the High School to remain almost exclusively classical with common curriculum taken by all pupils.²⁴ Despite the attempts of the university to prevent the teaching of Greek, a medal for that

subject was awarded by the city in 1814. By then the attendance had risen to over 700, and it grew to a peak of 890 in 1820. Overcrowding and the perceived social decline of the area led to proposals, with which the town council collaborated for a time, for a school in the New Town. When the Edinburgh Academy subscribers chose to proceed alone, the council were forced to find a New Town site, and the new school on Calton Hill was opened with a grand procession from the High School Yards in June 1829.



Drawn, Eng. & Pub. by J. & H. S. Storer Chapel Street Percevalville June 1. 1819.

HIGH SCHOOL.

FIGURE 10

1819 engraving by J Storer and H S Storer of new High School, showing boys playing cricket.

from *Views in Edinburgh and its vicinity, exhibiting remains of antiquity, public buildings, and picturesque scenery*, 1820).

Courtesy of HES [SC1244782](#)

FIGURE 11

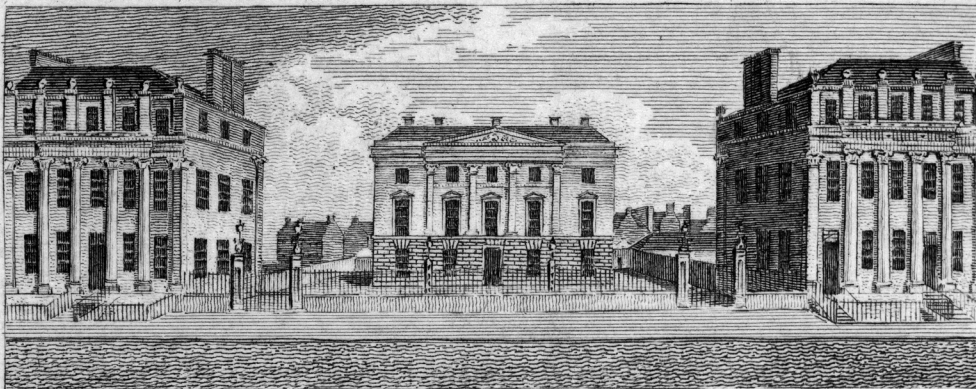
c1820 engraving of High School by 'R Scott Sc.'

from J Stark, *The Picture of Edinburgh: Containing a Description of the City and its Environs*, Plate III, 1820)

Courtesy of HES
[DP387050](#)



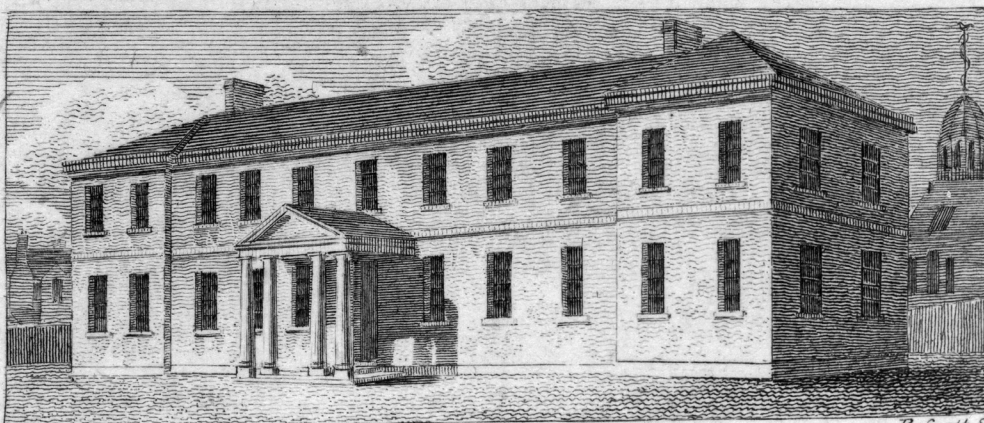
Bank of Scotland .



Royal Bank. Excise Office & British Linen Comp^y. Bank .



Custom House .



High School .

Edinburgh. Published by Fairbairn & Anderson. 1820.

R. Scott Sc.

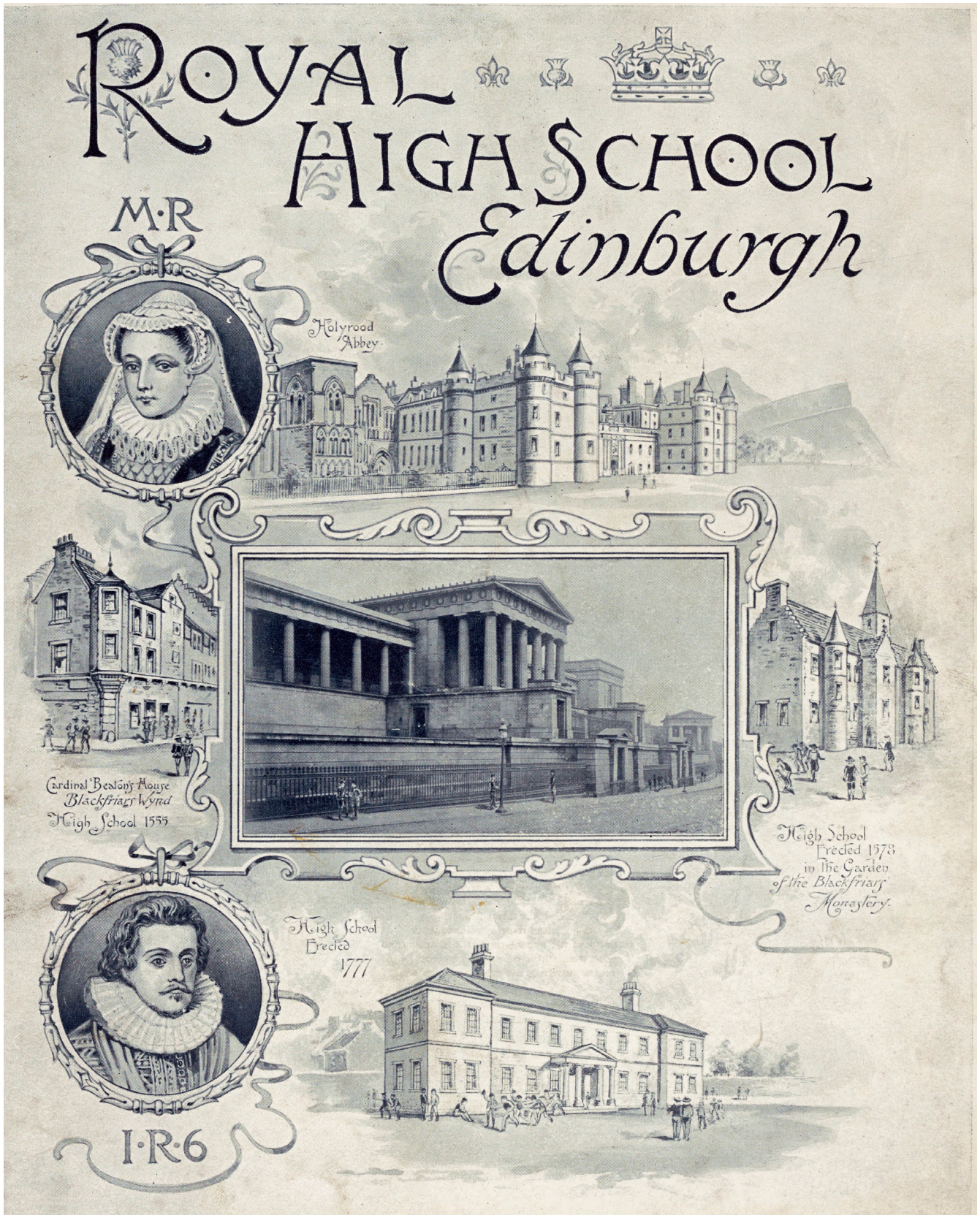


FIGURE 12

1895-6 Royal High School Prospectus, showing the Old High School of 1777 as the fourth home of the ancient burgh school (bottom right).

HES DP171425

Development

In 1827 the managers of the adjacent Royal Infirmary expressed anxiety that any development of the school site would affect the ventilation of their own building, and in 1829 they bought the old High School for £7,609. It was converted to a surgical hospital for £3,138, with a rear corridor on each floor, and the addition of the operating theatre to the east brought the cost to about £12,000. Opened in 1832, the Surgical Hospital was associated with the great surgeons James Syme (who had been a pupil in the school) and Joseph Lister. It remained in use after 1853, when a new surgical hospital was built to David Bryce's design adjacent to the south in 1848-53.

In 1870-1 the university failed to purchase the whole site of the old infirmary, but in 1881 the town council bought back the old school and adjacent buildings for use as a fever hospital. In 1903 it was acquired by the university, and underwent refurbishment 1905-7 to designs by Rowand Anderson & Balfour Paul. Its southern-most stair-tower was heightened and topped with an ogee lead roof in 1906-7, breaking the overall symmetry of its original composition. Since 1905 it has been occupied successively by the departments of engineering, geography, and archaeology.²⁵ In 2013, the university building was converted by Malcolm Fraser Architects to house the Edinburgh Centre for Carbon Innovation.



FIGURE 13

Detail of 1852 Ordnance Survey town plan of Edinburgh, showing the former High School reconstructed and extended to become a surgical hospital, with a new operating theatre to the north-east, and adjacent new surgical hospital to the south and east (designed by David Bryce 1848).

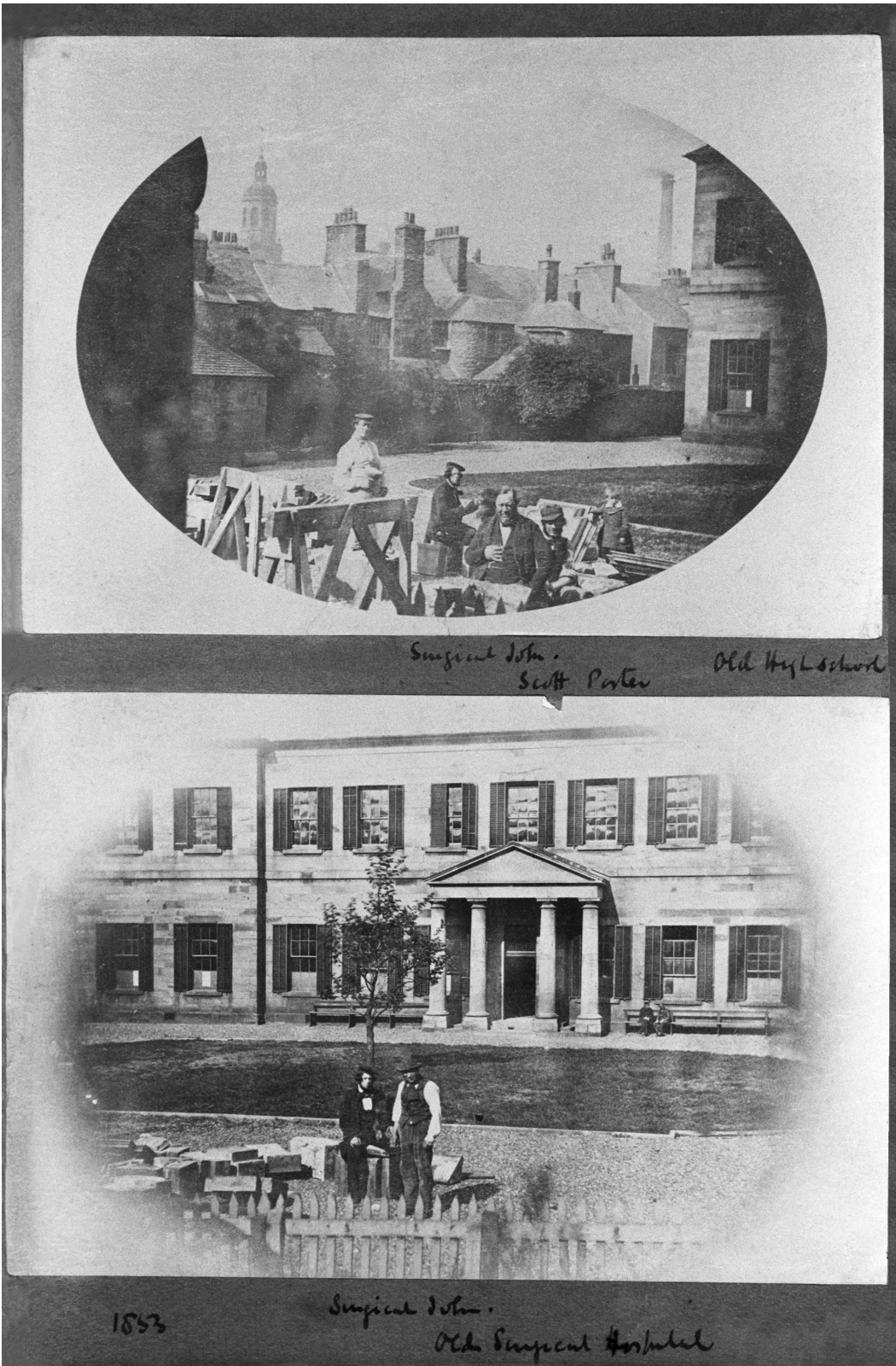
HES [DP063616](#)

FIGURE 14

Two 1853 early photographs of a group of workers on the forecourt of the surgical hospital. The top image, captioned 'Surgical John. Scott Porter.' at 'Old High School', shows John (hat on, second from right). The man far left may be holding a mason's mallet. The trestle, dressed stones and slabs (beside the child) suggest the men were preparing stone for construction. Behind, the north-west corner of the former school and the houses lining the north side of High Schools Yard.

The second image captioned 'Surgical John, Old Surgical Hospital' shows John and fellow worker standing beside a pile of cut stone on the carriage driveway behind a wooden fence. The 1777 building now has shutters.

Courtesy of Lothian Health Services Archive (SCRAN)



*Surgical John.
Scott Porter Old High School*

*1853
Surgical John.
Old Surgical Hospital*

**FIGURE 15**

c1904 view of former High School, then owned and occupied by the University of Edinburgh. The carriageway and grassy forecourt has been replaced by cobbles.

HES [SC1131444](#)

**FIGURE 16**

c1940 view which shows the entrance gateway at the west of the site, and the southern-most stair tower of the former school block heightened and topped with an ogee roof. The works were part of its refurbishment in 1905-7.

HES [SC2238134](#)

**FIGURE 17**

2015 aerial view showing the 2013 conversion of the Edinburgh Centre for Carbon Innovation buildings. The 1777 former school building (west) is externally intact, and the 1830 square operating theatre to its rear survives in altered form (east). The 1777 block is linked to the adjacent five-storey wing of the former nineteenth century Surgical Hospital (south).

HES [DP221181](#)

Endnotes

- ¹ The grammar school of Edinburgh was under the patronage of Holyrood Abbey and this may have originated in the twelfth century. For a detailed history of history of this ancient institution see W Steven, *The History of the High School of Edinburgh*, 1849. See also: W C A Ross, *The High School of Edinburgh*, 1934; J B Barclay, *The Tounis Scule, The Royal High School of Edinburgh*, 1974; and J Murray, *A History of the Royal High School*, 1997.
- ² See A Law, *Education in Edinburgh in the Eighteenth Century*, 1965, pp 58-103; R Anderson, *Education and Opportunity in Victorian Scotland*, 1983, p 21; R Anderson, *Education and the Scottish People, 1750-1918*, 1995, pp 1-24.
- ³ Sir William Forbes, laying of foundation stone ceremony, 24 June 1777, cited in *Scots Magazine*, June 1777, in Steven, *History of the High School*, p 124.
- ⁴ High School Records, McLeod Bundle 21, Edinburgh City Archives (ECA).
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, 31 August 1774.
- ⁷ H Arnot, *The History of Edinburgh from the Earliest Accounts to the Present Time ...*, 1778, p 249.
- ⁸ Adam drawings dated at the Adelphi, 8 October 1776 and 6 March 1777, Adam Drawings Collection, Sir John Soane Museum, Vol 31, Nos 24-3 (copies in RCAHMS). See W L Spiers, *Catalogue of the Drawings and Designs of Robert and James Adam in Sir John Soane Museum*, 1979, Index, p 11, and D King, *Unbuilt Adam*, 1991, p 55.
- ⁹ Undated letter from Forbes to D Dalrymple, High School Records, McLeod Bundle 21, ECA.
- ¹⁰ Steven, *History of the High School*, p 124; *Scots Magazine*, June 1777, pp 332-5.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² In April 1779 the subscribers were awarded the annual benefit performance at the Theatre Royal, a grant which continued for the next decade.
- ¹³ An elevation drawing of the west front by Laing was illustrated in the printed subscription pamphlet. This also details subscribers, and includes a letter from Forbes, subscription pamphlet, 1777, National Records of Scotland, GD18/5834. *Scots Magazine*, June 1777, figure opp. p 334. The lower storey as executed was 0.7m higher than shown in the elevation, 'general estimate of mason work, 22 April 1777', Royal High School Archives (RHSA).
- ¹⁴ 'General estimate of mason work, 22 April 1777', RHSA. J and H S Storer, *Views in Edinburgh and its Vicinity, Exhibiting Remains of Antiquity, Public Buildings and Picturesque Scenery*, Vol 2, 1820.
- Ordnance Survey 1:1,056 map ('Edinburgh and its Environs' 1852, sheet 36).
- ¹⁵ The east end of the old school, including two upper classrooms east of the rector's room, was demolished to make way for the north end of the new building, and a brick gable-wall was built. Additional windows and stoves were provided in the 'laigh hall' to house the displaced classes, which remained until the summer of 1779, but the final demolition remained unrecorded. The site was extended to the south by the acquisition of garden-ground from the infirmary and the Incorporation of Surgeons, but the playground was now separated from the High School Yards by a retaining wall to the north and north-east. The old entrance block at the head of High School Wynd, perhaps with its clock-tower, remained on Ainslie's map of 1780. A janitor's house in the north-west angle of the site had already been built, but the west boundary with the present entrance-gate was completed only in the early nineteenth century. The playground was slightly extended to the north-east at this period, but its south-west angle continued to be encroached on by a private house until after the sale of the school to the infirmary in 1829.
- ¹⁶ Letter from A Laing to Forbes, 17 May 1779, RHSA.
- ¹⁷ A further estimate of that year covered the provision of new desks, forms and tables, a pulpit with sounding-board for the hall, library bookcases and eleven roller-blinds of green linen for the front windows of the schoolrooms. Some of this may have been the wright-work executed in 1781 by the notorious Deacon William Brodie, 'Public Accounts', Vol 103, pp 35-8, ECA. Further mason work by Laing in 1788-9 cost £125.
- ¹⁸ Around 1830 its rear wall was incorporated in a large square operating theatre which survives in altered form as a lecture theatre. Thomas Hamilton senior carried out alterations in the old High school, dividing the common hall into examination rooms to accommodate rising pupil numbers, recorded 10 February 1784. The estimate dated 24 January 1793 included 12 chairs, McLeod Bundle 21, ECA.
- See also 'Joe Rock's Research Pages, Thomas Hamilton, Royal High School Chronology', <https://sites.google.com/site/joesrockresearchpages/Thomas-hamilton-architect/royal-high> (accessed 2012)
- ¹⁹ Ground and first-floor plans, scale 1:96, ECA. These plans may be the result of the survey ordered in 1815, Edinburgh Town Council Minutes, 2 August 1815, ECA.
- ²⁰ It served previously as a 'version-room' for pupils preparing Latin translations and probably occupied the north room, entered in 1815 from the adjacent stair-lobby by a short curved corridor partitioned from the hall. The south room was entered directly from the hall and an unsplayed opening in its north wall was perhaps an original external doorway. Before 1815, and probably during Bonnar's alterations of the previous year, the hall of 1794 (20.5m by 9m), was subdivided immediately south of the main doorway by a narrow wall with a central moveable partition. At first its rear wall had three doorways, each communicating with one of the stair-towers, but in 1814 the door to the south tower was blocked and an additional opening formed between the south division of the hall and the enlarged central tower. The west half of this tower was a room or vestibule with fireplace, 7.4m by 3.7m, and the other half was equally divided between the staircase to the north-east and a small room to the south-east.
- ²¹ The upper landings of the north and south towers originally each had two doors in the west wall, giving access to the adjacent masters' rooms which also communicated by doors at the west ends of the cross-walls. The end rooms measured 9.8m by 6m and the inner ones 8.8m by 6.4m, while the rector's room at the centre was originally 8.8m by 7.5m. It was heated by a fireplace in the rear-wall, and the other rooms by fireplaces in the cross-walls. Walter Scott was content to occupy a place 'about the middle of the class', which 'chanced to be near the fire'; J G Lockhart, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, Bart.*, Vol 1, pp 74-5. The extension of the rector's room to the east by 4.5m was the main reason for the enlargement of the central tower in 1814, which also provided a small south-east room entered from the main room

and the stairhead. The original towers contained unlit closets entered from the upper landings, described by Arnot as 'some small rooms for the conveniency of the masters': Arnot, *History of Edinburgh*, p 249.

²² Law, *Education in Edinburgh*, p 84.

²³ Letter from Forbes to Lord Provost, 16 February 1780, McLeod Bundle 21, ECA.

²⁴ Anderson, *Education and Opportunity*, 1983, pp 20-1.

²⁵ A Turner, *Story of a Great Hospital: The Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh, 1729-1929*, 1937, pp 181-4, 193-4, 234-40.

