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The Dark Mysteries of Mary King's Close

Edinburgh's Sealed Underground Street and the Ghosts of the Plague

Aiden Nightfall

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The Dark Mysteries

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Introduction

Beneath the Royal Mile in Edinburgh's Old Town lies a network of narrow streets, houses, and passageways that were once part of the city's living heart. These streets — known as "closes" — were the alleys and lanes that ran off the main thoroughfare of the Royal Mile, providing access to the tall tenement buildings where the people of Edinburgh lived and worked. Mary King's Close is one of these streets — a narrow lane, enclosed by buildings rising seven stories on either side, that was, in the seventeenth century, a thriving community of merchants, tradesmen, and their families. Today, Mary King's Close is underground — buried beneath the Royal Exchange, later the City Chambers, and accessible only through a guided tour that takes visitors beneath the modern street level and into the streets that the city built over and forgot.

The close is named after Mary King, a seventeenth-century Edinburgh merchant who lived and worked in the close. Mary King died in 1644, and the close that bears her name became infamous the following year, when the plague — the Black Death — struck Edinburgh. The plague ravaged the close, killing a significant portion of its population, and the events of 1645 — the suffering, the fear, and the deaths — are the source of the close's haunted reputation. The popular belief that the close was sealed with plague victims trapped inside is, according to historians, a myth. The reality is more complex and, in its way, more disturbing — the residents who were able to leave were relocated, and those who stayed continued to live in the close, caring for the sick and dying, until the plague passed.

Mary King's Close is associated with a wide range of paranormal phenomena. Apparitions of former residents, including a plague doctor in his crow-beaked mask, have been reported. The ghost of a little girl named Annie, who is said to have died during the plague, has become one of the most famous child ghosts in the world. The close has been the subject of television programs, books, and paranormal investigations, and it is one of Scotland's most visited haunted attractions. The combination of a real historical catastrophe — the plague of 1645 — and the physical preservation of the close as an underground site gives Mary King's Close a haunted character that is rooted in documented history.

Mary King's Close joins the Dark Mysteries series, which examines haunted and historically significant locations around the world. Mary King's Close is a distinctive entry in the series because it is not a single haunted house but an entire street — a community that was buried, forgotten, and rediscovered. The haunting of Mary King's Close is the haunting of a neighborhood, and the

ghosts that are reported there are the ghosts of a community — the merchants, the tradesmen, the plague doctor, and the children who lived and died in a street that the city built over and that time nearly erased.

The story of Mary King's Close is a story about what happens when a city builds over its own history. Edinburgh is a city of layers — a city that has been built and rebuilt on top of itself, with each generation covering the remains of the previous one. The Old Town of Edinburgh is, in a literal sense, an archaeological site — the streets that people walk on today are the roofs of the streets that people walked on centuries ago, and the buildings that people live in today are built on the foundations and the ruins of buildings that were there before. Mary King's Close is the most dramatic example of this layering — a street that was buried, forgotten, and rediscovered, and that now exists as an underground world beneath the city's administrative center.

The Dark Mysteries series has examined haunted locations across the world, from the Tower of London to the Lalaurie Mansion. Mary King's Close is distinctive because it is a public haunting — a haunting that is not of a private house or a single family but of a community and a street. The ghosts of Mary King's Close are the ghosts of ordinary people — merchants, tradesmen, lawyers, children — who lived ordinary lives in an ordinary street and who were caught in an extraordinary catastrophe. The haunting is a reminder that history is not only the history of kings and battles but also the history of streets and houses and the people who lived in them.

The plague of 1645 was not the first catastrophe to strike Edinburgh's Old Town, but it was one of the most devastating. The city had experienced outbreaks of plague before — in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries — and each outbreak had left its mark on the city's collective memory. The plague of 1645, however, was particularly severe, and Mary King's Close, with its dense population and poor sanitation, was one of the worst-affected areas. The plague killed roughly half the close's population — perhaps two hundred and fifty people out of five hundred — and the loss devastated the community. The close survived the plague, but it never fully recovered. The community that had been built over decades was broken, and the close that had been a thriving street became a place associated with death, disease, and loss.

Chapter 1: What Happened Here?

Mary King's Close is located beneath the City Chambers building on the Royal Mile in Edinburgh's Old Town. The Royal Mile — the street that runs from Edinburgh Castle at the top to the Palace of Holyroodhouse at the bottom — is the main artery of Edinburgh's medieval old town, and the closes that run off it are the narrow alleys that provided access to the tenement buildings where the city's population lived. Edinburgh in the seventeenth century was one of the most densely populated cities in Europe — a city of tall, narrow buildings, crowded streets, and limited sanitation, where rich and poor lived in close proximity and where disease could spread with devastating speed.

The closes of Edinburgh were, in effect, vertical neighborhoods. The buildings that lined each close rose to seven or more stories, and the social hierarchy was reflected in the vertical arrangement: the wealthiest residents lived on the upper floors, where the air was cleaner and the light was better, and the poorest lived on the ground floor, where the waste from the upper floors collected and where the risk of disease was greatest. Mary King's Close was a typical close in this respect — a narrow street with tall buildings on either side, housing a community of merchants, tradesmen, lawyers, and their families, with the social gradient running from top to bottom.

The physical structure of Mary King's Close — narrow, enclosed, and vertical — is central to its haunted reputation. The close is a confined space, with limited light, limited air, and limited escape routes. In the seventeenth century, when the close was inhabited, these conditions made it a healthy place for the spread of disease and an unhealthy place for the people who lived there. Today, when the close is a tourist attraction, the same conditions create an atmosphere that is naturally conducive to ghost stories — dark, enclosed, and atmospheric, with the physical remnants of the past — stone walls, paved streets, and the shells of houses — visible on every side.

The vertical structure of the close also produces a striking inversion in its modern identity. In the seventeenth century, the upper floors were the desirable ones — cleaner air, better light, safer conditions — while the ground floor was where the waste collected and the risk of disease was highest. Today the entire close shares the condition of the ground floor. Buried beneath the City Chambers, it is dark, damp, and low, and the social gradient that once organized the street has been flattened into a single underground level. The apartments of the wealthy, which looked out over the Royal Mile and took the light, were the first to be demolished when the Royal Exchange was built; what survived below was the world of the lower floors — the small rooms, the low ceilings, the spaces of the poor.

The close that visitors walk through today is, in a literal sense, the layer of the street that the plague struck hardest, and the haunting that is reported there is concentrated in the part of the close that history had already consigned to suffering.

The plague that struck Edinburgh in 1645 was one of the last major outbreaks of bubonic plague in Scotland. The disease, which was carried by fleas on rats, spread through the crowded, unsanitary conditions of the Old Town with devastating speed. Mary King's Close, with its dense population and its poor sanitation, was particularly vulnerable. Approximately five hundred people lived and worked in the close, and roughly half of them either died from the plague or were relocated.

The popular myth that the close was sealed with plague victims trapped inside is not supported by historical evidence. According to the available records, residents who were healthy enough to move were relocated to Burgh Muir, an area outside the city walls. Those who chose to stay — or who were too sick to move — continued to live in the close, and the city provided support: plague victims hung white flags outside their homes to signal that they needed food and coal, which were delivered by council workers and volunteers. The close was not sealed — it was quarantined, and the residents who remained were cared for by the community.

The plague doctor who served Mary King's Close was Dr. George Rae, who wore the distinctive crow-beaked mask that has become the iconic image of the plague doctor. The mask, filled with herbs and flowers, was believed to filter out the "miasmas" — the bad air — that were thought to carry the disease. The leather suit that Rae wore protected him from flea bites, which were the actual means of transmission. Rae's treatment involved slicing open the boils caused by the plague and cauterizing the wounds with a red-hot poker — a horrific procedure that, despite its brutality, saved many lives. Rae was promised financial compensation by the city council for his dangerous work, but he was never fully paid — a injustice that is part of the Mary King's Close story.

The burial of Mary King's Close was a gradual process that began in the eighteenth century, when the Royal Exchange — a building intended to house Edinburgh's merchants — was constructed on top of the close. The construction required the demolition of the upper portions of the close's buildings, and the lower portions were filled in and covered. The close was not entirely destroyed — the lower levels, including the street and the ground-floor rooms, were sealed beneath the new building, and they survived, in a modified form, for the next two centuries.

The close was not entirely forgotten. A few businesses continued to operate in the underground spaces — the Cheney family's saw business, for example, operated in the close until 1902. But the close was, for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a forgotten space — a network of streets and rooms beneath the city that few people knew existed and fewer still visited. The close was used as a bomb shelter during World War II, and it was rediscovered, in a dramatic way, when roadworkers punched through the surface of the Royal Mile and found themselves looking down into the buried streets below. The close was reopened as a tourist attraction in the 1990s, and it has since become one of Edinburgh's most popular historical attractions.

The discovery of Mary King's Close during roadworks is one of the most dramatic rediscoveries in Scottish history. Workers, repairing the surface of the Royal Mile, punched through the road and found themselves looking down into a buried street — a street that had been sealed for decades and that was largely intact. The discovery was a reminder of the layers of history that lie beneath Edinburgh's streets, and it sparked a renewed interest in the close and its past. The subsequent development of the close as a tourist attraction, in the 1990s, was a recognition of the close's historical significance and its potential as a cultural destination — a buried street, with a buried community, that could be opened to the public and used to tell the story of Edinburgh's past.

The close's location — beneath the City Chambers, the administrative center of Edinburgh — creates a striking contrast between the civic present and the buried past. The City Chambers, where Edinburgh's municipal government conducts its business, is built on top of a street where people died of plague three centuries ago. The councilors who meet in the chambers above may be unaware that, beneath their feet, lies a street of the dead — a street that has been sealed, forgotten, and rediscovered, and that now draws visitors from around the world who come to see the ghosts of the people who lived there.

The social structure of the close — with the wealthy on the upper floors and the poor on the lower floors — is a detail that has significance for the haunting narrative. The poor, who lived on the lower floors, were the most exposed to the plague — the waste that ran down the close collected at the street level, and the lower-floor dwellings were the most unhealthy. The plague, in this sense, was a disease of poverty — it struck hardest at the people who were most vulnerable. The ghosts of Mary King's Close, if they are the ghosts of plague victims, are disproportionately the ghosts of the poor — the people who lived on the lower floors, who were most exposed to the disease, and who died in the greatest numbers.

The haunting, in this interpretation, is a haunting of poverty as well as of plague — a reminder that the worst catastrophes always fall hardest on the most vulnerable.

The construction of the Royal Exchange over the close in the eighteenth century was a transformative event in the close's history. The Royal Exchange was an ambitious project — a building intended to serve as a commercial center for Edinburgh's merchants — and its construction required the covering of a significant portion of the close. The decision to build over the close was a practical one — the close was in a prime location on the Royal Mile, and the space was too valuable to leave as a narrow street — but it was also a symbolic one. The city was building its future on top of its past, and the close — the street where people had lived and died — was buried beneath the new building.

The close was not destroyed — the lower levels were sealed and preserved — but it was hidden, and the community that had lived there was dispersed. The construction of the Royal Exchange marked the end of Mary King's Close as a living street and the beginning of its existence as a buried and forgotten space.

The burial of the close should therefore be understood as a second catastrophe layered on the first. The plague of 1645 killed the community; the construction of the Royal Exchange buried its home. The two events are separated by nearly a century, but in the close's haunted identity they are fused — the ghosts are plague dead, but the setting that makes them plausible is the buried street, and the popular imagination has combined the two into a single story of entrapment. The sealing myth, examined later in this volume, is the clearest expression of that fusion: it takes the real quarantine of 1645 and the real burial of the eighteenth century and merges them into a single image — people sealed underground with the plague — an event that never actually occurred but that captures something true about the close's history.

The city did not wall its dead behind brick; it covered them beneath commerce, and the difference between those two acts is one of the reasons the story has retained its power.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aiden Nightfall writes at the intersection of horror, mystery, and history. His Dark Mysteries series investigates supernatural folklore across cultures -- from the water spirits of Morocco to the haunted fortresses of Eastern Europe -- asking not whether the stories are true, but why they persist.

Each book combines archival research, on-the-ground reporting, and psychological analysis to separate the myth from the mechanism without losing the atmosphere that makes the stories worth telling. His editorial standard is historical accuracy: dates verified, sources cross-referenced, nothing embellished.

He writes in the hours after midnight, when the research feels closer.