



# Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

January 2010

It is a normal and appropriate procedure for an organisation to examine its policy and procedures periodically, making use of consultations or enquiries as necessary. The City Council has two such undertakings under way at present which are of particular significance to those of us with a direct interest in the welfare of the Old Town.

The first of these concerns the so-called 'Night Time Economy'. It is being undertaken by the Council's Strategy and Research Unit and will look at both costs and benefits. Public consultation will be included, and the Old Town Association has already been told that it will be involved in the process. It is most encouraging, from our point of view, that City Centre Councillor Joanna Mowat takes a strong interest in the topic. Most recently, this was in the context of late night 'disturbances' regularly encountered in the Grassmarket and elsewhere. There was a description of the goings-on there in the press recently. Let us hope that 'costs' really are given full prominence in this investigation – the cost in terms of public disturbance as well as the direct costs of policing and accident and emergency.

Joanna's attitude is in some contrast to that of one prominent Councillor who is reported recently to have said 'if you've bought a property in one of our tourist hotspots there are going to be issues that come with it'. In fact many of us with homes or businesses in the Old Town have been here since long before the present disorder built up. The move was usually an informed decision, and we accepted the busy environment as a normal part of our life. In saying that however, we should be very clear that this is only as long as it doesn't include rowdy, aggressive or illegal behaviour. Presently there are big profits being made in the 'night time economy' at our direct expense. Let us hope that some real measures can be adopted once the full facts have been established, despite the howls of horror which will doubtless follow from the pub and club owners.

Meanwhile the Council's Built and Natural Heritage unit is to investigate how statutory controls and guidance on shop frontages might be strengthened within Conservation Areas. There is a possibility that this may be achieved by application to Scottish Ministers, rather than requiring new legislation.

The Newsletter has often drawn attention to the Old Town drink problem and to the unsightly shop fronts and obstructed pavements which are becoming increasingly common in the Old Town. Meanwhile the more law abiding

shops are being put at a commercial disadvantage. The offenders are doubtless making themselves wealthy by means of their activities. At the same time, enforcement is complicated and expensive, and financial penalties are unlikely to have any real impact unless used with determination

### **Two enquiries one photograph**

During December a very large advertisement appeared on the front of a building in Victoria Street. It accurately illustrates the present problems confronting the Council.

Of course Planning Consent may have been obtained for its display, but there again, perhaps it hasn't. If it has, the actions taken once the two enquiries are concluded appear to be even more urgent than originally thought. Then there is the content. Presumably the intention is to attract people to this particular venue, using cheap alcohol and long opening hours as a bait. Of course not all the attendees will get inebriated, and of those that do, many will not cause disturbance at 3 o'clock in the morning when they leave. But then again perhaps some will.



### **Christmas in the Royal Mile**

Just a postscript to the festive season as all the bright lights are about to disappear. A new and welcome addition to proceedings has been the most attractive seasonal lighting installed this season in the lower part of the Royal Mile and in Abbeyhill. The use of somewhat gaudy and unsubtle lights is now out of fashion, and these were simple pale blue lights threaded through trees. (The Grassmarket has been a longstanding style setter in doing this).

A major credit for this seasonal development must be given to the Community Council, which has argued for years that Canongate and Abbeyhill, with their vastly increasing role in Old Town life, have been poorly served in terms of seasonal brightness. The Community

Council has contributed £1000 towards the lights, although obviously the major sponsor is the City Council, and thanks are particularly due to our local Councillors who have supported the campaign.

The tree lights were to be found at a number of locations. Those in Hunter Square, in the front of the Canongate Kirk, in Reid's Court and at Abbeyhill could be seen from a distance, but others have been located in closes, providing a glimpse as one passed the close entry. The Council's aim, in choice of locations, has been to make people aware of the attractiveness of Canongate, the Closes and Abbeyhill area; this is an imaginative policy which we applaud.

## **Greyfriars Kirk and Kirkyard**

Greyfriars Church and its churchyard are to be found tucked away close to the busy area where George IV Bridge, Candlemaker Row and Chambers Street meet. Passing from there into the churchyard, one is struck by the sudden tranquillity – beautiful ornate, ancient monuments and gravestones, trees, herb gardens and a church that looks as if it has been there forever.

The story of Greyfriars and its churchyard starts in 1562. By that time the churchyard of St Giles was greatly overcrowded with burials, and Queen Mary gave permission for the town council to establish a new burial ground within the lands which had previously belonged to the Franciscan Friars, whose friary had been near-by in the Grassmarket. Soon, with the population of Edinburgh expanding rapidly, a new church was also needed, and the Kirk of Greyfriars was established on the site, finally opening in 1620.

The first church was of six bays with a tower at the west end. Gunpowder was stored in the tower, and unfortunately, in 1718 there was a disastrous explosion which caused great damage to that end of the building. A new westward extension was completed by 1722 and the building was partitioned so as to accommodate two congregations under the one roof, while many other features were also incorporated. In 1932 the partition was removed and the two congregations were united. Very recently restoration work has been applied to the outer fabric of the building and to the windows, floors and organ.

The Kirk was the first post Reformation church to be built in Edinburgh. It played an important role in the history of

Edinburgh, and indeed in the history of Scotland. In 1638 the National Covenant was signed there, while William Carstairs chief adviser in Scotland to William III at the Revolution Settlement of 1690, later became minister of Greyfriars, Moderator of the General Assembly and Principal of Edinburgh University. The church still makes an important contribution to the life of Edinburgh, with services in English and Gaelic and as a venue for concerts and exhibitions, particularly at Festival time.

The church receives many visitors as well – over 7,000 in 2009, and forty or so volunteer guides have been recruited, to greet them and answer their questions. Incidentally new volunteers are always welcome. They would be asked to undertake a single 2 hour session each week as one of a team of 2 or 3. If interested, phone 0131 225 1900 or email [administrator@greyfriarskirk.com](mailto:administrator@greyfriarskirk.com).



## **The Fringe on top**

Fringe activities started soon after the Edinburgh Festival itself was established, with theatre groups and others setting up independently at festival time. The Festival Fringe Society, responding to an obvious need, followed soon in 1950, and as is well known, has flourished ever since. It now runs the largest arts festival in the world.

Their present constitution, covering all aspects of governance, has served well since 1969, but it has been decided that the time has come for a revision to take place. With this in view, an online consultation has taken place. The result was over two thousand responses, coming from large organisations and public bodies, and from members of the public. About half the contacts were from Edinburgh, the remainder from elsewhere at home and abroad. The Fringe management has been pleased by the positive and helpful comments received. They have a general policy of welcoming contact and comment from the local community. The Head of External Affairs is Neil Mackinnon who can be contacted at [media@edfringe.com](mailto:media@edfringe.com).

### **Poetry in the Old Town**

The Scottish Poetry Library is situated in Crichton's Close off the Canongate. It is housed in a striking modern building, purpose-designed by Malcolm Fraser, which fits well into the location. The Library, founded just over 25 years ago, provides a friendly and welcoming environment. It holds a fine collection of books, tapes and CDs featuring poetry from Scotland and indeed from all around the world. These can be borrowed.

The library undertakes outreach work, and also welcomes visits, particularly from school parties. These are typically of 11 to 14 year olds, often in groups of 25 to 30. They are introduced to poetry of the City, go out on a tour of the main historic sites of the Canongate including the Kirkyard and the Parliament building and also have a go at writing poems. The OTA's Brownlee Trust has recently presented some beanbags to provide informal seating in the young peoples' area of the library.

Many members of the OTA will doubtless already have paid a visit to the Scottish Poetry Library. If you haven't, why not call in some time? Crichton's Close is on the south side of the Canongate between the Museum of Edinburgh and the Parliament Building. Further information is available by telephone on 557 2876 or on their website at [www.spl.org.uk](http://www.spl.org.uk).



### **Welcome to the National Library**

The National Library of Scotland in George IV Bridge is justly renowned for its unique collection of books and documents. Access has been made as straight forward as possible for such a massive collection, some of which is necessarily stored off site, while procedures are clear and straight forward.

The only reservation which might in the past have been aired was that the entry area, before reaching the reading rooms was somewhat sparse and clinical. On entering, there is now an information desk, and beyond this a refreshment area and a bookshop. Seats and tables have been placed not only in the refreshment area, but along the sides of the entry hall, and at the foot of the grand staircase which leads up

to the reading rooms. The whole atmosphere within this part of the building has become friendly and relaxed.

The security of the valuable collection is obviously most important. In order to gain access, it used to be necessary to show one's Reader's Ticket on entering the building. Now all the security measures have been concentrated at the entry to the actual reading rooms beyond the top of the grand staircase. This again enhances the friendly atmosphere in the building.

For those of us that are a bit wary of the Braveheart, tartan and bagpipes of the recent Homecoming event, well-run organisations which provide a high standard of service and a welcome, might well appear to offer a better prospect of attracting visitors to return to Scotland for a repeat visit. Without overstating the case, our National Library provides a good example of such an organisation.

### **Variety is the Spice of Life**

One of the many joys of living in the Old Town is the variety of everything, including shops. While there has been much written about the unrelenting flood of tourist tat, and rightly so, we should not forget the idiosyncratic shops that have found a home in the city centre and intrigue or distract us as we live our lives. Where else can you find shops that specialise in cheese or goods from

Russia, or boiled sweets. More bizarrely, we have three (yup, three) all year Christmas shops and no fewer than four outlets that will sell you a tattoo or body piercing. Now, we haven't yet found a shop that supplies Santa tattoos or holly nose studs, but perhaps its out there somewhere ...

### **Those trams**

The work in Princes Street is at long last finished apart from the overhead electrical system which will be added later. The process caused traffic chaos in the Old Town, at least in the top part of it, because the Mound was closed as part of the job, with the result that vehicles caused long queues as they waited to pass down Market Street and over Waverley Bridge.

All sorts of unexpected finds were unearthed during the work in progress, including features of archaeological interest. Perhaps the most dramatic was the large masonry duct or pipe which extended the water supply of the Old Town down to the New Town when the latter was built. These finds are to be described at one of the Old Town Association Spring presentations coming up in a few weeks time.

The whole City will be relieved when the work is at long last finished (and paid for). Meanwhile we in the Old Town can consider ourselves fortunate that the work will not actually come through our part of Edinburgh –at least not in the foreseeable future.

## OTA Spring activities

**NLS Map Library.** Monday 25th. January, 2.00 pm. National Library, 33 Salisbury Place, Newington (*N.B. not George IV Bridge*). There will be a tour of the building, then Chris Fleet (Map Collections Manager) will present a slideshow of Edinburgh maps and there will be a chance to view many original maps and atlas volumes in the collection. Coffee or tea will be provided.

Members only. Numbers limited, tickets £4

**King David's Tower.** Friday 19th February, 1.50 pm. Starting from Edinburgh Castle Drawbridge. A tour of the recently excavated King David's Tower and Historic Scotland staff will reveal its history, ancient and modern. **N.B !!** This visit will involve walking on very uneven ground and in dark spaces. Wear suitable footwear and warm clothes.

Members only. Numbers strictly limited, tickets £5

**St James Centre.** Thursday 4th March, 7.00 pm. Scottish Storytelling Centre, High Street. Andrew Wright, who took us through the history of Riddles' Court last year, will discuss the history and future of old James Square and the St. James Centre. The quarter faces major change and, for many, the welcome prospect of the demolition of the present unloved Centre. This is a combined event with the Cockburn Association.

Members' guests welcome. Tickets £5

**Talk and Members' Meeting.** Monday 22nd March, 7.00 pm. Scott House, 8-10 South St. Andrew Street, 2nd Floor. Sorina Spanou of Headland Archaeology will describe the finds which have been uncovered in the course of the works on the tram lines. The Members' Meeting is your chance to quiz the Committee on current issues and concerns.

Members' guests welcome. No charge, but please apply for tickets, to give us an idea of numbers.

**Edinburgh on Film.** Thursday 15th April 7.00 pm. Scottish Storytelling Centre, High Steet. Films from the Collection of the Scottish Screen Archive presented by Ruth Washbrook. This event is sponsored by Edinburgh World Heritage. Members of the Cockburn Association are being invited.

Members' guests welcome. No charge, but please apply for tickets, to give us an idea of numbers.

**Please remember to enclose an SAE when you order tickets.**