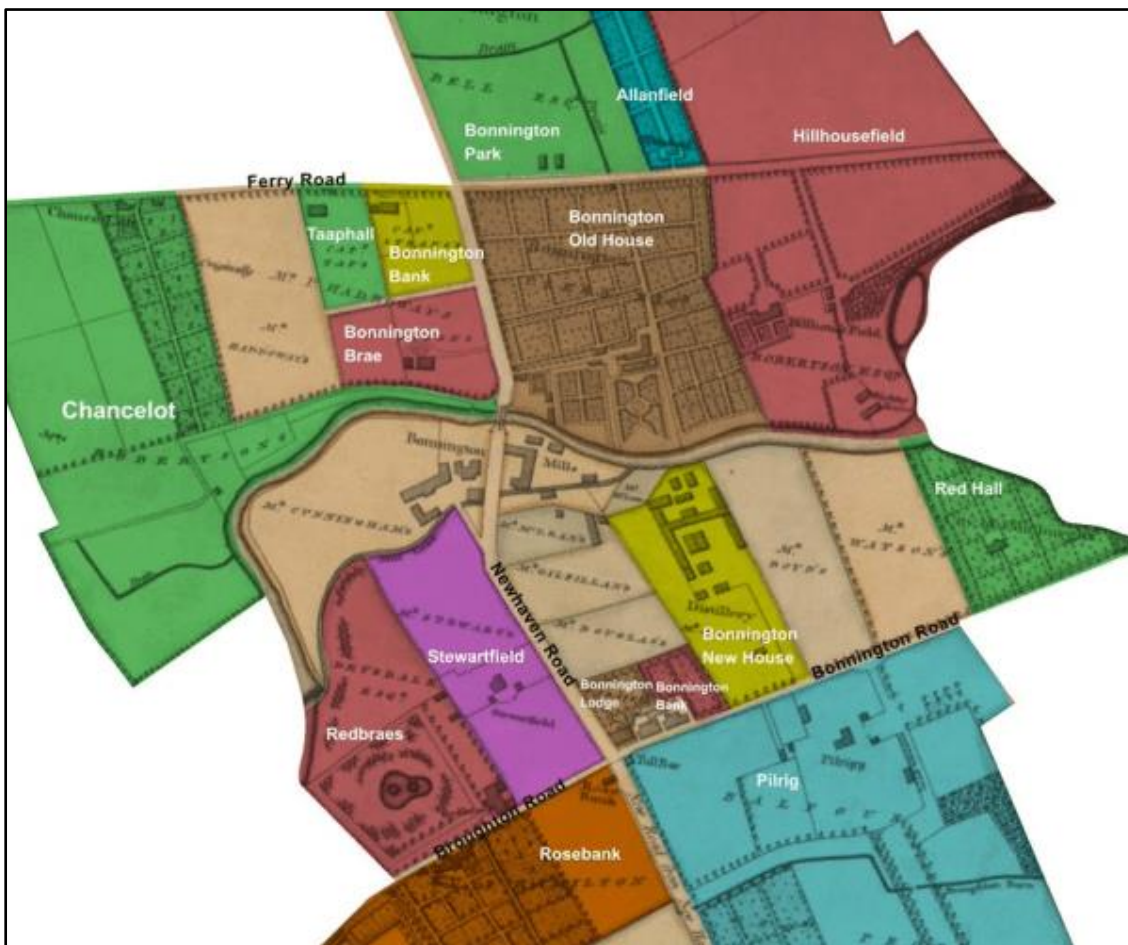


Bonnington Historical Background

The name Bonnington: comes from *Bondingtoun*, i.e. a piece of land let out to a bonder – a yeoman farmer. The roots of the word lie in Norse.

History: Bonnington is a district of Edinburgh. The area centres upon an original village which grew up around a ford on the Water of Leith, on the old boundary between Edinburgh and the port of Leith. The land and mills of ‘Bonnytoun’ formed part of the Barony of Broughton mentioned in King David I's confirmation charter in 1143. Bonnington was a milling village making use of the river's waterpower. The village suffered in 1544 when the Earl of Hertford's army passed through on its way to attack Edinburgh and again in 1547 after the Scottish defeat in the Battle of Pinkie, as part of the Rough Wooing.

Bonnington Old House: an early record dates to 1489. The original manor house (dark brown on map below) was probably destroyed during the Siege of Leith in 1560, having been situated between the river and what is now Ferry Road (i.e. near the reversing line which led into Bonnington Goods Yards).



Houses of Bonnington, 1817. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland

Bonnyhaugh Mills: The other historic centre of Bonnington was around the mills, on the other side of the river from Old Bonnington House. This area was

known as *Bonnyhaugh*. In Scots, *haugh* is a word for a piece of flat land on the banks of a river. The westernmost group of mill structures still exist as a little cluster of beautifully restored buildings, along with a big old iron mill wheel of the 'undershot' type (see photo), and the old mill lade running from the weir at Redbraes (lefthand edge of map). Milling started (1621) when the Town Council engaged a Dutch cloth maker and dyer, Jeromias van der Heill, to establish his craft on the site, which was already being used as a bleaching green.



Bonnyhaugh house (rubble-built in 1621 by the Town Council) probably rebuilt in the mid-C19th with smiddy on the left. The old mill house is behind the trees and the mill wheel.

Haig's distillery at Bonnington was built in 1798 (yellow on map above) and continued until 1853. It escaped the constrictions of the old town of Leith by moving up the river. A large pot still distillery sourced water from an existing well "St Cuthbert's chalybeate 184ft-deep well" with its characteristic empyreumatic (burnt organic) smell). From the Latin *chalybs* - possessed of iron salts. The drinking of salt waters was increasingly popular in late Stuart and Georgian times for their perceived health-giving benefits. A well house was built in the early C19th, containing a pump room and a reading room. The well was lost in 1857, during conversion of the distillery to a flour mill. Its location is still known; however, as a recent planning application ensured the well site was not encroached upon. Recently (2020) single malt production resumed nearby with water drawn from a deeper the aquifer 147m below.

Bonnington Bridge: Originally a ford and stepping stones. (Used by the famously confident Newhaven fish wives carrying 50-100kg of fish up to Edinburgh). A narrow bridge was built in 1812, to be replaced by the present bridge in 1902–03 - a single span segmental-arch incorporating a subsidiary arched span over the former mill lade.

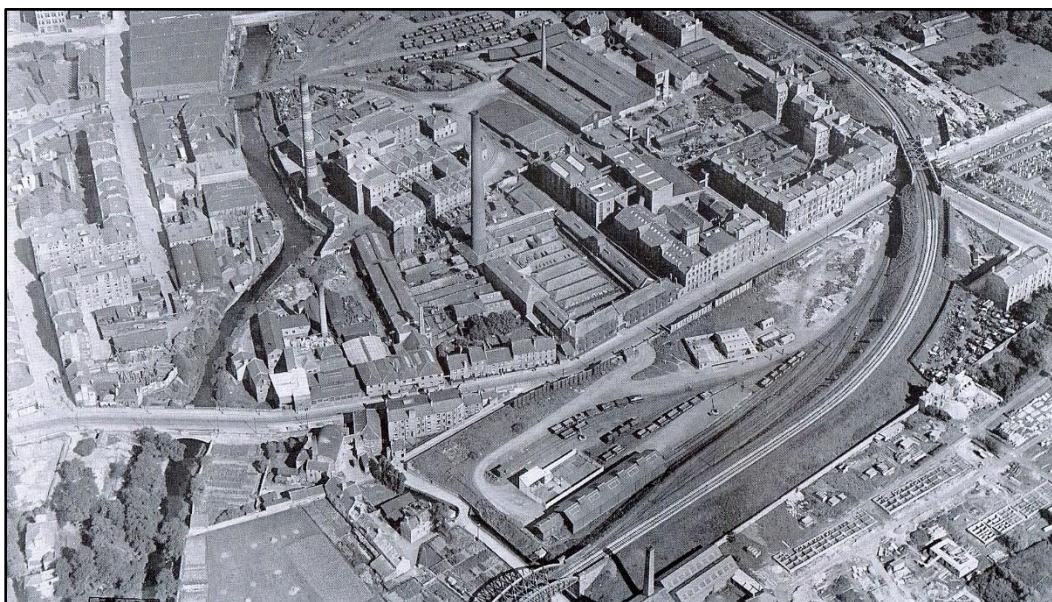
Tannery: In 1832, Robert Burns' skinworks occupied the site of Bonnington Mills. The tannery itself dates from the late C19th. An extensive complex, the oldest part of which is a 3-storey, 14-bay, snecked-rubble block, dated 1879, with drying sheds at the rear. The Burns tenement, built on Newhaven Road to house the tannery workers, was renovated in the 1970s. A stone tablet depicts a sheep and the tools of the tanner's trade.

Bonnington Bond Warehouse: This significant industrial complex (circa 1860-70) includes the largest bonded warehouse to survive in Edinburgh as well as the original buildings of the Bonnington Sugar Refinery Company. It was an important part of the industrial fabric of Leith and of Scotland. Later additions have left the street fronting facades relatively unaltered retaining much of their original character.

The sugar refinery was a large-scale industrial operation, producing over 250 tons of refined sugar each week. The prolific output necessitated that the site was linked to the railway, which brought the raw sugar cane and took away the processed and refined sugar.

1930 aerial photograph of Bonnington (Copyright City of Edinburgh Council)

From: <https://www.facebook.com/lostedinburgh/photos/a.271066716284352/438755602848795/?type=3>



View from above Redbraes. Bottom-left: Bonnington Bridge and Mill complex. Top-right Bonnington Toll. Centre: The large chimney is the Tannery. Centre-top: Goods Yard. Top-left: Chimney with stripes: Oatmeal Mill near Old Distillery.

Recent housing: The heavy, smelly industry has mostly gone. New housing built along the riverbank has totally changed the face of the area around Bonnington Mills and necessitated work on improving flood defences. Whilst industrial uses are protected in the general area, recent planning changes have led to residential uses becoming likely to dominate and to take over altogether.