The Reformation

On 24 April 1558, Mary, Queen of Scots married Francis Valois, the heir to the French throne. Many people, particularly those looking to reform the Church, feared that Scotland might become just a province of France.

The following month saw a big meeting in the Tolbooth. The people of Edinburgh feared an imminent English invasion and asked the Queen Regent to appoint people of standing to order the burgh defences. Various names, including the Earl of Bothwell, the Earl of Morton and Lord Glencarn, were put forward. At this time the provost, Lord Seaton, was in France attending the wedding of the queen. He was one of the major opponents of the Reformers and a loyal supporter of Mary of Guise and her daughter.

The council ordered stone walls to be placed across the foot of the closes on either side of the High Street. The burgh sent its money to the castle for safety, and the Church of St Giles did the same. Both the merchants and craftsmen raised forces of over 700 men each for the defence of the burgh.

During the summer, the statue of St Giles was broken. A replacement was hurriedly made for a procession through the High Street on 1 September, attended by the Queen Regent. Banners were carried and tabors, trumpets and bagpipes provided the music.

On 17 November, Mary Tudor died and the Protestant Elizabeth succeeded to the English throne. Many Catholics did not recognise the Boleyn marriage and, thus, the legitimacy of the new queen. The next in line to the English throne was Mary, Queen of Scots.

The Church in Edinburgh

At this time, the burgh had two collegiate churches – St Giles and Trinity College. The collegiate churches contained altars where prayers and masses were said for the souls of the founders and their patrons. In Edinburgh these were usually the families of rich burgesses or the members of the craft guilds. The priests in the college were headed by a man holding the title of provost (but confusingly not the same position as the head of the burgh council).

There was also St Mary’s Church in the Castle, but by the middle of the sixteenth century this was probably only used by the garrison and other employees of the castle. Two other churches were situated close to the burgh. St Cuthbert’s, at the west end of the Nor’ Loch, was an ancient foundation which included Macbeth as one of its patrons. Much of the northern part of modern Edinburgh belonged to the parish of St Cuthbert’s, and the present church was built on the site of the old church. The other church was St Mary’s in the Fields, better known as Kirk O’ Fields. It stood close to the junction of South Bridge and Chamber’s Street, where the university is today. It was a collegiate church.

At the Reformation, the Reformers generally took over the old churches, and the burgh agreed to pay the former provost John Penycuik £1,000 for Kirk O’ Fields in 1563, but they were unable to close the agreement. The Hamiltons had their town house to the south of Kirk O’Fields.

Outside the burgh, the Church of St Columba, in Cramond, belonged to the Bishop of Dunkeld. While, at Corstorphine, the church was supported by the wealthy Forrester family. It was dedicated to St John the Baptist, and at some time during the middle of the fifteenth century it became a collegiate church.

The ancient church of Duddingston was under the authority of Kelso Abbey, and Holyrood Abbey had been given the church at Liberton in its founding charter.

The Church of the Holy Trinity and the Virgin Mary at Restalrig was founded by James III and continued to receive royal support. Its parish included South Leith and the lands of the Logans of Restalrig. The well of the ancient Scottish St Triduana stood near the church. Other churches were taken over by the Reformers, but the first General Assembly of the Church of Scotland ordered its destruction and South Leith Church, founded sometime around 1490, became the parish church for South Leith and Restalrig.

A chapel was founded in North Leith in 1493 but only became a parish church in 1609. James IV had built a chapel at Newhaven dedicated to the Virgin and St James but it fell into ruins. Currie Kirk had belonged to the Archdeaconry of Lothian, and at the time of the Reformation the patronage fell into the hands of the Burgh of Edinburgh. Thus, the affairs of the parish of Currie fell into the hands of the burgh council.

The Virgin Mary was a revered figure in medieval times. Chapels dedicated to her were to be found in Portsburgh, Niddrie Wynd and St Mary’s Wynd. Mary of Guise had her own private chapel in her palace which stood near what is today the top of the Mound.

A chapel dedicated to St Roque was built on the Burgh Muir. The Muir was used as a place to isolate plague victims. The cemetery of the chapel was the burial place of those who died of the plague while in exile on the Muir.

In these times, hospitals were not places for the sick but homes for the elderly poor of the burgess community. East of Greyfriars was the chapel and hospital of St Mary Magdalene. Arnot states that it provided a home for a chaplain and seven poor men of the ‘hammermen craft’. The Hospital of Our Lady was situated in Leith Wynd.
near Trinity College Church. It was the home of twelve poor people. Later, the council used the property as a
workhouse and it became known as St Paul’s Work.

At the time of the Reformation, Edinburgh had three friaries. The Carmelite friary, situated at Greenside on
the slope of Calton Hill, was founded in 1526. Greyfriars was the home of the Franciscans, and the largest and
most important was the Dominican friary of Blackfriars, situated in the Cowgate. The friars were a particular
target for the wilder elements among the Reformers. On 1 January 1559, notices to quit were placed on the
doors of friaries throughout Scotland. This became known as the Beggars’ Summons, since it demanded that the friars
quit their buildings in favour of the poor and the sick. Friday, 12 May was to be ‘Fitting Day’.

The wealthiest foundation in Edinburgh was the abbey of the Augustine canons at Holyrood. It owned large
estates, especially in the north of the present city. Broughton, Canonmills, the Canongate and North Leith all
belonged to the abbey. James IV had built a palace there and his son had added to it. The abbey church was the
place of worship for the citizens of the Canongate until the reign of James VII when it was used for Catholic
worship.

Leith had a community of canons dedicated to St Anthony. Their monastery stood near the foot of Leith Walk. A
new foundation was the nunnery of St Catherine of Sienna, which gradually fell into ruins after the Reformation. It
is from this nunnery that the district of Sciennes received its name. Another nunnery dedicated to St Mary of
Placentia – thus giving the name Pleasance to a district of Edinburgh – appears to be totally fictitious.

John Knox

The most famous minister of Edinburgh was John Knox. He had been associated with George Wishart and was
one of those captured by the French when they took the castle of St Andrew’s after the murder of Cardinal
Beaton. There, he met Sir William Kirkcaldy of Grange, one of the leading Protestant lairds who had brought
about the Reformation. Knox spent years in exile, before returning to Scotland as the crisis which led to the
Reformation deepened. He was even corresponding with William Cecil, Queen Elizabeth’s Secretary of State. In
a letter of October 1559, he used the pen name, ‘John Sinclair’. Sinclair himself was Dean of Restalrig and a
leading opponent of the Reformation.

At the end of June 1560, the Lords of the Congregation entered Edinburgh, and on 7 July John Knox was
installed as minister of the burgh. Any suggestion that the burgesses should choose their religion by vote was
rejected by the Reformers. There was a strong Catholic Party in the burgh led by the provost, Lord Seaton. Once
in Edinburgh, the Lords of the Congregation made contact with the English, and in particular with Sir Henry Percy
and William Cecil, Queen Elizabeth’s Secretary of State. Sir William Kirkcaldy of Grange wrote letters in July to
both Percy and Cecil.

John Knox was not just a preacher, for he played an important part in the negotiations. In a fortnight, he wrote
twice to Cecil and once to Percy. He even wrote to Queen Elizabeth, trying to heal the rift between them. In
August, he attended a secret meeting on Holy Island which Sir Henry Percy described in his report to Cecil, ‘Mr
Knox arrived in Holy Island so without any secrecy that it is openly known in both England and Scotland’.

In 1562 Knox was joined by John Craig, formerly minister of the Canongate, as second minister. The return of
Mary, Queen of Scots, increased the tension between Church and State. There could be no meeting of minds
between the young queen, who was a devoted Catholic holding mass in Holyrood, and the man who had served
the Reformers for most of his adult life. To Knox, the saying of the mass was (I was going to say ‘unspeakable’
but Knox was not a man to keep silent) an outrage.

Where did John Knox live in Edinburgh? His first manse in Edinburgh was the former lodgings of the Abbot of
Dunfermline. When he first came to town, David Forrester had paid his expenses, for he is recorded as being
repaid by the council. Did Knox ever live in the house named after him? The house certainly dates from the right
period, but it appears to have belonged to an Edinburgh goldsmith called James Mossman. It is possible that
Mossman rented part of the house to the burgh as lodgings for their minister. There is no contemporary evidence
connecting the house with Knox. It is not until the beginning of the nineteenth century that people began to
believe this was the manse of John Knox. Twice, in 1561 and in 1564, the council ordered the treasurer to pay
Robert Mowbray, the heritor of the house occupied by John Knox. In 1569, he is recorded as occupying John
Adamson’s house.

The Growing Crisis: Summer, 1559

With the threat of disorder fermented by the Protestants, the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise, asked the provost
and the council to ensure that order was kept. On 19 April, Alexander Barroun, one of the bailies, and Alexander
Guthrie, the burgh clerk, were arrested and placed in the Tolbooth by the order of the provost, Lord Seaton. The
council asked for an explanation, but the provost’s reply that they were held ‘in prison for certain reasons known
to him’ naturally failed to satisfy them. He sent a further message ordering them to put Adam Dickson and two
sons of Thomas Thomson in irons. In May, Seaton had a second bailie, David Forrester (a known Protestant, as
he later gave John Knox financial aid) arrested and placed in the castle. These arrests appear to be an attempt
by the provost to weaken the Reform Party in the burgh. However, the removal of two bailies and the town clerk
must have seriously weakened the administration of the burgh at a time when civil war threatened to break out in
the country.
The Siege of Leith, 1560

The English decided to intervene on the side of the Protestants. The Duke of Norfolk took overall command of the expedition, although he remained in England. Admiral Winter, on The Lyon, reached the Forth in the last week of January. Forts on Inchkeith and at Leith and Burntisland fired on the English ships, and by the middle of April his force had increased to twenty-nine ships, although most of them were probably quite small. He was considering an attack on Inchkeith which he felt was poorly defended.

On 6 April, an English army estimated at 10,000 men entered Scotland. They advanced on Edinburgh. Four days later, the English established their first camp on the high ground above Leith at Restalrig. The Duke of Norfolk had given orders not to besiege the castle. He did not believe Queen Elizabeth would wish to put the dowager (Mary of Guise) in danger, nor did he wish to turn Lord Erskine, the governor of the castle, into an enemy. The Scots were more concerned with the French in Leith and would have been alienated by what they considered a diversion.

The following day, cavalry from both sides came into contact before the French withdrew behind their defences in Leith. The port was protected by a 30ft wall of earth and stone designed to absorb the cannonballs of any attacking force. The French had also placed guns on the steeples of St Anthony’s and St Nicholas. The town was defended by 3,500 French and 500 Scottish soldiers.

The English set about constructing two fortified batteries linked with trenches. Mr Pelham and his pioneers built a battery on the rising ground south of Hermitage Place. The mounds on the Links appear to be natural features and not gun emplacements, as the Pelham Fort shown on a map of the siege is placed further south. The second battery in North Leith was not completed until 11 May.

After a week (probably 18 April) the English grew slack. Some of them even left their lines to visit Edinburgh. French cavalry and infantry broke out of Leith and drove the English from their trenches. However, they counter-attacked and the French were driven back into Leith. Both sides lost between 140–160 men killed or wounded. Obviously, there must have been some criticism of the failure to push home the attack on Leith, for Lord Grey informed the Duke of Norfolk, ‘This opinion of our slackness is wrongful, for no day escapes or almost a night but we lose some blood and distress our enemies’.

On 30 April, a large fire started in south-west Leith, destroying as much as a third of the town. This appears to have been an accident and not due to enemy fire. It is credit to the defenders that they got it under control and continued holding the town.

Two assaults on Saturday, 4 May, using over 5,000 men, failed to make a significant breach in the wall. The French soon repaired the damaged sections of the wall. However, they did abandon the mills, which were situated outside their defences where the Water of Leith flowed into the town. Lord Grey complained that his men were ‘raw soldiers without skill’. Most of the English soldiers were probably levies from the northern counties lacking the technical knowledge to handle a siege. The attack cost the English 1,000 men dead or wounded.
A massive attack was put in on 6 May. This involved using 2,700 men to attack the defences in North Leith while 3,750 men were deployed south of the river. The aim was to make breaches in several places on the upper parts of the wall and then to use scaling ladders to allow the soldiers to climb through these holes. The English made some breaches in the wall but their ladders proved to be too short to take advantage of the situation and the French drove them back. According to Knox, Sir James Croft was to lead an attack along the shore from the west. This he failed to do. In the official report, Sir James was to look after the artillery on the north side of the river. The consequence for the attacking force was serious since they were reduced to only 4,500 men fit for action. Powder was so short that they had to borrow it from the ships. While Lord Grey was trying to assure Cecil that the losses were not as bad as rumour would have it, Sir Ralph Sadler was informing Norfolk that the men were ‘more likely to mutiny or desert us than do good service’.

And what of the French? They must also have taken heavy losses, for they made no attempt to follow up their success. D’Oysel had a large force but they had to be fed; they would no doubt be low on ammunition and, unlike their enemies, they had no way of bringing supplies into the port. On 12 May, a group of French soldiers who were foraging for shellfish on the shore were caught by the English cavalry. That night an attack was made on the English trenches but it was repelled.

The English changed tactics. They gave up plans for a direct assault on the walls and began digging mines. Tunnels were to be dug beneath the walls and then the supports removed. They would cave in and hopefully the wall above would collapse into the tunnel. They began digging three mines. One was aimed at the area known as the Citadel (in North Leith close to where the later Cromwellian Citadel was built) but the ground proved difficult and progress was slow. A second mine was directed towards St Anthony’s, at the most southerly point in the wall. The third mine was being dug from the Pelham Battery under the Links and probably was directed towards Leith to begin negotiations. In the official report, Sir James was to look after the artillery on the north side of the river.

On 6 June, Sir Henry Percy informed Norfolk that he had contacted d’Oysel, who wanted him to come into Leith to begin negotiations. In the Calendar of Scottish Papers Vol. 1, D’Oysel complained of ‘the ill treatment of our soldiers by Lord Grey’, and continued by saying, ‘I would rather we the nobility should fall into the hands of Sir Henry than taste the cruelty of Lord Grey’.

On 11 June, Mary of Guise, the wife of James V and Regent of Scotland, died in Edinburgh Castle. She had given much of her life to the securing of the French cause and the succession of her daughter. It is one of the strange ironies of history that she should die in the middle of a war with the country that her grandson would one day rule.

June 17 brought a ceasefire, allowing negotiations to continue. Finally, on 6 July at a meeting in Edinburgh, a treaty was concluded. French and English troops were to withdraw from Scotland, leaving the Scottish nobility and the Reformers in charge of the country. On 5 December 1560, Francis II, King of France and husband of Mary, Queen of Scots, died. He had never been strong and his death was to mark the end of the ‘Auld Alliance’.

Neither the French nor the English could claim victory in the Siege of Leith. The French had built a strong defensive wall round Leith using the latest technology. They were probably the more skilled soldiers, most of whom were professionals. However, with the English ships controlling the Forth and much of the country hostile to them, they were trapped in Leith. The English lacked soldiers of the same quality as the French and did not have the overwhelming numbers necessary to overcome the well-defended positions around Leith. The attack on 6 May showed a failure in leadership, since an attack on breaches using inadequate ladders can only be put down to bad decision making. In a letter to Queen Elizabeth written on 17 June, William Cecil places the blame on Sir James Croft, ‘Sir James Croft, I am sorry to find so apparent matter, his neglect of duty was the principal [cause for] the losses of the town’. This seems a harsh judgement since it was Lord Grey, and not Sir James, who had overall command of the siege.

Edinburgh Under the Reformed Church

Parliament met in Edinburgh in August and the authority of the Pope over the Church in Scotland was brought to an end. It became illegal to celebrate the mass. A confession of faith was drawn up, and superintendents, elected for three years, were to be responsible for each diocese. Scotland was to have ten of these, and they were expected to travel throughout their diocese, preaching and supervising the ministers. Knox, however, claiming ill health, declined to become a superintendent. His wife, Marjorie, had died five or six weeks before the end of the year and he was left with a young family.

Before the end of 1560 the first General Assembly of the Church of Scotland met in Edinburgh, and the ‘First Book of Discipline’ was signed in January 1561. Preaching became the centre of church life, so that large churches like St Giles had to be partitioned. Without modern sound systems, it would have been impossible for a minister to project his voice over such a distance in a long sermon.

Trinity College Church continued to serve the north-east parish. Other churches, outside the old burgh, were taken over by the Reformers, except for Restalrig; the assembly ordered it to be closed and the parishioners to attend the Church of South Leith. The collegiate Church of St Mary in the Fields (Kirk O’Fields) also appears to have also been closed.
Laws Against Immorality

Early in June, even before the Reformation Parliament met in Edinburgh, the Reformers on the council set about controlling morals. Those people found keeping idols (crucifixes, statues of saints, etc.), brothel keepers and prostitutes were to appear before the minister or the elders and promise to reform. The first offence led to the offenders being carried through the town in a cart. For a second offence, the culprit was branded and exiled from the burgh. A third offence was final, for those convicted could be hung. Persons caught swearing were to be set in irons. Strict rules for the Sabbath were proclaimed to ensure that everyone attended the morning and afternoon services to hear the sermons. Markets and other sales from street booths were banned on Sunday. Taverns and other hostelries were forbidden to serve food or drink during the times of the services. A strict warning was given to women serving in taverns who in previous years had offered more than meals and drinks.

The Sabbath and the Kirk

Sunday was to be kept for the study of the scriptures – both by attending sermons and studying the catechism at home. The council passed laws to control activities on the Sabbath. Markets and every kind of selling were forbidden. Everyone was expected to attend the morning and afternoon sermons. Taverns and hotels were to be closed during the time of sermons. The Sunday Fleshmarket was moved to Saturday.

The new Church may have come into conflict with the monarchy but, in Edinburgh at least, the ministers did not speak out against the rulers of the burgh who, it has to be said, called them to their churches and were responsible for their stipends. Inflation and food shortages led to some ministers to ask for rises in their salaries while the council struggled to raise the money from the congregations.

The Riot of November, 1560

In November 1560, the first test of the new laws occurred when John Sanderson, the Deacon of the Fleshers, was caught in an affair with Margaret Lyell. Sanderson was sentenced to be carried through the town in a cart and then to be banished. The craft deacons objected and the affair led to a riot by some of the craftsmen of the burgh. John Rynd (a pewterer), John Sanderson, William Wycht (a cutler) and James Fraser (a saddler) were arrested for organising the riot. The Privy Council took action and ordered them to be imprisoned in the castle.

The representatives of the fourteen crafts were called before the council. They plead that they had taken no part in the riot, which they claimed was caused ‘by wicked members’. They promised that in future all their members would keep the law. To show there was no ambiguity, the council brought in new laws. When a craftsman was accused of breaking the law the craft was forbidden from holding a meeting to raise support for him. Craftsmen were made responsible for their servants.

The whole affair illustrates two recurring themes in the governance of the town. The council wished to run the burgh on the strict ethics of the Puritan Protestants. For some two centuries they struggled to protect the Sabbath. The council itself was chosen from the merchant elite of the burgh. They had no wish to share their power with the representatives (deacons) of the craftsmen. In this they were to prove spectacularly successful, holding onto power until the Reform Act of 1832.

The ‘Robin Hood’ Riot

One of the popular activities of late medieval Edinburgh was the ‘game’ of Robin Hood. It was an opportunity for the apprentices and youth of Edinburgh to let off steam and enjoy themselves. This, to use modern terms, was not necessarily the image of the burgh the Reformers wished to project. Such events naturally led to some disorder. On Sunday (probably 9 May 1561) a band of craft servants and apprentices entered the Netherbow with banners, armour and weapons. They marched up the High Street to Castlehill and then marched down again, taking possession of the Netherbow Port. These high spirits led to some of the apprentices being locked up in the Tolbooth.

The following year, the council received a letter from the queen instructing them to ensure that no one was chosen as Robin Hood, Little John or the Abbot of Unreason. She considered it to be an excuse to cause a disturbance.

The Arrival of Mary, Queen of Scots

On 19 August 1561, Mary landed in Leith. She had made a fast passage from Calais and her early arrival surprised everyone. She was given hospitality by a rich merchant of Leith, called Lamb. This was not in the present-day Lamb’s House, which was built some sixty years later. Eventually she entered the burgh and a small boy of 6 years old presented her with a Bible, a psalter and the keys of the town.
The Tolbooth

In 1385 Richard II had captured Edinburgh and set fire to the burgh. After this, it is believed that a new tolbooth was built. A further destruction by the Earl of Hertford in 1544 may have damaged this building.

The summer of 1560 saw the Tolbooth used by the Privy Council as a place to hold its prisoners. The building was also used as a school, a tolbooth (a place where the council met and worked), a prison and the burgh clerk’s chambers. If that was not enough, the Tolbooth had to provide room for the Court of Session.

Faced with this demand for more space, the council decided to use St Giles. James Barron, the dean of guild, was ordered to build a wall, a foot thick, partitioning off the west end of the kirk (in those days there was no great western door). It is thought that this might have had two storeys, for in 1560 there is a reference in November of that year to the council meeting in ‘the Over Council House of the Tolbooth of this burgh’.

In June 1561, the youths involved in the craft riot were held in the Over Tolbooth, while in September of the same year the council met in the Tolbooth. ‘The Tolbooth’ refers to council business premises and not necessarily one building.

The situation was complicated when the newly arrived queen wrote to the council in February 1562. ‘The Queen’s Majesty understands that the Tolbooth of the Burgh of Edinburgh is ruinous’ and ordered them to take ‘down the said tolbooth’ and to provide room for the Lords of Session, justice and sheriff courts. Action followed immediately with David Somer’s appointment. He began to remove slates from the roof.

Six hundred marks was to be spent on the Tolbooth and on the other tolbooth at the west end of the kirk for the Lords of Session. Timber from the Old Tolbooth was to be used to further this work. By April, work must have slowed down because the Lords of Session were threatening to move to St Andrew’s. In July, the building seems to have finished, as the council met in the new tolbooth. However, by now the work had stopped as funds were exhausted. In fact, it was not until December that William Currou received £100 for the land on which the new tolbooth was built as part of his payment.

Work started again in February 1563 when David Somer was ordered to use stones from the old chapel in the Nether Kirkyard. There is no mention of using stones from the Old Tolbooth. By June that year, the council were forced to borrow 1,000 marks to complete the building. The future income of the town mills was used as security. At the same time, there is an order to repair the tower of the Old Tolbooth and make it watertight. Thus, it would appear that by the mid-1560s there were three buildings used as a tolbooth.

The Old Tolbooth became more and more used as a prison. In 1575, repairs were made to the tower, the jailor’s house and the prison ‘in the Old Tolbooth’. Hugo Arnot certainly believed the Old Tolbooth was built in 1561, but it seems improbable that in less than fifteen years it should be referred to as ‘old’ or those extensive repairs were required. It would appear that, faced with a considerable demand for space, the council did not pull down the Old Tolbooth but continued to use it mainly as a prison. It must be remembered it not only housed those who were convicted of crimes in the city but also those seen by the Privy Council as enemies of the state.

So what did David Somer build? For what was the money raised used? There must surely have been a third building. This third building is referred to as the ‘Councilhouse’. Regulating meetings in December 1576 it was ordered that the council should meet in the Councilhouse at two hours before noon. This was a separated building in the south-west corner of Parliament Square.

Greyfriars

By April 1561, the kirkyard no longer had space and a new burial ground was needed. The former lands of the Grey Friars were suggested to the council as a suitable place. James Watson, the dean of guild, was later instructed to check the property and repair the walls. The council seem to have considered that the property belonged to the burgh and they could do what they wanted with it, but it cannot have been granted to them by the queen, as she did not arrive in Scotland until August. In fact, it was not until August of the following year that the queen granted Greyfriars to the burgh as a burial ground.

Much of the repair work cannot have been completed, because Alexander Guthrie, as dean of guild, was asked to repair the wall and put a door on the front entrance. In fact, by the summer of 1563 there were plans afoot to build a hospital in the old Blackfriars. Things had gone so far that three men were appointed to oversee the work while another group were asked to draw up plans.

The Council Elections, 1561

In October, the queen’s government began to take an interest in the burgh’s affairs. This may have been provoked by a proclamation of banishment against priests, monks, friars and other supporters of the Pope. The order of the council was read at the Market Cross. The queen’s letter ordered the council and ‘community of the burgh to meet in the Tolbooth and remove the provost, Archibald Douglas of Kilspindie, and the bailies from office’.

The new election became complicated because most of the deacons refused to be involved since they objected to the rights of the assessors to vote. However, such matters never affected the merchants on the council and they immediately went on to elect Thomas Makcalyeane as provost.

Having completed the election, Neill Laing appeared with a message from William Maitland of Lethington, the queen’s Secretary of State. In it the queen proposed three names for the position of provost – Lord Seyton, Alexander Erskine and Simon Preston of Craigmillar. David Kinloch, Deacon of the Baxters, who had led the
protest against the assessors, used the opportunity and claimed that he would obey the queen’s will. It would appear on this occasion that the council had their way, because Makcalyeane remained in the post of provost.

William Robertson and the High School

In April 1562, the council expressed concern at ‘the great corruption of the youth by Master William Robertson, master of the grammar school being an obstinate papist’. They wrote to Lord James Stewart (later Earl of Moray) asking him to use his influence to ensure the office went to a ‘learned and qualified man and to try to persuade the queen to grant them the lands of the friars [presumably Blackfriars]’.

Three days later, William Robertson turned up with evidence that he had been given the office by the Abbot of Holyrood. The council wanted more information. The case dragged on until June when the council ordered him to be removed from his post.

However, William Robertson had no intention of going. On 22 July he came before them with his grant signed by the abbot, sealed by the chapter and dated 1546. He then handed them a list of names supporting his case.

John Moscrop, counsel for the burgh, changed direction and began to question whether Robertson was qualified to hold the post. It would appear that the council was not only prosecuting the case but they were also judging in the matter. The odds were stacked against Robertson. A board of experts, which included John Craig, minister of the Canongate and later assistant to John Knox, were appointed to examine his teaching.

The case then moved on to a technicality. The abbot had been only 14 years old at the time of the gift and thus not a man to give up, however, and by then he had found a new ally. Various letters arrived from the queen, and the matter became extraordinary that, if this were true, no protest had arisen earlier.

However, filling the post was to prove difficult. In February 1563 they sent a message to James White, a Scotsman living in London, inviting him to take the post. The mission does not appear to have been a success, because a year later, in the council records, William Robertson is still referred to as ‘Master of the High School’.

The council employed a new tactic to remove this troublesome man – they stopped paying him. Robertson was not a man to give up, however, and by then he had found a new ally. Various letters arrived from the queen, and a stern letter of February 1564 pointed out that Robertson had a lawful grant from the Abbot of Holyrood and had held his post uninterrupted for eighteen years. She was concerned at the harassment of the master ‘for what cause we know not’.

Neither side seemed willing to touch the real issue – William Robertson was a Catholic. The queen complained of them ‘intending to put another in his place against our express mind and will’. Another letter arrived in December demanding that he should be paid. It was not until May 1565 that the council gave way and the treasurer was ordered to pay Robertson. In fact, he continued in office, as he is then recorded as being paid for the Whitsun term of 1566.

Nothing further is heard of the matter until July 1568, when Alexander Guthrie was sent to St Andrew’s to offer the post to Thomas Buchquhennane. Had William Robertson retired, or had the new regime (the regency of the Earl of Moray) enabled them to remove him? We will never know.

The Kirk of the Field

In August 1562, the queen had promised to provide land for a hospital and a school once the council had money to carry out the building. The following March, Bailie John Spens, Andrew Murray, and John Preston, the town treasurer, were instructed to meet with John Pennycuke. Pennycuke was the former provost of the collegiate Church of St Mary’s in the Fields. They were to discuss the position of the kirk and buildings, probably with a view to the town purchasing them.

The negotiations appear to have reached a conclusion in June 1563 when, according to the Burgh Records, Pennycuke sold the kirk and buildings to the council, ‘John Pennycuke sells and disposes to the good town the whole building sometime called the Kirk of Field both old and new with kirkyard with lodgings, buildings, mansions, yard, duties pertaining to the provost and prebendaries’.

Despite this, Pennycuke appears to have acted as if he owned the property. In August 1564 no agreement had been reached, but the council were worried for they had heard that Pennycuke was dismantling the church and planning to sell off the stones. These, the council had hoped, could be used to build a hospital or college (university). However, the plot thickened. In December 1566, according to the Register of the Privy Seal, the property was acquired by Robert Balfour ‘by the resignation of William Pennycuke, the last provost’. Knox states that he bought the kirk and the houses but confuses Robert with his brother.

Does all this matter? It would probably be of little interest, but for the fact that in February of 1567 Lord Darnley, husband of Mary, Queen of Scots, was murdered there. Why did Robert Balfour want the Kirk of the Field?

The Markets

The whole main street, High Street and Lawnmarket, was one market place. The council and many of the inhabitants of the burgh were concerned with the crowds congregating in the Lawnmarket during market days. At this time, the main entrance to the town from the west was through the Bow and into the Lawnmarket. This
passage was being blocked by the booths and shoppers. Since the lands around Niddrie Wynd were not inhabited at this time, the council decided to move the market for wool, skins and hides to that area.

The Poor

The queen wrote to the council noting the daily increase of the poor and instructing them to see that the inhabitants of the burgh pay their dues for the upkeep of the poor. The letter was presented by one of the burgesses, Adam Fowleston, who told them that they should not be offended if he complained to the queen and the Privy Council of their failure (a polite threat!). Interestingly, this discussion about charity took place on Christmas Day.

The council acted a fortnight later by ordering a tax on all the inhabitants to be collected quarterly. It was to be used to sustain the poor and those who worked in public services for the kirk until another solution could be found. Previously they had relied on voluntary contributions given at the church door or, as set out in 1561, a group of men visiting houses and booths asking for donations. The council had agreed that everyone must contribute, but set out no sum to be paid by each citizen. Before the Reformation the Church had been the main provider of relief for the poor, now the State, in the form of Edinburgh Council, had to take its place.

Archibald Douglas

In 1562, the queen informed the council that she wished them to elect Archibald Douglas of Kilspindie as provost. This was a remarkable turnabout, as he had been removed from office the previous year by the direct intervention of the queen.

Douglas had served as provost before and after the Reformation. His father, bearer of the same name, had also served as Provost of Edinburgh. He was a member of the powerful Douglas family, who were led at this time by James Douglas, Earl of Morton.

Archibald Douglas remained in office until August 1565 when George Drummond appeared before the council with a letter from the queen and the king (Darnley), once again ordering them to remove Douglas from office. The letter claimed that they had 'many reasonable causes and considerations', but failed to name any. However, the council sent six members to the queen and the king intending to put their case concerning the removal of the provost and also the ban on John Knox’s preaching. That afternoon the delegation must have come home empty-handed, because they declared that they would not silence Knox.

The very next day, John Spens, advocate for Their Majesties, informed the council that the queen and king wished them to elect Simon Preston of Craigmiliar as provost instead. He was hurriedly made a burgess and a member of the Merchants’ Guild, before being elected Provost of Edinburgh. Preston owned Craigmiliar Castle and had been one of the three who were proposed by the queen for the office the last time Archibald Douglas had been removed.

The Chaseabout Raid

On 29 July 1565, Mary married Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley, whose maternal grandmother was Margaret Tudor, the sister of Henry VIII. They were thus cousins and heirs to the English throne should Elizabeth die. Most Catholics did not recognise the Boleyn marriage, and so denied Elizabeth’s right to the throne. The marriage was conducted by John Sinclair, Dean of Restalrig, using the Catholic rite in the Abbey of Holyrood.

The marriage took place despite the objections of James Stewart, Earl of Moray, and William Maitland of Lethington, the queen’s Secretary of State. Both these men saw it as a strengthening of the Catholic position. They had worked hard to form an alliance with England which, in the event of Elizabeth having no heirs, would lead to Mary or her heir inheriting the English crown. Certainly Elizabeth was not best pleased with this marriage.

Moray led a rebellion but failed to gain support from the Protestant lords and the English. Despite a lot of manoeuvring (or chasing about) neither side met each other. Eventually Moray fled to England. The episode became known as The Chaseabout Raid.

The Murder of David Riccio

At no time in her long history has Edinburgh witnessed so many dramatic events which were to lead to the end of the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots. Already the burgh had been occupied by the Earl of Moray and his supporters. The queen’s government was becoming more and more unpopular with the ruling classes. Only a few nobles remained at court; most of them felt that their rightful place as advisors to the queen was being usurped by men who were neither noble nor Scots.

One man in particular was angered by his growing exclusion from power – the queen’s husband, Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley. No one, in nearly 450 years, has come forward with a favourable assessment of him. Despite being the son of the Earl of Lennox, he does not seem to have had any close friends among his peers. He wanted to be king in his own right and yet he showed little interest in the government of the realm.

David Riccio was the leading light of a new group that had formed round the queen. He became her private secretary and, as such, probably controlled access to her. A group of Protestant lords led by James Douglas, Earl of Morton, Patrick, Lord Lindsay, and Patrick, Lord Ruthven, plotted the death of the queen’s new favourite.
On the night of 9 March 1566, they entered the Palace of Holyrood with the aid of Darnley. They rushed into the queen’s private rooms and seized Riccio. It was said that Riccio was stabbed fifty-six times – this was a particularly brutal murder performed in front of the pregnant queen.

The next morning, James Melville, one of Mary’s ambassadors, was passing below the queen’s window when she called down to him. She asked him to go up to the town and seek the provost’s help. As he left the palace Melville was stopped by Nisbet, master of the Earl of Lennox’s household. However, the ambassador claimed that he was going to St Giles to hear the sermon and was thus allowed to pass.

He found Simon Preston, who was willing to call the people together. However, he informed Melville that ‘he expected no help from their hands because the most part of them were so discontented with the present government that all desired change’. It was only in August of the previous year that the queen had demanded the removal of the last provost, Archibald Douglas of Kilspindie.

The murderers fled to England, except for Darnley who had promised to protect them. These included James Douglas, Earl of Morton (Darnley’s mother was a Douglas). On 24 December they were pardoned by the queen and returned to Scotland, forming one more group who held a grudge against Darnley.

The Murder of Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley, King of Scots

The English Ambassador, Thomas Randolf, wrote to the Earl of Leicester at the beginning of June giving an assessment of the situation. He was based in Edinburgh and had represented Queen Elizabeth since the early days of the Reformation. He quoted a general rumour, ‘The hatred towards him [Darnley] and his house is marvellous great, his pride intolerable, his words not to be born’, adding also, ‘They find nothing but that God must send him a short end or themselves a miserable life’.

September 1566 brought better news. In Edinburgh Castle, Mary gave birth to a son – the future James VI. James was later to succeed to the English throne and to become the first person to rule the whole British Isles. But all that was in the future. His father withdrew to Glasgow, part of the Lennox lands, where presumably he felt safer. It was possible that Darnley was plotting to seize power but he had no allies to assist him.

It is believed that a group of nobles led by the Earl of Moray and Maitland of Lethington met in Craigmillar Castle, the home of the Provost of Edinburgh. There they formed a pact to remove Darnley. Another man deeply involved in the plot to remove Mary’s husband was James Hepburn, Earl of Bothwell.

Darnley was ill; most historians believe he had contracted syphilis. In January 1567, Mary set out for Glasgow to see him and persuaded him to return to Edinburgh. The initial plan was for Darnley to stay at Craigmillar Castle, which would offer some security. This was changed – by whom is a matter of debate – and Darnley was taken to the Kirk O’Fields and placed in the Old Provost’s Lodgings. This property had had been acquired by Robert Balfour a few weeks previously.

Early in the morning, about 2 a.m., on 9 February 1567 the inhabitants of Edinburgh were awoken by a loud explosion. The Old Provost’s Lodgings had been completely destroyed and the bodies of Lord Darnley and one of his servants were found some distance away. They had either been strangled or smothered. A group of horsemen were seen close to the scene of the murder. Were they James Douglas, the Earl of Morton’s men? It seems possible that in fleeing from one attempt on his life, Darnley might have fallen into the clutches of a second group.

The Last Days of the Reign of Queen Mary

Accusations were made against the Earl of Bothwell by Darnley’s father, the Earl of Lennox. In April, a trial was held in Edinburgh, but the burgh was full of Bothwell’s men. Lennox refused to attend the trial fearing that he might be attacked by them. The Earl of Bothwell was naturally acquitted but suspicions remained. Placards appeared in the burgh continuing to accuse the earl of Darnley’s murder.

On 15 May 1567, Mary and Bothwell, who had only just divorced his wife, were married.

In June, a powerful group of Scottish nobles entered Edinburgh ‘in arms for punishing of King Henry Stewart’s murderer’. Among these men were the Earls of Athol, Montrose, Morton and Mar, as well as two of the Riccio conspirators, Lords Lindsay and Ruthven, and the future leader of Mary’s party, Sir William Kirkcaldy of Grange. They came together in the Councilhouse to make a bond to pursue the king’s murderers, dissolve the marriage, protect the prince and restore justice. The council promised to assist the lords.

On 15 June, on Carberry Hill, just to the east of Edinburgh, the two armies met. Negotiations began, but little was decided. However, most of the troops supporting Mary and Bothwell began to desert, leaving little doubt as to the result of any battle. Mary surrendered and Bothwell fled.