

# Welcome to John Knox House

*Built in 1470 - Museum Est. 1853*

Welcome to John Knox House, the oldest surviving residence on the Royal Mile. It is named after **John Knox**, a 16th-century Protestant Reformer. He was said to have lived here for 18 months towards the end of his life, and it was his connection to the building that saved it from demolition. Despite the name, this house was never owned by Knox but by **Mariota Arres** and her husband **James Mossman** - goldsmith to the Stuart rulers of Scotland. This tour will take you into the lives of Mossman and Knox, who were on opposing sides of a turbulent Civil War that dramatically changed the religious and political makeup of Scotland.

As you explore this historic home, envision the vibrant market scenes, political debates, and artistic endeavours that once filled this space. This house is a portal to a past that has left a lasting mark on Scotland's heritage. Enjoy your journey through John Knox House and discover the stories woven into its walls!



## Station 1 – The Luckenbooths

**Station is in the bookshop, in between the windows and the bookcases**

During the time of John Knox and James Mossman, what is now the reception area was a local **shopping centre**. The jeweller's shop was placed prominently at the front windows. In the gallery where the book cases are, five or six other trades displayed their wares, including a cutlery maker, a furrier and a tailor. Each pillared section in the gallery had a **luckenbooth** or 'locking booth' for daytime display. Each trader also had a cellar for storage and manufacture below.

Step into the gallery to feel the **original external wall** and see the cellar stairs. Then step back into reception. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century there was also access to the shops next door through the archway that now leads to the modern part of the **Scottish Storytelling Centre**.



## Station 2 –John Knox House Exterior

**Station is located outside. Please exit the bookshop and look at the entrance to John Knox House.**

The John Knox House looks so picturesque that people have said it is a reproduction or fake! In fact, it is Edinburgh's **only surviving medieval mansion** complete with its overhanging timber galleries.

There were multiple entrances that led to the shops or booths on the ground floor, and to the foreland house and backland house to the rear, which were originally separated. The frontage is particularly grand with its classically correct Doric columns and wreaths. Mariota brought the house into the Mossman family as her dowry, following the pair's marriage in 1559. Under the new couple's direction, the house underwent major upgrading. This includes this new stone façade.

The **coat of arms** is that of the Mossmans. The initials can be read vertically or horizontally. JM and MA indicate the marriage of **James Mossman** and **Mariota Arres**.

The **sundial** shows Moses receiving the light of God as symbolised by the Sun on Mount Sinai. When Jesus in the New Testament was asked what the most important thing in the Law of Moses was, he said, "Love God and your neighbour as yourself", which is carved on the façade in Scots as follows:

***"Luve God abuve al and yi nychtbour as yi selfl."***

James Mossman was a traditional Catholic. He was devoted to the Queen Regent Marie de Guise, and then to her daughter **Mary Queen of Scots**.

If you move towards the road, you can see the outside stair or fore stair that led into the upper part of the front house.



## Station 3 – The Netherbow Tower

**Station is located on the outside stair at the side of John Knox House.**

This is the **halfway point** of the Royal Mile. Looking downhill, you can see Holyrood with Aberlady Bay in the far distance. Look uphill to **St Giles' Cathedral** and Edinburgh Castle. John Knox was the first Protestant Minister of St Giles' Church after the Scottish Reformation in 1560.

This half-way point is called The Netherbow or Lower Bent. For much of Edinburgh's history, a protective stone wall surrounded the city, with the Netherbow Port as the grand entry dividing the Royal Mile from Canongate.

Residents had to pay a toll to pass, leading to the term “The World’s End” for those who couldn’t afford it.

The Port was initially located beside John Knox House but was moved to the crossroads below in 1513 after the Battle of Flodden. In 1603, it was reconstructed and elaborately ornamented in honour of James VI when he moved to London to become the first ruler of both England and Scotland, as a reminder from the people of Edinburgh that he had another capital city in the north. The Port was eventually demolished in 1764.

The contemporary Netherbow Tower beside you displays two features from the gateway. The **sculptured panel** of 1606 commemorates the escape of James VI and I and Queen Anne from the Guy Fawkes ‘Gunpowder Plot’. It bears James’ personal motto “Beati Pacifici” (“Blessed are the Peacemakers”) and “God Save the King”.

At the top of the Tower is **Edinburgh’s City Bell**, commissioned by “the senate and people of Edinburgh” from Holland in 1621. It bears the mottoes “To God be the Glory” and “Wha Daur Meddle Wi Me?” You can see the bell from further down the street. After the gatehouse was demolished in 1764, the bell was lost until rediscovered in the early 21st century in an orphanage basement.

**Please move back inside the house to continue your tour.** The introduction to the museum is through the swing door to the left of reception. Mind your head under the low doorway. Please take time to listen to the dramatized audio tape in the seated area before continuing up the turnpike stair to Station 4 on the landing.

## **Station 4 – Spiral Stair (Turnpike)**

**Station is located inside the museum, on the first floor landing of the Turnpike Staircase.**

The ‘turnpike’ or spiral stair gave access to the upper floors of both the front and back houses. The Mossmans used the house, not only as their home, but as a place of business and of manufacture. Goldsmiths were jewellers, pawnbrokers and money lenders. Apprentices and relations were accommodated in a domestic space above. Managing the household was a demanding professional task for Mariota Arres, Mossman’s first wife.

The spiral staircase in this house features a rare right-hand turn, a deliberate design choice to accommodate right-handed swordsmen. In the event of an attack, defenders descending the stairs would have their sword arm free to fend off assailants coming up. This practical defensive measure is uncommon, with



only about four right-turn spiral staircases in all of Edinburgh; most spiral staircases turn left.



## Station 5 – Book room

**Station is in the book room to the left. Please mind your head on the low doorways, they are made of stone!**

The Reformation began in Europe and involved those like **Erasmus**, who remained Catholic; reformers as well as Protestants like **Martin Luther**, **Calvin** and **John Knox**. The movement arose because scholars were rediscovering the languages and cultures of the past, so putting ideas in their original historical context.

The **invention of the printing press**, along with the spread of education in the growing towns, meant that debates on religion and politics became widespread. Protestants wanted everyone to be able to read the Bible for themselves in their own languages rather than in Latin, which belonged to educated elite.

In case 3 you can see the **Bassendyne Bible**, the first English Bible to be printed in Scotland. It was printed in the Netherbow in 1572–3. Amongst the important European figures in these debates were Knox's teacher John Mair, a Catholic philosopher, and the poet and historian George Buchanan. His ***"History of Scotland"***, which is also in case three, argued that rulers were subject to the sovereignty of the people and that unjust monarchs should be deposed.

John Knox himself was to write a ***"History of the Reformation in Scotland"*** but it is more a passionate defence of his cause and his actions than an objective history. This can be seen in case 5.

One of the key arguments between Protestants and Roman Catholics was about the role of the Mass or Communion service in Christianity. The debate between John Knox and the Abbot of Crossraguel was printed in 1563 in the Netherbow. It is at the foot of case 5.

The Victorian painting hanging over the fireplace is by **William Dyce** and shows Knox conducting the first Protestant Communion in Scotland on a secret visit in 1557–8. Knox is depicted like Jesus at the Last Supper.



## Station 6 – Mossman Room

**Station is located in the adjacent room.**

In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, before the 1560 Reformation, Edinburgh was a wealthy and expanding town. The Mossmans were prominent in the city's economic life because of their goldsmith's craft.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century this room would have had panelling, perhaps ornamented with carvings. The worktable below the window displays the **tools of the goldsmiths' craft**. Mossman often made jewellery for Mary Queen of Scots. In addition, the Mossmans acted as the **royal assay**, responsible for ensuring the coinage had the correct balance of precious and base metals. The twentieth-century ceramics above the fireplace are reproductions of coins made while the Mossmans were keepers and assays to the Royal Mint, featuring portraits of the Stewart monarchs.

Some of the Mossmans' wealth was used to sponsor the Church, in particular the magnificent town Kirk of St Giles. The goldsmiths shared a Chapel there with the hammermen or metalworkers, dedicated to their patron **Saint Eligius** who is in the niche on your left. **The Blue Blanket** or Banner of the Holy Ghost hung in the Chapel. You can see a replica of the banner on the far wall. In the Chapel, masses were said for dead craft members and meetings held to dispense charity to widows and orphans.

The **fireplace** itself is a fine example of Dutch tiling dating to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The elaborate vase of flowers was the trade sign of the **Bloempot tile factory** in Rotterdam.

Security was an issue in those times and the small strongbox in the case to the right of the fireplace would have held jewels or gold coins. Minting coins was a highly skilled craft. The **Royal Mint** in the Mossmans' time was at Holyrood Palace. The display case next on your right contains Scottish coins from the 1559-72 period.



## Station 7 – Castle Gallery

**Station is located beyond the Mossman Room.**

Mossman's life and prosperity ended tragically in a civil war between supporters of the now exiled Queen Mary and supporters of the new Protestant regime of her infant son James.

Pawning the crown jewels to buy weapons, Mossman participated in a **three-year defence of Edinburgh Castle** for the Queen and using his knowledge of minting he produced coins bearing Mary's head. These were both capital

offences. When the Castle fell in 1573 Mossman was among only three of the defenders selected for **execution**. James Mossman was dragged backwards up the street in a low cart and was hanged at the **Mercat Cross** beside St Giles' Cathedral.

Crime and punishment were brutal realities of sixteenth century Edinburgh. The **scold's bridle** at the bottom of the case was the punishment for gossiping, slander or verbal abuse. It was fitted over the gossipers' head and locked in place. Talking or eating were limited, since any movement of the mouth could cause a severe piercing of the tongue due to a spike inside the gag.

The siege of Edinburgh Castle between 1569 and 1573 caused a lengthy blockade of the town and huge damage to property. The plan displayed in the Gallery was reproduced in "*Holinshed's Chronicle*", probably from eyewitness information.



## Station 8 – The Reformation Room

**Station is on the second floor, up the stairs and in the first room on your right.**

When John Knox returned to Scotland in 1559 from exile in Europe it was to take part in a **Protestant revolution** against the Catholic and French rule of Marie de Guise. The aim was to depose Marie de Guise and abolish the legal authority of the Pope in Scots Law, along with the Mass.

This was achieved but Knox had wanted to go much further, establishing a godly society and using the wealth of the Church to set up schools and social security in every parish. He was frustrated because the nobility wanted the lands and wealth of the Church for themselves, and Mary Queen of Scots maintained her mother's support for Roman Catholicism.

However, Knox became an icon of later Scottish values of **education, equality and hard work**.

The stained-glass window in this room brings together the craft of two different artists from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The window was designed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by Victorian artist and poet, **James Ballantyne** (1808-77). While most of his window has been replaced, elements of his work such as the bird motif have been reincorporated in this 20<sup>th</sup> century design. The striking image of John Knox was a later addition to the window, crafted by Edinburgh born artist **Isobel Wood** (1886 –1975).

**Take a seat and listen to an extract from the "*Kirk's Scots Confession*" of 1561 at the bench speakers before retracing your steps to the top of the stairs.**



## Station 9 – The Stair Entrances

**Station is on the landing at the top of the stairs. Please take care as the doorways are very low.**

The top of the turnpike stairs shows the increasing difference in level between the front and back sections of the house clearly showing the **originally separate properties**.

After James Mossman's death, his widow and second wife, Janet King, eventually recovered the house as her "marriage portion" or, in effect, pension. Sub-letting and subdivision became the order of the day as this landing shows. It is the lobby for a separate residence with its own front door and door knocker. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, despite the differences in level, sub-division became by floors with each resident occupying back and front rooms, foreland and backland. In front of you is the principal room of the fine second floor residence of that later period which continued to be occupied by the landowning or merchant class, though not on the Mossmans' scale of affluence.



## Station 10 – The Oak Room

**Station is located through the doorway, inside the Oak Room.**

In 1561, despite the Protestant Revolution led by John Knox, Mary Queen of Scots had returned to occupy the Scottish throne. Many Scots presumed that the good old days had returned and that the traditional Catholic faith would be restored. In fact, Mary's return was the signal for bitter religious and political conflict, not least between Knox and the young Queen.

The Mossmans rejoiced at Mary's return and redecorated this to be their **main room**. They established a pattern of elaborate decoration continued by succeeding occupiers. The tiles in the fireplace were rescued from other Old Town houses which were demolished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The **painted ceiling** that you can see today probably dates from around 1600 and is a riot of imagery and was originally a collection of strong colours. There are signs of the zodiac, winged fairies and devils. These patterns existed as painters' conventions from which clients could select. Here the client's taste seems to have been wide-ranging, exuberant and humorously bawdy.

It is sometimes wrongly said that the Reformation banned the visual arts in Scotland. Religious art was excluded from churches but as you can see, it thrived in domestic decoration and printed books.



The painted panel on the left of the room depicts the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. Note also the replica of a **Jacobean kist** with Masonic symbolism. This belongs to the same mood and atmosphere – the time of witchcraft trials, religious persecution and new philosophies.

You can listen to a conversation between Mary Queen of Scots and John Knox by pressing the button on the panel on the chest or kist. (If you have difficulty hearing the audio, please see a transcript of the conversation by the kist)



## Station 11 – Memorial Gallery

**Station is located beyond the Oak Room, in the tiny gallery traditionally believed to have been John Knox's study.**

Despite their profound differences, both Knox and Mary Queen of Scots were sincere religious believers. Tragically, the politics of the day put them in opposing camps and led to much suffering and to death.

The royal **lion carving** above the fireplace is dated 31<sup>st</sup> October 1561, the year of Mary's return to Scotland.

John Knox and Mary Queen of Scots both left moving **last prayers**.

"And so I end rendering my troubled and sorrowful spirits in the hands of the eternal God earnestly trusting at his good pleasure to be freed from the cares of this miserable life and to rest with Christ Jesus, my only hope and life." - *John Knox*

"Into thy hands, oh God, I commend my soul." *Mary Queen of Scots*

**We hope that you have enjoyed the tour of John Knox House.  
Please make your way back to reception and continue your visit  
with the Storytelling Centre, Café and Exhibition space.**

