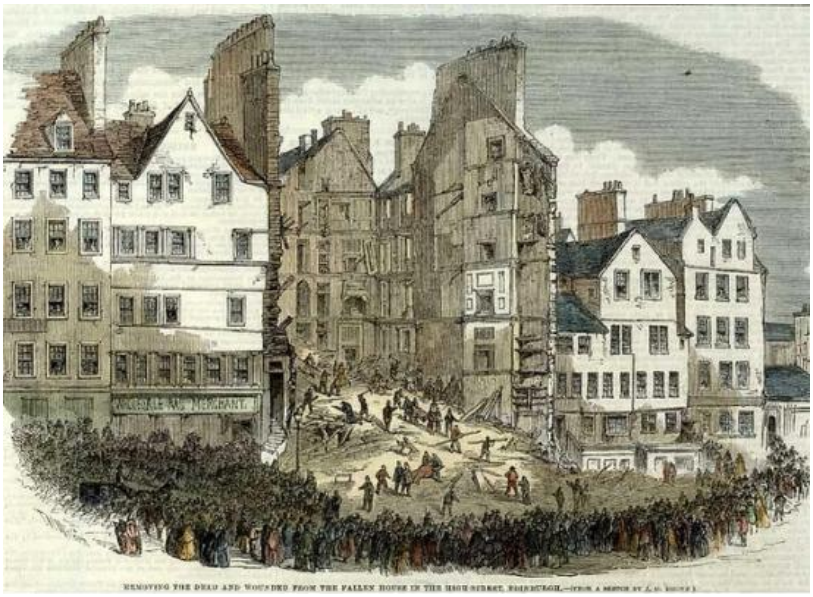
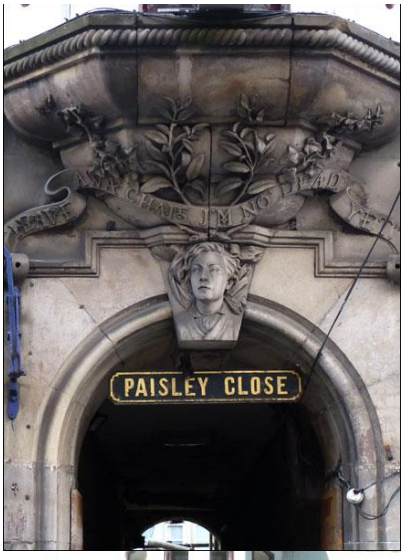
Paisley Close

The Old Town of Edinburgh consisted originally of the main street, now known as the Royal Mile, and the small alleyways and courtyards that led off it to the north and south. These were usually named after a memorable occupant of one of the apartments reached by the common entrance, or a trade plied by one or more residents. Generically such an alleyway is termed a **close** /ˈkloʊs/, a Scots term for alleyway, although it may be individually named close, entry, court, or wynd. A close is private property, hence gated and closed to the public, whereas a wynd is an open thoroughfare, usually wide enough for a horse and cart. Most slope steeply down from the Royal Mile creating the impression of a herring-bone pattern formed by the main street and side streets when viewed on a map. Many have steps and long flights of stairs.

Because of the need for security within its town walls against English attacks in past wars, Edinburgh experienced a pronounced density in housing. Closes tend to be narrow with tall buildings on both sides, giving them a canyon-like appearance and atmosphere. The Royal Mile comprises four, linear, conjoined streets: Castle Hill; Lawnmarket; High Street; and Canongate. Closes are listed below from west to east, divided between the south and north sides of the street. The High Street runs from St Giles Street to St Mary's Street, the location of the Netherbow Port, and the limit of the pre-19th century burgh of Edinburgh. Paisley Close is a dead end on the north side of High Street.

Paisley (Paisley's) Close was named thus by 1679 for Henry Paisley, who owned property in it. On the Sunday morning of November 24th, 1861, the adjacent 250-year-old tenement in Bailie Fyfe's Close collapsed, killing thirty five people.





The image sculpted at the entrance to the close is that of Joseph McIver, a young survivor of the tragedy, who was pulled to safety after rescuers heard his call of *"Heave awa, chaps, ah'm no, deid yet'.* At the request of the proprietor of the flat immediately above Paisley Close, a bust of the boy McIver was carved on the keystone of the arch, with a scroll bearing his exclamation. McIver is often said to have been the only survivor of the collapse, but there were in fact several others (one of whom, William Geddes, was photographed with his rescuers shortly afterwards).

Ultimate responsibility for the disaster was laid squarely at the door of the Edinburgh Council, who had been failing miserably to improve (or even maintain) living conditions for the poor in the Old Town. They had allowed the city to be horrifyingly overcrowded, with over 160,000 people crammed inside boundaries which had barely expanded since the Middle Ages. The building which collapsed had survived since the sixteenth century, and there were countless others which were just as ancient, in similar states of disrepair, and in some cases twice as tall. The potential for a tragedy of vast scale was obvious, and the Council were finally forced by the Heave Awa' disaster to take the matter seriously.

In 1867 the City Improvement Act was passed, beginning the gradual dismantling of the Old Town's medieval closes and wynds which, but the end of the 19th Century, had been almost entirely replaced by the sturdier Victorian buildings which make up the bulk of the historic "Old Town" today; ironically making it less old, brick-for-brick, than the "New Town". Among them was the new block over Paisley Close, the lintel of which bears a bust of Joseph McIvor, though "my lads" was replaced by the more genteel "chaps". The expansion of the city limits gradually eased the overcrowding and led, eventually, to the elimination of the Old Town's slums.