



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

January 2022

*A Happy New Year
to all our readers!*

The opening sentence of last January's Newsletter was "After the year we have just been through we must all be hoping fervently that 2021 will be happier". Well ... on the whole, it was. By mid-year we seemed to be returning to some sort of normality. The vaccination programme was proceeding apace; tourists were returning, in reduced numbers (which was no bad thing); and the festivals were able to run live as well as virtual events, although at nothing like the scale of previous years. The emergence of the omicron variant of Covid-19 at the end of the year was a blow. The Hogmanay events had to be cancelled again and at the time of writing various restrictions are in force – although these are nothing like as stringent as the full lockdown at the start of the pandemic. Perhaps we can be cautiously hopeful that 2022 will see changes for the better.

Changes form something of a theme for this newsletter: changes already seen (and heard) on our streets and elsewhere; changes which may be coming; changes in the way we look at things; and proposed changes we can be grateful didn't happen. There is no photo essay but a variety of images which we hope will be of interest.

Bill Cowan

One change for the Association towards the end of the year was Bill Cowan's decision to stand down from the Committee after many years' sterling service. Bill acted as the Association's lead on planning issues and he contributed to the Nicolson Committee review of liquor licensing law and practice in Scotland in the run-up to the 2005 Act. Bill was also for a considerable period a member of the Old Town Community Council, providing an invaluable link between the two organisations. He was tireless in monitoring planning applications and submitting comments and objections on the Association's behalf where appropriate. His thoughtful and witty contributions to committee meetings will be much missed but we understand his decision to move on and wish him all the best for the future.

Committee member Kate Marshall has taken on the planning role on an interim basis but would like to share the role with somebody else. If any Association member feels they might like to take on this role and would like to explore what is involved (without commitment) please get in touch at info@eota.org.

Listen Here

Anyone walking on the High Street in the last month or so is likely to have spotted a bench which has appeared next to the Buccleuch Monument in front of St Giles. The bench is painted in eye-catching white, green and blue (see image overleaf) and has the words "Let's Talk" printed on it in a variety of languages. Apparently it is one of six benches which have been put in place in cities across the UK as part of a campaign to tackle loneliness by offering people somewhere to sit down and chat.



It doesn't seem to be used much, but with the cold, wet weather we experienced in December, not to mention the new Covid variant, that is hardly surprising. Perhaps in the New Year ...

Anyone for Candy?

Other very visible recent additions to the Edinburgh streetscape are brightly painted shop fronts advertising "American Candy and Treats". There are three on the Royal Mile, one on South Bridge and others elsewhere in the city. It isn't clear from whom they are hoping to get custom. If it is American tourists their timing is particularly bad. If not Americans, is there really enough appetite for Hershey's and root beer among locals to keep all these shops going? And most of them seem to be shut most of the time. All very mysterious!



New Clock on New College

Rather less in-your-face than the American candy stores is the clock which has been added to New College on the Mound. When William Playfair designed the building 175 years ago he included two stone framed roundels on the east tower: one to the north facing Princes Street and the other to the east. It seems likely that these were intended to take clock faces.

However, the building project went £5,000 over budget (around £600,000 in today's money), savings had to be made and no clock was installed. Now, with a generous donation from Robert A Funk, an American alumnus and friend of the college, that omission has been rectified and two discrete clockfaces sit in the stone frames on the east tower.



And still on the Mound

As usual, over the festive season a fine Christmas tree, donated by the Hordaland County Council in Norway, stood on the grassed area in front of New College on the Mound. This year it was accompanied by a contemporary art installation created by Edinburgh-based artist Hannah Ayre, alongside Amanda Yates.



Photo: edinburghchristmas.com

Described as cascading geometric snowflakes it irresistibly reminded those of us of a certain age of the spirograph toys of our childhood. But it was a welcome spot of colour on dreich December days.

Drinkers' Pens

These on-street enclosures are not exactly new now (our last newsletter included a photo essay on them). But having initially been billed as a temporary response to the restrictions on numbers in indoors hospitality venues it is worrying that there have now been several applications to extend their use. Many of the enclosures have acquired side screens (reducing air flow and making them less Covid secure) and some even sport space-heaters – hardly compatible with net-zero ambitions.



Professor Cliff Hague, the Chair of the Cockburn Association, in a powerful letter in the December 2021 edition of the *Edinburgh Reporter* newspaper, said “Decking creates an ideal habitat for rats. The seating is used for loud drinking sessions in the early hours, creating disturbance for those living in flats overlooking the street and litter piles up. ... A World Heritage Site is being trashed with planning rules suspended. Common Good Land effectively is being privatised without the required public consultation”.

The Old Town Association agrees that moves to make such enclosures permanent need to be resisted. We have objected to the planning applications which have been submitted to date and will object to any future applications.

High Street Security Barriers

Again, not exactly a new feature, but one to which the Association has recently turned its

attention with a view to seeking changes. Committee member Helen McBride explains.

Members may have spotted reference to the OTA in MSP Angus Robertson’s regular column in the *Edinburgh Evening News*.

Several committee members met with him at the beginning of October to seek his support for removal of the ugly security barriers (known as National Barrier Assets, or catchily “NBA”) in the High Street and Johnston Terrace and their replacement with more aesthetically pleasing barriers, more in keeping with the appearance of our important World Heritage Site. We are pleased to report that he has given us his support.

To recap, these NBA were erected in August 2017 in the wake of terrorist attacks in London and Manchester with the laudable aim of helping to keep people safe from potential vehicle weapon attacks while they were attending events at Edinburgh Castle and the High Street during the Festival and Fringe. We understand that they were only ever intended to be temporary, but they have stayed and as far as we can tell, look likely to stay.

Whilst they make handy tables for revellers wishing to put down their beer glasses or serving as a seat while watching street shows, the committee does feel that it’s time for the various bodies involved (City of Edinburgh Council and Police Scotland) to have a rethink. To be clear, we fully recognise the need for security but not these paint-chipped ugly archways and wedges please!



A problem with the barriers is that they have both to be moveable to allow vehicle access and sufficiently obvious and solid to deter would-be bombers. There are several examples of more attractive security measures elsewhere in Edinburgh which meet one but not both of those criteria. The discreet barriers in Multrees Walk and the similar ones to the north of the new St James Quarter are moveable but probably not robust enough to do the job that is required in the Old Town. The low walls/benches which blend neatly into the streetscape in front of the Scottish Parliament are robust but immovable.



The St Paul's area of London has been provided with barriers which do both jobs in a more attractive way than those on the Royal Mile.



Photo: eyeonedinburgh.net

If any members can provide examples of security barriers more pleasing to the eye, either in the UK or abroad, we would really like to hear from you. Some of you may also have specialist knowledge of security issues and we'd really like to hear from you too. Drop us an email at info@eota.org.

What's making that noise?

One welcome side-effect of the lockdown at the start of the pandemic was the disappearance of aircraft noise. Commercial passenger aircraft are now back, albeit in much reduced numbers. But, perhaps because of the contrast with the silence of earlier months, helicopter disturbance over the Old Town was very noticeable in the summer of 2021. Clearly there is a need for Police Scotland and air ambulance helicopters to overfly the city. But there are several companies offering members of the public the opportunity to "cruise over Edinburgh in an executive helicopter", "cruise the Edinburgh skyline", "flying at 2,000 feet ... see Edinburgh Castle, the Royal Mile, Holyrood Palace and the Scottish Parliament". One such flight (also taking in St Andrews and Dundee) can be had for a mere £1,900 plus VAT which the website carefully explains is for the whole helicopter, not just a single seat. Quite apart from the disturbance they cause on the ground, can such flights really be justified in the wake of the COP 26 climate conference and the drive to achieve net zero carbon emissions?

Caught short?

A definitely unwelcome side-effect of the first lockdown was the closure of public toilets. And with pubs and cafes and restaurants closed as well, trips out and about needed careful planning! At the time of writing most public toilets remain closed. But there are plenty of places selling coffee and providing outdoor seating. Cafés, right? And cafés have to provide toilets for their customers, right? Apparently not. Because the seating is outside it seems these places can classify themselves as takeaways and therefore don't have to provide toilets. A case of regulations needing to be updated to match changed circumstances?

Old Royal High School

In October the City Council finally agreed to lease the Calton Hill building to the Royal High School Preservation Trust. The trust has put forward plans to turn the iconic Thomas Hamilton designed building into a new home for St Mary's Music School with performance space, café, gallery and visitor centre. There is funding in place to make this vision a reality. The building dominates views north from the eastern Old Town and it is good to think that the view may soon be of a building brought back into full and appropriate public use.

A statue of a woman in the High Street?

There are plenty of statues of men on and near the Royal Mile: David Hume in front of the High Court building; the 5th Duke of Buccleuch on top of his monument outside St Giles; Charles II and James Braidwood in Parliament Square; Adam Smith nearby; and Robert Ferguson in the Canongate. But there are no women. In fact, apart from Queen Victoria (and our present monarch inside the Queen's Gallery), statues of women are notable for their absence throughout the city. Now that may be about to change.



Image of Elsie Inglis produced by 12-year-old Chloë Graham and being used by the fund-raising campaign.

The City Council has agreed to support fund-raising activities for a statue in tribute to pioneering Edinburgh doctor Elsie Inglis. She is best known for the front-line hospitals she organised in World War One for the French, Serbs and Russians. An official of the British War Office rejected her offer of help, telling her to "go home and sit still". In 1894 Elsie Inglis had co-founded a small hospital for women and children in Edinburgh and this moved to the High Street in 1904. So it is appropriate that it is proposed to erect her statue on the High Street. For more information (or to make a donation) go to www.elsieinglis.org.

Historic Lantern Slides discovered



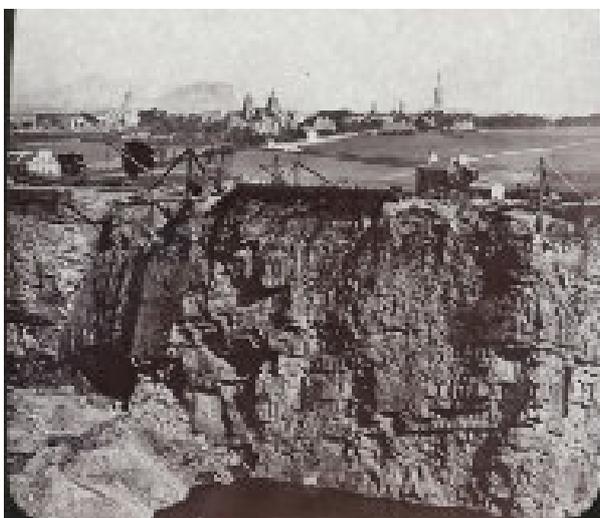
Two George Washington Wilson images of Old Town locations shown in recently rediscovered lantern slides: Top: Whitehorse Close on the Canongate. Below: Westbowhead.

Russell Clegg, Collections Engagement Officer in the *Auld Reekie Retold* team, tells us about an interesting discovery at the Museums' Collections Centre that may prompt us to look in a new way at familiar sights.

Museums and Galleries Edinburgh have discovered a set of evocative views of the late Victorian city during their current *Auld Reekie Retold* project. A wooden box containing the 38 black and white glass slides was found in the Collections Centre at Broughton Market during inventory work. They cast a dramatic look at the city showing locations, buildings and monuments which though familiar are also surprising and unusual.

Titled (completely coincidentally) *Auld Reekie* the slides have very little provenance or accession detail but are believed to have been produced by the studio of photographer George Washington Wilson, if not by the renowned and pioneering photographer himself.

The slides themselves would have been projected on to a screen using a "Magic Lantern", that most Victorian of household entertainments. The images are striking, illustrating views which are now long gone in some circumstances. Take the stunning image of Craigleith Quarry with the city skyline in the background for example; the ornate roof of the original Waverley Market shown from the Scott Monument, looking east along Princes Street, as another; and the sight of sheep grazing on the Meadows in front of the former Royal Infirmary.



Auld Reekie Retold is a major three-year project connecting objects, stories and people using Museums & Galleries Edinburgh's collection of over 200,000 objects. Funded by the City of Edinburgh Council and Museums Galleries Scotland, the team are recording and researching our objects, then showcasing their stories through engagement with the public. You can find out more at www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/auld-reekie-retold.

The find also coincides with a podcast series on early photography around our collections taking in a tour of Leith, early domestic photography, the temperance movement and the 1886 International Exhibition. These can be accessed via all major podcast providers and on the Museums and Galleries Edinburgh website.

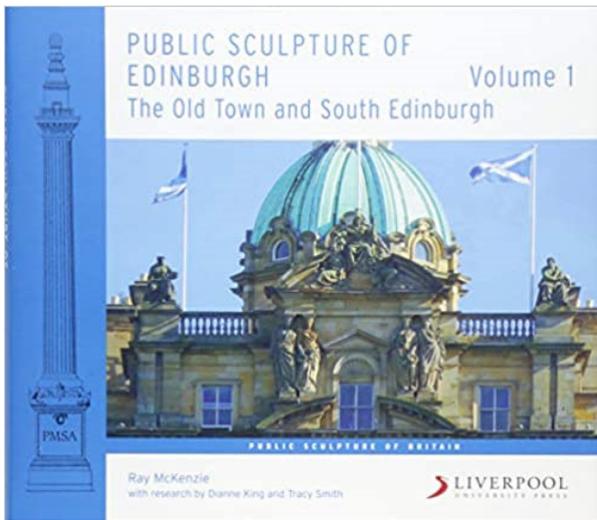
Looking about us in a new way

Here Association member Odile Hughson reviews a book which has got her looking at her surroundings in a new way as she walks about Edinburgh.

Public Sculpture of Edinburgh, Ray McKenzie, Liverpool University Press, 2 volumes:

1: The Old Town and South Edinburgh

2: the New Town, Leith and the outer suburbs



This is more of a reference resource than a book to read, yet the style is not that of a catalogue, so it is very approachable. Each artefact is treated in several paragraphs: description, discussion, related works and condition. The text is full of very useful information about the subject, the sculptor, materials, dimensions and inscriptions, giving dates from the start of the project to when the statue was unveiled and what happened subsequently. There is a good biography of both the artists and the persons sculpted, with small details of interest, such as the locations of their studios and homes. The appendix on lost and removed works is interesting. Coats of arms are also described.

It offers good references. The history of the commissions with the ensuing controversies, disagreements with the artists, their remuneration (or lack thereof) and the final chosen locations for display are reported with a hint of humour. It is fascinating to imagine huge sculptures being transported and re-erected across the city.

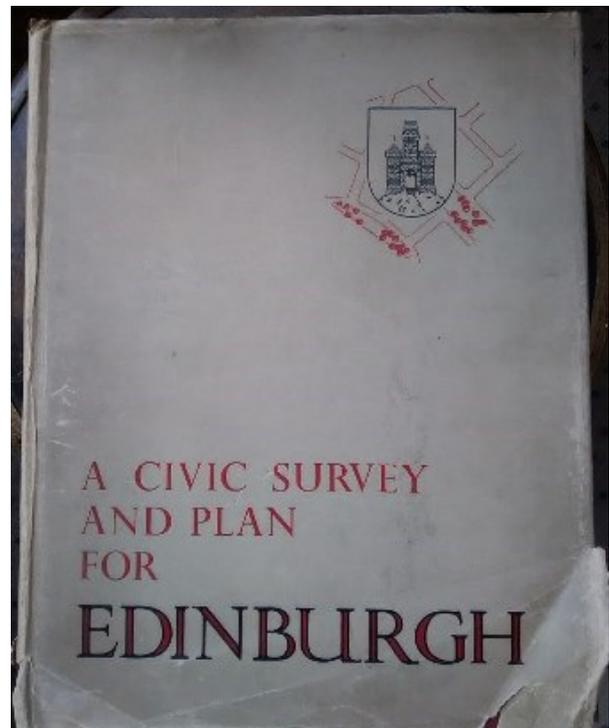
The production is monumental (quite right in this context), attractive and very well researched. It is a quality production with beautiful photographs. I regret that the format is not more user-friendly, at least in paperback form; the two volumes are heavy, floppy and not easy to handle, but it would weigh even more in hardback.

I enjoyed having my attention drawn to details and learnt how to look at the sculptures properly all the way round, instead of simply taking an overall view as one passes by.

This is an excellent publication, ideal to brighten our restricted existence during the pandemic, mixing intellect with physical exercise. I would certainly recommend *Public Sculpture of Edinburgh*.

Escaped from Tunnels?

In separate talks to the Association in November 2021 Chris Fleet, Map Curator of the National Library of Scotland, and Henry Sullivan of the City Archives both referred to the 1949 Civic Survey and Plan for Edinburgh (the Abercrombie Report). This prompted your editor to look again at the report. It really is an extraordinary document. We can be grateful that some of its proposed changes were never implemented.



One of its best known, and most notorious proposals was for a motorway-scale inner ring road which would, among other things, have sliced through Inverleith Park, run along the south side of the Meadows and tunnelled under the High Street and Calton Hill. But if all of the Abercrombie proposals had been implemented those wouldn't have been the only new tunnels in Edinburgh: in fact the city would have been riddled with them.

There was to be a new goods railway line running in a tunnel from St Leonards under the Meadows and Tollcross to Haymarket. This was part of a wider scheme of railway changes

which would have seen a new station in Morrison Street and Waverley downgraded to take only local trains. That would have allowed the station to be reduced in size and it and the line through Princes Street Gardens to be covered “beneath a roof of lawns and terraced gardens” allowing the gardens to “be greatly improved and extended to restore the original shape of the valley”.

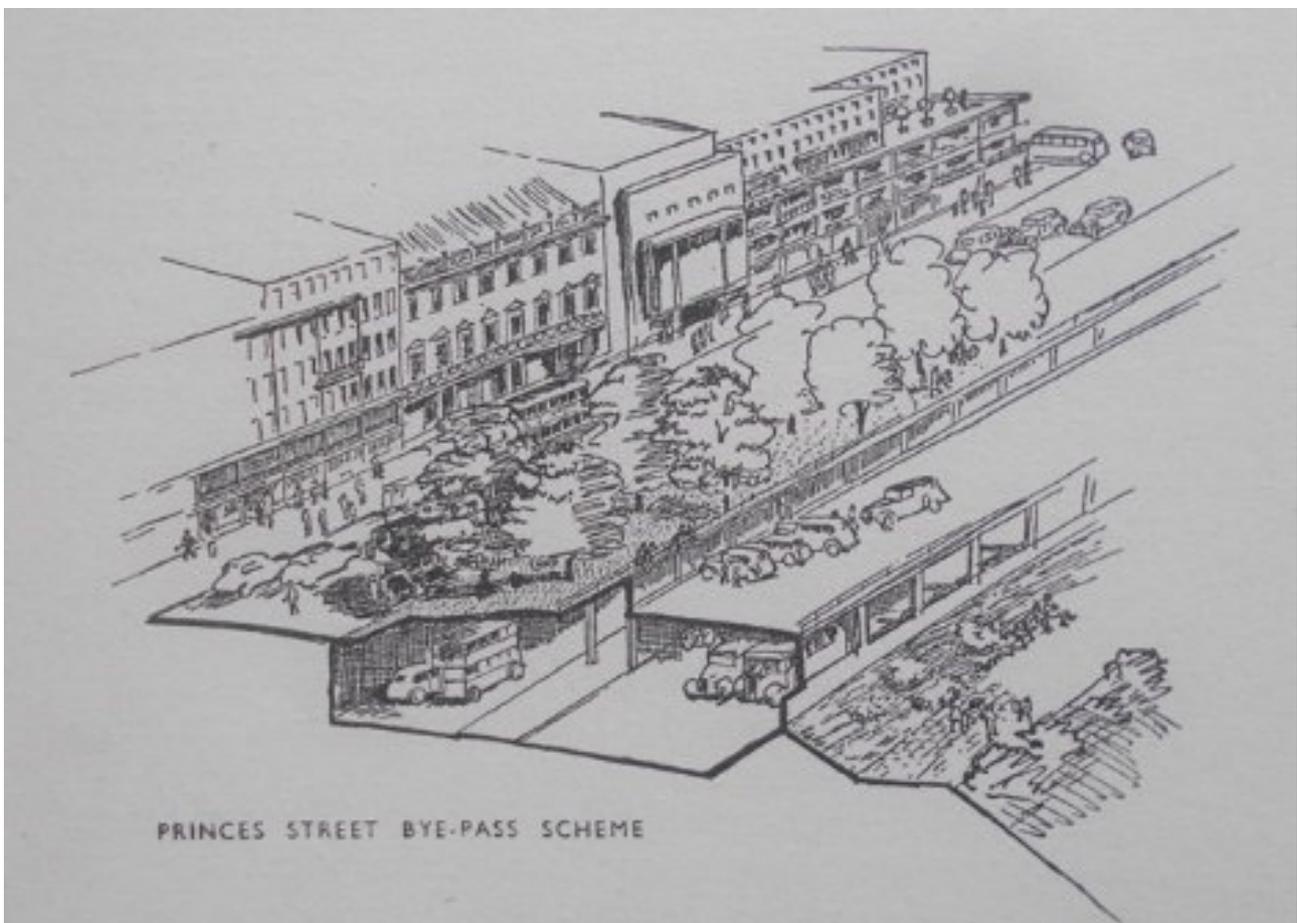
That actually sounds rather attractive. But what was proposed for the other side of the Gardens would have had a disastrous effect. Princes Street was to become primarily a service link road with all through traffic diverted away from it. Ten feet below the street was to be a deck designed for “car parking and promenade”. And below *that* was to be a road for through traffic, lit and ventilated by colonnades and clerestory windows opening into the gardens – and so polluting them with traffic fumes and noise. Incredibly, the report feels able to assert that this would be as “an interesting and important contribution to the amenities of this magnificent valley”

Oddly, given his apparent obsession with tunnels, Abercrombie had no proposals for what in 1949 was already a disused tunnel running from Waverley, under the New Town to the foot of Scotland Street. This was part of a railway running to Leith and the section north of Scotland Street is now a popular pedestrian and cycle route. But the tunnel under the New Town remains shut off.

The Broughton Spurtle: a correction

In the September 2021 newsletter we referred to *The Broughton Spurtle* as “the New Town & Broughton Community Council newsletter”. An Association member (and former member of the NT&BCC) points out that *The Spurtle* is independent – and at times critical of the Community Council. Your editor should have remembered that and pleads an attack of Covid brain. *The Spurtle* is, incidentally, an excellent read and is available free at various locations on its patch (issued monthly)

All photographs in this newsletter are by Eric Drake and Rosemary Mann unless otherwise credited.



Proposals for Princes Street in the 1949 Civic Survey and Plan for Edinburgh

Places to Visit and Things to do

Pre-booking is no longer required at the National Museum of Scotland, the City Art Centre, the Fruitmarket Gallery (now reopened after a major refurbishment) or the Museum of Edinburgh. The Writers' Museum, the Museum of Childhood and The People's Story remain closed.

At the **National Museum of Scotland** in Chambers Street the exhibition on *The Typewriter Revolution* continues to 17 April 2022. This looks at the typewriter's evolution and its role in society, arts and popular culture. From 12 February to 8 May the Museum will be holding a major exhibition of *Audubon's Birds of America*. Around 1820, naturalist John James Audubon declared his intention to paint every bird species in North America. The result of this ambition was *Birds of America*, published between 1827 and 1838, and featuring 435 life-size, hand-coloured prints. The book's large size (almost 1m high) and its publication as a series of folios has resulted in very few complete volumes remaining to this day. Audubon visited Edinburgh in 1826 when he was looking for an engraver capable of reproducing his paintings. Go to www.nms.ac.uk for more information. There is an admission charge for the Audubon exhibition.

At the **City Art Centre** the exhibition *New Acquisitions at the City Art Centre* continues to Sun 28 May 2023. *Reflections, The Light and Life of John Henry Lorimer (1856-1936)* continues to Sun 20 March, and *Tapestry: Changing Concepts* continues to 13 March. More information on these and the other galleries and museums run by the City Council, see www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/whats-on. A wide variety of digital lectures and events can also be booked through this website.

To mark Her Majesty The Queen's Platinum Jubilee year, **The Queen's Gallery** at the Palace of Holyroodhouse will be holding an exhibition titled *Masterpieces from Buckingham Palace*. This will bring together more than 30 spectacular works by artists such as Rembrandt, Rubens, Claude, Artemisia Gentileschi and Van Dyck. The exhibition will run from 25 March to 22 September. Go to www.rct.uk for more information.

Between 22 January and 11 June the **Dovecot Studio** is holding an exhibition on *The Art of Wallpaper – Morris & Co*. This explores the legacy of William Morris in over 130 works from the Morris & Co. archives, focusing on his legacy and including framed original samples, as well as interior layouts. Visit <https://dovecotstudios.com> for details and for information about online exhibitions.

National Library of Scotland: <https://www.nls.uk/events> for online events including lectures.

Auld Reekie Retold: <https://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/stories> for podcasts including past talks available to download. See how a small, unassuming object can convey a huge story.

The Old Edinburgh Club: <http://www.oldedinburghclub.org.uk/lectures/> for monthly lectures on Zoom. Free for members, £5 for non-members. There are three remaining in the 2021-22 season.
19 Jan 2022, 7.00 pm, Professor Iain Hutchison, Disability in Edwardian Edinburgh.
16 Feb 2022, 7.00 pm, Nicholas Uglow, The history of places before Binns: local significance in collective experience and memory.
16 Mar 2022, 7.00 pm, Dr Rebecca Mason, Widows, Dowry and Debts in Early Modern Scotland.

Society of Antiquaries of Scotland: <https://www.socantscot.org/events/> for free on-line lectures:
Monday 17 January, 6.00 pm, Zandra Yeaman, Curating Discomfort.
Monday 7 February, 6.00 pm, Dr Churnjeet Mahn, Diversity is not a silo: routes to anti-racist work in Scottish heritage.
Monday 14 March, 6.00 pm, Professor Annelou van Gijn, Connecting tools and materials in the Dutch Late Neolithic through use-wear analysis and experiments.

OTA Activities

Two of the OTA talks given in autumn 2021 have been recorded and are available on YouTube: *Edinburgh: Mapping and Planning the City* by Chris Fleet is at <https://youtu.be/sNFSuLmA13o> and *The City Archives* by Henry Sullivan is at <https://youtu.be/diIsZla7V2I>

The Association is offering three on-line events in the first quarter of 2022. We hope that we will be able to offer live events, especially walks, from the second quarter onwards. OTA online talks use Zoom and the links will be sent to all members for whom we have an email address. If you did not receive an email with links to the newsletter and activities, then please send an email to info@eota.org.uk and we will put you on our email list. The OTA will use your email to contact you on any matter of interest or pertaining to Association business; your details will not be used for any other purpose nor passed to any other party. ·

Edinburgh: Venice of the North? Monday 24 January, 6.30 pm, by Zoom. Edinburgh is known as the Athens of the North, not Venice. But Edinburgh does have buildings influenced by the architecture of Venice and the Veneto countryside as will be shown in this virtual walk across the Old Town to the New Town led by retired town planner Gordon McFarlane, previously in Edinburgh Council's conservation planning team, a member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation and a New Town Guide.

St Giles, the Reformation and the Covenanters. Tuesday 22 February, 6.30 pm, by Zoom. Association Committee member Helen McBride, who is also a volunteer guide at St Giles, will explore the many links between that church, the Scottish Reformation and the Covenanters.

Annual General Meeting. Wednesday 9 March, 6.30 pm, by Zoom. We hope that you will join to hear the reports of the last year, elect your committee for the coming year and raise any issues or concerns. After the formal business, committee member Rosemary Mann will give a short presentation about **The Unicorn and other Scottish Emblems.**



These online events are free to members. If the talks had been held in a venue, hire charges would have meant tickets costing at least £5.00. We hope members will consider a donation in lieu of a ticket fee. We suggest £4.00 for one event, £7.00 for two or £10.00 for three.

Non-members may attend if a donation of at least £5.00 for each event has been made. Donate online through the OTA website and we will send you the link to join the talk.