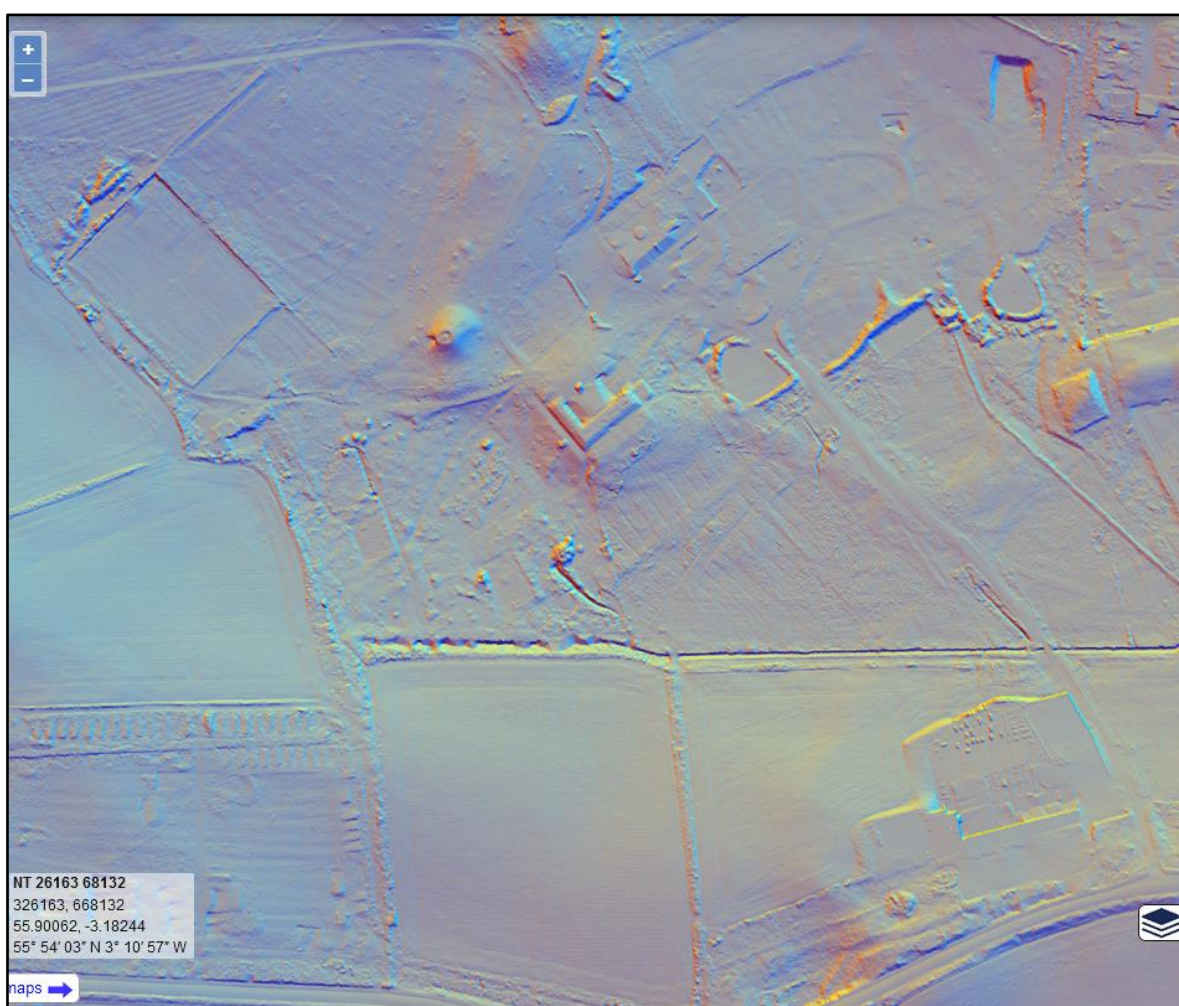


# Mortonhall Stroll Notes

**MORTONHALL:** The name Mortonhall is thought to derive from the Anglo-Saxon word 'mire' or 'Mor' i.e. area of marshy or waterlogged ground and the word 'tun' meaning farmer's home.

**HISTORY:** Robert the Bruce gave Mortonhall estate to Henry St Clair of Roslin in 1317 (as a reward for his bravery) along with Pentland, the forest of Pentland Moor, and Morton. Henry had been Commander of the Knights Templar at Bannockburn (1314), having previously sworn fealty to King Edward, and been appointed by Edward I as sheriff of Lanark. Later John Trotter (merchant, and royalist), first Baron of Mortonhall, bought the estate in 1635 (during reign of Charles I). Born in 1588, he was a younger son of Robert Trotter of Catchelraw, nr. Duns, in Berwickshire (one of the Clans of the East Marches long involved in Border Reiver life). The chaotic world of the Border Reivers was brought to an effective end by the 1603 Union of the Crowns. The resulting order and stability, for the first time in Scotland's long history where warfare and civil unrest had been endemic for centuries, delivered the possibility of a safe life, in the clean air beyond the medieval walls of Edinburgh, Scotland's overcrowded and unhygienic capital city.



**Lidar 50cm DTM.** (Good multidirectional, hillshade dataset for locating old structures.) Rectangular Walled Garden: top left. Icehouse: circle to right. Mortonhall House: L-shape further right. Old Bowling Green: faint rectangle SW of House. Stables: faint diamond around circle NE of house. Further N Kennels: rectangles. Family Tomb: diamond shape, far-right. Stenhouse Burn Ha-ha: pronounced horizontal feature. Garden Centre and Postwar Camp: bottom right. Concrete Army Nissan hut bases: long lines of small rectangles bottom left. One field further north, at lefthand edge of image, the old driveway is seen as a diagonal line aiming towards the icehouse. (<https://maps.nls.uk/guides/lidar/>)

The present Mortonhall House (a somewhat austere tall Georgian mansion) was established in 1769 by the 7th baron, Thomas Trotter (d1793) close to the site of the earlier house having inherited the estate in 1763. A Doric porch and service wing (to the E) were added c1835, probably by David Bryce, while dormer

windows were added in the 20th century. The estate contains a fine collection of ancillary buildings, many of which date from the 19th century, including the Factor's House (1835) and the kennels. The stable and granary complex is of the same date as the house (1769). Nearby Morton House is also 18th century and was at one time the Mortonhall Dower House [i.e. a moderately large house available for use by the widow of the previous owner of the estate]. Although parts of the estate have been sold and the house converted into privately owned flats during the 1980s, the Trotter family still own the Mortonhall estate.

Mortonhall once encompassed farms from Oswald Road north of Blackford Hill stretching south to Allermuir Hill in the Pentlands. This encompassed the farms of Blackford, Bowbridge, Buckstone, Frogston, Morton and Greenbank. With declining fortunes of agriculture, the estate initiated a strategic policy of releasing land from farming for developers. Also, the steep v-shape of the land at Braidburn valley park had protected it from development, and it was farmed until the late 19th Century by the Trotters of Mortonhall House. The land was sold to the Council in 1933 to be used as a public park on condition that it remained open ground '*for all time coming*'.

The family vacated Mortonhall in 1939 and the property was taken over during the war as an army camp for the training of the Royal Engineers. Mortonhall House was leased to Edinburgh university in 1949, when it was used 'for a Marxist experiment in communal living'. It was used in the 1950s and 1960s as a nursing home and then lay empty for a number of years. It was converted into 13 flats in the mid-1980s.

**MAPS AND GRAPHIC EVIDENCE:** Shown 'Mortonhal' on Adair's 1682 map as a house with tower in a small enclosure. Roy c1750 shows 'Mortoun Hall' on the north side of a series of tree-lined enclosures with an entrance on the west. Knox 1812 shows a Noblemen's Seat among irregular enclosures, also the walled garden, and new driveways to W, N and S. This basic plan is shown in more detail on Sharp Greenwood and Fowler's 1828 large-scale map with the house set in parkland. They show the walled garden to the west, a courtyard of buildings to the east, the long sinuous drive to Buckstone and entrances from the E and S. OS maps from 1852 onwards add fine detail showing ornamental planting on the west side of the house, south of the walled garden, including walks, a bowling green and fountain, plus a pigeon house and icehouse in the vicinity; a tree belt follows the Stenhouse burn.

**OUT BUILDINGS:** West Lodge, Braid Road: greatly altered lodge and part of gates remain (adjacent to Buckstane Farmhouse). East Lodge, Howden Hall Road: was B listed but now demolished - made way for new crematorium entrance in 1960s. South (Shepherd's) Lodge, Frogston Rd East – also demolished). Factor's House. Square dovecot adjacent to stables. Meadowhead Farm, E of golf course, now used as riding stables. Kennels, SW side of walled garden; also NW corner of campsite. Walled family burial ground amongst trees to east of house, 0.10 ha. Large walled garden over 1 ha in area. With arched entrances to N, W and E, plus several other doorways. Previously 'admirable and most productive gardens with forcing houses'. Icehouse (late C18th). Family burial ground with some surviving memorials on tree-planted mound to E of house with stone retaining wall (adjacent to NW corner of Crematorium). A low mortar-bound rubble estate wall with distinctive chunky coping remains along Frogston Road for much of its length, also along part of Braid Road. Substantial half-dyke along west side middle section of Meadowhead drive. North-west Driveway: attractive long approach from Braid Road with tree belts either side. East Driveway: survives as Stanedykehead Road.

**ARBORETUM:** A substantial area of open woodland adjoining the west side of the house including cypresses, thuyas, hemlocks, yews, Norway spruce, Cedrus deodara, Cedrus libani (very large), and large mixed broadleaved trees including cut-leaved and purple beeches. Trees were grown from some of the earliest seed imported from the west of America. The Arboretum includes the space of the former bowling green, a damaged semi-circular inscribed fountain (still functioning but overflowing to surrounding area) and plinths with no statues. [In 1835 'A sycamore tree at Mortonhall (opposite the principal entry and vestibule), said to have been planted in 1700, measures 14 feet in circumference'.]

**INSTITUTE OF GENETICS:** The house was occupied by scientists at the new Agricultural Research Council Unit of Animal Genetics and their families during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Formed at a time of rapid expansion under the leadership of the biologist and polymath Prof. Conrad H. Waddington (successor to

Prof. F.A.E. Crew). His initial solution to staff accommodation problems in Edinburgh was the acquisition of the nearby Mortonhall and an experiment in collegiate living (Waddington, an old-fashioned intellectual who lived in both the arts and science milieus of the 1950s, had left-wing political leanings). This unusual arrangement whereby staff and their families were housed together in Mortonhall soon led to frictions. The communal living arrangement proved to be a turbulent experience and became immortalised in Edith Simon's fictional book *The Past Masters* (1953) and her short story entitled '*Murder at Mortonhall*'.

About ten families moved in, in the middle of 1947, with singles accommodated in the attic. The adult inmates all ate together at one large table. As a solution to the immediate problem this was satisfactory but as an experiment in communal living in the long term it was not. Waddington probably had a Cambridge College in mind in setting up this structure but there were critical factors which complicated matters. Even in Cambridge, high-table life is not all harmony. Here we had a group with the same hierarchy at work as at home and the added problem of wives staying behind during the day, with very different ideas as to how children should be brought up. After two or three years, families began slowly to move away, and the house was closed after six years. The arrangements provided many anecdotes, usually of a rather wry kind.

**ARMY CAMP:** A World War I army camp within the grounds of the estate, was occupied by the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The descendants of John Trotter included two generals, and a long association with the military. This may have resulted in the family making parts of the estate available for military usage. Also, WWII Nissen huts were built for the Durham Light Infantry c.1940. Maybe ~200 structures, the camp housing some 16 officers, 40 warrant officers and sergeants, and 460 other ranks. The concrete bases of the huts for this camp are found at field edges. [Well seen on Google Earth and Lidar and old maps.] Converted from tented to permanent accommodation in mid-1942. Following the departure of the DLI on Christmas Day 1942, the Royal Signal Corps occupied the camp until the immediate postwar period.

In the shelter belt can be found remnants of a postwar camp for displaced people from Eastern Europe, including Ukrainians and Poles. Local reports that Mortonhall was a POW camp are probably unfounded (based only on the presence of foreigners). It was a common feature of WWII camps, to be placed within woodland in an attempt to disguise them from the air, thus making them less vulnerable to observation and attack. Due to housing shortages, the only way to accommodate the vast number of immigrants in the immediate post-war years was to place them in the camps recently vacated by the army.

**A MYSTERY:** Where was the original fortified house, moat, and drawbridge? There seem to be no visible remains today. However, there are a few clues: First, Whyte 1793, helpfully wrote: "*The new houfe is nearly on that fite where the old houfe ftood, 'which is a fmall eminence on rifing ground. Here, in more ancient times, was a fort or ftrong hold, and, according to the then mode, was encompaffed with water, and the entry to it was by a draw-bridge. The Garden was formerly on the fouth fide of the houfe, but now on the weft*". Second, early maps (especially Roy c1750) show the old house as near the current house, with a short driveway coming directly from the W, before swinging slightly ENE towards the old house.

Where does this leave us?

Three possible sites come to mind. First, a tree covered eminence on rising ground at 55.90603, -3.186133 (200m S of the 14<sup>th</sup> green of Mortonhall golf course) partly fits Whyte's description but appears to be merely an old quarry. A site slightly W of the Stables block, where all the driveways converged on an elongate oval, is a second possibility. The icehouse area 55.90312, -3.183699 is a third potential location.

The old, straight, driveway is locatable today on lidar and as a broad field boundary. It points towards the icehouse area, as on Roy's map, and also parallels Laurie's map of 1766, where the old driveway passes to the N of the new house. These landscape features all support the ice-house suggestion. Turning to Whyte's relative positioning of the old house and garden. The walled garden is early-19th century, only appears on maps from 1812 (Knox) onwards. So, the garden referred to by Whyte could well refer to part of the arboretum the W of the main house and hence lying S of the icehouse area.

In short, the icehouse site appears satisfactory on both counts.

## Useful historical maps (from <https://maps.nls.uk/Nat>)



**Enlargement of Roy's Lowland map, 1752-55.** The old Mortonhall house is the red oblong near the centre of the map. Frogstone Brae runs EW near the bottom of the map. A good reference point is the bend in the road where, in 2018, a double-decker bus famously swerved on ice and was videoed narrowly avoiding disaster during the infamous Beast from the East blizzards.



**Mapmaker:** Sharp, Greenwood & Fowler.  
**Title:** Map of the county of Edinburgh.  
**Date:** 1828. **Note:** Main house, stable block, walled garden, four sinuous driveways: W towards Buckstone Farm House, E to Howden Hall Road, near St Catherine's House, S to Frogstone Brae and N to Libberton Tower, plus road to Stone Dyke Head.