



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

September 2009

The mission report on our World Heritage site won't go away. It won't go away from Edinburgh City Council, but the Council doesn't appear to have given it a public response. This is important for those of us that are concerned about the standards of management of the site.

The report stops short of proposing that it be put on the list of World Heritage Sites in Danger, but it made unusually clear and specific criticisms. Of the Caltongate development, they criticised the proposed demolition of listed buildings and they also disapproved of the design of several of the buildings which they considered to be ill fitted to the site. As regards the Haymarket proposals, they considered that the visual impact of the seventeen storey hotel would be inappropriate, being so close to the boundary of the World Heritage site. In this context they wished to see the establishment of a well-defined buffer zone around the site. They also requested that their comments should be made available to the public enquiry by Ministers into the Haymarket planning application. This was done, and the result of the enquiry is awaited.

At a more general level they also called for the use of open competition to undertake the design of key buildings within the World Heritage site in order to enhance architectural standards, and for greater involvement of the stakeholders in the consultation process. The sad thing about these criticisms is that they all have already been voiced by 'stakeholders' on a number of occasions.

The mission limited its enquiries to specified development projects and proposals, so they didn't look at broader issues. For example the apparent lack of control of commercial activities within the site, a topic which causes much public concern. The problems, particularly in the Old Town, are well known – pavement clutter, goods for sale hung on the outside of shops, noisy 'music' directed straight out into the street and public disorder resulting from excessive provision and consumption of alcohol. These factors are bound to have a strong influence on the perception outsiders receive of Edinburgh and its World Heritage site. A clear example is to be found in how we have created a suitable image for Stag and Hen parties. Some of the better pubs simply ban them, but others, including those that stay open until 3 o'clock in the morning, welcome them and give them what they want.

John O'Groats' was recently described in the press as a 'seedy little tourist trap'. Over page we present what is unfortunately rapidly becoming another example – the Lawnmarket. This has the most gracious lines, which were first set out nearly 900 years ago, and contains architectural gems such as Gladstone's Land and Riddle's Court. Similar but less acute problems occur throughout the Old Town and in the shopping area of the New Town as well.



So What?

The City Council is confronted with a difficult task in dealing with these problems. We asked our MSPs and local Councillors for comments and advice. The responses we received were detailed and most helpful, but they clearly illustrate the difficulties.

David McLetchie MSP responded, and explained what legislation was available for the Police to deal with noise issuing from shops, while Councillors Beckett and Dundas have taken a real interest in our concerns and reported activities under way within the Council to address the problems. We have also been referred by them to officials who can

provide detailed information. They too were most helpful.

It became clear that several initiatives are under way to look for ways forward. A decision will soon be taken as to whether 'A' boards should be banned because some premises have been abusing the present system. The law as regards goods hung on the frontages of shops is also being re-examined. Meanwhile action has already been taken to remove illegal street clutter, and will be repeated as necessary, but this illustrates one of the problems. It is labour intensive.

Responding to street noise faces a similar problem. In serious noise situations it is necessary to hand over to the police authorities. As is well known, they are under considerable pressure in the course of their duties, and in these circumstances such activities just add to their case load.

At a more general level – should not new, more specific standards be introduced by way of legislation, limited in scope perhaps to Conservation Areas or at the very least, to the World Heritage site? Experience suggests that authorities would be most reluctant to contemplate such a move. Many would claim however that the present situation is unacceptable.

Learning Space

The Museum of Edinburgh, or Huntly House Museum as it was once called, holds an intriguing collection illustrating the history of Edinburgh. They have now added a 'Learning Space' designed to attract adults and children alike. This provides an activity trail within the museum, and hands-on experience of replica objects, while children can even dress up in the costumes and gowns from days of old, not antique ones of course. Large banners, made to designs produced by children from Abbey Hill and Royal Mile Primary Schools, decorate the area. There is a friendly,

informal and welcoming ambiance to the space which contrasts with the relative formality of the museum exhibits themselves.

The Museum of Edinburgh is open, free of charge, Monday to Saturday 10.00-17.00 and Sunday 12.00 to 17.00. The new facilities are available during these hours. Information is available on access for school groups from Margaret Findlay on 529 3963.

New stands for the Tattoo

Not long ago the Newsletter was reporting new traffic arrangements for access to the Castle Esplanade. At that time news was awaited for the go-ahead to provide new stands for the Esplanade, to be used at Tattoo time and for open air concerts. There is news now that the multi-million project is to get started in the near future.

The project is to be supervised by the engineering contractors Sir Robert McAlpine. They have been asked to produce designs for stands which are capable of being installed or removed in three to four weeks. This would be a great step forward as a significant portion of each year is presently occupied with these operations.

Hopefully the large chunk of the year during which the access down from the Esplanade to Princes Street Gardens is closed to the public will be similarly reduced. One suspects that it could be reduced still further if some additional thought were put into it. The paths that are closed off go through particularly attractive scenery with fine views.

The timescale envisaged for the project is surprisingly brief. Designs are scheduled to be ready by the end of the year with planning consent lodged by

early next year. It is hoped that the new stands will be ready for use by the summer of 2011. Well, we will see, as apart from technical matters, the promised funding will have to be in place equally speedily.

What an Experience

The Scotch Whisky Heritage Centre was founded twenty one years ago on Castlehill, close to the entrance to the Esplanade. It is located in the carefully adapted Victorian building of Castle Hill School, and still makes use of the Boys' and Girls' staircases which in those days led to separate classrooms through separate playgrounds and entrance doors.

The Centre contains a wide range of facilities including a restaurant, bars, reception rooms and a large shop offering nearly 300 variety of whisky. The main attraction however for the yearly quarter of a million visitors is the Scotch Whisky Experience which was given a revamp to celebrate the Centre's twenty first. This starts with a 'barrel ride'. If you have never encountered such a device, take a look at our illustration. The visitor is conveyed through a well designed multi-media display which explains the complete process of whisky production from grain to bottle. The commentary is lively but accurate and the barrel rider (or is it barrel-ist?) has a choice between 15 different languages for the presentation. The barrel ride is a complex system which took a great deal of hard work to install and commission, but the design has proved to be sound and it has now been working well for several months.



The final stop in the Scotch Whisky Experience is a visit to see the recently acquired collection of whiskies purchased from the Brazilian businessman and whisky enthusiast Claive Vidiz. This was collected by Vidiz over more than three decades and features more than 3000 bottles.

This Centre is obviously intended mainly for the tourists visiting Edinburgh, but it provides a very good way of learning more about this historic product which is so important to Scotland's economy. All are welcome to pay a visit, but it might be wise not to go during the peak season.

New Footprints in the Old Town

We must all have been made aware by now of the need to reduce energy consumption and our 'carbon footprint'. Not only, we are told, does this help to protect the environment but it can also save us money. Our greatest consumption of energy as individuals is likely to be incurred in heating our own homes, perhaps as much as 50% of our

total carbon output over a year. Modern buildings are generally more energy efficient than older ones but a lot can be done to improve the energy performance of existing buildings. Edinburgh Old Town has a high proportion of old tenements which would benefit from energy-saving measures, but such buildings, particularly when of historic importance, present special challenges.

The OTA was recently approached by both *Changeworks* and *Edinburgh World Heritage* to support applications for funding from the 'Climate Challenge Fund' in order that structural assessments and energy surveys might be undertaken, aiming to identify ways by which carbon emissions might be reduced in the Old Town. There have already been pilot projects which have shown that intervention can be successful in even the most sensitive of cases. Such measures, which might be taken up by a whole stair or by an individual householder, can then be supported by grant aid which would offset the cost of installation.

Greatest cost savings and energy reduction can be made simply through better insulation, and there are well publicised grants available for loft and cavity wall insulation, though it is doubtful if many residential buildings in the Old Town have enough of a cavity to permit so much as a mouse to pass - some unfortunates might wish to disagree however! There are other ways of achieving savings in the energy consumption of a building which are in no way visually intrusive. For instance, solar panels have been installed on roofs in the New Town, not visible from the street or any vantage point, except perhaps on Google Earth.

Then there is also the concept of a heat pump, rather like a refrigerator operating in reverse. Air-source heat pumps need not be visually intrusive if positioned with sensitivity and they are relatively cheap and easy to install. Ground-source heat pumps require installation below

ground. The end result is an installation which is hidden from view but which is more expensive to put in place than an air-source unit. Such installations are likely to be ideal for historic buildings in the Old Town.

We need to wait and see what proposals are put forward as a result of the Old Town studies that are being initiated. These will cost nothing and they may well result in solutions of interest not only to individual owners but also to landlords, the largest of whom in the Old Town is the City Council, an active supporter of this initiative.

A meeting for Members of the OTA has been arranged for November 9th when Bob Barnham of Changeworks will outline the background to their work. See the Autumn activities over the page for details.

The AGM and you

On the AGM agenda will be the election of the OTA Committee. The Committee consists of the Officers (Convener, Vice-Convener, Honorary Secretary, Honorary Treasurer) and not more than 15 further members. Nominations for the election of Officers and Committee members can be made at or before the Annual General Meeting. Nominees for election as Officers or Committee members shall declare at the Annual General Meeting at which their election is to be considered any financial or professional interest known or likely to be of concern to the Association.

We hope that any interested members will put themselves forward for election. The Committee meets once a month on a weekday evening, and this is the only commitment when joining. If interested, please contact the Convener, Roma Crampin, 4/7 Advocate's Close, EHI IPS, or telephone 225 4771.

The Annual Accounts will be available at the AGM. For an advance copy, please send a stamped, self addressed envelope marked 'OTA Accounts' to the Treasurer, Rosemary Mann, 2 St Mary's Street, EHI ISD.

OTA Autumn activities

Hidden Gardens of the Royal Mile. Wednesday 16th September, 4.30 pm. Meet at the Scottish Storytelling Centre, High Street. Jean Bareham of Greenyonder Tours will lead us on a walk through some treasures of the Royal Mile that even long time residents may not know!

Members only. Numbers limited, tickets £5

Living Streets. Wednesday 14th October, 7pm. Old St. Paul's Church Hall - enter from Jeffrey St. Kirstie Henderson of "Living Streets" will explain the aims of this long standing organisation, which aims to put pedestrians first. Local residents can find out how they can reclaim their streets and make them better places for pedestrians.

Members' guests welcome, tickets £3

Tour of the City Chambers. Tuesday 27th October, 7 pm. City Chambers. Take a tour of the recently refurbished City Chambers to hear some of its history, and benefit from also meeting Rachel Simmons, the architect who was closely involved in the work

Members' guests welcome, tickets £3

Changeworks: an environmental aid. Monday 9th November, 7 pm. Quaker Meeting House. Join us to hear from Bob Barnham of Changeworks, an ecologically sustainable development charity, on how you can help the environment and your own finances by upgrading your own homes in energy saving ways.

Members' guests welcome, tickets £3

AGM and talk by Paul Macauley. Thursday 3rd December, 7 pm. Quaker Meeting House. Our AGM is the chance for you to meet and quiz the Committee, hear reports of the last year, and raise matters of concern. It will be preceded by Paul Macauley, Conservation Officer with the Council, who talk about the Edinburgh World Heritage 'Twelve Monuments' conservation project and the Old Town.

AGM, Members' guests welcome, but only Members can vote - no cost, but please apply for tickets to let us judge numbers.

Dates for your diary

Saturday 26th & Sunday 27th September:

Edinburgh Doors Open Days : your annual chance to see behind the scenes in many buildings normally closed to the public. For more details see /sign up to the Cockburn Association website: www.cockburnassociation.org.uk

Saturday 10th. October:

"A gude cause"! There will be a commemorative march starting at midday, from Bruntsfield Links to Calton Hill to mark the centenary of the huge Suffrage March in 1909. If you would like to take part, or help in any way get in touch with Helen Kay on 229 0993 or e-mail: gudecause@peaceandjustice.org.uk.

Saturday 28th - Monday 30th November: Free entry to Edinburgh Castle.