

Sciennes Heritage: Background Information

Sciennes' history in brief

Today Sciennes is a small residential district of Edinburgh, lying between Newington and Marchmont, on the south side of the Meadows, around 1 mile south of the city centre.

- In the first half of the 12th century, it was given to the city by David I. Then by a decree of James IV, in 1508, cleared of woodland, having been the abode of "*hartis, hindis, toddis and siclike maner of beastis*", and giving shelter to vagrants and outlaws.
- The name Sciennes derives from the Convent of St. Catherine of Sienna, built c1517, on four and a half acres of land to the west of the causeway (the old road from Liberton). Its location can still be identified, to the west of Causewayside, at the eastern end of the common lands of the Burghmuir, south of the small, recently built hamlet of Mureburgh and reached by a lane from the hermitage chapel of St. John the Baptist. [Sciennes – from French spelling of *St. Caterina da Siena*.]
- Causewayside was one of the medieval routes to Edinburgh. By 1586 its width had been fixed at 18 ells. This important roadway (from London via Carlise & Selkirk) skirted past the old Borough-Loch to lead to the old city gate near Potterow, or through the Bristo Port and down Candlemaker Row to the Grassmarket.
- The Borough-Loch stretched from its head at Summerhall, westward, to its outfall along Tarvit Street, and consequently presented a major geographical obstacle for travellers.
- Before 1700 development to the south of Edinburgh, beyond the city walls, consisted of scattered houses, open fields and some ribbon development. South of Sciennes lay the isolated Grange Estate.
- The Borough-Loch with its surrounding marsh lands began to be drained in more than a piece-meal manner in the early 1700s. Subsequently Sciennes Hill House (1741) was the first substantial town house built beyond (south of) the lochan. Later significant southward expansion beyond the city walls created George Square (1766) and Buccleugh Place (1766). Even later, at the end of the 1700s, the construction of North Bridge and South Bridge incentivised greater southward expansion.
- Up until the early C19th much of the area of present-day Sciennes was occupied by just a few mansions and large villas. Sylvan House (1740) remains as a good example. It occupied one of the four large garden estates that led down to the Meadows from Sciennes Rd.
- By the end of the C19th the old mansions had largely been replaced. Sciennes had been turned, in the north, into a series of terraced tenements and, in the south, villas. Once started, development occurred at pace such that Sciennes' present-day street plan and housing had all been set out and realised by 1876. Transport was quickly provided. First by horse-drawn bus services (1870s), and then after 1871 by horse-trams.

The Meadows

- The site of the former ¾-mile long Borough-Loch was one of the main water supplies of Edinburgh's Old Town. In times of drought the level of the loch dropped, and the quality of the water fell. A dyke was built at Lochrin to try to control the level. The loch was inevitably used for washing animals and a depository for rubbish of all kinds. The draining and improvement of the Meadows began in the early C18th. This process made the district of Sciennes much more accessible from the city centre.

Commemorative pillars

- At the west end of Melville Drive are the two ornamental octagonal stone pillars donated by Thomas Nelson & Sons in 1881, in 'commemoration of the kindness and sympathy shown to them by the magistrates at the time of the great fire in 1878'. At their very top sit a 7-ft high unicorn and lion. The pillars are matched, at the east end, by two 26ft high commemorative pillars erected in 1886 by the Master Builder and Operative Masons of Edinburgh for the International Exhibition. The blocks of stone, from which these pillars are constructed, are representative of the quarries which supplied Edinburgh housing in the 19th century.

'Dick Vet' (Summerhall)

- Replacing a row of terraced houses, shops and a family run brewery, Summerhall's main building and wings were purpose built for The University of Edinburgh Veterinary College between 1913 & 1925. The sandstone mason work around the front door is unfinished, as it ceased on the outbreak of the First World War as young men volunteered to join the armed services and there was a shortage of building labour. Inside, the wonderful, old Anatomy Lecture Theatre survives with its wooden, horseshoe-shaped, steeply tiered seating - the last remaining example of this type of lecture theatre at any veterinary colleges in the United Kingdom. At the opening, in 1914, a time capsule was laid underneath the grand entrance steps, where it remains to this day.

Basil Spence's art-deco-style garage

- Spence's earliest work in Edinburgh (1933) is the former garage on Causewayside. Designed in a typical art deco style it exhibits an early adoption of the principles of modernism - including the use of materials like steel, concrete and glass - simplicity of shape, and a minimalist approach to decoration. This former garage is now an off licence.

Old Police Station / Old Braid Fire Station / Old Jewish Burial Ground

- The former 'A' Division Police Station stands on the corner of Causewayside and Sciennes House Place. A four-storey building in the Scottish Baronial style. Note the carved knotted rope over the arched doorway. The two windows on the corner were the telephone switchboard room. The station closed in the early 1980s and has been converted to flats.
- Also, in Sciennes House Place is the Old Braid Fire Station (1885). Newly converted into an architect's office, the distinctly large entrances have been thoughtfully and attractively preserved.
- Directly across the road, the first Jewish Burial Ground in Scotland, the Sciennes House Place cemetery is of historic importance. It was opened in 1816 by the Edinburgh Jewish Congregation - the Jewish community was strong in Newington - but then closed to burials in 1870. Some of the memorials commemorate up to four generations of the same family.

Sciennes Hill House

- Built around 1741, Sciennes Hill House was originally a substantial three-story town house set in a large garden. An early owner had previously lost a fortune in the disastrous Darien scheme (1698-1700). Partially demolished in 1868 the remaining parts were incorporated into a terrace of Victorian tenements. These now form the northern side of Sciennes House Place. Today's street frontage was originally the back of the house. The old frontage (especially the original parapet balustrade - including hand-carved fruit bowls) can be glimpsed from the open space in front of 42 Sciennes.
- In the winter of 1786-87, Sciennes Hill House was the location of the only recorded meeting of Robert Burns and Walter Scott, at a dinner hosted by the philosopher Professor Adam Ferguson. A bronze plaque, on the outside wall, commemorates the event. Other guests included important figures of the Scottish Enlightenment: philosopher Dugald Stewart (1753 - 1828), economist Adam Smith (1723-90), geologist James Hutton (1726-97), chemist Joseph Black (1728-99), play-wright John Home (1722 - 1808) and adventurous Italian balloonist Vincenzo Lunardi (1759 - 1806). At the time Sciennes Hill House was on the very edge of the city and, because of its remoteness, was jokingly referred to as 'Kamchatka' by house guests.
- Sciennes Hill House occupies the site of the former Chapel of St. John the Baptist (1512), which was created as a hermitage for vagabonds. Its custodian was charged with offering up perpetual prayers for the dead and keeping a lamp burning day and night. The general area within which the chapel was placed can still be identified: to the west of Causewayside and extending south from the old hamlet of Muresburgh (which was positioned on the triangle now enclosed by Sciennes Place, the Sciennes and Lord Russell Place) as far as Sciennes House Place.

Arthur Conan Doyle

- Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) the novelist noted for his Sherlock Holmes stories lived briefly in the tenement at 3 Sciennes Place when he was eight years old.

Convent of St Catherine of Scienna

- The Dominican Convent of St Catherine of Scienna was founded in 1518. It stood on the south side of the present Sciennes Road, west of where St Catherine's Place now stands. [The Dominicans already had a priory in Edinburgh (nr. High School Yards), founded in 1230, by King Alexander II.]
- After the Battle of Flodden, 1513 (the last great medieval battle in the British Isles), in which many noble Scottish Lords lost their lives a group of widows successfully allied with Sir John Crawford, a canon of St Giles, to convince pope Leo X and James V to support their construction of a Convent.
- The Dominican Convent of the Order of Friars Preachers was built, near a well, on land acquired from Sir John. Its walled grounds were entered from the east (using a gated pathway from John the Baptist's Chapel). A plaque in the front garden of No 16 St Catherine's Place marks the site. Houses of women attached to the Dominican Order became popular in the 1200s throughout Europe. These female houses differed from male houses in that they were totally enclosed.
- Up to 30 sisters lived within the surrounding walls, following their isolated lives of asceticism, and devoting the rest of their lives to God. Sisters were to be silent in places of prayer, the cloister, the dormitory, and refectory. As well as sewing, embroidery and other genteel pursuits, the nuns participated in several intellectual activities including reading and discussing pious literature. The Sciennes' ladies were described as 'really respectable'. An interesting contrast to elsewhere, as in many other seminaries, convents, and monasteries around the British Isles there had been a gradual creeping of frivolity – with many communities falling into bad repute.
- The Sciennes Convent was short lived. In 1567 it was destroyed, the nuns driven out, and their community dispersed by the Protestant forces of the English army as part of the Reformation - the most sweeping religious change since the arrival of Christianity,
- The high surrounding walls (rising to a height of 12-15 ft. and known as the 'Sheens Walls') however survived and formed the leading landmark of the district for the next two centuries.

James Croll

- At the time of the 1881 Census, James Croll (1821–1890), his wife and maid lived at 21 St Catherine's Place. James was a remarkable and exceptional self-educated polymath. The son of a crofter-stonemason who had been evicted, during the Lowland Clearances, from his Perthshire smallholding. [James' life](#) was characterised by a dizzying range of menial occupations, by poor health and by financial concerns, and yet he became a Fellow of the Royal Society, a pioneer of orbital dynamics, explained the origin of ice ages (correctly), and discovered (also correctly) the key feedbacks that drive the threat of today's Global Warming ([Thompson, 2021](#)). James worked for the Geological Survey Scotland at No. 1 India Buildings, Victoria Street. He had been promoted to Geologist in 1869 but typically chose to modestly describe his role as 'resident surveyor and clerk'.

Sciennes Primary School

- The school building outwardly looks very similar now to the way it looked when it first opened in 1892. Note how the windows of its classrooms were designed to be high enough so that the outside world did not provide a distraction to the pupils. But also note how the windows are large - a demonstration of the School Board's interest in the positive health effects of light and ventilation.

Sick Kids

- The sizeable edifice of the former Royal Edinburgh Hospital for Sick Children (an imposing neo-Jacobean building) completed in 1895 has recently been converted for domestic use. It is a listed building with murals by Phoebe Anna Traquair in its mortuary chapel.

Joseph Black

- The white lime-harled Sylvan House is an C18th Category B listed building. Although much-altered it has been sympathetically restored. It remains a private residence. It was built around 1740 for advocate Joseph Williamson, Town Clerk of Edinburgh - who famously refused to surrender the keys of the city to Prince Charles Edward Stuart in 1745.
- In the 1790s Sylvan House became the summer home of the great chemist Joseph Black (1728-99). Black discovered that limestone could be heated to yield a gas he called "fixed air". His experiments also showed how the same gas (now known as carbon dioxide) is produced by respiration. These

pioneering works started off a whole new era of research. Within a few years other atmospheric gases - hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen - were also isolated for the first time.

- Black's other truly great discovery was of latent and specific heat. Heating water raises its temperature, but Black noticed that the application of heat to boiling water does not result in a rise in temperature. Instead, the heat increases the amount of steam. This observation led him to realise that the heat applied must have combined with the boiling water and become latent. Once again, his groundbreaking studies initiated a whole new science - the subject of thermodynamics.
- Black was a friend of the young James Watt. Watt was puzzled why so much cooling was necessary to condense steam into water in pumping engines. Black explained this conundrum in terms of his findings about latent and specific heat. Subsequently Watt was able to conceive the idea of a condensation chamber that was separate from the main working cylinder of a steam engine. This advance greatly improved the previously poor fuel economy caused by the enormous thermal losses associated with the need to repeatedly heat and cool a steam engine's main cylinder. The improved efficiency, in terms of both power and fuel consumption, was achieved by always keeping the main piston and cylinder warm and the condenser cool. The step change generated by Watt's invention significantly increased the practical uses for steam engines, kick-started the Industrial Revolution (which was powered by steam for the next 200 years) and changed our world forever by liberating mankind from a life of continuous toil.

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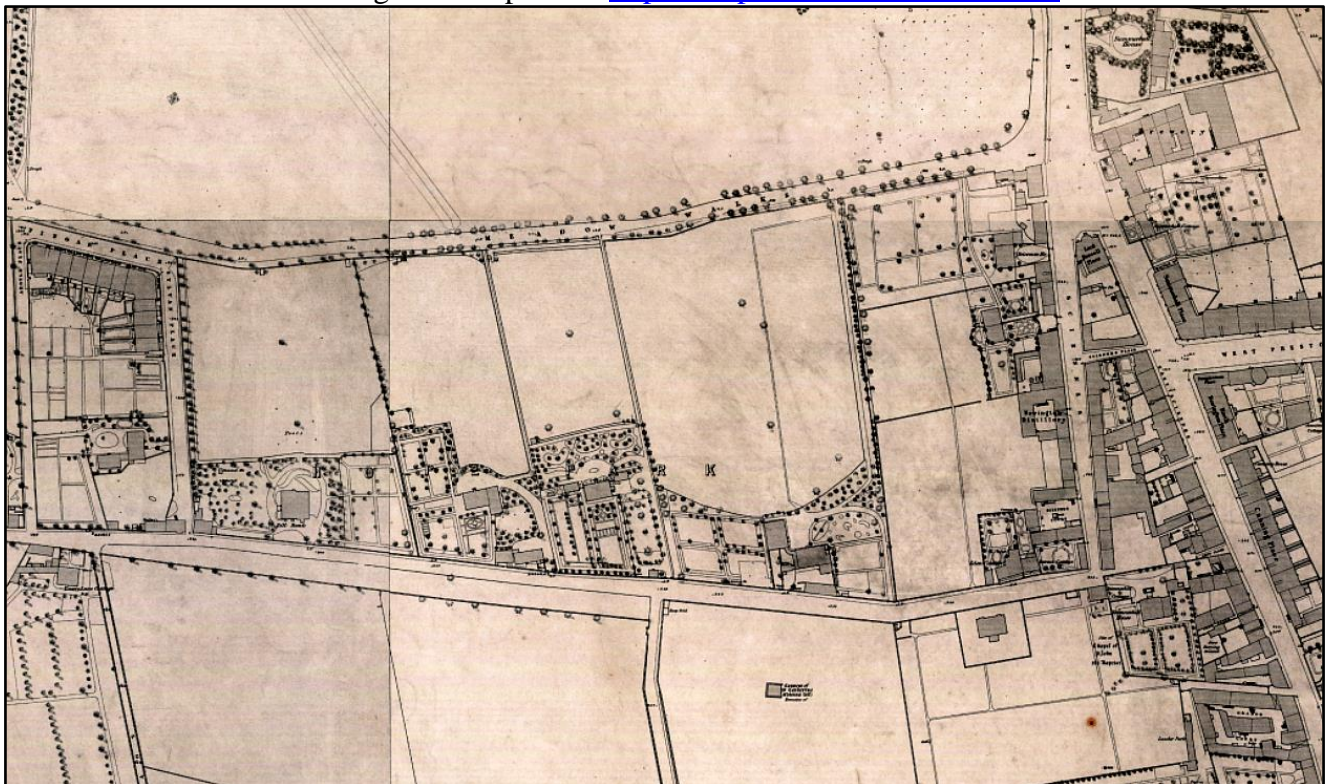
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Roy Thompson, March 2024