As syphilis spreads across Scotland, an Act is passed in Edinburgh giving uninfected ‘whoremasters and harlots’ the opportunity to confess their conversion to a new way of life, or face public punishments ranging from branding to death.

Allan Ramsay published his first collection of poetry, many of which were written in Scots about life in Edinburgh, including the drinking dens and brothels of the Old Town. One of his finest poems is Lucky Spence’s Last Advice, about the final words of an infamous brothel keeper, advising her “loving Lasses” on how best to rob and exploit their patrons.

“When he’s asleep, then dive and catch His ready Cash, his Rings or Watch; And gin he likes to light his Match at your Spunk-Box, Ne’er stand to let the fumbling Wratc een take the Pox.”

James Boswell, an Edinburgh Advocate and close friend of David Hume and Adam Smith, begins keeping his Edinburgh Journals, in which he writes frankly about his copious drinking binges and visits to the city’s many brothels.

“The Edinburgh Magdalen Asylum opens in the Canongate, originally as a half-way house for women coming out of prison. After four years it officially becomes a refuge for women who want to leave prostitution. It is a sharply segregated place, with women who had been ‘out on the town’ kept away from those of ‘a better order’. Women were kept in solitary confinement for the first three months, “to eradicate the taint of moral contagion”; after that their heads were shaved and they were admitted to the Asylum. There they were bullied, tortured, beaten by the staff, harassed by the locals and generally crushed into a pathetic and demoralised shadow of their former selves.
1828 Mary Patterson is discharged from the Edinburgh Magdalen Asylum on the 8th of April, after 18 months incarceration. One day later she is murdered by Burke and Hare.

1840 Dr William Tait takes over the Edinburgh Magdalen Asylum. He argues that the atmosphere of violence and the location caused depression and a loss of self-respect among the women. The Asylum moves to a rural location in Dalry, where it remains for over 100 years.

1842 Dr William Tait publishes Magdalenism, an account of sex work in Edinburgh at the time. Most of the women in the city’s 200 public brothels were in their late teens; some were as young as nine or ten. He describes three classes of brothels: the first for noblemen, merchants and military officers; the second for businessmen, clerks and theologians; and the third for soldiers, sailors and country folk.

1892 The Burgh Police (Scotland) Act allows women to be prosecuted in the police courts for ‘being a common prostitute or streetwalker’.

1927 The Macmillan Committee on Street Offences commends the law in Scotland relating to female street prostitution, particularly that women were only charged in court as a ‘common prostitute’ after surveillance and several cautions.

1937 The Children and Young Persons (Scotland) Act allows girls and young women, whose sexual promiscuity is thought to lead to a life of prostitution, to be forced to be routinely examined for venereal disease in remand homes or schools.

1946 Dora Noyce opens her “YMCA with extras” at 17 Danube Street which continues as an Edinburgh institution for almost 30 years. She was known to quip that while her busiest time was during the Edinburgh Festival, the two weeks of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland came a close second.

1949 The Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act gives courts the power to remand sexual offenders, including prostitutes, for a medical examination. Within a few years it became common practice for so-called ‘habitual prostitutes’ to be regularly remanded in custody for venereal disease treatment, whether or not they had symptoms.

1950 The Edinburgh Magdalen Asylum in Dalry closes on November 11th. The building is now known as Springwell House Social Work Centre.
A virtual tolerance zone already operates in Leith; despite the notoriety of ‘pick-up’ spots like the Deep Sea Fish and Chips and the Imperial Hotel, Princes Street and the surrounding area account for 90% of the prosecutions for solicitation in Edinburgh.

The first Traverse Theatre opens in the Lawnmarket, in a former doss house and brothel known as Kelly’s Paradise and Hell’s Kitchen.

The Civic Government (Scotland) Act comes into force, which makes it illegal for a sex worker to solicit or loiter for the purposes of prostitution. It does not, however, make prostitution itself illegal. The Act also gives local councils the power to issue licenses for public entertainment. Edinburgh Council begins granting entertainment licenses to massage parlours and saunas, becoming the first city in the UK to effectively decriminalise brothels.

The tolerance zone in Leith’s Coburg street begins, with police turning a blind eye to solicitation and loitering offences and (eventually) organisations such as Shiva, the Centenary Project and SCOT-PEP offering services to sex workers.

SCOT-PEP is officially established, after a year of providing unofficial services in the guise of a Edinburgh University research project. For a full history of SCOT-PEP, see the Advocacy Section.

The Criminal Law (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act is passed, again leaving sex work itself legal but making many other aspects of indoor sex work illegal.

The SCOT-PEP drop-in centre in Coburg Street opens, with GUM clinic, counselling, addiction and ‘New Futures’ services offered.

The Coburg Street tolerance zone comes to an end after increasing pressure from local residents. Councillor Phil Attridge comments: “I don’t have any sympathy for those people who bought property in the Coburg Street area because they knew prostitution had been tolerated there for almost 25 years.” A new zone, on Salamander Street, lasts for three months before outrage from local residents forces the police to abandon the scheme.