



# Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

January 2011

Buskers are an integral part of the way of life in the Old Town and many of them contribute in a very positive way to the street scene. It is not at all unusual, at least in the summer, to hear violinists or guitar players of the highest ability, playing classical and traditional music. Admittedly in Festival time, the standards are not always of the highest, but the Fringe staff schedule and control what takes place in a discreet but efficient way, and are aware of the identities of the participants. This past year Fringe organisers (although their responsibility stops at 9pm) even asked their all-night security men to speak to noisy performers and ask them to stop if they were still around after 10pm.

Things are not always so happy at other times. The activities of buskers can become really intrusive if they are too loud, stay too long or are performing at late hours. Many horror stories can be told – people playing bongo drums, a loud, persistent and monotonous sound, night after night at the same spot, a saxophone player performing at 1 o'clock in the morning, or a loud 'singer' performing a limited repertoire of songs over and over again for up to three hours. Bongo drums, one might point out, are actually banned in some towns.

If you are troubled by unreasonable noise, you can phone the Police and they will come as soon as an officer is available, and move the trouble-makers. So far so good, but it's not quite so simple. The disturbance is often late in the evening and, by the time the Police come, residents can have endured hours of noise, and because it's late, most residents are unwilling to go outside and attempt to deal with the situation themselves.

There are other problems. Persistent buskers are just that. When requested by police officers to move on, many will simply come back the next day, or even just move further along the street and start again once the police have left the scene. They have excuses too, like 'we are perfectly legal until 11 o'clock' or 'we didn't realise people lived around here'. Do they really believe what they are saying? There may not be rows of suburban houses, but rather like rodents, you are never more than a few metres from a resident wherever you are in the Old Town!

The Police are fully aware of the limitations of the present situation and are genuinely keen to find a solution consistent with available resources. They are

holding discussions between the relevant Council staff and their Safer Neighbourhood Team, and 'Priority Group' meetings with Council staff and various members of the public are taking place to discuss issues of concern to the community.

Meanwhile, buskers present a less serious immediate problem than, for example robbery or serious assault, problems which the Police have to deal with on a day by day basis. Their consequences are less traumatic in the short term, but their continuing effect can have a serious impact in the long term. Perhaps a system could be introduced for police officers to note names of offenders and provide guidelines for future behaviour when moving buskers on. The introduction of a formal busker registration process might also be a way forward. We will have to wait and see, but some such arrangement is needed.

### **Canongate Venture – good news**

The Caltongate project, involving the extensive site on the north side of the Canongate collapsed a year or so ago. The scheme included the demolition, amongst other buildings, of Canongate Venture, previously the North Canongate Infant School, which stands across East Market Street from the Council's Waverley Court. The proposal to demolish this elegant early 1900s building generated vigorous protests, and the Council has now produced a new development scheme for that area which will incorporate the building. This is really good news, but there could be a small problem.

The accompanying photograph from the early 1900s shows the new school building with a splendid bellcote and bell surmounted by a cupola and weather vane. They are there no more, but enquiries reveal that steeplejacks removed the whole structure at the request of the Council some two years ago, because the wooden uprights had rotted, with the risk that the whole assembly might come crashing down.

The important components are now said to be in safe storage, pending definite decisions regarding the future role of the building. We very much hope the bellcote and weather vane will soon be repaired and restored to their rightful place.



Photo: Crown Copyright RCAHMS.

### **Planning and retail – a guide**

You may have noticed a certain loss and degradation of the retail offering in the Old Town in recent years. George IV Bridge for example retains only two shops, both newsagents, along with sixteen outlets selling food and or drink. You can't blame businesses for doing this, it is their job to make a living, which they will do by the best available means, and they will constantly push the rules to the limit. Compared to proper retailing, sandwich bars are easy pickings for an entrepreneur; no special knowledge, training or experience is required, and unskilled staff can be employed. Also, you don't need planning permission.

There are problems with the planning system, in that the 'use classes' are too broad and ill defined; Class 1 Retail includes sandwich bars, which can re-heat food. They are not supposed to cook, offer table service or have more than eight covers, but there is no penalty for breaking these conditions. In the Grassmarket alone, there are six such 'retail' units, all still offering cooked food,

Then there is 'Ancillary Use'. Blackwell's bookshop, claiming a need to provide refreshment for its customers, leased Café Nero an area which is in effect a separate operation with its own shopfront, and even the National Library serves coffee now.

Certain streets are designated as 'speciality shopping'. St. Mary's Street, Jeffrey Street High Street, Lawnmarket, Victoria Street and the Grassmarket are supposedly protected by certain policies. Change of use from Class 1 shop to Class 3 restaurant, is supposedly prohibited where it would result in four or more consecutive non-retail uses, but of course that doesn't count sandwich bars!

There are numerous Guidelines for assessing whether such changes of use should be granted, to be found on: <http://tinyurl.com/plan-guidelines>

Unfortunately a lot of these are actually non-statutory. If the Council rejects an application, the applicant can appeal to Scottish Ministers. Meanwhile the Council has a limited budget to spare for legal battles with well funded developers. The solution to this of course is exemplified in the new Licensing Act, national not local in its scope, its instruments statutory and backed up by prescribed penalties.

Edinburgh needs to get more serious about its retail offering, some advances have been made in the city

centre, but compared to fast food outlets, small speciality shops in the Old Town are just as valuable and if anything a greater draw to the city. This is a challenge that the Council needs to be encouraged to meet.

## Charles II

In our April edition last year we described the Edinburgh World Heritage Twelve Monuments Restoration Scheme. This is progressing well, and the Old Town Association has now given a donation of £500 towards the cost of restoring the equestrian statue of Charles II that has been a feature of Parliament Square since 1685. The statue was lifted from its plinth one Sunday morning in November and our picture records the historic event.

The precious item duly arrived safely at the conservators in Rochester in Kent. After a careful recording of its external condition, it will be examined internally in order to agree the repair works. External inspection has shown evidence of previous coatings, including traces of gilding. Covering the statue in gold would protect the fragile lead from the Scottish weather and prolong the life of the statue. Whether we are ready for the dazzling spectacle is another matter. The statue, with or without gilding, should be returned to its plinth by the end of March 2011.



Frank McGrail, Edinburgh World Heritage

## Cheer up

We thought you might like a cheerful picture to light up the winter gloom. This is the Shambles in York, a busy tourist street, well cared for. It just shows what is possible with proper controls and enforcement! Our Council officials are clearly doing the best they can for the Old Town in the face of inadequate legislation, however despite our hopes, things have actually deteriorated over the last year or so. The latest horrors are large flags outside the shops and strong floodlighting shining on white painted frontages. If things don't improve soon, the problems may well become a significant factor in future Council and Scottish Parliamentary elections.



[www.visityork.org](http://www.visityork.org)

**Renewing Old Edinburgh - Book review**  
Argyll Publishing, £14.99.  
[www.argyllpublishing.com](http://www.argyllpublishing.com)

This book by Jim Johnson and Lou Rosenberg has had a long gestation but it is certainly worth the wait. The authors are well known in their own fields of

architecture and town planning; additionally because of their long term residence in and allegiance to the Old Town, they are admirably suited to capture the spirit of the place and to understand the relevance of the Geddes legacy.

The book takes the 1860s as its starting point for the renewal of the Old Town and concentrates on 'the protracted struggle between two conflicting approaches to area-based regeneration'. These are large scale demolition and comprehensive development (*pace* Edinburgh University and the late unlamented Council-Mountgrange axis) and the Geddesian smaller scale, sensitive approach (which Geddes classified as 'cosmetic surgery').

Johnson & Rosenberg make extensive use of original sources. Their approach is scholarly but the plethora of high quality photographs, both of the Old and New Towns, are a fine leaven to the text.

A book highly recommended to anyone interested in the development, both past and future of the City. It explores new areas giving due credit to the Old Town Renewal Trust and UNESCO involvement. Although there is history, it is finally remarkably up-to-date, looking at the future threats to the area, which still loom large.

The Brownlee Old Town Trust contributed towards the publication of this work.

*Renewing Old Edinburgh may be purchased through the bookstall on the Old Town Association website. Click on the link and it takes you to the relevant Amazon page (where the book is sold at a discount). A small donation to the OTA is made for each purchase you make by clicking from this page. You do not have to buy any of the books listed – if you access Amazon using links on the OTA bookstall, all your purchases benefit the OTA. If you buy from Amazon, make sure you access the site from the OTA site; then all your purchases will benefit the Association.*

## OTA Spring activities

**Royal Observatory, Blackford Hill.** Thursday, 27th January, 6 p.m. at the Observatory. It is now many years since our last visit to the Observatory, which has this year had a major refurbishment. Come for a tour of the new facilities, which will include a visit to the dome for a demonstration of how the roof turns and opens and, clouds permitting, we will view the heavens through the reflector telescope.

Members' guests welcome, tickets £4

**The John Murray Archive, an overview.** Wednesday, 9th February, 6.30 p.m. at the National Library of Scotland, George IV Bridge. Join us for talk by David McClay, Senior Curator, National Library of Scotland. Although best known as the publishers of the likes of Lord Byron, Jane Austen, David Livingstone and Charles Darwin, the London based John Murray publishing house also had strong and important links with Edinburgh. Discover more in this illustrated talk.

Members' guests welcome, tickets £3

**Old College excavation.** Wednesday, 2nd. March, 7 p.m. at Scott House, 8-10 South St. Andrew Street. Recent excavations of the entirety of the University of Edinburgh's Old College quadrangle by Addyman Archaeology revealed an extraordinary wealth of archaeological remains including the medieval cemetery of Kirk o' Fields, a 16<sup>th</sup> century ducal residence, and the remains of 17<sup>th</sup> century and later college buildings. Tom Addyman will talk us through the finds. To be followed by wine and nibbles - come and join us for a wee party!

Members' guests welcome, tickets £5

**A wardrobe fit for a king.** Monday 21st March, 7 p.m. at the Quaker Meeting House, Victoria Terrace. When George IV announced that he was visiting Edinburgh in 1822, it threw the population of Scotland into a frenzy. What to wear to meet the King and where to buy it? Go shopping in the capital city and consult Sir Walter Scott and Mrs Siddons about appropriate attire. An illustrated (and sometimes hilarious) lecture from Annie Scanlon will be followed by a **Members' Meeting**. Please do support this as a donation will be taken to support Annie's 'twin school' in Kenya.

Members' guests welcome. No charge, but please apply for tickets as usual.

**Please remember to include a SAE when you order tickets.**

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### Vouchers for schools.

The supermarkets will be issuing vouchers for schools again this year in promotions. Please save them so that we can pass them on to the children in the Old Town. Either send them in with your requests for tickets, hand them in at a meeting, or send them directly to Naomi Richardson, Flat 23, 50 North Bridge, Edinburgh EH1 1QN