



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

September 2012

Can New Brooms Sweep Clean?

Following the recent council elections we have a fresh regime in Edinburgh. The new Councillors were elected expressing the will to tackle the poor state of the shops in the Old Town. There is absolutely no reason to doubt their good faith, but they are already finding how difficult this is within the present legal framework.

Attention was paid a few weeks ago to the shop which is one of the most consistent offenders. It regularly has racks of goods for sale, together with two grotesque animal figures cluttering a large area of the pavement, accompanied by quantities of other goods festooning the front of the shop and advertisements for rented accommodation occupying the remainder of the frontage. A few weeks ago the pavement clutter was removed by the Council. Last time this was tried further up the street a year or so ago, replacements had been placed out in the same positions within an hour. There was some improvement this time. There were no replacements for two days, but then, bit by bit all the rest came out and we were soon back to where we started, although one of the animal figures appears to be taking its annual holiday.

This is written in a slightly flippant way, but seriously, unless the new administration seeks adequate new powers, we will be in for yet another period of failed intentions, and the Old Town really deserves better.

Caltongate Revived

The Caltongate development was bought by Artisan Real Estate Investors in December 2011. Artisan can proceed with the development that we are all so unhappy with as it has planning permission, but we are hopeful that significant changes will be made taking into account the views of UNESCO, national conservation bodies and local civic and amenity organisations. If significant changes are made, the application will be made in the autumn.

Artisan is proposing to hold consultation events, one in October in the pre-application period, and a second once an application is lodged. We have asked Artisan's PR consultants Weber Shandwick to send us details of the events as soon as they are arranged. We shall post the information on our website.

There's a small hotel

A few years ago, there was a proposal for a small hotel to occupy the former Salvation Army women's hostel at the west end of the Grassmarket. When the proposal came up for planning consent, local people, by and large, thought it a reasonable idea, and it was approved by the planners, naturally with a licence to sell drinks. Then, it was magically transformed from a 54-bed boutique hotel into Art Roch, a 200-bed backpackers' hostel, welcoming stag and hen parties, with, of course a licence already in place to sell booze. Local people were outraged at what had happened, and hopefully the Council will ensure that such skulduggery cannot happen in future. We can never be sure however, as the same thing happened in the Cowgate where a small hotel with a bar ended up as a massive bar on three levels providing a few rooms of accommodation.

The result in the Grassmarket was a scruffy mess, with reports in the press of poor maintenance, so poor that there was an outbreak of bedbugs at one stage. Viewed from the Vennel, which passes down one side of the building, it is poorly kept with rubbish left piled up outside.

The establishment has now gone into administration and will be sold, most likely to the highest bidder, but this is just the sort of place that we could very well do without in the Old Town. Perhaps we will now get a 54-bed boutique hotel on this prime site, but don't hold your breath!

Tree Rings and Paintings

One of the Old Town's oldest buildings is through the pend of Advocate's Close on the right which dates from the late 1400s. This was occupied for some years by the art gallery DOM. Before that it was the offices of the Old Town Renewal Trust. Earlier yet, it was for a while the home of the Council's Licensing Department, having been 'modernised' with a false ceiling and panelled walls.. When these

were removed as part of the current development work a fine painted ceiling was revealed. This will, of course, be retained following a conservation exercise during which some small samples of the wooden beams were taken in order to determine their age by means of tree ring analysis.

When a tree is growing, it produces tree rings indicating annual growth and these vary in width from year to year, depending on the weather. By measuring the pattern, this can be matched to a collection of others for trees of known age and from different locations, and the source of the timber and its date can often be found. This is made easier if the sample contains rings right out to the most recent year's growth beyond which would have been the bark. They were lucky as this was the situation they found at Advocate's Close.

The results were most dramatic. The beams were actually identified as being of Norwegian oak felled between 1589 and 1591. Norway was a common source of timber used in Scotland in those times, and the tree ring dates correspond exactly to the 1590 carved over the main door of the building along with the initials of wealthy Edinburgh merchant Clement Cor and his wife Helen Belenden. Their initials, together with the family coat of arms and Clement's merchant's mark can be seen over the entrance door. Clement Cor added the upper storeys of the building, building on the lower floor which dates from the 1400s.

Collapse!

The firm behind the proposal to erect a 200ft observation wheel in West Princes Street Gardens has collapsed and gone into administration. The OTA was one of many organisations and individuals who objected to the proposal to destroy one of our accessible peaceful places with this abomination. Still, if something had to collapse, better by far that it was a company than the bridge over the railway!

A Change for the Better?

The proliferation of ‘tartan tat’ shops in the city centre has been a recurring theme of recent newsletters. While things are still bad we are cautiously optimistic that the nadir may have been passed. One or two of the worst tat shops have been ‘rebranded’ as slightly more up-market souvenir establishments, with fewer baskets clogging the pavement and less merchandise draped across the shop-fronts. The ‘cashmere’ has probably never seen a goat, the country of origin is nowhere near Scotland, and they are not shops we could recommend, but ... they are a step in the right direction.



Sometimes our pessimism has been misplaced. When the soap shop at 263 Canongate closed, we all expected it to become yet another ‘tat’ shop. Our Hon President even had a bet with a local businessman that it would re-open as a ‘tat’ shop. Our Hon President was delighted to lose the bet; 263 Canongate has re-opened as a top-quality food shop selling Scottish produce of mouth-watering variety. If you are ever stuck for a ‘thank you’ present, or where to send guests for Scottish produce, ‘Cranachan & Crowdie’ is the place!

Above, Cranachan & Crowdie, 263 Canongate

Right, Ghost of a fruit shop in the Canongate, visible during recent shop-front renewal

Royal Mile Shopping – Sixty Years of Change

With the quality of goods on sale quite an issue, students from the University of Edinburgh Business School carried out an audit of shops on the Royal Mile in 2012. This shows that over half the shops sell goods that can be classified as gifts, and that does not include kilt shops or antique and jewellery shops.

A study of the Post Office Directory in 1952 provides an interesting comparison. See the table overleaf and the pie charts on the following page. It starkly points up the shift from ‘useful’ shops to tourist-oriented ones. For example, 23 food shops in 1952 and only 5 now (and that includes the fudge shops!). It is also interesting to see how much small industry there was in 1952 with workshops such as wireworks, printers and blacksmiths.

There are some mysteries: what was the ‘charging station’ at 326 Lawnmarket? And what did the delightfully-named Buffery’s sell at 34 High Street? Perhaps some of you know!



Cool, Calm and Collecting

Readers may recall the justified fuss that was made last year when Tom Gilzean was making collections for local charities at Castlehill without official permission. The authorities relented and he ended up collecting tens of thousands of pounds, with £25,000 going to the Sick Children's Hospital; an extraordinary achievement for a person in his early nineties.

Tom is back again this year, now located across the road from St Giles, still dressed in an immaculate tartan outfit, and now on wheels, although he says that he has no intention of taking up Grand Prix racing! He does a daily stint of three or four hours, weather permitting, with the odd cup of tea provided by one of the shops to keep him going. This year's target is to raise £50,000 and on going to print he has already reached £26,000.



During WW2 Tom served in the Royal Engineers and was in North Africa when the allied troops were being driven back towards Egypt. He tells with a twinkle in the eye that they anticipated that as the allies retreated General Rommel might end up staying in a particular hotel so they

packed explosives behind the fireplace. This didn't work however – the hotel was soon no more, but Rommel didn't stay there! Later Tom was in the Far East, then in Holland and Belgium towards the end of the conflict. There certainly are not too many distinguished characters like that to be found in the Old Town.

GIFTED

Between March and November 2011, ten intricate book sculptures were gifted anonymously to various institutions across Edinburgh including Edinburgh Central Library, The Scottish Poetry Library and the Scottish Storytelling Centre. Each of the pieces came with a unique message that included the line 'in support of libraries, books, words, ideas...'. All ten sculptures will be on display at the Scottish Poetry Library from Saturday 24 November to Saturday 8 December. See <http://thisiscentralstation.com/featured/mysterious-paper-sculptures/>

Enlightenment

Something to recommend to visitors is the Edinburgh World Heritage Bus Tour. This is an addition to the sightseeing tours in open-top buses run by Edinburgh Bus Tours, part of Lothian Buses. The tour covers the large World Heritage Site in an hour. The tour reaches as far east as Drummond Place, north to Great King Street, west to Stewart's Melville and Donaldson's and south to Lauriston Place. The commentary, devised with the help of Edinburgh World Heritage, not only covers the development of the city, but touches on its cultural heritage, pointing out writers' residences such as those of J M Barrie and Robert Louis Stevenson. As with the other open-top bus tours, you may get off and on at will, so you can use the orange-and-buff World Heritage Bus Tour to visit the Modern Art Galleries and the Georgian House and Gladstone's Land. You may roam further afield by buying a joint ticket for the other bus tours, all of which leave from Waverley Bridge.

Autumn Activities 2012

Chippendale International School of Furniture, Gifford, East Lothian. Saturday 29 September, 11.30 am. Founded in 1985, this highly-regarded furniture school runs professional furniture and cabinet making courses. Take this opportunity to visit this acclaimed institution and perhaps enjoy lunch and an afternoon in East Lothian. Gifford has good pubs / places to eat. Members' guests welcome but numbers are limited, tickets £5 .

Scottish Genealogy Society, Victoria Terrace. Thursday 11 October, 7.00 pm. Meet at the Quaker Meeting House, Victoria Terrace. Join us for a talk by the Scottish Genealogy Society. We will split into two groups for the evening. One will have a presentation in the QMH, while the other sees the resources in their nearby premises, and then we swap round. Bring your family details and see what is on offer! Members' guests welcome but numbers are limited, tickets £3 .

A Walk around the Bridges. Saturday 27 October, 11.00 am. Meet at Howie's, Waterloo Place. In the late 18th and early 19th century Edinburgh was radically reshaped by the construction of the bridges within the city centre. These great civil engineering works transformed how people moved around the city and enabled the development of the New Town and the suburbs beyond. Today these structures are rather taken for granted and go unnoticed, partly hidden by the surrounding buildings. Structural Engineer Dominic Echlin will lead a walking tour to look at South Bridge, North Bridge, Regents Arch and George IV Bridge and will discuss their fascinating history and how they transformed Edinburgh. Members' guests welcome but numbers are limited, tickets £5 .

Members' Meeting and Talk on Children's Gardens in the Dark Places of the Old Town. Monday 19 November, 7.00 pm. Quaker Meeting House. In the early years of the 20th century, children living in the slums of Edinburgh's Old Town had virtually no access to green space. Within a few years, two pioneering initiatives, the Free Kindergartens and the Outlook Tower, created more than fifteen children's gardens. Jean Bareham will give an illustrated talk about the major role played by women in bringing gardens and creative outdoor play to the area. The Members' Meeting follows, with an opportunity to ask questions and raise concerns. Members' guests welcome. No cost, but please apply for tickets as usual to give us an idea of numbers

700 years - Edinburgh's Archival Heritage and Treasures. Wednesday 12 December, 7.00 pm. City Chambers. Come and see some of the hidden treasures of the City Archives. These range from medieval to modern, from the beautiful to the quirky, and downright gruesome! City Archivist Richard Hunter will show us the exhibits and share his expertise with us. Members' guests welcome, tickets £3.

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

Other events and happenings

William Wallace Letters on display at the Scottish Parliament, 15 August to 8 September. See www.scottishparliament.uk for exact times.

Riding of the Marches: Sunday 9 September - finishes with ride of around 200 riders up the Royal Mile and a ceremony at the Mercat Cross

Doors Open Days: Saturday 22 & Sunday 23 September.

Samhain Festival: Wednesday 31 October. Procession and street theatre outside St. Giles.

Previously! Festival of History 13 - 30 November. <http://www.historyfest.co.uk/events/>

Free weekend entry to Edinburgh Castle around St. Andrew's Day. Historic Scotland.