

What were the effects of the Edinburgh City Improvement Act of 1867 on the inhabitants of Blackfriars Wynd and Todricks Wynd?

Project Description

In the 1860s, Blackfriars Wynd and Todricks Wynd were in the most densely populated area of the Old Town in Edinburgh. As part of the Edinburgh City Improvement Act of 1867, the east side of Blackfriars Wynd, along with the west side of Todricks Wynd, which runs parallel to it, were completely demolished. They were replaced by new buildings which formed the east side of the new, much wider, Blackfriars Street, and Todricks Wynd ceased to exist. Some of the buildings on the west side of Blackfriars Wynd were improved, but not demolished.

By using Census information from 1861, prior to the changes, and 1881, after the changes were complete, I hope to quantify the effect of the improvements on the inhabitants, looking at such things as population density and number of households living in a single room. Other sources are also be used where appropriate, to back-up the census information.

Background

By the middle of the 19th Century, Edinburgh's Old Town had degenerated into little more than a slum. There were two main reasons for this; the first was the degeneration of the buildings and the second was the influx of working class people to the city.

With the concentration of building programs on the New Town area of Edinburgh no major private or public building projects had taken place in the Old Town for many decades. The buildings were falling into a terrible state. There was a serious fire in 1824 which destroyed around 20 tenements and left eight dead and over 400 homeless [1]. It also claimed the top of the steeple of the Tron Church. Another fire in the following year, which started in a printing office, destroyed the tenement at the top of the west side of Blackfriars Wynd [2]. In 1861 a tenement on the High Street collapsed; killing 35 people and making many other homeless [3].

At the same time, the population of Edinburgh had doubled between 1801 and 1841 from 82,660 to 163,726 [4]. A large part of this growth was due to immigration into the poorer areas of the city from the rural areas of Scotland. There was also a sharp increase in Irish immigrants, in part due to the potato famine.

Since there was no corresponding growth in the number of suitable houses, living conditions within the tenements became dire – many families having only a single room of 14 x 11½ ft to live in [5]. Even some of those, took in lodgers for extra money. With the combination of appalling sanitary conditions and polluted water, outbreaks of Cholera and Typhus were not uncommon.

The Builder journal of 1861 [6] summed up the general atmosphere with the following:-

“We devoutly believe that no smell in Europe or Asia.....can equal in depth and intensity, in concentration and power, the diabolical combination of sulphurated hydrogen, we came upon one evening about ten o'clock in a place called Todrick's Wynd.”

Several worthy people started to take up the plight of the poorer people or 'lapsed classes'. They wrote to the newspapers and produced pamphlets. One, in particular, was George Bell, M.D. who, in 1850, wrote a detailed account of Blackfriars Wynd and the terrible conditions there [7]. He describes how, with a single exception, none of the tenements or 'lands' had a drop of water; it all had to be carried from the next close. There was also no drain in the Wynd and “*consequently all the filth of the place remains on the surface*”. His pamphlet is full of pitiful stories of the inhabitants of the Wynd, but he clearly had no sympathy for those that drank or for Irish immigrants.

In 1862, Henry D Littlejohn M.D. became the first Medical Officer of Health for Edinburgh. He produced a very detailed report on the City's sanitary conditions [8]. This report showed that the area which contained Blackfriars Wynd and Todricks Wynd had the worst death rate and population density in the City. It also showed that children under five were around 2½ times more likely to die in this area than in the Upper New Town area.

William Chambers, the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, instigated the City Improvement Act of 1867 [9] to help tackle these problems. He advocated a large amount of demolition and rebuilding in the Old Town but, as with most plans of this sort, funding issues caused it to be pared back. For example, his and Littlejohn's idea of cross streets between St Mary's Wynd and Niddry Wynd to open up the area and allow more daylight and air into the closes, did not get the go-ahead. However, Todricks Wynd and the east side of Blackfriars Wynd did come under the Improvement Plan and were demolished to make way for a wider, more open street with less dense housing, while the west side of Blackfriars Wynd had less radical improvements to the buildings.

This project aims to determine the practical effect that these changes had on the living conditions in Blackfriars and Todricks Wynd.

Analysis of the Effects of The City Improvement Act

Using Census Information

The best, and most reliable, sources of detailed information on the population before and after the improvements are the 1861 and 1881 censuses. 1861 covers the period just before the improvements and by 1881 the rebuilding was complete.

The maps in Figures 1 and 2 on the following page, show the two areas to be considered. The west side of Blackfriars Wynd (shown in green) was not demolished, but did undergo less drastic improvements. I decided to treat this separately to see if there was any noticeable difference compared to the rest of the area. I have called this Area A. The east side of Blackfriars Wynd and the west side of Todricks Wynd were both demolished to make way for the east side of the new,

widened Blackfriars Street. This area is shown in the maps in red. I have called this Area B.

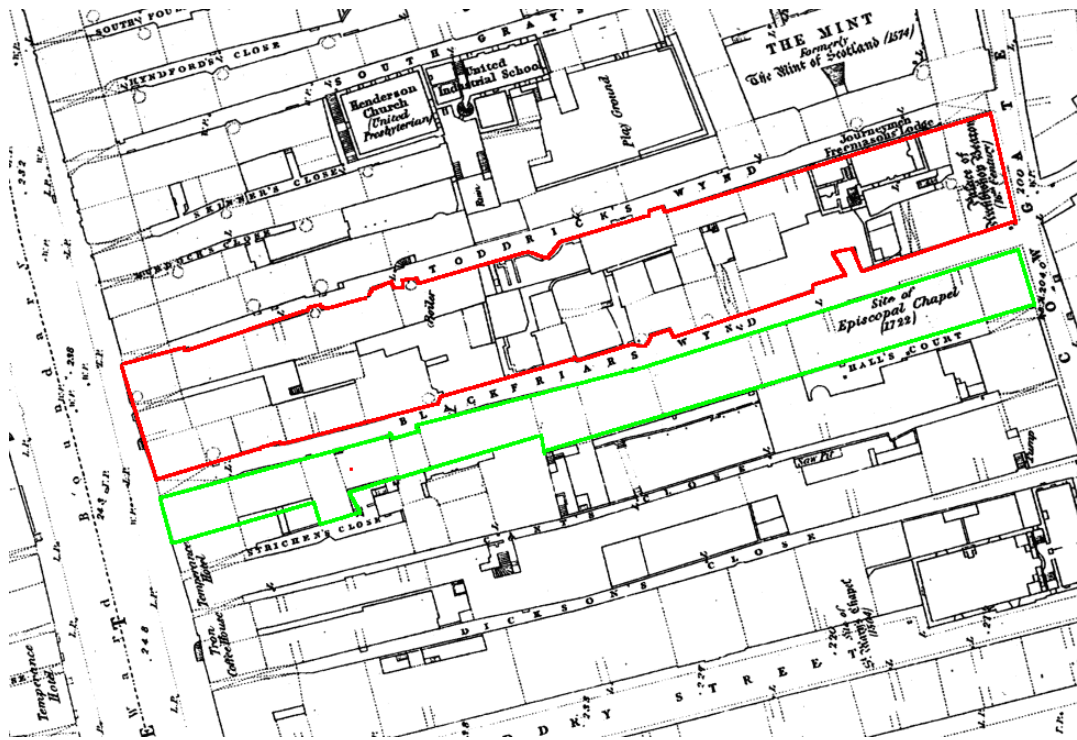


Figure 1 – 1852 Ordnance Survey Map - Reproduced by Permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland

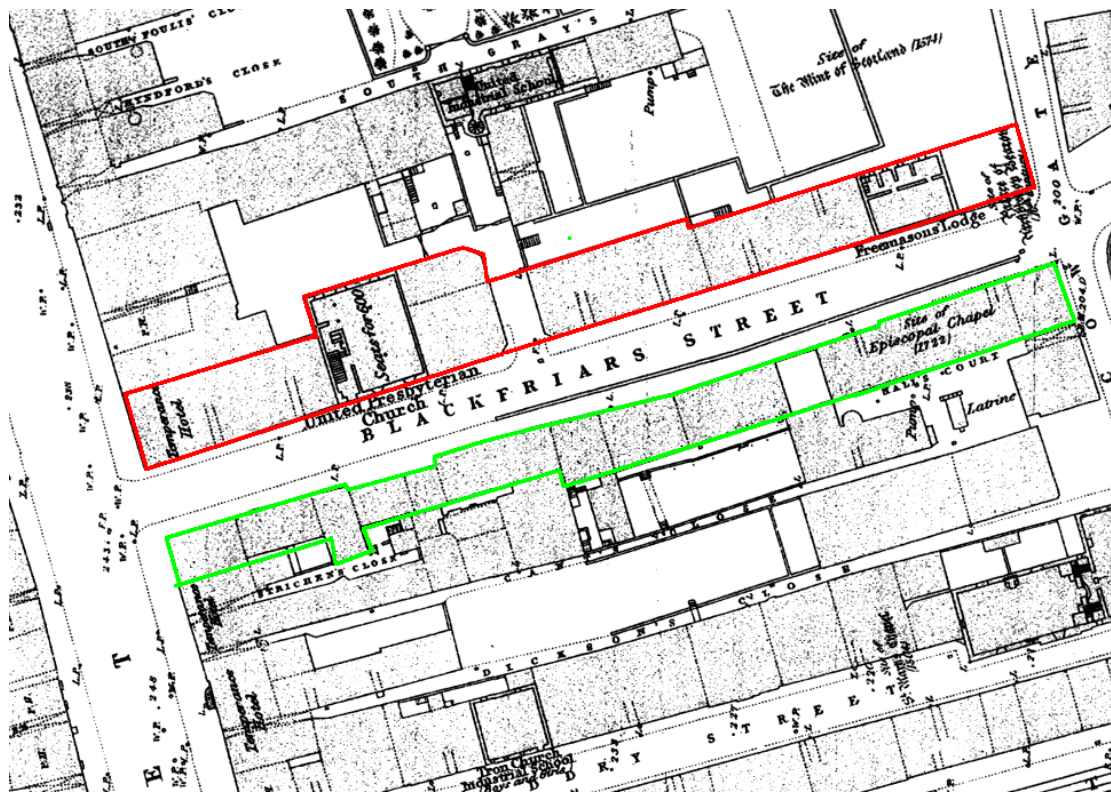


Figure 2 – 1877 Ordnance Survey Map - Reproduced by Permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland

The 1861 census was taken on 8th April. Microfilms of the enumerators' books are held in the Edinburgh Room of the Central Library in Edinburgh. I took photocopies of the pages required from these microfilms and worked from the photocopies.

The 1881 census was taken on 3rd April. I have a CD of the 1881 census for the whole of the UK from the Church of Latter Day Saints. I used this as the main source, but since it does not include the number of rooms with windows, I again consulted the microfilms in the Edinburgh Room of the library to get this information and to double-check the CD.

Areas A and B are in the Tron Parish in Edinburgh and I referred to the 1861 and 1881 Census of Scotland in the Scottish Reference Library for information on this parish in total.

For simplicity and consistency, I made the following observations and assumptions for both the 1861 and 1881 censuses:-

- I have assumed that all property shown on the map which fronts either Blackfriars or Todricks Wynd is included in the census for that Wynd.
- I have assumed that the enumerators all followed the same rules in terms of what constituted a room with a window.
- Where the age of a child was given in months, I rounded it up or down to the nearest year.
- I always used the base data rather than any totals at the foot of pages. In many cases, these totals are wrong.
- One enumerator took the trouble to note that two families had disappeared since receiving their census schedule to complete. Since there was no option, I have not included any information on these families.
- In some cases lodgers were treated as separate households, in others they were considered as part of the main household. For consistency I have always considered them part of the main household.

The following table summarises the information from both the censuses, along with the total figures for the Tron parish for comparison. I have included both lodgers and visitors as they are included in the parish totals.

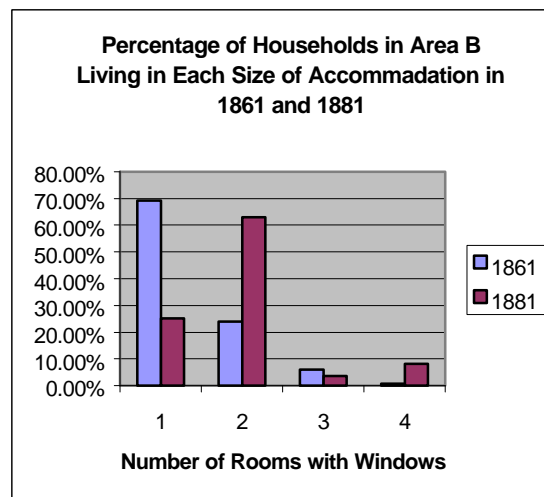
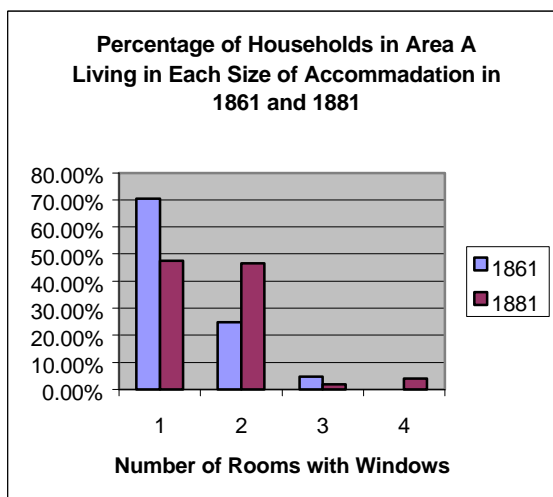
	Area A		Area B		Tron Parish	
	1861	1881	1861	1881	1861	1881
Number of households	154	103	133	135	774	402
Total number of inhabitants	608	405	630	577	3288	1912
Average household size	3.95	3.93	4.74	4.27	4.25	4.76
Number of rooms with windows	200	167	184	247	1229	833
Average number of people per room	3.04	2.42	3.42	2.34	2.68	2.3

Table 1 – Population Density Information from 1861 and 1881 Census

Table 1 shows that for Area A, where there were improvements rather than total demolition, the population had decreased by one third between 1861 and 1881. At the same time, the number of rooms had decreased by only 16.5% (from 200 to 167) giving an improved ratio of 2.42 people per room.

For Area B, however, the changes were different. After the rebuilding, there were almost exactly the same number of households, but slightly fewer people in total (577 rather than 630). However, the living conditions were greatly improved since the average number of people per room had dropped dramatically from 3.42 to 2.34. This makes Area B consistent with the rest of the Tron Parish where before it was considerably worse.

Looking in more detail at the data, I was interested in the distribution of households for each size of accommodation. Given that the areas are slightly different in size, I decided to look at this by percentages.



These graphs show that for both Areas, in 1861 around 70% of households had only one window while 25% had two. By 1881, Area A had around 47% of households with one window and the same with two. This is a considerable improvement, but Area B is even better, with only 25% of households living in a single room with window by 1881 and 63% with two windows.

Other Sources

I have tried to cross check this information with other likely sources of information for this time period. Unfortunately neither the Post Office Directory nor the Voters Role had any entries at all for Blackfriars or Todricks Wynd. Two other sources, however, were useful.

Littlejohn's report on the sanitary conditions in Edinburgh, as mentioned above, states that the Tron had the highest density of population anywhere in Edinburgh. He divided the city into Sanitation Districts, and so his version of the Tron district was not the same area as the Tron parish, but did include Areas A and B. The average was 314.5 people per acre, but the most dense area, which was from the North Bridge to St Mary's Wynd was 646 people per acre.

Areas A and B are on the other side of the High Street from Littlejohn's worst area. I have measured Areas A and B from the original of the map in figure 1 and found them to be approximately 1.2 acres in total. This includes the streets and open areas as well as the built up areas. The population density in this small area is therefore 1031 people per acre which is even worse than Littlejohn's worst area!

The other useful source of information was the Improvement Act itself which noted the occupiers of all the houses to be affected by the improvements and so covered Area B. This was dated 1867 and only gave the name of the head of the household. Around one half were the same names as in the 1861 census. Unfortunately it was not possible to distinguish between shops and dwelling houses, although some businesses, such as a cooperage were separate. In Area B in 1867, shops and households together totalled 153. This compares with 133 households alone in the 1861 census. These numbers seem consistent if we assume there were 20 shops or small businesses.

Plans of New Houses

To get an idea of the layout of the new buildings in Area B, I checked the Sasines in the National Archives and the Plans in the City Archives. Other than a church, all the plots in Area B were tenements and shops. Open areas were created for drying clothes and not for "*depositing barrels, boxes, rubbish or any other materials*". Any building below street level had to be for cellars only. No manufacturing or business of any kind could go on in the tenements which could be deemed a nuisance to neighbours or the public.

I have included, in Figure 3, a copy of a plan of one floor of the new tenement at the corner of Blackfriars Street and the High Street. This shows that a typical living area was either a unit of a kitchen and bedroom, or simply just a single bedroom. These bedrooms could be as small as 7 feet by 10 feet 6 inches, so not much of an improvement as regards size on what was there before. There were, however, 2

small W.C's and a lavatory with 3 W.C's, which, if Dr Bell is to be believed, is definitely an improvement on the general living conditions.

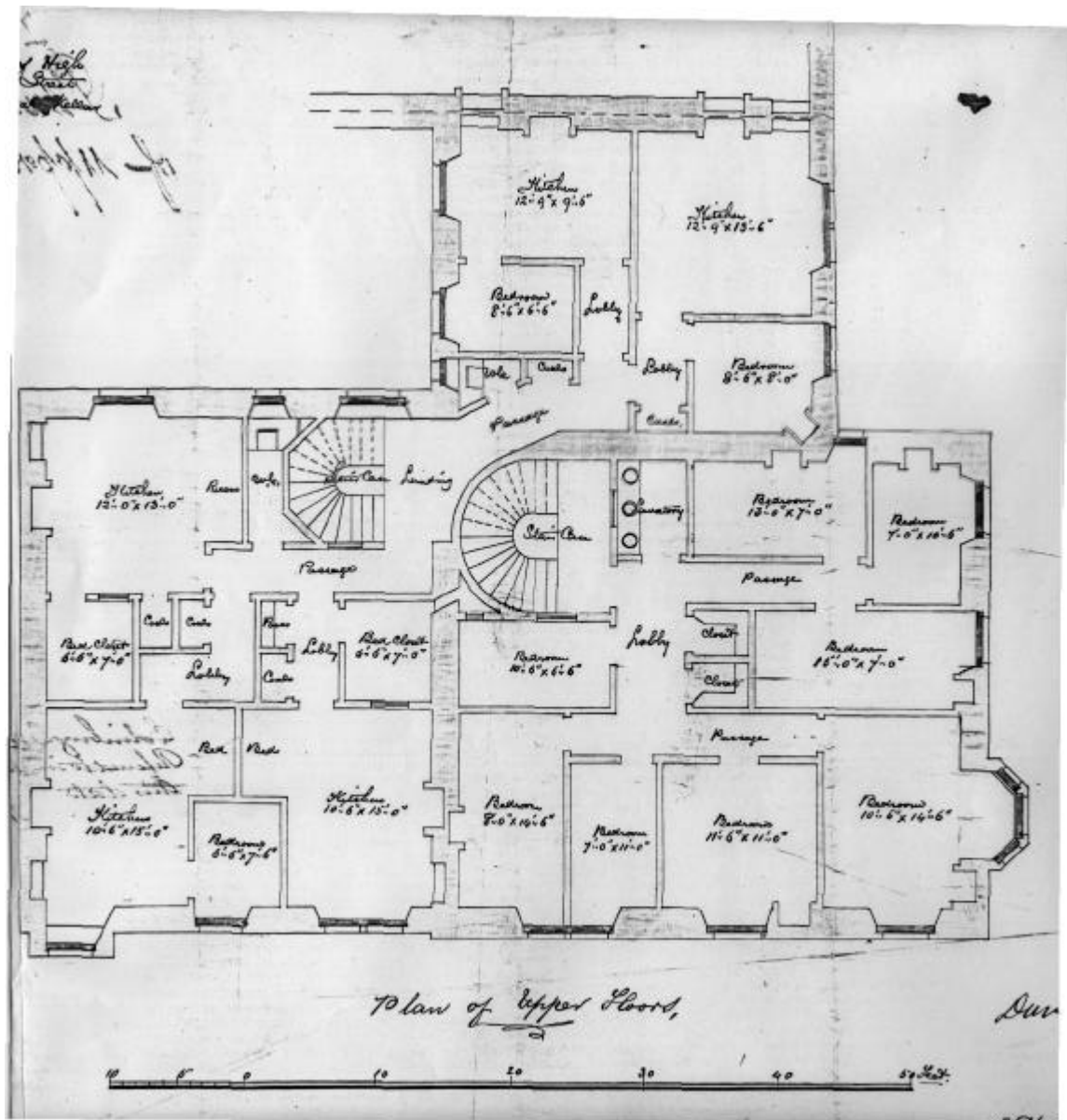


Figure 3 – Plan of one floor of new tenement in Blackfriars Street – 1871

Conclusions

The Edinburgh City Improvement Act of 1867 set out to improve the living conditions of the poorer people living in the worst areas of the Old Town in Edinburgh. Although no specific targets were set, I would say that this act resulted in considerable improvements for the people of Blackfriars and Todricks Wynd. In the area most affected (Area B) the number of families living in a single room with a window dropped from 70% to 25% and the average number of people per room dropped from 3.42 to 2.34. The new houses also had more facilities, with internal WCs for example.

If this projected were to be taken further, I would like to look at an area in the Old Town not affected by the Improvement Plan for comparison. I would also like to look in more detail at the birth and death statistics to see if there was any improvement in the death rates and to look beyond 1881 to see if the improvements were maintained.

References

- [1] Edinburgh a Travellers Companion, Selected and Edited by David Daiches, 1986
- [2] Edinburgh Paper, Feb 23 1825
- [3] Housing the People, The Colonies of Edinburgh, 1999
- [4] First, Second and Third Statistical Accounts of Edinburgh.
- [5] A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1930, T. C. Smout, 1997.
- [6] The Builder, 1861
- [7] Blackfriars Wynd Analyzed, George Bell M.D., 1850
- [8] Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the City of Edinburgh, Henry D Littlejohn, 1865.
- [9] Edinburgh City Improvement Act 1867.