



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

May 2023

Past, Present and Future

This Newsletter opens with a piece by former Convener Barbara Logue setting out her personal memories of what is now the South Bridge Resource and Education Centre which began life as the South Bridge School. This is not the only former school in the Old Town and that thought prompts further reflection on things we have lost, and also things we can be glad never happened. And perhaps some things to look forward to?

Some of the material in this newsletter has previously appeared on the OTA Facebook page. We are doing this 'recycling' partly so that members who may not have visited that page have an idea of the range of material on it. And perhaps more of you will be prompted to visit the page, which you can do via the link on the OTA website. Fiona Cameron, the OTA committee member who manages the Facebook page, is always on the lookout for snippets of news or historical facts to post. If you have anything which you think would fit the bill, do send it to us, preferably with an image (and permission for use).

South Bridge Resource and Education Centre

Barbara Logue reports: Recent newspaper reports have publicised the proposals of Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society to take over South Bridge Resource and Education Centre as its Community Hub. The proximity of South Bridge to the existing footprint of the Fringe is apparently a key consideration. The development as a hub will be a new chapter in the history of this building.

South Bridge School was built in Infirmary Street in 1886 as a primary school and served the local community for many years. My personal involvement in South Bridge School began when I started to teach there almost 50 years ago. Since then I have been interested in the changes that have taken place over the years. I spent nine enjoyable years at the school but unfortunately the number of pupils was getting fewer, more composite classes had to be formed and it became clear that the school would have to close. When this happened pupils and staff were relocated to Milton House Primary School in the Canongate – now the Royal Mile School.

The next step was for the building to be reinvented as South Bridge Resource and Education Centre. It became a City Centre Community Learning and Development Centre where the offices of the Canongate Youth Project and the Old Town Community Development Project were based. The Canongate Youth Project is still located at South Bridge. Over the last few years South Bridge has been the place for organising the City of Edinburgh's Adult Education programme. It has also been the venue for courses that cover a wide variety of practical and academic subjects including Italian and Social History. The building is in a central location and well-served by public transport.

If the Fringe Society's plans are implemented the proposal is that Canongate Youth will remain as a tenant in the building and other small arts and cultural organisations may also be offered the opportunity to co-exist, creating a vibrant mixed-use community space for all and a hub for the Fringe. It is recognised that the building will have to be made more accessible: there is no lift and there is still a confusing arrangement of staircases and landings dating from its time as a primary school.

Postscript: The City of Edinburgh Council's Finance Committee has approved the proposal that the Edinburgh Fringe Society should rent the South Bridge Resource Centre on a long lease from the Council. The UK Government announced in the spring budget that £8.6 million of funding was to be made available to the Edinburgh Festivals. It has since been confirmed that £1.6 million of this is to go to the International Festival and the remaining £7 million to the Fringe. The Fringe Society is now in the process of creating a full business case for their use of the South Bridge Resource Centre.

Lost schools, lost children

The South Bridge Resource Centre is adorned with a relief of a woman and child sometimes described as an allegory of education and sometimes as representing Queen Margaret in her role as patroness of education. Whichever it is, there are similar reliefs on schools all over Edinburgh including (pictured) the Royal Mile School on the Canongate: the only remaining school in the Old Town.



There is a similar relief on the Scottish Whisky Heritage Centre on Castlehill, reminding us that this began life as Castlehill School. Other repurposed school buildings in the Old Town are the Brewdog Doghouse Hotel on East Market Street and flats on Drummond Street in the former St Patrick's RC Primary School.

All these changes reflect the fact that the resident population of the Old Town, and particularly the young resident population, has reduced drastically over the years. In March we posted on our Facebook page four charming images which appeared in the Illustrated London News in 1948 as illustrating the backdrop to the then still new International Festival. They were described as being by their special artist Captain Bryan De Grenau. Two of those images (reproduced again here) show children playing in Whitehorse Close and St John Street.



Such scenes are unlikely to be repeated: partly because modern parents would be reluctant to let their children play unsupervised in the street but also because there just aren't that many children around in the Old Town. The St John Street image shows something else we have lost. All the Georgian houses on the right would be swept away in the next decade or so to allow for expansion of the Moray House campus.

Lost Art

The granite sculpture *Body and Soul* in Hunter Square was intended by the artist, Peter Randall Page, to be a gently moving fountain. From the day it was installed in 1996, it attracted rubbish and the water hardly moved at all. (It has since transpired that the water

pipe of its mechanism was crushed during installation, hence its sluggishness.) It has now been covered with a neat hexagonal black box: already attracting graffiti, flyers and loungers. Perhaps it will form a plinth for a succession of the many living statues who populate the High Street in the summer.



Still Open? Not for long!

Since before the Covid-19 lockdown, the Royal Mile branch of the Bank of Scotland has been lost to sight under swathed scaffolding as the Grenfell-type insulation is removed from the façade of the Missoni Hotel (now the Radisson Collection).



Now we are to lose it altogether. Account holders have been told this branch will close at the end of July with counter services being available in George Street or South Clerk Street. This is a disappointment and another hassle for people living in the Old Town, but it is hardly a surprise: the bank staff seemed to spend their time telling visitors that they did not exchange currency and directing them to bureaux de change elsewhere.



Early for Bastille Day?

Residents were surprised to see the pillar box in the High Street near the Tron appearing in the colours of liberté, égalité et fraternité well before the 234th anniversary of Bastille Day on 14 July.



However, all was explained when Union flags and the coronation logo appeared, in good time for the presentation later in the year of the Honours of Scotland to our new King in St Giles ... at which time the box will probably be blocked for security!

Happy Nonocentenary to St Giles!

St Giles Cathedral or High Kirk, one of the High Street's most famous landmarks, will be 900 years old next year! Started in 1124, St Giles has played host to many of our historic events and has endured fires, riots and restorations to still stand proudly in the centre of Scotland's capital. Next year, an ambitious programme of spectacular events is planned. As well as integrating the celebrations into the annual events such as Hogmanay and Burns Night, there will be a series of special events involving not only the Edinburgh community but also international artists. We will hear more as the months go on but if you would like to know more at the moment, have a look at the February newsletter on the Cathedral website www.stgilescathedral.org.uk

A lucky escape?

The City of Edinburgh Council has turned down a planning application to turn the former dry cleaner's premises at 14 St Mary Street into a community hub to be used by recovering addicts. The grounds for the refusal of the

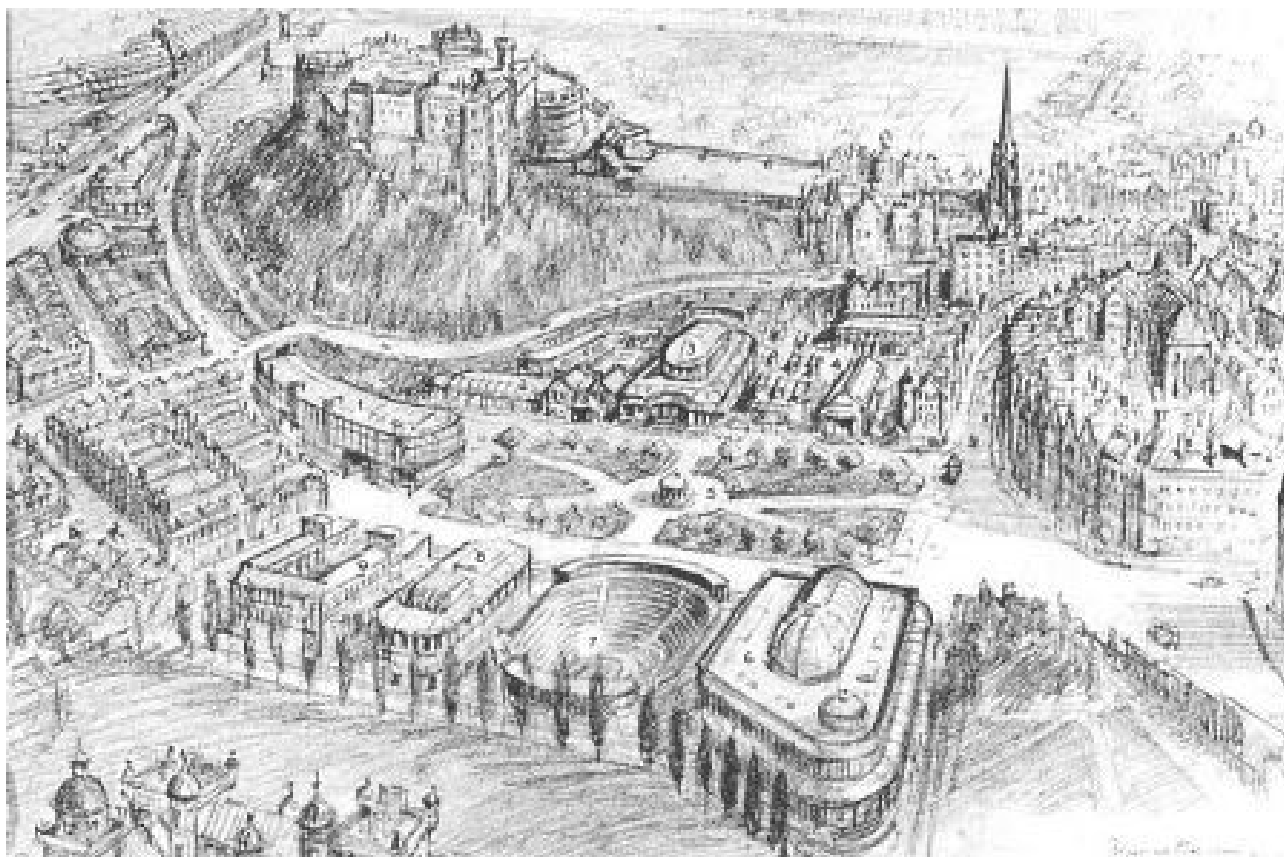
change of use were that it would undermine the character of the designated speciality shopping street, and that the use would be to the detriment of the amenity of the surrounding area.

In its submission to the Council objecting to the planning application, the OTA had also made the point that it was ill-considered to bring recovering addicts to a location so close to ongoing addiction in the Cowgate.

We hope that a more suitable use is soon found for this now rather sorry-looking shop so that it doesn't detract from businesses in the street.

Another lucky escape?

In 1949 the Illustrated London News published another Edinburgh image from the hand of their special artist Captain Bryan De Grenau. This showed what could have happened if a proposal then under consideration to create a dedicated hub for the International Festival had been followed through. Effectively, the whole of the Grassmarket would have been flattened. Thank goodness nothing came of this!



The buildings as numbered in the image are 1. multi-storey car park (what every festival needs), 2. restaurant, 3. concert hall, 4. school of music and practice studio, 5. gardens, 6. opera house, 7. open air theatre (perfect for Edinburgh!) 8. small theatre, 9. administration, lecture theatre and art gallery.

Image Illustrated London News publications.

Progress on North Bridge

On 26 April our Facebook post celebrated the fact that there is two-way traffic on North Bridge again. It is still all on one carriageway, so progress is often slow and it will be a long time before the bridge returns to normal.



As buses returned to their normal routes on the Bridges the No 35 was being rerouted because the lower High Street was closed for additional work on the recently re-laid setts. That work is now complete but the 35 faces another diversion when the work currently going on in Holyrood Road and St John Street extends into the Canongate. The 35 must surely be the most disrupted bus service in the City!

Progress on the High Street barriers?

In previous newsletters we have commented on the ugly security barriers in the High Street and have expressed the hope that they might be replaced with something more appropriate to the World Heritage Site setting. OTA Committee Member Helen McBride has been doggedly pursuing this and the City Council have accepted that the OTA is a stakeholder to be included in consultation on the replacement of the barriers. The Council seems to be fully on board and has accepted that replacements have to be aesthetically in keeping with the area as well as being effective. Watch this space.

Progress on Spaces for People?

The City Council introduced 'Spaces for People' measures, including cycle lanes and widened pavements, during 2020 and 2021 with the aim of giving people more space during the Covid-19 pandemic. Not all the

changes were well-thought through and some of the cycle lanes were quickly removed. However the scheme as a whole was extended in September 2022 for a further 18 months. More recently it has been announced that a consultation on making the measures permanent will be restarted following admitted 'errors' by the Council which have cost thousands of pounds and delayed the process by six months. Another space to watch.

A Camel in the Canongate

From time to time our Facebook post has a 'on this day' theme. Here is the one from 23 January 2023. Although we can't be specific as to the precise date (although we know that it was some time in January 1659), let's imagine that it was on this day that John Nicoll, Writer to the Signet, recorded in his diary:

'At this tyme, thair wes brocht to this natioun ane heigh great beast, callit ane Drummodary, quhilk being keipit clos in the Cannongait, nane haid a sicht o it without thrie pence the persone, quhilk producit much gaine to the keipar, in respect of the great numberis of pepill that resortit to it, for the sight thairof. It wes very big, and of great height, and cloven futed, lyke unto a kow, and on the back ane saitt, as it were a sadell to sit on. Thair wes brocht in with it ane lytill baboun, faced like unto ane aip.'

Which being translated into modern English is 'At this time was brought to this nation a high great beast, called a dromedary, which being kept close in the Canongate, nobody had a sight of it without [paying] three pence per person, which produced much gain to the keeper, in respect of the great number of people that resorted to it, for the sight thereof. It was very big, and of great height, and cloven hooved, like a cow, and on the back a seat, as it were a saddle to sit on. There was brought in with it a little baboon, with a face like an ape.'

Coffee with a Smile

Edinburgh's Police Boxes, designed by City Architect Ebenezer MacRae in 1929 and manufactured by Carron Ironworks in Falkirk, have often found new uses as ticket booths or coffee bars:



The proprietor of the coffee bar at the top of the Canongate (above) has a sense of humour and brightens the day with his signs:



*Wanted! Customers
No previous experience required!!
Please apply within*

Brownlee Goes Bananas

The Brownlee Trust was delighted to respond to a request from the Central Library for materials for the Music Library. A supply of percussion instruments was duly delivered to the Library on George IV Bridge and formally handed over at our AGM in March.



Left to Right: Helen McBride (OTA Secretary, Bronwen Brown (Library Development Leader) and Eric Drake (OTA Convener) at the hand over.



While percussion instruments might not be the first thing that comes to mind as a donation to a library, it is hoped that the boomwhackers, tambourines and rattles (one in the shape of a banana) will encourage more young people to visit the Library.

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

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.

At the **City Art Centre** the *New Acquisitions* exhibition continues until Sunday 28 May. From 27 May until Sunday 1 October 2023 the Centre will host a major exhibition of works by Peter Howson, called *When the Apple Ripens: Peter Howson at 65*, the exhibition will bring together about 100 works spanning the artist's career. From Saturday 24 June until Sunday 2 June 2024 the Centre will host *Shifting Vistas: 250 Years of Scottish Landscape* with a selection of historic and contemporary artworks drawn from the Centre's permanent collection of fine art. Entry to the New Acquisitions exhibition is free. There will be an admission charge for the Howson exhibition. Entry to the Shifting Vistas exhibition will be free.

Current (free) exhibitions at the **Museum of Edinburgh** are *Local Foreigners: the human face of migration* (until Sunday 10 September) and *Front PAGE Views* (until Sunday 25 June) a photography exhibition by the Photo Arts Group Empowerment (PAGE) project run by Access to Industry, a third sector organisation that supports people facing complex barriers to employment.

For 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.

At the **National Museum of Scotland** in Chambers Street the next exhibition in the Special Exhibitions gallery, running from Saturday 1 July to Sunday 29 October, will be *Beyond the Little Black Dress*. The exhibition sets out to deconstruct this iconic garment and examines the radical power of the colour black in fashion. Admission charges apply.

A brief, free exhibition at the museum, running from Saturday 3 June to Sunday 2 July will provide a rare chance to see one of the most important documents in Scottish history: the *Declaration of Arbroath*. This letter dated 6 April 1320 was written by the barons and freeholders of the Kingdom of Scotland to Pope John XXII, asking him to recognise Scotland's independence and acknowledge Robert the Bruce as the country's lawful king. The exhibition was to have been held in 2020 to mark the 700th anniversary of the Declaration but the pandemic intervened.

The current exhibition at **The Talbot Rice Gallery** (until Saturday 27 May) is the *Accursed Share*: nine international artists and artist groups explore the way capitalism alters our relationship to people and nature. See <https://www.trg.ed.ac.uk/> for exhibitions thereafter.

The **Dovecot Studio** exhibition is *Kaffe Fassett: the Power of Pattern* which runs until Saturday 8 July. See <https://dovecotstudios.com> for more details.

The current exhibition at the **National Library of Scotland**, running until Saturday 2 December, is *Blood, Sweat and Tears: Scotland's HIV Story*. There is also a new display of items from the *Ian Rankin 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.

OTA Activities

Our activities over the next few months are all in-person. In the autumn we are likely to return to having talks which are hybrid, being live-streamed as well as presented to a live audience. Some talks, though not all, will be recorded for uploading to the OTA YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9GOPJ3iS_InOZtuPqJQZrA

Edinburgh and the Making of Modern Scotland. Thursday 1 June 10.30 am and Tuesday 6 June 2.30 pm. OTA Convener Eric Drake, who is also a Volunteer Guide at the National Museum of Scotland, will lead a tour in the museum looking at the great changes that happened in Scotland between the late 17th century and the late 19th century and at Edinburgh's role in those changes. Numbers limited to 10 per tour, tickets £7. **Members only.**

Visit to Edinburgh Printmakers. Thursday 15 June 2.00 pm. A chance to see this creative hub for printmaking and the visual arts in its new home in an interesting, repurposed industrial building in Fountainbridge / Dundee Street. Tickets £9.

Summer Garden Party. Tuesday 11 July 2.00 pm. A chance to enjoy drinks and nibbles with fellow members (and family and friends), see one of the newest hidden gardens in the Old Town, created in Chessels Court as a lockdown project, and to find out more about the surprisingly long history of gardens in this area. Tickets £9.

You may apply for tickets on-line (email your requirements to info@eota.org.uk) or by post (form below). **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.

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Ticket Booking Form

To: OTA, % The Cockburn Association, Trunk's Close, 55 High Street, Edinburgh EH1 1SR

Please send tickets for the following events:

Museum of Scotland tour	Thurs 1 Jun 10.30 am tickets @ £7.00	£.....
	Tues 6 Jun 2.30 pm tickets @ £7.00	£.....
Edinburgh Printmakers	Thurs 15 June 2.00 pm tickets @ £9.00	£.....
Summer Garden Party	Tues 11 July 2.00 pm tickets @ £9.00	£.....
	Total		£.....

Please pay by bank transfer to **Bank of Scotland**, sort code **80-02-29**, account number **00551475**, informing info@eota.org.uk of the tickets required before you make the transfer, or by cheque payable to **Old Town Association** (please enclose a stamped self-addressed envelope)

NAME(S):

ADDRESS:

.....POSTCODE: TELEPHONE:

EMAIL:

If an event has to be cancelled or rearranged for any reason, we shall try to contact only those members whose email address or telephone number are on this form. We rely on members applying for more than one ticket to inform those for whom the other tickets were intended to tell them of the cancellation or new arrangement.