



# Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

January 2023

*A Happy New Year  
to all our readers!*

## Looking back, looking forward

The turn of the year is traditionally a time for reflecting on what has happened in the last twelve months and thinking about what may be to come in the next twelve. And there is certainly a lot to reflect on in the events of the last twelve months, internationally, nationally and locally. Internationally the dominating event was Russia's invasion of Ukraine with repercussions felt around the world, in Edinburgh as elsewhere.

For the UK, 2022 will be remembered as the year of four Chancellors of the Exchequer, three Prime Ministers and two Monarchs. Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee was followed all too soon by her death and then the arrangements leading up to her funeral. These affected the Old Town as The Queen's body spent a night in the Palace of Holyrood House and then lay at rest in the High Kirk of St Giles before moving to London. Crush barriers went up along the Royal Mile extraordinarily quickly and were manned cheerfully and efficiently by police officers, many of them drafted in from outside the city. They didn't always have a very firm grasp of local geography. One was heard to answer an enquiry with a desperate "I dinna ken, I'm fae Falkirk". Another (a Glaswegian this time) asked by a member of the public how he could get to the other side of the Royal Mile at a time when all the crossings were closed said he had been told there was a park somewhere beyond the Palace and it might be possible to get around there.

When Her Majesty's coffin came in from Balmoral to spend the night at Holyroodhouse the pavements of the Royal Mile were packed solid and the same was true the next day as the coffin slowly processed up to St Giles. Paddington Bear was spotted observing events from an upper window in the Canongate Kirk. And then we had the efficiently managed and fast moving queues of people filing past the coffin to pay their final respects.



*The Queen's coffin being carried into the Palace of Holyroodhouse*

*Photo credit:BBC*

Turning from these events with national and international resonance to more local issues might seem a touch parochial. But it is worth reviewing some of the issues which arose during 2022 and which are likely to have a continuing impact on those who live in, work in and care about the Old Town. And some things which happened during the year are worth recording in their own right.

But to start with, prompted by two current exhibitions at the City Art Centre, and a dive into the Old Town Association archives, we take a look at the Old Town past, going back a bit further than 2022.

### **Long-gone shops and lost buildings**

The City Arts Centre in Market Street currently has a wide range of exhibitions (see the Places to Visit and Things to do section below). Two of the exhibitions have material of particular Old Town interest. Ron O'Donnell's photos taken in the 1970s and '80s include a number of Old Town shops and businesses: Robert Cresser's brush shop in Victoria Street (which survived until 2001); Mr Fraser's Fur Shop on Forrest Road; Crawford's Tea Rooms on North Bridge with their curiously shaped windows; George Mackay bowling green bowls maker in Blackfriars Street; M T Macdonald tobacconist on George IV Bridge; and R M Banks and Sons Pet Bureau in Fleshmarket Close. The large, sharply focused prints are extraordinarily evocative, not least because most of the premises are shown without customers or staff. Only in the pet bureau is there a hint of life: the ghostly blurred image of a cat which didn't stay still through the long exposure time needed for the photo.



Ron O'Donnell 'Crawford's Tea Rooms, North Bridge' 1978 © the artist

The *Auld Reekie Explained* exhibition also at the City Art Centre includes a fascinating large-scale map of the Canongate and adjoining streets produced in 1907. It colour codes different categories of historic buildings: "ancient buildings demolished since circa 1900" (eight or nine of those); "ancient buildings threatened" (which included all of Bakehouse Close); "Ancient buildings now remaining" (not all of which remain today). A final category is very revealing of architectural attitudes of the time: "old buildings less important (mainly eighteenth century)". These include the whole east side of St John's Street (which was to be swept away to allow for the expansion of the Moray House campus) and, extraordinarily, Canongate Kirk. The prejudice against eighteenth century architecture which was expressed so forcefully in the 19th century by Charles Dickens and John Ruskin clearly still lingered in Edinburgh in 1907.

### **Blasts from the past**

Over time the Old Town Association archives became spread around the attics and storerooms of different committee members. Recently we have made an effort to bring them together and sort them out. This work is ongoing but it has already turned up some fascinating nuggets.

Early newsletters reveal both that some things never change and that some burning issues come and go (and sometimes come back again). The very first newsletter appeared in November 1977, ten months after the Association was formally constituted. It contained a piece lamenting the enormous gap site between Niddrie Street and Blackfriars Street which was "large enough to provide homes for many families as well as shops and offices" but which had stood vacant for over ten years. The owners of the site had recently submitted plans for a large commercial block which the District Council turned down. This saga was to continue for a dozen years. Successive newsletters reported on the coming and going of different schemes while Buddleia and rubbish continued to dominate the site. Eventually the October 1989 edition could report that a topping out ceremony had been held for the Scandic Crown Hotel (now, of course, the Radisson Blu).

In November 1978 under the heading “The Tourists versus the Old Town” the newsletter commented “The summer, such as it was, has come and gone – and with it the torrent of tourists who poured up and down the Royal Mile”. It is interesting that at that time tourism was seen as only “a summer invasion” but even so there was concern about whether “the rights of those who live on the tourist routes are being adequately safeguarded”. This was to be a recurring theme with items on “Royal Mile – Museum Mile” (June 1987) – “who wants to live in a museum?”, “Tailbacks on our Pavements” (October 1989), “Disneyland – No Thanks!” (January 1990), and “Tourism v People” (October 1990). Those concerns certainly still resonate: see Tackling the impact of tourism – Amsterdam leading the way? (below). Other recurring themes which still resonate are traffic, rubbish disposal and the loss of useful local shops.

From time to time the newsletter jumped the gun. In January 1989 under the headline “Goodbye, Eyesore” it reported gleefully that “The second ugliest building in the Old Town is doomed!” This was a 1963 office block in Jeffrey Street, occupied in 1989 by the Department of Education and Science. (The newsletter didn’t say which was the ugliest building in the Old Town.) In 1989 a planning application had been submitted to demolish the 1963 block, and some adjoining buildings and redevelop the site. In the event, nothing came of this. The 1963 block is still there, having been for many years occupied by Jury’s Hotel (recently rebranded the Leonardo Royal).

Other newsletter pieces provoke a sense of déjà vu. In January 1990 there was a reference to “The ingenious and hair-raising scaffolding on North Bridge” which would be an apt description for the scaffolding currently on the bridge. The January 1991 newsletter reported that the scaffolding was gone but commented “What a pity that the clean outline of North Bridge has been spoilt by bus stops, like warts on a forehead. Who in their right mind wants to take a bus to the middle of a bridge anyway? The bus stops should be at either the north or south end of the bridge as they were during the refurbishment”. The Association made very similar points recently in objecting to Lothian Buses’ proposals to reduce the number of bus

stops on South Bridge (where they are useful) and instead to concentrate stops on North Bridge (where they are not).

## **Short-term Lets**

These do not seem to have been an issue in the early days of the Old Town Association. Presumably at that time tourists mainly stayed in hotels and B&Bs. But short-term holiday lets have certainly become a matter of concern in the Old Town in recent years.

As we mentioned in the September newsletter, Scottish Ministers have given approval for Edinburgh to become the first Short-term Let Control Area in Scotland. Since 5th September 2022 use of an entire dwelling that is not a principal home as a short-term is considered a material change of use requiring planning permission. There were a number of applications for such permission in the last quarter of 2022 and this is likely to continue during 2023. The Old Town Association generally objects to such applications where they involve a loss of residential accommodation. However we recognise that self-catering accommodation needs to part of the mix of tourist provision. Where this can be provided without detriment to residential amenity we are happy to see it go ahead. So we raised no objection to a recent application to turn offices on the High Street into short term lets.

Encouragingly, the City Council now seem much more inclined to refuse permission for inappropriate short term lets. Long may that continue.

## **Tackling the Impact of Tourism – Amsterdam leading the way?**

Towards the end of 2022 it was reported that Amsterdam, another European city significantly impacted by tourism, was proposing strong action to manage that impact. This involves a campaign to discourage ‘intoxicated tourists who create an uncomfortable and unsafe atmosphere’ and ‘rowdy crowds of partygoers’. Sofyan Mbarki, the city’s deputy mayor who is implementing the tourism measures, was reported as saying: “The aim of the discouragement campaign is

to keep out visitors that we do not want. If we love the city, we must take action now. Action is needed to prevent nuisance and overcrowding. Amsterdam is a world city and bustle and liveliness come along with this but to keep our city liveable we need to choose limits instead of irresponsible growth.” Hear, hear!

## **Buddleia**

It is interesting that back in the 1970s the High Street gap-site was notable for “Buddleia and rubbish”. Buddleia is still blooming in the Old Town in the 2020s, not in gap-sites (there are far fewer of these) but on structures:



*Buddleia on walls at North Bridge, St Patrick’s Church, by Trinity Apse, and on a retaining wall in Calton Road next to the refurbished railway bridge.*

Buddleia, being a non-native, invasive plant, does not have any local creatures to chew its leaves or roots and thereby keep it in check. Where its small seeds can find a nook or cranny, there it will take root. The warmer and wetter summers of our changing climate encourages the growth of Buddleia, its roots penetrating masonry and threatening the integrity of the structure.

It is good to see fewer Buddleias growing on buildings, though the developers of the former school in New Street, now open as the BrewDog Doghouse, have let this one grow:



The biggest, most damaging Buddleias this summer were on bridges: South Bridge over the Cowgate and Waverley Bridge over the railway carry spectacular examples. If any of these plants lead to structural damage, the effects could be horrendous. The managers of our infrastructure need to wake up: keeping Buddleias in check is vital!



*Buddleia on South Bridge and Waverley Bridge.*

## Roadworks

2022 was a year marked by major roadworks and closures. Some of this work has been completed. The new setts at the Netherbow junction are so far bearing up well. The railway bridge at the New Street/Calton Road junction has been revealed in its smart new green paintwork. Work on North Bridge continues. The large container parked on the bridge and labelled ‘asbestos’ is probably a clue to one of the reasons the work is taking so much longer than originally scheduled.

And there is more work to come. A major programme, described as a road renewal scheme is due to start on 30 January. It will be carried out in five phases and affect the whole of Holyrood Road, St John Street and a small section of the Canongate adjoining St John Street. The work will include carriageway resurfacing and what are somewhat mysteriously described as “active travel improvement works”. The estimated overall duration of the works is 21 weeks. So even if everything goes to plan the work will extend into the summer.

## And finally ...

Three unrelated features of 2022 which are worth noting in passing.

### *Candy comes, candy goes*

In the January 2022 newsletter we reported with some bemusement on the sudden appearance of several brightly painted shops selling American candy. We wondered who was their target market, particularly as most of the shops seeming to be closed most of the time. It turns out that this phenomenon wasn’t limited to Edinburgh: there were press reports of similar shops on London’s Oxford Street with suggestions that they were a front for money laundering and were failing to pay business rates. We don’t know whether the same suspicions attached to the Edinburgh candy stores. But whether they did or not, they all seem to have disappeared!

### *Visiting African wildlife*

In the September 2022 newsletter we mentioned the *Giraffes around Town* event which saw statues pop up at various locations in the Old Town (and elsewhere in Edinburgh) in July and August. Statues of another African

wildlife icon – lions – have made a slightly longer visit to a site just outside the Old Town. An impressive installation of twenty-five life-size bronze lions and cubs appeared on the north side of the Meadows, near Middle Meadow Walk, in October. This exhibition is organised by the charity Born Free to raise awareness of and funds for its work protecting wild lions. The lions are due to depart at some point in January.



### *Christmas Decorations*

In previous January newsletters we have commented unfavourably on the standard of festive decorations in the Old Town. It is only fair to record that things were a bit better in 2022. Other streets, such as Cockburn Street, had similar lights to previous years but (after an initial minor glitch) they all worked which has certainly not always been the case before.



The City Chambers was enlivened by a festive purple wash of light, an elegant change from sparkles ... and far more tasteful than the garish green and red on the Bank of Scotland building on The Mound.



*Photo: Peter Ranson*

The tree in Parliament Square was, as in previous years, sadly under-sized for the space. But there were good trees on the Bank of Scotland HQ, in the Old College quad and in the Museum of Scotland (the last with decorations cleverly themed to the current Bernat Klein exhibition). The Norwegian gift tree on the Mound was fronted by an illuminated ‘Edinburgh’ sign: a useful aide memoire for selfie-takers who couldn’t remember where they were. Let’s hope these improvements are the start of a trend for future years.



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

## OTA Activities

We are offering our usual selection of activities. Visits are in-person only; talks are hybrid, being live-streamed as well as presented to a live audience. Some talks will be recorded for uploading to the OTA YouTube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9GOPJ3iS\\_InOZtuPqJQZrA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9GOPJ3iS_InOZtuPqJQZrA)

**Phyllis Bone, Edinburgh's animal sculptor**, Friday 27 January, 6.30 pm, in The Crannie, Cranston Street. Talk by art historian Dr Elizabeth Cumming on sculptor Phyllis M Bone RSA. Dr Cumming will describe her career with particular emphasis on the sculpted animals inside and outside the Scottish National War Memorial such as the unicorn and lion (below). Hybrid event, tickets £7, guests welcome.



*Photos: Aye Whithorn 2*

**Tour of St Giles High Kirk**, Tuesday 14 February 3.00pm or Thursday 16 February 3.00pm. Tour of the ancient Cathedral of St Giles on the Royal Mile led by OTA Committee Member and St Giles Volunteer Guide, Helen McBride, who will talk about the 900 year history of the Cathedral, and the events commemorated there which have shaped our nation. Also included is a short tour of the magnificent Thistle Chapel. Numbers are limited so this is an event for **members only**, tickets £7

**Visit to the Zachs Collection**, Monday 13 March, 3.30 pm or 6.30 pm. Old Town resident Dr William Zachs is a keen collector and researcher of manuscripts and books, notably from the Scottish Enlightenment. He has built a huge private library of amazing books, together with manuscripts, other artefacts, antiques and paintings. He will show the Old Town Association a selection of items from his collection relevant to the Old Town. Tickets £7, **members only**.

**Annual General Meeting**, Monday 27 March, 5.30 pm, in the George Washington Room in the Central Library, George IV Bridge. Join fellow members 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, there will be an opportunity to see some of the treasures of the Library, brought out especially for us. Free, but please book so we know how many chairs to set out, guests (and potential new members) welcome.

You may apply for tickets on-line or by post. Details on the ticket form. **When we say *members only*, we mean it!** Please do not ask for tickets for partners or friends for events that are for members only unless they are also members.

## Places to Visit and Things to do

Below is a list of current exhibitions at museums and galleries in the Old Town. We recommend you check websites in case of closures at short notice.

The **City Art Centre** exhibitions are *Auld Reekie Retold*: new stories of an old city (until Sun 19 Feb), *Glean*: early 20th Century women filmmakers and photographers in Scotland (until Sun 12 Mar), *Ron O'Donnell*: Edinburgh: A Lost World (until Sun 5 Mar), and *New Acquisitions* (until Sun 28 May).

The exhibition at the **Museum of Edinburgh** is *Respect! Caribbean life in Edinburgh* celebrating the culture of Caribbean Scottish people through museum objects, poetry, music and film.

For more information on these and the other galleries and museums run by the City Council, see [www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/whats-on](http://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/whats-on). A wide variety of digital lectures and events can also be booked through this website.

The exhibitions at the **National Museum of Scotland** in Chambers Street are *Doctor Who: Worlds of Wonder* which brings a scientific perspective to The Doctor's adventures (until 1 May), and *Bernat Klein: Design in Colour* (until 23 April) which explores the life and career of Bernat Klein, Serbian-born textile designer who worked in fashion and interiors, colour theory and industrial design.

Current exhibitions at **The Talbot Rise Gallery** are: *Momentary Monument* installation by Lara Favaretto solo exhibition by artist *Qiu Zhijie*, and multi-channel video installations by *Nira Pereg* (all until 18 Feb). See <https://www.trg.ed.ac.uk/> for exhibitions thereafter.

**The Dovecot Studio** exhibition is *Knitwear: Chanel to Westwood*, which runs until 11 March 2023. See <https://dovecotstudios.com> for more details.

The current exhibition at the **National Library of Scotland** is *Pen Names* which runs until 29 April 2023. There is also a new display of items from *Ian Rankin's archive*, donated by the creator of Edinburgh-based DI Rebus in 2019. Do also visit the refreshed display of *Treasures of the National Library* which gives some of the stories behind the books and manuscripts. For information about lectures and other events at the National Library, see <https://www.nls.uk/events/>

**The Queen's Gallery** at the Palace of Holyroodhouse is closed until 2024.

Winter lectures given by the **Old Edinburgh Club** are:

Wed 18 Jan, **Rebekah Higgitt** on *Instruments, Institutions and Individuals: The Local Networks of the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh, in the 19th Century*

Wed 15 Feb, **Diane Watters** on *Scottish Historic Schools: The Architecture of Burgh Schools, Academies and Educational Institutions before 1880*

Wed 15 Mar, **Penelope Wilson** on *Networked Edinburgh 1800-1820 and the Stamp Office Story*  
All at 7 pm in Augustine United Church or online (free to members).

Winter lectures from the **Society of Antiquaries of Scotland** are:

Thur 19 Jan, Professor Margaret Connolly on *Cut Out and Stuck In: Fragments of Medieval Manuscripts in Nineteenth-Century Albums*

Thur 23 Feb, Dr Qin Cao on *'Auspicious Gold' and 'Precious Stones': Rethinking Weapons in Bronze Age Shang China (c.1250-1050 BCE)*

Thur 16 March, Dr Louise Yeoman and Professor Julian Goodare on *Scottish Necromancers and Elite Magic*

All at 6 pm in Augustine United Church or online (free to members).