



Edinburgh Old Town Association

Convener's Report 2017

Throughout 2017 the issue of short-term lets and Airbnb has been a major concern for the Old Town Association. The growth of short-term lets in the Old Town is distorting the resident/visitor balance. There are now tenements and residences in the area where there is a majority of short-term tenants so that fewer owner/occupiers and long-term residents are left to deal with the maintenance of buildings, refuse disposal, security and anti-social and inconsiderate behaviour. There are also potential problems with buildings insurance and health-and-safety. With a turnover of holiday guests there are fewer neighbours and more strangers gaining access to your building. There have been attempts to address the issue. In February members of the OTA Committee attended a Round Table meeting on short-term lets, Andy Wightman MSP has called for council powers to limit short-term rentals in Edinburgh to alleviate the situation and the Scottish Government is to produce a report on short-term lets that will cover Scotland. There may be progress but it is very slow.

Another area where progress is very slow is the fate of the former Royal High School which is still not resolved. I addressed the issue two years ago in my Convener's Report of 2015. With the weight of informed opinion being in favour of the Royal High School being established as a Music School it is to be hoped that once again 'the building ...will form one of the finest pictures in the scene' as the Lord Provost said at the time of its construction.

The Old Town Association has been in communication with Police Scotland over the seemingly perennial problem of busking in the Old Town. After complaints from local residents there was a meeting at Torphichen Street with Inspector David Robertson where he outlined the scheme of yellow cards to be issued to buskers during the Festival period indicating what behaviour was acceptable. After the Festival we asked for feedback from Police Scotland about how successful the initiative had been but as yet we have been given no information. It is a step forward that notices about the time buskers must finish and the non-use of amplified music are now noticeable in the Old Town area.

Further Festival/Hogmanay issues arose over the colourful barriers erected in the High Street as security measures. We were interested in finding out how long the barriers were to remain in place. In correspondence with local Councillors we learned in September that the barriers may be in place for up to 18 months while the City of Edinburgh Council develops a streetscape response. We will keep a watchful eye on progress.

There has been correspondence about Fringe Street events where the Festival Fringe Society was asking for comments about possible changes to the infrastructure that is brought onto the High Street during August for the Festival Fringe. Our main response was to ask that consideration be given to local residents in terms of the size, noise and convenience of any changes. The Fringe Society will keep the OTA in touch with future developments.

We have tried to help members' concerns on various issues like the roadworks involved in the SGN Gas Mains Improvement Project, the delivery by Enterprise of City Car Club vehicles on inappropriately huge car transporters in the Old Town area and the graffiti on the Calton Studios building. As with the High Street barriers we were helped by our local Councillors, Joanna Mowat and Karen Doran and we are very grateful for their support. Cllrs Mowat and Doran are also trying to find out if the Council is able to gain financially from the use of city sites including in the Old Town used for the making of films and TV programmes. It would seem that Glasgow made £15 million from filming in the city in 2017! What about Edinburgh?

Last year the OTA contributed to the digitisation of the Boog Watson Archive and this year we gave £500 towards the restoration of a book of Victorian photographs by Archibald Burns mainly of the Old Town and dating from 1868. The book is called *Picturesque Bits from Old Edinburgh* and it can be seen on request at the National Library.

The OTA continued to have links with other agencies including the Old Town Community Council, Edinburgh World Heritage, Edinburgh Civic Forum, the Cowgate Under-5s Centre, the City of Edinburgh Council, Scottish Civic Trust, the Royal Mile Business Association and the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust.

The Committee members are the backbone of the Old Town Association and without their effort and commitment the Association could not function. On behalf of the OTA membership I would like to record our thanks to them. Eric Drake and Rosemary Mann as editor and photographer respectively are responsible for the thrice-yearly newsletters with their informative and esoteric mix of articles and photographs. Bill Cowan, our Planning Secretary, has managed our responses to the many and varied planning applications submitted over the year to the City of Edinburgh Council. Our Activities Secretary, Naomi Richardson, organised a varied and stimulating programme of events. Activities included a walking tour of the Old Town, a visit to the recently restored St Cecilia's Hall, a tour of the NMS stores at Granton, tours on the technology of fashion at the Museum, a walking tour on Poverty in Victorian Edinburgh and a visit to the newly reopened Patrick Geddes Centre at Riddles Court. There were talks on Scotland's Urban Past by Historic Environment Scotland, on Burke and Hare, the showing of a National Museum of Scotland archive film about its past and a talk on The Joy of Spines at the National Library. The year ended with a Christmas party at Augustine United Church. Some of our speakers asked that their remuneration from the OTA for their talk or tour be given to local charities. Other members of the Committee are Jean Fairbairn as Minutes Secretary, Rosemary Mann as Treasurer, Katie Kerr, Laura Harrington and Anja Amsel our Honorary President. We were very sorry that Roma Crampin, who had served on the Committee for many years latterly as Membership Secretary, resigned to move through to Glasgow to be nearer her family. In December she was awarded honorary membership of the Old Town Association. We are very grateful to Laura Harrington for agreeing to become Membership Secretary.

OTA Committee members are volunteers and new members would be made very welcome. The Committee meets monthly, so if you feel willing to give it a try PLEASE get in touch!

Financially, the OTA remains on a sound basis:

Summary Accounts for year to 31.08.17		Receipts	Payments	Surplus/ (Deficit)
Events		1,552	1,100	452
Donations		159	500	(341)
All other receipts and payments		1,071	783	288
Total		£2,782	£2,383	£399
Balances	31.08.16	Receipts	Payments	31.08.17
	£6,454	£2,782	£2,383	£6,853

Current membership of the OTA is 192 individual members and 8 corporate members. Membership is open to people who live in, work in or have an interest in or affection for the Old Town. New members would be very welcome – we believe we give good value for money with our reasonable subscription rate. Our thanks are due to our loyal members and for their support at this year's AGM and members' meetings. The website has been updated so please visit it at www.eota.org.uk for further information, links to other relevant websites and newsletters and activities.

Our aspirations for the future include the possibility that to manage short-term lets Edinburgh Council might introduce a 90-day restriction on any person wanting to rent their home/property as happens in other European cities like Barcelona. We would also hope that the future of the Royal High School as a Music School is determined. Finally there is also the possibility – if newspaper reports are to be believed – that the Grade-A listed Tron Church will again become an asset to the Old Town under its new occupants, Edinburgh World Heritage.

Barbara Logue
Convener