



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

January 2014

Old Town Community Council

The Old Town Community Council is winding up. One of the Community Council's long-standing members, and past Chair, is OTA Hon President Anja Amsel. Anja explains why the Community Council is winding up:

“We started with high hopes and a reasonably sized membership. Although the Community Council is a statutory body it appears to carry little weight with the policy makers, and although consultation happens it is frequently merely tokenism. Over the years the situation has become more and more untenable. Among the community there is a feeling of disillusion about what can be achieved.

“Against this background it is hard, even impossible, to recruit people who will give their time and commitment. The feeling is that we operate in a scenario where resident interests, which the Community Council represents, are sacrificed to commercial ones.

“Against this bleak scenario I can see no alternative but for the Community Council to wind itself up. If the Council would like such a statutory body to be part of the structure, there must be a climate in which it feels effective.”

This feeling of helplessness is not limited to the Old Town. Similar views were expressed at a recent meeting on the Edinburgh Civic Forum; a regular gathering of community councils, local street associations, amenity and partnership bodies to discuss issues of common interest. Why bother to collate views on matters of current concern if all that time and effort is ignored?

If you want something done...

There might be a feeling of disillusion about what can be achieved with regard to consultation by the City Council, but this is most definitely not present within the community with regard to their open spaces. In recent years, local residents have taken over patches of concrete and turned them into oases of green. Here is a selection of photos taken last summer:





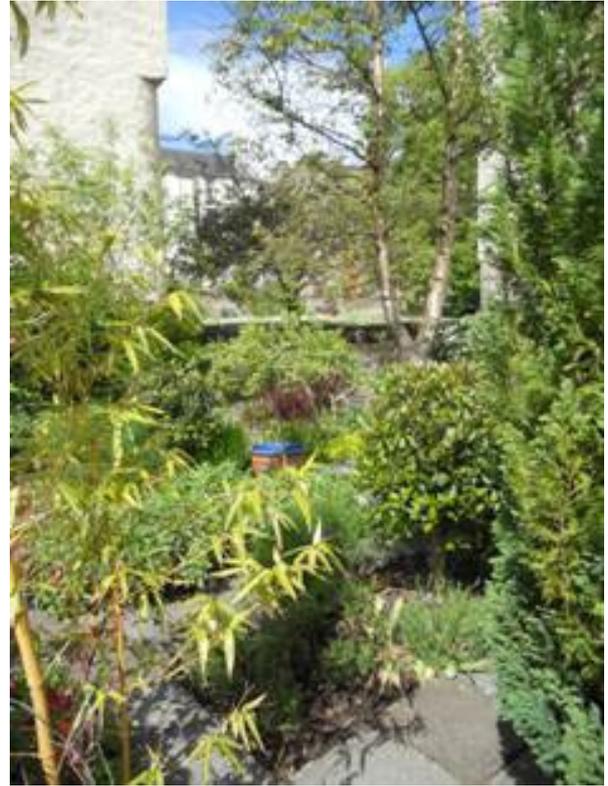
Abbeyhill Crescent. The previous page shows an unimproved area.



Campbell's Close Stumpery: a pile of logs creating a haven for insects.



Tweeddale Court. A private balcony turned into a patch of colour.



Above and below: Chessels Court.



To be fair, the City Council has provided a lot of help with many of these initiatives, but none of these green spaces would have happened without the active involvement of local residents, not only with deciding what areas to turn into gardens, but carrying out the work to create the flower beds and subsequently maintaining them.



*Above: Coinyie House Close.
Below: Tron Square.*



This community effort was recognised by the award of overall winner in the Large City category in the Britain in Bloom national awards 2013. Edinburgh's award was chosen for the front cover of the RHS Community Update Magazine using a photograph of part of Chessels Court and featuring one of the



*Above: Geddes Garden, West Port
Below: Detail of the cover of the Royal Horticultural Society Newsletter featuring Anja Amsel.*



leading local gardeners, OTA Hon President, Anja Amsel.

Congratulations to all involved. Patrick Geddes would have been proud of the community spirit and the green spaces which have been created in line with his motto 'by leaves we live'.

Happy birthday to the landslide

We reported in our September Newsletter that access to the whole of the slope down from the Castle Esplanade to the railway lines had been closed, due to a minor landslip having removed a section of the path. The situation remains unresolved, with the closure now well past its first birthday. The Council reports that, due to the landslip problem, 'this area is currently closed to the public for investigatory works. A survey is underway to clarify the extent of the problem and to assess remedial works required. The Hill will be reopened when it is deemed safe for public use. As we do not yet know the extent of the problem we are unable to put a timescale on the closure'.

If it really takes that long to survey, one might suspect that it is being undertaken by the late Lord Nelson! Also it is notable that during the 2013 Tattoo, a small wooden section was positioned over the fault on a temporary basis, presumably to provide an emergency exit from the Esplanade if needed. Why was this not simply left in place until a more permanent solution had been found? This whole 'problem' is beginning to look just a little bit silly. Let us hope that we do not have to mark the landslide's second anniversary.

Party flat horrors & A board hazards

The City of Edinburgh Council has now taken action to control the short term letting of flats which are rented out to stag and hen parties, where large numbers of noisy drunk visitors cause disturbance to neighbours deep into the night. This is doubtless a lucrative trade for the landlords, but there have been countless reports in the press of the continuing misery caused to neighbours at locations throughout the City. This form of exploitation for financial gain at the expense of others has long needed redress

Things are looking up, however. Permission has now been granted by the Courts for the Council to take control of two such properties, and new Regulations are in place empowering fines of up to £20,000 to be

imposed against those not co-operating. Neighbours of these first two have already reported rapid improvement and the intention is now for such permission to be sought for a number of other trouble spots to be dealt with in a similar way, with a Council review of results in a few months time.

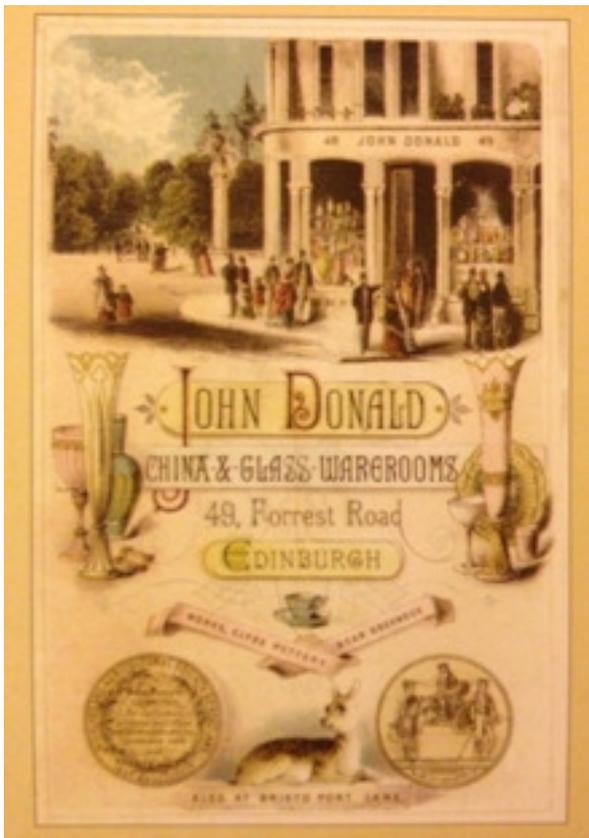
A wish has again been expressed in Council circles to tackle the problem of street clutter. The Old Town Association has long complained about the state of the streets, with goods and flags hanging on the outside of shops, loud speakers pointed into the street and A boards and other advertisements cluttering the pavements. Our September Newsletter showed photographs of examples of advertisements in many parts of the Royal Mile for cafés, bars, tourist attractions and tours. Proposals are presently under consideration to limit the tour operators to shared space in Hunter Square. Whatever the merits or otherwise of this proposal, surely the first action should be taken under present powers to remove all such clutter from the public pavements, and if present powers are insufficient, to obtain stronger powers. Perhaps the moves taken over the party flats could pave the way, but, whatever happens, it is effective and continuing action that is needed, rather than just talk.





Family Firms in the Old Town

John Donald, China Merchant in Bristo Place, is in the process of finally closing. It was recorded in 1871/2 as existing in Bristo Port Lane, with John Donald's own residence at 60 George Square, and in 1911/12 they had expanded around the corner into 8-10 Bristo Place, now described as 'Merchants to Her Late Majesty Queen Victoria and His Late Majesty Edward VII'. For a time John Donald had another shop in Forrest Road, overlooking Middle Meadow Walk.



The present member of the family has recently retired and his son is in employment elsewhere, bringing an end to a splendid story lasting more than a 140 years.



Another long lived family enterprise, still going strong, although not in the Old Town, is Croan's Fishmongers, established in the Canongate in 1883. In 1911/12 it was to be found at 270 Canongate. They were a large family, and as recently as 1991 one family member left and set up on his own. He now has a successful shop splendidly called 'Something Fishy' located at the top of Broughton Street. The Canongate shop closed a decade or so ago, but 270 Canongate still contains some fishing-related wall tiles.



In this reproduction you won't see it, but the fishing boat is the *Mary Croan* with a Leith registration (LH99) and the Croan name also adorns one of the fishing boxes.

Still Going Strong

A recent concert held by the Georgian Concert Society celebrated the 250th anniversary of St Cecilia's Hall. St Cecilia's Hall is the oldest purpose-built concert hall in Scotland and was designed by Robert Mylne. The part on the Cowgate was added in 1812; the original entrance can be seen in Niddry Street.

Another Owl and Pussycat

Our newsletter of April 2013 featured a recent tree sculpture of the Owl and the Pussycat in Chessels Court. The OTA was contacted about another carving of the Owl and the Pussycat in the Old Town. These two carvings are in Cockburn Street, either side of the wallhead gable of No 59. Sure enough, there they are...



Now, Cockburn Street was built by the High Street and Railway Station Access Company, under the Railway Station Acts of 1853 and 1860, to provide access to Waverley Station from the High Street. The street was designed by Peddie & Kinnear, with a gentle slope for horse-drawn vehicles yet with a sinuous curve so the street was not visible from Princes Street.



According to the Historic Scotland listing, Nos 59-63 were designed in 1859-61 and the date plaque on the first floor carries the date 1864.

So far, so good. But ... the well-known and well-loved poem of the Owl and the Pussycat by Edward Lear was not written until 1867 and not published until 1871. Extensive research (albeit a thorough use of a well-known search engine), does not bring up any reference to an Owl and a Pussycat before 1867. So why are these carvings on a building put up in 1864? Does anybody know?

Dates for your Diary:

Georgian Concert Society.

Saturday 18 January, Ensemble Meridiana – Leipzig Connections.

Saturday 15 February, Ensemble Labyrinthe – The Renaissance Transition.

Saturday 22 March, London Haydn Quartet with Eric Hoeprich (basset clarinet) – Haydn and Mozart:

Concerts start at 7.45 pm and are held in St Cecilia's Hall. Tickets £18, over 60s £16, students and unwaged £5.

Old Edinburgh Club.

Wednesday 15 January, Wilson Smith, New research on the Edinburgh International Exhibition, 1886.

Wednesday 19 February, Malcolm Cooper, Gerard Baldwin Brown: Edinburgh's forgotten preservationist.

Wednesday 19 March, Dr Tawny Paul, Debts, debtors, and the debtors' prison 1730-70.

OEC lectures take place in the Augustine United Church, 41 George IV Bridge, at 7.00 pm. Non-members £5