



Edinburgh Old Town Association

Convenor's Report 2009

If we didn't care so much about Edinburgh's Old Town we presumably would not have to spend so much time complaining. It is a place for living, working and playing; we do try to remember this, and also to remind some others, who shall be nameless, of the importance of balance if the Old Town is not to lose its unique identity. The City of London is for working and more or less closes down at night; York is for working and playing, with very few people living in its historic centre; we want Edinburgh Old Town to maintain its triple purpose. It is because of this that we have spent much of the year trying to persuade the Council of its duty – that is not too strong a word! – its duty to hold back the tide of bad pubs and bad shops.

We have no objection to pubs, we object to badly-run pubs; we have no objection to people enjoying themselves but we object to people spoiling the enjoyment of others; we have no objection to shops, no objection to cheap shops, but we do object most strongly to shops that either diminish their surroundings or encroach upon the space of others. It is hoped that a report from the Council next year into Edinburgh's "night-time economy" will address some of the licensing problems. The visual and sound pollution from the plethora of so-called "tat shops" is only occasionally and not definitively dealt with.

You may remember that at the end of last year a UNESCO delegation came to Edinburgh in order to assess the state of our World Heritage Site. Although it has received little public comment, their report came out in June and even though it stopped short of putting Edinburgh's World Heritage Status in danger it did make specific criticisms. The one which affects the Old Town is the comment on the proposed Caltongate Development: disapproval of some of the design and disapproval of the proposed demolition of some listed buildings. This came after the big news at the beginning of the year that Mountgrange, the would-be developer of the Caltongate site, had gone into receivership leaving another Edinburgh hole in the ground and the future of various buildings uncertain. And that is how the situation remains. At some point the Receivers will sell – a site with planning permission already granted.

As every year, we have considered all Old Town planning applications and made comments when appropriate. There were numerous applications – usually granted – to change a shop to a café; the slippery slope that usually leads to another bar.

The Association worked, as usual, with other amenity and local organisations. Representatives attend meetings of the Old Town Community Council, the City Centre Neighbourhood Partnership and the Edinburgh Civic Forum. We are consulted by the City Council, the Scottish Government and major developers; our opinions are taken seriously even if not always acted upon. The Edinburgh Evening News often follows up an article in our newsletter or asks for our viewpoint on local matters.

Those newsletters, edited by Robin Tait, come out three times a year and have developed a strong voice. They combine news about our local world, trenchant but reasoned opinions, and information for members and their friends. Also three times a year we have members' meetings – one also the AGM – to discuss policies or matters of concern. During 2009 Fiona McDonald and Adam Wilkinson of the Edinburgh World Heritage Trust have spoken at these meetings about their repair programme, and their work in general; Ian Wall gave us a talk on Scotland's public spaces – not always in complimentary terms.

The programme of other events arranged by Naomi Richardson has been particularly strong and well-attended. Talks by Donald Smith on Burns, followed by refreshments in St Giles' Cathedral; by Gen Harrison and David Rudram on Printing in the Old Town; by Andrew Wright on Riddles Court and Bob Morris on Edinburgh's Industrial Past – these last two shared with the Cockburn Association members, a co-operation that started so successfully last year. Our members visited Hidden Gardens with Jean Bareham, the City Chambers with Rachel Simmons, the Council CCTV Centre, and – as a follow-up to the Printing Talk – a Printing Walk with Helen Williamson. Members were able to investigate their family roots at the Scottish Record Office; later in the year we learned about Living Streets (streets should put pedestrians first) and Bob Barnham of Changeworks imbued members with enthusiasm for his suggested ways to save energy and help the environment.

As we have minimal overheads – few committee members have to claim any expenses and we even hold committee meetings in our own houses – most of our income can go to cover the cost of activities and to local charities. We were able to donate £500 towards the cost of restoring the Charles II statue in Parliament Square. We spent nearly £600 on new publicity leaflets and their distribution within the Old Town area, an exercise which has brought in new members. We think it important to keep our subscription low and activity costs reasonable: no one should find it too expensive to join. Membership presently stands at nearly 300. The Brownlee Trust continues to support projects for young people in the Old Town, this year helping the Museum of Edinburgh to supply dressing-up costumes for young visitors, and buying colourful children's beanbags for the Poetry Library.

I have already mentioned the excellence of our Newsletter Editor, Robin Tait, and our Activities Organiser, Naomi Richardson. Rosemary Mann is a very well-organised Treasurer and we are very lucky to have moved seamlessly from one super-efficient Secretary to another – Rose Mackenzie has taken over from Jean Fairbairn. Bill Cowan continues to cast his idiosyncratic eye over all planning applications and Eleanor Peat keeps efficient control over membership and activities tickets. Martyn Lambourne has set up and maintains our user-friendly website. Anja Amsel, Willie Drysdale, Richard Smith and Jane Yeoman are still giving their time and talent to the Committee as required. During the year Nancy Sturgeon (because of ill-health) and Margaret Morrison decided reluctantly to leave the committee. We were delighted to co-opt Jolin Warren – amongst other advantages he has brought down the average age of the committee. On your behalf I thank them all.

This is definitely my last report as Convener. If the Committee wishes I have agreed to be Acting Convener for a month or so but then a new one will be volunteered, appointed, press-ganged ... Rose, Rosemary, Robin, Naomi, Bill and Eleanor do most of the work; I am confident there will be a smooth transition and I look forward to a new broom sweeping us towards a lively but uncluttered and reasonably quiet Old Town.

Roma Crampin
Convener.