

Keeping up appearances

From the second half of the 18th century, an ambitious plan for a stylish New Town created lavish, desirable homes for wealthy Edinburghers. **CONNIE ROUT** visits one townhouse restored to its Georgian pomp

Part of the charm of the Georgian House in Charlotte Square is that you could very easily walk straight past without noticing it. There's a National Trust for Scotland sign outside the door, but the building itself could, like the other addresses sharing its row, be just another well-to-do property in the city. (Its neighbour at number 6 is Bute House, the official home of Scotland's first minister.)

This house – like most others in the area – is very far from nondescript, however. Designed by acclaimed Scottish architect Robert Adam in 1791, the row was created to look like one sprawling palace, complete with Corinthian columns and a triangular pediment in the neoclassical style. Number 7 – now known as the Georgian House – was built five years later during the construction of Edinburgh's New Town.

In the early 18th century, perhaps 40,000 inhabitants were squeezed into the medieval Old Town, many in cramped and often squalid conditions. A 1753 Act of Parliament called for improvements to the city's accommodation, and plans for the New Town began to take shape. In 1766, a competition to design a street layout was won by James Craig, and development of the New Town began the following year, though it wasn't completed until around 1850. At the time, it was the largest town planning project in the world, intended to provide smart townhouses for the swelling ranks of Edinburgh's wealthier professional and merchant classes.

Since 1975, the Georgian House has opened its doors to showcase a typical New Town home in all its late 18th-century

splendour. The first residents at number 7 were the Lamonts, who moved in while the New Town was still being built around them. John Lamont was a clan chief, but the purchase of the family's opulent new home for £1,800 (a sizeable amount then) – and the demands of the accompanying lifestyle – contributed to debt so heavy that he was eventually forced to sell one of his Highland estates. In that period, though, maintaining appearances was paramount.

Set across five floors, the Georgian House reveals practical details of life around the turn of the 19th century. The iron snuffer tube in the front-step railings was used to extinguish torches, for example, while delicate scented oil burners in the drawing room disguised body odour during parties.

The Lamont household used about 20 jugs of water a day, delivered in barrels to the door – until the launch of the Edinburgh Joint Stock Water Company in 1819 enabled a pump to be installed in the scullery. Facilities for ablutions consisted of a washstand for hands and face, plus a bidet. Meanwhile, the 'necessary passage' between the master bedchamber and the dining room housed a portable water closet. This was emptied daily, after which the council sold off its contents to be used as fertiliser. Waste not, want not!

During your visit, don't miss the special exhibitions on the second floor, with displays changing at least yearly.

To stay on theme, after visiting the Georgian House, walk to the National Monument on Calton Hill. This was left unfinished in 1829; by that time the city council was in dire financial straits, and was declared bankrupt four years later – in part because of the expense of constructing the New Town. Strolling past the district's elegant buildings, it's not hard to see where the money went – elegance that endures today. **tt**

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For more information, head to [nts.org.uk/visit/places/georgian-house](https://www.nts.org.uk/visit/places/georgian-house)



The original black marble fireplace survives in the Georgian House's dining room, now decked out in period style with luxurious furniture and tableware



The master bedroom on the ground floor has a fine four-poster bed, as well as access to the 'necessary passage' housing a portable water closet



Bute House, the official residence of Scotland's first minister, is at number 6 Charlotte Square, next door to the Georgian House



A c1814 portrait of John Lamont, chief of the clan Lamont and first buyer of number 7 Charlotte Square – which took a heavy financial toll

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At the time it was begun, Edinburgh's New Town was the largest architectural project in the world