

A Short History of Edinburgh

It was during the Dark Ages that the name of Edinburgh - at least in its early forms of Dunedin or Din Eidyn ('fort of Eidyn') - first appeared. Castle Rock, a strategic fort atop one of the area's extinct volcanoes, served as the nation's southernmost border post until 1018, when King Malcolm II established the River Tweed as the permanent frontier. In the reign of Malcolm Canmore (1058 - 93), the castle became one of the main seats of the court, and the surrounding town, which was given privileged status as a royal burgh, began to grow around it. In 1128, David I established Holyrood Abbey at the foot of the slope leading down from the castle, later allowing its monks to found a separate burgh, known as Canongate.

Medieval Prosperity

Robert the Bruce granted Edinburgh a new charter in 1329, giving it jurisdiction over the nearby port of Leith, and during the following century, the prosperity brought by foreign trade enabled the newly fortified city to establish itself as the permanent capital of Scotland. Under James IV (1488 - 1513), the city enjoyed a short but brilliant Renaissance era, which saw not only the construction of a new palace alongside Holyrood Abbey, but also the granting of a royal charter to the College of Surgeons, the earliest in the city's long line of academic and professional bodies.

Renaissance to Reformation

This period came to an abrupt end in 1513 with the calamitous defeat by the English at the Battle of Flodden, which led to several decades of political instability. In the 1540s, Henry VIII's attempt to force a royal union between England and Scotland led to the sack of Edinburgh, prompting the Scots to turn to France for help: French troops arrived to defend the city, while the young queen Mary was dispatched to Paris as the promised bride of the heir to the royal throne, the Dauphin. While the French occupiers succeeded in removing the English threat, as Catholics, they themselves antagonized the locals, who had become increasingly sympathetic to the ideals of the Protestant Reformation. When the radical preacher John Knox returned from exile in 1555, he quickly won over the city to his Calvinist message.

Union

James VI's rule (1567 - 1615) saw the foundation of the University of Edinburgh in 1582, but following the Union of the Crowns in 1603 which saw Scotland and England united under a single monarch for the first time, the city was totally upstaged by London: although James promised to visit every three years, it was not until 1617 that he made his only return trip. In 1633 Charles I visited Edinburgh for his coronation, but soon afterwards precipitated a major crisis by introducing episcopacy to the Church of Scotland, in the process making Edinburgh a bishopric for the first time. Fifty years of religious turmoil followed, culminating in the triumph of Presbyterianism. Despite these vicissitudes, Edinburgh expanded throughout the 17th century but, constrained by its walls, was forced to build both upwards and inwards.

The Union of the Scottish and English Parliaments in 1707 dealt a further blow to Edinburgh's political prestige, though the guaranteed preservation of Scotland's national church and its legal and educational systems ensured that it was never relegated to a purely provincial role. On the contrary, it was in the second

half of the 18th century that Edinburgh achieved the height of its intellectual influence, led by an outstanding group that included David Hume and Adam Smith.

City Growth

Around the same time, the city began to expand beyond its medieval boundaries, laying out a New Town that became a masterpiece of the neoclassical style. Industrialization affected Edinburgh less than any other major city in the nation, and it never lost its white-collar character. Nevertheless, the city underwent an enormous urban expansion in the course of the century, annexing, among many other small burghs, the large port of Leith.

Cultural Capital

In 1947 Edinburgh was chosen to host the great International Festival which served as a symbol of the new peaceful European order; despite some hiccups, it has flourished ever since and in the process helped make tourism a mainstay of the local economy. In 1975, the city carried out another territorial expansion, moving its boundaries westwards as far as the old burgh of South Queensferry and the Forth Bridges. Four years later, an inconclusive referendum on Scottish devolution delayed Edinburgh's revival of its role as a governmental capital, and Glasgow, previously the poor relation but always a tenacious rival, began to challenge the city's status as a cultural centre.

Cultural Capital

However, while the 1990s saw Glasgow establish a clear lead in driving Scotland's contemporary arts scene, they also marked the return of power and influence to Edinburgh. Following a referendum in 1979 in which Scotland voted resoundingly in favour of re-establishing its own parliament, elections were held in May 1979. On July 1st 1979, the Queen formally opened the parliament - its first since 1707 - temporarily housed in the twin-towered Church of Scotland Assembly Halls on the Mound.

Resurgence

With debates, decisions and demonstrations about crucial aspects of the government of Scotland now taking place in Edinburgh, there has been a notable upturn in the sense of importance of the city. It has continued to assert itself as a significant centre for finance, arts and research, not just in Britain but in Europe also.

While what many had hoped to be the crowning achievement of the new Scotland, the opening of an inspiring new parliament building, has been dogged by controversy, there is little doubt that the innovative and challenging design of the new Parliament at the foot of the Royal Mile will quickly make it the emblem of 21st-century Edinburgh.