

A guidebook to The Vennel's rich history

It's one of the most photographed for Instagram areas in Edinburgh, with connections to figures from infamous murderers Burke and Hare to Scotland's youngest suffragette, and crime writer Sir Ian Rankin and his literary cop, John Rebus.

Now the first-ever history and guidebook has been produced devoted to Edinburgh's Vennel.

A vennel, in Scots, is a narrow alley or lane between houses. The Vennel Steps in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town is an iconic tourist destination best known as the perfect spot to pose for a photograph against the backdrop of Edinburgh Castle.

Edinburgh's Vennel: Steps into History, the new pocket-sized guide by Elspeth Wills and Jennie Renton, reveals its "hidden history".

It relates that the Flodden Walls which form part of the Vennel were built in the 16th century to protect the capital from English invasion, and explains that a garden was created for and worked by slum children.

Once a slippery lane where kids with candles offered to light people on their way, the book reveals how the 77 steps were added in the 20th century to make the passage between Heriot

Place and the Grassmarket safer.

It also tells how in 1900 the location became the birthplace of the “suffragette piper girl” Bessie Watson – sent to bagpipe lessons aged seven to strengthen her lungs in the midst of a tuberculosis epidemic that claimed her brothers and aunt.

Bessie went on to become one of the youngest people to take part in a march and pageant demanding Votes for Women.

When fellow suffragettes were imprisoned in Edinburgh’s Calton Gaol she would play her pipes outside to raise their spirits.

More recently, its spectacular views of Edinburgh Castle and spooky night-time atmosphere have seen the Vennel feature in the Netflix series One Day and in the recent Rebus TV series based on the novels of Sir Ian Rankin, who lives nearby.

While in the classic 1969 film The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, the charismatic history teacher played by the late Dame Maggie Smith is shown leading a group of schoolgirls down the Vennel to the Grassmarket.

Ms Renton, who also lives nearby, said: “Visitors to Edinburgh know the Vennel Steps as the best spot to picture yourself – and friends and lovers – against the backdrop of the Castle. For local people it is perhaps no more than a handy shortcut when escaping the hubbub of the Grassmarket for the green expanse of the Meadows.

“But the Vennel has a rich and tantalisingly hidden history. Its many stories have been overshadowed by the Grassmarket’s more lurid tales of public executions and riots. We decided that the Vennel deserves a guidebook of its own.”

The book tells the “tragic but ultimately heart-warming” story of how the “child garden” at the top of the steps was created in memory of a young soldier killed in the First World War to

give local slum children the chance to play outdoors.

Among the other revelations are its links to “Jinglin’ Geordie” George Heriot – goldsmith, moneylender and jeweller to King James VI – who built the current George Heriot’s school and the role the location played in the trial of William Burke and William Hare, who murdered at least 16 people in the 1820s before Burke, at least, was brought to justice.

Burke’s common-law wife, Helen McDougal, gave a false alibi when she testified in court that one of the victims, a woman called Madge, was alive the day after the alleged murder as she had seen her in the Vennel.

The book also reveals tales of hurtling fireballs; a hostel for homeless women and the chapel where “lifters” and “Anti-lifters” fell out.

* Edinburgh’s Vennel: Steps into History is published by Main Point Books, priced £10.

