

The Royal Mile Sundial Trail

The Royal Mile Sundial Trail by Dennis Cowan

This sundial trail takes in the whole of Edinburgh's famous Royal Mile from the Castle at the top, right down to the Palace of Holyroodhouse at the bottom, with a slight detour to the National Museum of Scotland. The Royal Mile is a collective name for the following six streets - Castle Esplanade, Castlehill, Lawnmarket, High Street, Canongate and Abbey Strand. It is in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town, as distinct from the New Town at the other side of Princes Street, which itself is well over two hundred years old.

This trail gives you the opportunity to visit one of the most famous thoroughfares in the world. Apart from the sundials mentioned in the trail, there are many other attractions that could be visited including Edinburgh Castle, the Camera Obscura, the Scotch Whisky Heritage Centre, Gladstone's Land, the Writer's Museum (situated in Lady Stair's House), St Giles Cathedral, the Museum of Childhood, White Horse Close and even the New Scottish Parliament building and many others besides. If you visit during the famous Edinburgh Festival in August, there are many street performers who will do their best to tempt you to watch their performance and you may decide to leave the sundials for another day!

In the immediate vicinity of the Royal Mile are Princes Street and its gardens, the Sir Walter Scott Monument, the National Gallery and Dynamic Earth. See the map at the end of this trail for the locations of these other attractions.

You may also want to visit the Queen's Park which is situated at the bottom of the Royal Mile. From this wonderful enormous open space situated almost in the centre of Edinburgh, you can walk round the Radical Road below Salisbury Crags or climb the ancient volcano of Arthur's Seat, both giving wonderful panoramic views of the city.

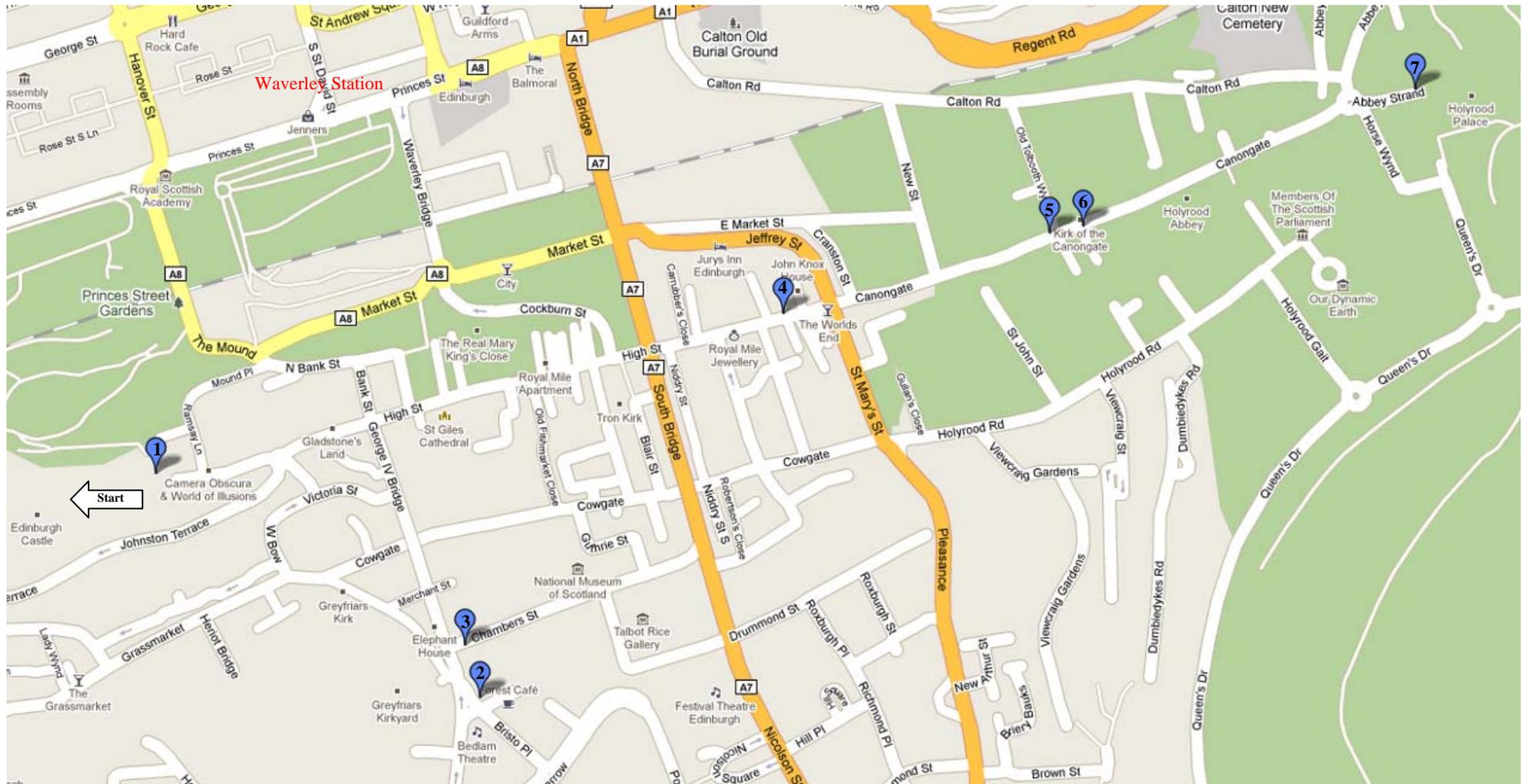
Conveniently, Edinburgh's main railway station, the Waverley, sits in the very centre of the city between the Royal Mile and Princes Street and is only a short walk away.

If you manage to avoid all of these other attractions (or distractions), you should be able to complete the whole trail in around two to three hours. There are options to visit another three sundial locations which will extend the time required considerably, but you may want to look at these another day. These are identified at the end of the trail. There are many options for meals and refreshments on the trail, from fast food restaurants to very classy establishments, particularly on the upper part of the Royal Mile and on George IV Bridge.

The Royal Mile is actually 100 yards or so longer than a mile, and due to the relatively short distance involved and the lack of suitable parking, it is not practical to undertake this trail on anything other than by foot. However it does start from the top and works its way down the hill, rather than the other way around!

Note that the Palace of Holyroodhouse is often closed at various times between mid May and early July, if the Queen is in residence. It would be wise to check in advance on the official website prior to making any arrangements -

<http://www.royalcollection.org.uk/default.asp?action=article&ID=36>



http://maps.google.co.uk/maps/ms?hl=en&ie=UTF8&msa=0&msid=112182472914363169958_0004927b5ad1699a731d&z=16

Finding the start of the trail is very easy, as the castle dominates everything around the centre of the city. Start at the entrance to the Castle, and at the bottom left of the Esplanade is Goose Pie House, part of Ramsay Garden. Virtually adjoining the esplanade of Edinburgh Castle, Ramsay Garden is not a garden at all but a collection of houses in a delightful jumble of different architectural styles, conceived in the 18th century, but with 19th century additions. Ramsay Garden is a distinctive part of Edinburgh's skyline and there are classic views of the buildings from the junction of Princes Street and the Mound, and at many other points along Princes Street.

See the map on the previous page.

No 1 on map (map from Google Maps) - The red sandstone sundial (on the cherub's shield), minus its gnomon, and which dates from 1892, will be seen quite easily from the Castle Esplanade and is on the wall of the quaintly named Goose Pie House (home of the 18th century poet, Alan Ramsay). This single faced sundial is bordered by quotations in Greek from Aeschylus and also from Scotland's national poet, Robert Burns.



Continue down the Royal Mile and at the first set of traffic lights, take a short detour away from the Royal Mile by turning right into George IV Bridge. A walk of 5 minutes will see you at the junction of George IV Bridge and Chambers Street on your left, which is the site of the National Museum of Scotland. Just before this junction, look out for the famous statue of Greyfriar's Bobby on the other side of the street. This is a statue commemorating the Skye Terrier who stayed by his master's grave for 14 years until his own death in 1872. The one o'clock gun fired from the castle was its cue to go for something to eat and drink, provided by the good citizens of Edinburgh, before returning to resume his vigil at his master's graveside.

No 2 on map – Walk on a little further to the SW side of the museum to the junction of George IV Bridge and Bristo Port and look out for the sundial on the wall about 3 metres above pavement level. It is easy to miss. It is described as a west decliner with a restricted hour range. It was designed by Mark Lennox-Boyd and commissioned by the late Earl of Perth, one of the museum's Trustees. It is dated 2001 with the motto "gang warily" (go carefully).



No 3 on map – Walk round the corner into Chambers Street, go into the museum and head for the Science and Technology Department. There are a number of sundials on display including the following significant examples:

- **a broken fragment of an old scratch or mass dial from Islay, an island in the Inner Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland, famous for its very peaty and pungent whiskies. Scratch dials are very uncommon in Scotland, although the fragment of another scratch dial was found on Inchcolm, an island in the Firth of Forth in 2009. The Islay fragment is of grey schist, found in 1954 in the scree at the foot of Craig More, near Kilchoman House, Islay. The rest of the dial is unfortunately missing;**



- an extremely complex lectern sundial with around 25 separate dials including cup hollows. This dial was found in a builder's yard in the 1950/60s and was acquired by the museum in 1991. Unfortunately it has lost its provenance;



- another lectern sundial, dated 1781, from Cantray in Aberdeenshire, with the monogram DD (David Duncan) and with dials for 13 locations around the world. These are Cantray, Peking, Goa, Rome, Jerusalem, Cairo, Naples, Syracuse, Ozaca, Troy, Smyrna, Bengal and Paris. This sundial was gifted to the museum around 1931 by Miss EM Davidson. It is of grey sandstone;



- a fabulous quaint and interesting multi-faced dial originally from Carberry House in East Lothian with 13 separate dials. It has a short rounded column with female busts on the North and South faces. This dial has travelled – it was taken from Carberry to Ponteland near Newcastle in England from where it was eventually purchased by the museum;



- a beautiful complex brass dial plate made in Aberdeen by Joseph Williamson and dated 1728. This dial includes a monthly calendar, compass and equation of time and also includes times for Jerusalem, Constantinople and Rome.



You could stay all day in this museum, but tear yourself away and head back to the Royal Mile and continue downhill. After crossing the major junction (traffic lights) at North Bridge, John Knox's House, dating from 1490, will be seen another 100 yards further downhill on the left, just as the pavement narrows.

No 4 on map - On the SW corner of the house you will see a sundial which includes the figure of Moses twisted round the corner of the house, kneeling on top of a mount pointing with his right hand to the sun and to the word “God” carved in English, Latin and Greek. Some say that the figure is of John Knox himself (ca. 1505-1572). He was the Scottish reformer who was one of the most celebrated followers of John Calvin and became the chief force in the introduction and establishment of Presbyterianism in Scotland. There are two vertical dials on the mount. John Knox’s house itself is open to the public and is well worth visiting.



Continue down the Royal Mile again, looking for the Canongate Tolbooth (built 1591) on the left. This building will be easily identified due to the large clock sticking out at 90 degrees to the building.

No 5 on map - There was a vertical dial, which was reported as being very weatherworn in 1890, incorporated on to the south face of the Tolbooth. I have looked, but have never been able to see it. Perhaps you can?

The Tolbooth is now a museum and is also worth a visit. The Tolbooth is virtually next door to the Canongate Kirk where the Queen’s grand daughter Zara Phillips is to be married in the summer of 2011.

Just a few yards down the Royal Mile on the other side of the road is the 16th century Huntly House, now also a museum.



No 6 on map - A many faced polyhedral sundial with dials on each facet will be seen through the gate of the courtyard in Bakehouse Close. Although it appears to be in a reasonable condition, it does appear to be uncared for locked away in the courtyard. Despite a plea to the museum staff for access, this was refused on Health and Safety grounds. Huh! Another view of it can be had from a window on the upper floor of the museum. This sundial was one of the two that were originally at Grange House in Edinburgh until its demolition in 1936. It is believed that the other sundial was also saved and is still in Edinburgh in a private garden. (Note the faces that can be seen between the lower large circular dials.)



Continue down the Royal Mile one last time to the Palace of Holyroodhouse, passing the new Scottish Parliament building on your right. Access to the palace is from Abbey Strand just before the palace gates in front of you.

No 7 on map - In the grounds of the palace (you will have to pay an entrance fee) stands another polyhedral sundial. This sundial is by John Mylne from 1633 and reputedly cost £408 to make, an absolutely enormous sum of money in those days. Although this sundial is popularly associated with Mary, Queen of Scots, it was constructed in 1633 for the coronation of her grandson Charles I, long after Mary lost her head in 1587 at the hands of Queen Elizabeth 1 of England. The dial includes the crowned initials of Charles I, his queen Henrietta Maria, and other royal heraldic devices and badges. Like his grandmother, Charles was also executed, in 1649. The octagonal pedestal, which appears to have been renewed, stands on the original base of three octagonal steps. The total height is 10' and the width of the base is 10'3". This sundial originally stood within a formal layout in the King's Privy Garden, west of its present position.



For those hardy souls who still want more, there are another three sites in the near vicinity all within a short walk from Princes Street, where another four sundials can be seen. These are easily found and are identified on the map on the following page (map from Google Maps).

OPTION A – There are two old sundials (one single face and one with three faces on a cube) on Bell's Brae Toll House at the junction of Bell's Brae and Queensferry Road. The right hand face of the cube dial has a star with a fly below, probably referring to the pun "Time Flies." (Thanks to Tracey Madden for the fly, as I missed it on my visit.)

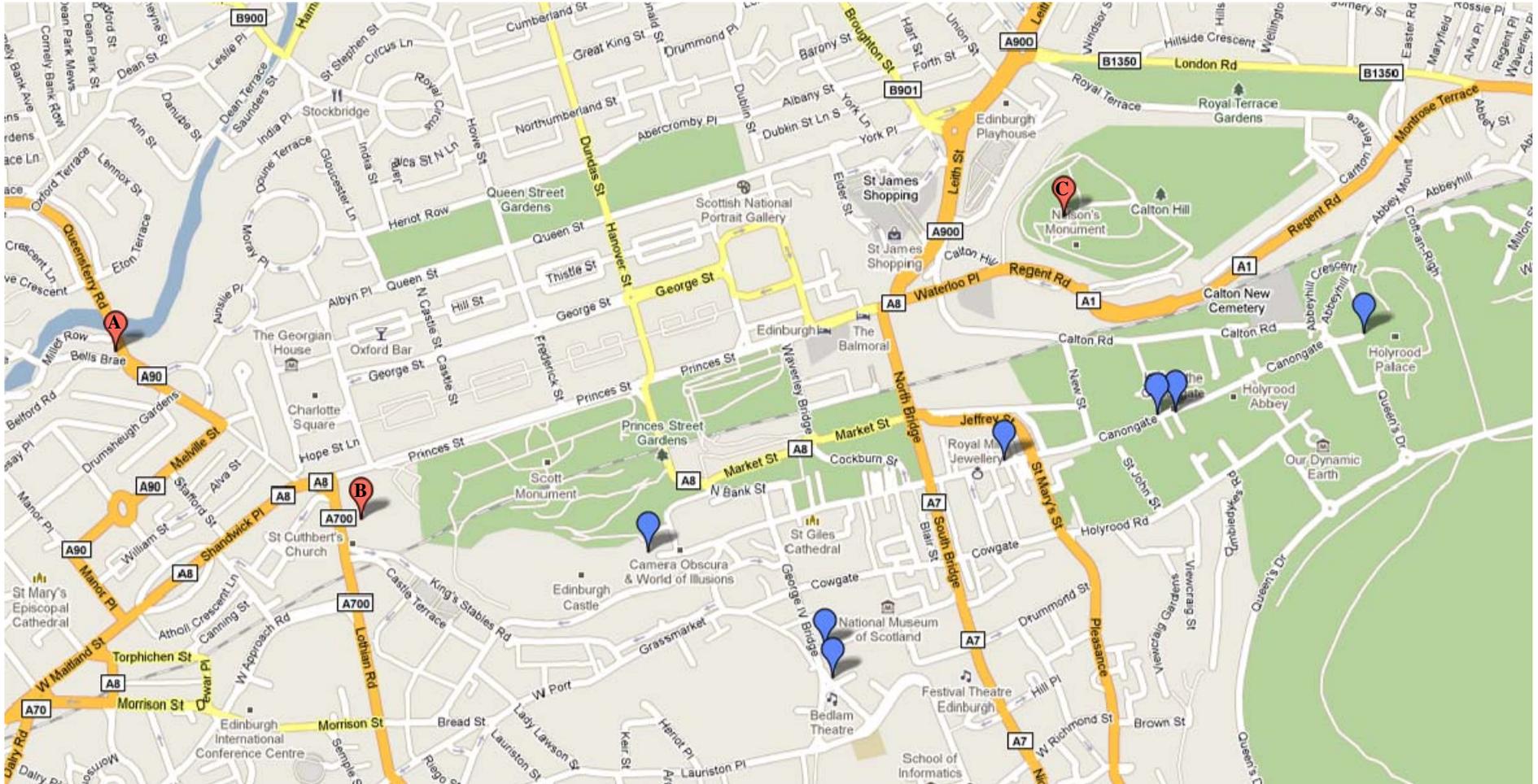


OPTION B – There is a large single faced sundial dated 1774 on the tower of St Cuthbert's Church, also known as the West Kirk. Note that this is not the church on the corner of Princes Street and Lothian Road, but the one to the south behind it. Access is from Lothian Road. Great views of the Castle can be had from Princes Street Gardens which can be accessed from the graveyard surrounding the church.



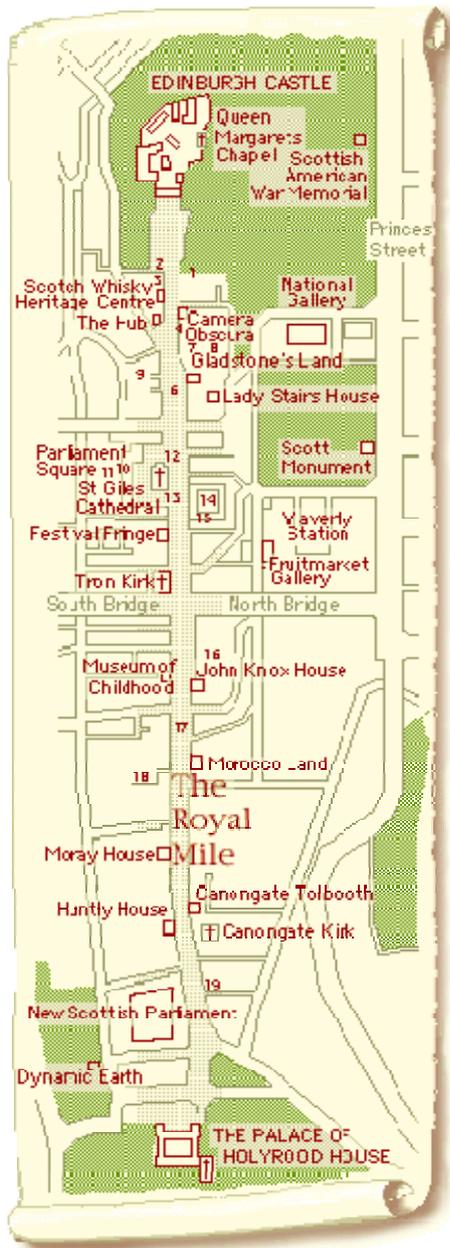
OPTION C – there is a single faced sundial above the entrance to the City Observatory on the top of Calton Hill. Great views of both the city centre and the outskirts of Edinburgh can be had from here, and it is well worth the bit of effort to climb the short path to the top of the hill for the views alone. Access is via a footpath from just about the point where Waterloo Place becomes Regent Road.





<http://maps.google.co.uk/maps/ms?hl=en&ie=UTF8&msa=0&msid=112182472914363169958.000492f7b5ad1699a731d&z=16>

Map showing many of the other attractions on the Royal Mile
 (map and text reproduced with kind permission of aboutscotland.co.uk)



EDINBURGH CASTLE

- Goose Pie House (1)
- Cannonball House (2)
- Scotch Whisky Heritage Centre
- The Hub, Tollbooth Kirk
- Boswell's Court (3)
- Camera Obscura
- Assembly Hall (4)
- Lawnmarket (6)
- Milne's Court (7)
- James Close (8)
- Gladstone's Land
- Lady Stair's House
- Brodie's Close (9)
- The High Kirk of St Giles
- Law Courts (10)
- Parliament House (11)
- Heart of Midlothian (12)
- Mercat Cross (13)
- City Chambers (14)
- Mary King's Close (15)
- Tron Kirk
- Brass Rubbing Centre (16)
- Museum of Childhood
- Moubray House
- John Knox House
- Canongate (17)
- Chessel's Court (18)
- Morocco Land
- Canongate Tollbooth
- Canongate Kirk
- Huntly House
- Panmure House
- White Horse Close (19)
- New Scottish Parliament
- Dynamic Earth

THE PALACE OF HOLYROOD HOUSE

If this trail has wetted your appetite and you would like to look at details and photographs of other sundials, then visit my website at www.sundialsofscotland.co.uk.