

Words by  
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# ONLY IN EDINBURGH

*Scotland's capital is home to many attractions,  
but here are a few lesser-known highlights*

## 1. THE MORNINGSIDE WILD WEST

14 Springvalley Gardens, EH10 4QG

Hidden behind busy Morningside Road, in an alley down the side of 14 Springvalley Gardens, is something quite unexpected. It is a replica of a street in the American Wild West complete with trading station, livery stables, cantina and jail.

This most unlikely of Edinburgh streets, with its incongruous backdrop of tenement blocks, dates to 1995, when furniture salesman Michael Faulkner wanted some striking storage units for his Great American Indoors furniture company.

He commissioned the unusual frontages from some set designers, who had just returned to Edinburgh after working at Euro Disney. Unfortunately for Faulkner, the arrival of IKEA in Edinburgh just four years later brought about the demise of his business. Remarkably, the frontages were left intact and their increasingly ramshackle appearance now gives the impression of a Wild West ghost town.

Urbane Morningside is certainly a strange place for a Wild West street and yet conveniently it serves as a reminder of when the area really was Edinburgh's frontier land on an ancient route leading to the southwest of Scotland and Carlisle. The so-called Bore Stane embedded in the perimeter wall of the former Morningside Parish Church on Morningside Road is a

survivor from those far-off days. It is said to mark the spot where, in 1513, Scottish forces mustered under James IV before marching south to the Battle of Flodden and defeat at the hands of the English.

## 2. UPS AND DOWNS IN DEAN VILLAGE

Bell's Brae, EH4 3BJ

Anyone exploring Edinburgh on foot will encounter hills and valleys everywhere. Most dramatic is the gorge carved by the Water of Leith as it skirts the northwest reaches of the city. Nestling on its bank is Dean Village, a unique community of former watermills and Victorian housing.

The village lies at the bottom of Bell's Brae, where in 1128 King David I granted the income from several watermills to Holyrood Abbey. In those days, the Water of Leith was the most powerful river within easy reach of Edinburgh. As many as 11 mills operated here until the 19th century, providing flour to the city's burgeoning population, and the emblem of the millers' trade guild (in the form of two bakers' paddles) can still be seen.

By the early 1800s the river was also being used by tanners, textile workers and blacksmiths, all benefitting from the fact that the main route west out of Edinburgh crossed the river here. Construction of the new Dean Bridge in 1832 was a blow, although the tanners remained and in 1886

the then proprietor of *The Scotsman*, John Ritchie Findlay, financed construction of Well Court to provide them with improved housing. By the 1960s even the tanners had gone and Well Court, with its oriel windows and imposing clock tower, was converted into modern apartments. Dean Cemetery on the opposite side of the river contains the grave of Dr. Joseph Bell (See: *Scotland Magazine* #101), the college lecturer on whom Arthur Conan Doyle based his most famous literary character, Sherlock Holmes.

## 3. THE MOVING HISTORY OF THE MERCAT CROSS

Parliament Square, High Street, EH1 1RF

In Parliament Square, off the Royal Mile, stands Edinburgh's Mercat Cross. Scots for 'market cross', this is where in bygone days markets and fairs were permitted by royal decree. A feature of many towns and villages in Scotland, it acted not only as a symbol of a burgh's prosperity but also its authority, where state and civic proclamations could be read out, public events marked and punishments dispensed.

Edinburgh's Mercat Cross is first mentioned in a charter of 1365, when it stood north of its current position in the middle of the Royal Mile. Since then it has moved around a fair bit. In 1617, it was relocated eastwards to the head







THIS PAGE: Well Court in Dean Village.





THESE PAGES, LEFT TO RIGHT: The window of Magdalen Chapel; The Wild West Street; Gilmerton Cove.



#### 4. THE CHAPEL OF THE HAMMERMEN

*Magdalen Chapel, 41 Cowgate, EH1 1JR*

At 41 Cowgate, in the shadow of George IV Bridge, stands one of Edinburgh's hidden gems. The Magdalen Chapel not only occupies a key position in Edinburgh's religious history but also boasts some unique architectural features, too.

The chapel was commissioned in the early 1540s by one Janet Rynd, using a bequest left by her wealthy husband, the moneylender Michael MacQuhane. It was to be used as a place of worship by the Incorporation of Hammermen, an important craftsmen's guild comprising various medieval metalworking professions. Additionally, seven poor pensioners were to be accommodated in an accompanying almshouse, where they would pray for the souls of the MacQuhanes and for Mary, Queen of Scots.

Completed in 1544, the Chapel was the last Roman Catholic chapel built in Edinburgh before the Reformation. Although today the Victorian façade obscures the original structure, the inside is largely intact and features the only Scottish medieval window glass still in situ. Following the Reformation, the Chapel

became a centre for Presbyterianism and in 1615 doubled as the convening hall of the city's incorporated craftsmen's guilds, including the Hammermen. During the Killing Time in the 1680s it was used as a mortuary for martyred Covenanters prior to their burial in Greyfriars Kirkyard.

The Chapel today serves as headquarters of the Scottish Reformation Society, which continues to defend and promote the ideals of the Protestant Reformation, and can be visited from Monday to Friday between 10am and 4pm.

#### 5. THE SECRET OF GILMERTON COVE

*Beneath 16 Drum Street, EH17 8QH*

The Edinburgh suburb of Gilmerton offers much to its residents but seemingly little to visitors. A former village with medieval origins, it was once home to coal miners and quarrymen. This helps explain Gilmerton's great secret. Namely, an extraordinary subterranean complex concealed beneath an old miner's cottage at 16 Drum Street.


Gilmerton Cove consists of a 40-foot-long tunnel off which branch seven chambers, all hand-carved from the sandstone bedrock. How it came into

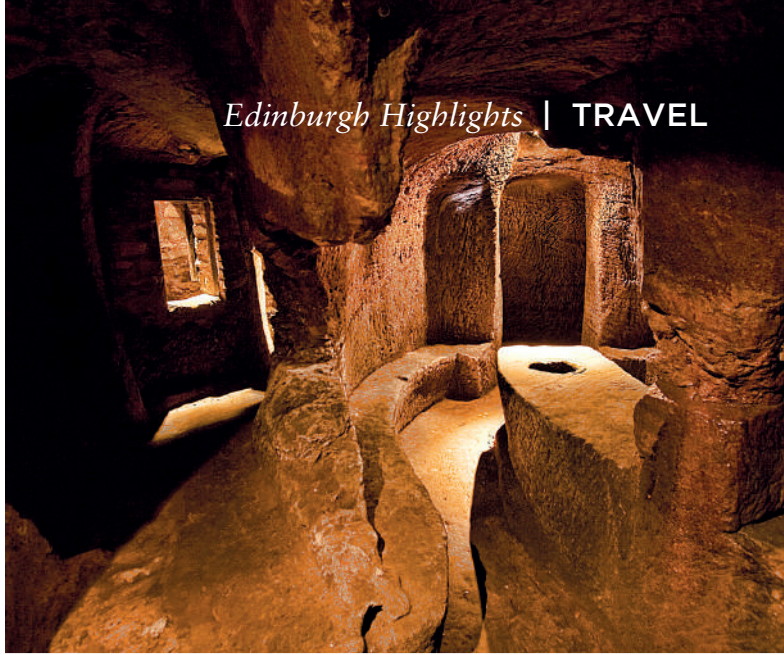
of Fishmarket Close, where in 1745 the Jacobite colours were ceremoniously burned following Bonnie Prince Charlie's defeat at Culloden. Despite demolition of the cross in 1756, in readiness for the opening of the new Royal Exchange, merchants still gathered at the site. So much so that in 1866 the remains of the cross were re-erected outside the north door of St. Giles' Cathedral. After becoming a hindrance to traffic, it was moved one last time in 1885 to its current position.

The Mercat Cross that can be seen by visitors today consists of an octagonal stepped base like the original but with the addition of an arcaded superstructure concealing a staircase, and a parapet with eight turrets between which are intricate royal, burgh and university coats of arms. It is used in modern times to announce general elections and the succession of a new monarch.



being, however, is a moot point. Given Gilmerton's history of quarrying, it seems likely that it originated as a trial borehole to determine whether coal or minerals were present. Then, around 1720, it appears to have been enlarged by a local blacksmith, George Paterson, for use as a drinking den, which explains the carved furniture.

This explanation hasn't prevented numerous outlandish theories being put forward. It has been claimed that after Paterson's death the Cove was variously used as an illegal whisky distillery, a smugglers' hideout, a meeting place for the Hellfire Club and a witches' coven. It has even been proposed that a Freemasons' compass symbol carved on one of the tables supports the notion that a blocked doorway conceals a tunnel leading to Rosslyn Chapel, where symbols pertaining to the Knights Templar have been identified. Make up your own mind by taking a guided tour, available by appointment at [www.gilmertoncove.org.uk](http://www.gilmertoncove.org.uk). 



## FURTHER INFORMATION

This feature was adapted from the 2nd edition of *Only in Edinburgh: A Guide to Unique Locations, Hidden Corners and Unusual Objects* by Duncan J. D. Smith, published by The Urban Explorer in March 2019.

