

## A "TERRIBLE SHOWER"

During a visit to Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1754, Edward Burt of London reported that when he "first came into the High Street," he thought that he "had not seen anything of the kind more magnificent," with the long street overlooked by well-sashed stone buildings of extreme height.<sup>10</sup> He was much less favorably impressed by what happened that evening though. At ten o'clock that night, "by beat of the city drum," the people dumped the contents of their chamber pots and buckets, the accumulated human waste of the day, out of the windows onto the street in a "terrible shower." Burt made it to his rooms unscathed only by having a guide go before him, shouting to the people above to "hud your haunde" (hold your hand), and he then found it necessary to hide his head between the sheets in an attempt to escape the "smell of the filth, thrown out by the neighbours on the back side of the house."

"This great annoyance," human waste dumped from as high as "eight, ten, and even twelve storeys" to accumulate in the streets, was hauled away in the morning by "scavengers"—night-soil haulers—except on Sunday, which thus was "the most uncleanly day."

When Burt considered possible solutions to the problem, however, he decided that it was "remediless." The city had been built on rock near



*Figure 16.1 The magnificent, well-sasbed stone buildings of the High Street in Edinburgh today are even more welcoming than they were in 1754, because there is no worry of a “terrible shower” of human waste at ten o’clock at night.*

the castle for protection, in a place so narrow that construction was forced up rather than out, so people were living and excreting waste as high as the twelfth floor. Burt observed that “anything so expensive as a conveyance [for the waste] down from the uppermost floor could never be agreed on; nor could there be made, within the building, any receiver

suitable to such numbers of people." He noted that there was plenty of nearby flat land with a stream, "which would be very commodious for a city," but the magistrates would not allow building there because then the people would leave the old city, "which would bring a very great loss upon some, and total ruin upon others, of the proprietors of those buildings."<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Burt reported that the people were stuck with dumping their human waste out the windows because the available options were too technically demanding, or too expensive for people to agree to, or involved loss of money by established businesspeople who had influence with the government.

When I first came into the High Street of Edinburgh, during a visit in 2010, I'm happy to report that I too "had not seen anything of the



*Figure 16.2 Reconstruction of diners burning things to cover the smell of the "terrible stonew" of human waste at 10 p.m. in Edinburgh, 1754, prepared for the filming of Earth—The Operators' Manual.*



*Figure 16.3 Reconstruction of the “terrible shower” of human waste at 10 p.m. in Edinburgh, 1754, prepared for the filming of Earth—The Operators’ Manual.*

kind more magnificent,” with the same well-sashed stone buildings of extreme height that so impressed Burt more than 250 years before. But when our party came out of the pub at ten o’clock that night, we had no worry about a “terrible shower” on our walk down the long and beautifully clean street to our rooms. Edinburgh had indeed expanded into the flatter regions below, but the High Street remained the focus of the city. There, agreement had long since been reached among the people and the proprietors to build “a conveyance down from the uppermost floors” for the human waste.

Clearly, something happened between Burt’s visit and mine, to turn a “remediless” problem into something that was remedied so well. To see what happened, let’s visit Burt’s home of London, a century later.