



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

September 2010

The recent economic recession put a brake on various large-scale developments in the Old Town. Things are picking up again now, but it is not clear at the moment whether the recession will have changed things for the better or not. The Caltongate scheme and proposals for the site around Advocate's Close have both already obtained Planning Consent. The Advocate's project may now go ahead, but efforts to kick start Caltongate have so far come to nothing. Anta Architects suggested modifications to Caltongate which might result in it not clashing so brutally with the local environment. It will be tempting however at both sites for the new developers to go ahead along the agreed lines, rather than experience delay while they apply formally Planning Consent to incorporate preferred changes.

Meanwhile consent is being sought for development of a large brewery site at Sugarhouse Close in the Canongate. This is located on the south side of the street between Moray House and the Museum of Edinburgh. It is a large single plot of land extending down to Holyrood Road. Many such Canongate backlands remained as gardens until industry took them over, and the closes were quite short, simply providing access from the Canongate to the backs of the houses and to the gardens. The early industry here was sugar refining, hence the name of the close, but the site spent most of its industrial life as a brewery, one of many in Canongate in Victorian and later times. This is the last surviving group of brewery buildings in the Canongate.

The proposal is for some housing, together with managed student accommodation which is designed to be used as an Apart/Hotel during the tourist season. The layout incorporates and makes good use of the original brewery buildings, with modern additions alongside. The overall configuration is like an elongated 'H' with buildings down the two sides of the site, joined together in the middle.

The proposals appear in general to have been well received, although concern has been expressed about intended building heights adjacent to the Museum of Edinburgh and at the Holyrood Road end of the site, and also regarding cladding materials being proposed.

Building height in Old Town redevelopments is frequently an issue. Developers naturally wish to obtain the best investment return they can, and upper floor rooms with good views over the tops of the surrounding buildings

are an attractive proposition. There is inevitably potential conflict over such matters for the Councillors who have to make well balanced planning decisions, but also wish to develop the local economy and, of course, increase Council Tax income.

The future decisions of the Planning Department, including this one, will be watched with interest following the 'smacked wrist' administered to the Council by the World Heritage assessors last year. In the present case, if the Planning Department were to take a firm lead, it seems that a satisfactory compromise and an acceptable and extremely pleasing development might arise. Will they and will it? We shall see.



Perspective view of the proposal looking north from Holyrood Road, thanks to Oberlanders Architects LLP

Trees

People are fond of trees, in both town and country. Lord Cockburn wrote, concerning the building of the New Town 'we massacre every town tree that comes in the mason's way', and 'no apology is thought necessary for destroying a tree; many for preserving it'. Things have improved greatly since then. In planting new trees however, more care and foresight appear to be needed in choosing suitable sites.

The distant or not so distant sight of the Old Town perched on its steep sided ridge is one of the best known and appreciated views of Edinburgh. It is getting more difficult to find places from which to do the appreciating in recent years however. Trees, planted for all the best motives, increase in height, and then can block cherished views. One well known Old Town vista is from the open lawn to the

south of Inverleith House in the Botanical Gardens. The whole Old Town descending from the Castle down to Holyrood used to provide a spectacular view from beneath the mature beech trees which surround the lawn. Trees that were planted in the Chinese garden below and to the north are rapidly getting in the way however. Even in this centre of botanical excellence, nobody appeared to think of this when they laid out these areas.

Closer to home, the main upper path in East Princes Street Gardens can still provide the view, but it is largely obscured from the rows of park benches on the lower path. The same can be said of the view from sections of the path through the West Gardens looking towards the Castle.

Too much of a good thing perhaps?.

Royal Palaces and Hostel Dorms

We sometimes forget that the Old Town is home to more than tourists. We have multi-starred hotels, student housing, luxury flats, council houses - but also homes for the homeless.

These last can be as varied as any hotels or private housing: the Salvation Army or Cunningham House will provide clean accommodation in rooms and dormitories, but the Old Town also has a house run by Keymoves, a voluntary organisation, where homeless women can find their dignity and confidence again after suffering months, or even years, of various sorts of abuse. They have their own room in a shared flat (for which they pay rent according to their means) while they are helped to regain independence. The Council - helped by churches and individuals - subsidises such hostels, but by law, official funding cannot be automatically extended from year to year so there is always a certain uncertainty! What is certain, sadly, is that less money will be available in future. The Old Town takes a pride in having such a wide range of housing within its boundaries and we can ill afford, in human terms, to lose any of them.

Angels with bagpipes

There have been angels with bagpipes in the Thistle Chapel of St Giles' for a while but some of them appear to have escaped across the High Street. Baffled? Well Angels with Bagpipes is the name of a new restaurant which has just opened there. This is a really good bit of news for the Old Town. What earlier were Council offices at 343 High Street, at the head of Roxburgh's Close, have been beautifully converted for Marina Crolla and Sylvia Hamilton by Malcolm Fraser Architects.

The design exploits the best features of the old buildings. The frontage has had careful restoration, but is relatively narrow. There

is a long side wall however with large windows facing out over the courtyard of Roxburgh's Close. This used to look a bit drab and deserted, but now it is completely transformed, with tables set amongst trees and potted plants. Rooms on two floors of varying size within the restaurant are designed to create a range of atmosphere from discrete intimacy to extroverted welcome. There is seating for over eighty guests with tables outside in addition.

The menu created by Paul Whitecross the head chef is broadly based, with a definite hint of Italian. Is there perhaps a coincidence that Roxburgh's Close was named after a seventeenth century inhabitant who owned several properties in the Close including the present one and was described in old documents as 'John Roxbruch, cooke'? Perhaps he was Paul's distant predecessor.

Why is 'Angels with Bagpipes' good news? Well, when so many properties in the Royal Mile have been going relentlessly downmarket, it is a real pleasure to welcome this well designed, high quality development making an appearance. Go and see for yourself, and perhaps stay for a cup or glass of something.

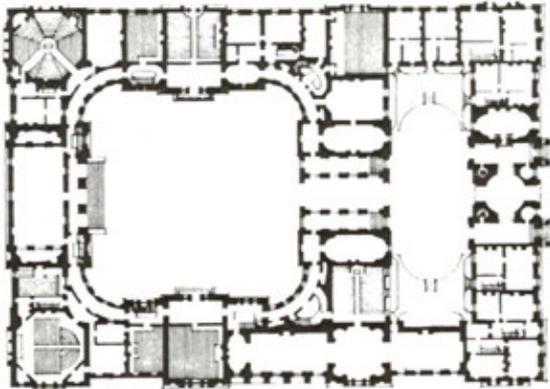


Photograph thanks to Marina and Sylvia

A New Look for the Old College

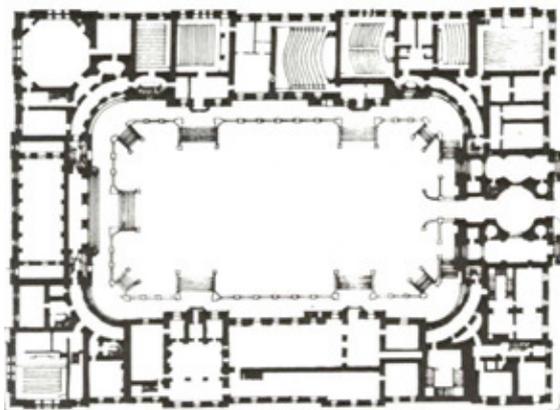
The quadrangle of Old College is to be given a make-over. Instead of a sloping gravel area, it is to be levelled and grassed

over with a paved surround. The design is by conservation architects Simpson & Brown.

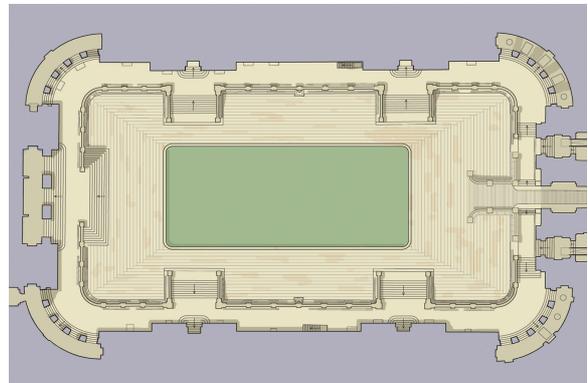


Old College is not as the original architect intended. Only the east range was built to the designs of Robert Adam, and even then the (rather puny) dome designed by Adam was not built. Adam intended that there should be two courtyards, on different levels to allow for the sloping site, with a sloping ramp beneath the building separating the two courtyards similar to the sloping ramp from the street that we see today.

The building was completed a generation later by William Playfair, and he changed Adam's double-courtyard scheme to a single courtyard. While the buildings on all four sides were completed to Playfair's design, the courtyard was not finished and the raised access walkway and steps were added later. Also added later was the great dome, designed by Robert Rowand Anderson and topped by the golden boy holding the torch of education.



All these changes of design left the issue of the levels in the quad unresolved. The University now has money (from a private donor) to spend on the problem. The answer produced by Simpson & Brown is to extend the ramp from the street into the open space to gain extra height, so allowing the rest of the quad to be levelled. There will be benches and unavoidable clutter (litter bins and bicycle racks) but it should be a great improvement on the present rather haphazard appearance. And a final bonus will be that the public will be welcome to come in and sit in what will be an oasis of academic calm amid the hurly-burly of South Bridge.



Images thanks to Simpson & Brown Architects

Electronic Curtain Twitching

The favoured way to know what is going on in your neighbourhood, is to peer out of one's window – twitching the net curtain. But the Old Town is a densely built-up area and has windows in tight corners and high up, so the view can be limited. These days, one can see much more by twitching the electronic curtain.

Search engines can bring you lots of information about your area. The best known, Google, gives you maps, aerial shots, oblique views and photos taken from passing vehicles. Google also points you to websites and information on the World Wide Web – and there is a whole industry to make one person's site stand out from the crowd (this usually involves money passing to Google). Better by far to be selective and choose what sites you go to

for information. Many of the most useful are sites of public bodies. This is public information – your rates and taxes paid for it – use it!

Scottish Assessors Association (www.saa.gov.uk). Entering the postcode of any property will bring up information about rates including the proprietor (owner or agent) and occupier; a further click will bring a note of the accommodation within a building, and its designated use. See who owns the shop which belts music into the street. Check who is the occupier of the restaurant which puts out its rubbish too early so that it gets spread across the pavement by seagulls. Information on domestic property is limited to the Council Tax band – the owner or occupier are not listed – so you can't be too nosy.

The City Planning Portal (<http://citydev-portal.edinburgh.gov.uk>). You can search for details of properties by address or by zooming in on the map and clicking on the dot. Once you have selected a property, you can see its planning history for the last twelve years. Does that take-away have permission to serve hot food? Has consent been granted for that horrible awning? This is where you can find out.

You can see if a building is listed as being of architectural or historical importance from the Historic Scotland website (www.historic-scotland.gov.uk) – click on 'Looking after our heritage', then 'Historic and listed buildings'. The list description is only a few clicks away, though be aware

that you might take several searches to find the right combination of terms to find the building you are looking for– the whole of Edinburgh is covered by the parish of Edinburgh Burgh (City of). Even if your building is not listed, the Dictionary of Scottish Architects and Scotland's Places can lead you to information. These two are:

(www.scottisharchitects.org.uk) and
(www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk).

Happy browsing!

The Old Town viewed from Westminster

Central Edinburgh? No, We're East! What do the Old Town, Craigmillar and Joppa have in common? Not a lot, you might think, as they have different history, architecture and demography. But they are all in the Westminster Constituency of Edinburgh East. The demise of the Central Edinburgh constituency did not mean that the area was equally divided between the five new larger constituencies covering Edinburgh, instead all of the Old Town was added to Edinburgh East. The boundary runs to the south of The Meadows and Bruntsfield Links, up Lothian Road, along Princes Street and out along Regent Road and Easter Road. So not only all of the Old Town but the Southside and parts of Tollcross are in Edinburgh East. Who would have thought that the King's Theatre (our own West End) is not West at all, but East!

Committee membership

The Committee of the Old Town Association meets monthly at one or another of the Members' houses or flats. The meetings are conducted in a businesslike manner, but members also enjoy something of a social occasion with a friendly atmosphere. One can get a good idea of the wide range of topics covered if you are a regular reader of the Newsletter. We can always do with new members, people that are really interested in aspects of life and work in the Old Town. Those with specialist knowledge or skills, in Planning or Licensing procedures, computing or bookkeeping for example, would be particularly welcome. If you might be interested, get in touch with our Convener Barbara Logue on Bj21logue@aol.com.

OTA Autumn activities

Calton Hill Observatory House. Tuesday 14th September, 6.30 p.m. Come and enjoy a sneak preview of Observatory House on Calton Hill, freshly renovated and shortly to be made available for rent to the public by the Vivat Trust. Simon Green of RCHAMS will be our guide and explain the history of the building.

Members only. Numbers Limited, tickets £3

Our Poetic Royal Mile. Wednesday, 22nd September, 4.30 p.m. Explore the poetic history of the Old Town on this walking tour led by poet Ken Cockburn. Starting from John Knox's House, we'll make our way down the Canongate to the Scottish Poetry Library. On the way we'll visit courtyards, kirkyards and vennels, accompanied by the words of poets old and new, from Burns and Fergusson to MacCaig and De Luca. Come and be inspired!

Members only. Numbers limited, tickets £5

The value of place. Tuesday, 12th October, 5 p.m. Urban Room in the Council's Waverley Court, Market Street. Riccardo Marini, the City Design leader, will talk about how we should understand the real value of our open spaces and their power to shape our future.

Members' guests welcome, tickets £3

Historic shopfronts of Edinburgh. Wednesday 3rd November, 7 p.m. Augustine United Church. Join us with Dr Lindsay Lennie, a consultant for Historic Scotland, for an illustrated talk on the architectural history of Scottish shops with a particular focus on Edinburgh. Dr Lennie has researched the historic shops of Scotland, and published a book on the topic earlier this year.

Members' guests welcome, tickets £5 This is a joint event with the Cockburn Association.

AGM and talk. Monday 13th December, 7 p.m. Second floor, Free Church of Scotland Building, 15 North Bank Street, on the Mound, The AGM is the chance for you to meet the Committee, hear reports of the last year, and raise matters of concern. It will be preceded by a presentation by Jenny Paine of St. Thomas of Aquin's High School on her work with Edinburgh World Heritage on their project "Looking up!"

AGM, therefore members only - no cost , but please apply for tickets to let us judge numbers.

Please remember to send a stamped addressed envelope for your tickets!

Other events and happenings

Riding of the Marches: Saturday 12th. September - finishes on the Royal Mile.

Doors Open Days: Saturday 25th & Sunday 26th September. Brochures from your local Library.

Public Meeting: Neighbourhood Partnerships, Thursday 30th September, 7.00pm, at the City Chambers.