



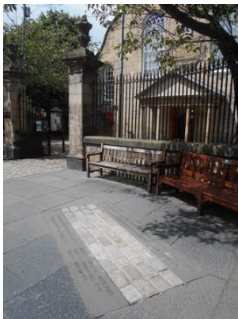
# Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

September 2023

## Events, dear boy, events ...

... as Harold Macmillan probably didn't say, or so spoilsport historians tell us. But if he had been in the Old Town over recent months it is a comment he might well have made. Because there has certainly been no shortage of events.

July saw the first Edinburgh Royal Week of Charles III's reign, starting with the Ceremony of the Keys at the Palace of Holyroodhouse on Monday 3 July. This was followed on Tuesday by the traditional garden party accompanied by the almost equally traditional torrential rain. Wednesday saw the presentation of the Honours of Scotland at St Giles with an interestingly varied programme of music and Olympic rower Dame Catherine Grainger literally upholding the honour of Scotland carrying the magnificent new Elizabeth sword; at 7.5kg it is 3.9kg heavier than the sword Penny Mordaunt carried at the Westminster Coronation.



The crowds lining the Royal Mile to view the processions to and from St Giles were somewhat thinner than those in the week following the late Queen's death last September. One missing spectator was the statue of Robert Fergusson outside the Canongate Kirk. He is currently at the Powderhall Foundry for necessary surgery on a weakened Achilles tendon. Other Old Town events during Royal Week were the unveiling by the King and Queen of a plaque beside the new Jubilee Gates at Holyrood and a visit by the Queen to the Dovecot Studios in Infirmary Street.



*Photo: www.royal.uk*



Then on 6 August, as part of the UCI Cycling World Championships, the start of the Men's Elite Road Race took place outside the Scottish Parliament with riders heading up the Royal Mile and then down the Mound. Glasgow featured heavily on the banners lining the route and international TV viewers may have been confused about which Scottish city they were seeing!

But of course, the main events of August have been the Festivals, now back to something like their pre-pandemic scale – or, at least, that’s how it felt trying to get up or down the High Street. This was the first year with Nicola Benedetti as Director of the International Festival. She put together an interesting and thoughtfully curated programme and she still managed to fit in some performances herself.

Despite gloomy forecasts (of which more below) the Fringe seemed as lively as ever with multifarious venues across the Old Town and beyond.



Here’s a quiet interlude in a busy day at one such venue, the Canongate Kirk, with Alastair Savage and friends rehearsing ahead of a well-attended evening concert. Earlier in the afternoon the kirk was crammed for a full-on performance by the Wellingborough Community Gospel Choir.

One new Fringe-related feature were coloured sleeves around the anti-pavement-parking bollards along the High Street.



These provided a nice bright touch and reduced the risk of pedestrians colliding with the easily overlooked bollards. And with crowded pavements and so many people’s attention focussed on their phone screens that is a real risk. The bollards at the Edinburgh College of Art, host of the Book Festival, were given a similar, if less formal, treatment:



The Book Festival has settled well into its Art College home (although it is still apparently due to move in 2024 along and across Laureston Place to the Edinburgh Futures Institute now taking shape in the Old Royal Infirmary building). This Festival faced some sponsorship controversy this year and it will be interesting to see what, if any, changes it makes in future.

There was a welcome, albeit scaled-back, return of the Film Festival with open-air screenings in the Old College Quad. And the Art Festival put on an interesting programme this year.

So all is well with the Festivals? Well, not if some gloomy prognostications reported in the media are to be believed:

## We’re all doomed?

This year there have been many headlines such as “Edinburgh Fringe only for the wealthy”, “Edinburgh Fringe digs cost us more than our £10,000 prize”, “Up-and-coming performers are being priced out of the Fringe” and “Rising accommodation costs are ‘grim reaper’ for festivals”. That last headline was above a

report of Shona McCarthy, Chief Executive of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society addressing the House of Commons Scottish Select Committee in May. She was reported as saying that “while they were ‘very supportive of the short term lets legislation’ – which involves new licences having to be awarded for properties rented out on a short term basis – she added it had ‘unintended consequences – particularly for artists’”.

Earlier, in February this year, Festivals Edinburgh, which brings together the city’s various Festivals, voiced fears that the introduction of licences for Airbnb-style lets could result in a third of the overall Fringe programme being lost. In a written submission to MSPs, it noted the Fringe Society had made the “conservative estimate” that a third of its programme for 2024 could be lost with this representing a minimum of £30 million in additional economic impact and nearly 700 FTE (full time equivalent) jobs in the first year alone”.

Concerns about accommodation costs are legitimate (although it is worth mentioning that similarly apocalyptic warnings have been sounded for a decade or more, during which the Festivals have continued to flourish). But some of the ways in which those concerns have been linked to the City Council’s attempts to better regulate short-term lettings are, at best, disingenuous.

To recap, in 2022 the Scottish Parliament approved a new regulatory system for the licensing of short-term let properties which comes into force on 1 October 2023. Additionally, in a review of the Planning System, the Scottish Government introduced new Short-Term Let Control Areas which, if designated, would require any residential property used as a short-term let operation to apply for a formal Change of Use (planning) application, thus clarifying the legal land-use status of short-term lets (STLs).

The City of Edinburgh Council was the first local authority in Scotland to introduce a Control Area, which covers the whole of the local authority area. This was formally approved by the Scottish Government following local consultation.

A group of operators and landlords opposed to the Council’s scheme sought a judicial review and in June, after a two day hearing at the Court of Session, Lord Braid issued a judgment which was widely reported as ruling Edinburgh’s short-term let plan unlawful. The Cockburn Association in its detailed and thoughtful review of the judgement ([bit.ly/3KSzvKl](https://bit.ly/3KSzvKl)) commented wearily “The presentation of this review in the news was, perhaps not unsurprisingly, simple and lacking any sense of nuance or depth”. While Lord Braid did rule aspects of the Council’s scheme unlawful it is not the case that the whole regulatory system has been thrown out.

In July the City Council issued an update following the Judicial Review. It is worth quoting key points from this which make it clear both that the policy remains in force and how it will be carried forward.

- The requirement to obtain the relevant STL licence is unaffected by the Court’s judgement and the Council’s STL licensing scheme remains fully operational.
- The Council is required to operate a licensing system and has no discretion to exempt in particular anyone home letting or home sharing from the need to obtain a licence.
- There are no changes to the policy in relation to home letting, home sharing or temporary exemptions as a result of the Judicial Review.
- Existing hosts and operators have until 1 October 2023 to apply for a licence in order to continue operating whilst their application is being considered. You are an existing host or operator if you have already been using your property to provide short term lets prior to 1 October 2022.
- If you were not using your premises to provide short term lets before 1 October 2022, you cannot take bookings or receive guests until you have a licence.



It is also worth mentioning that the Council’s scheme was always primarily intended to regulate the conversion of whole residential properties to permanent short-term letting. Different rules apply for home letting (defined by the Council as “using all or part of your own home for short-term lets, whilst you are absent. An example of this could be whilst you are on holiday”) and home sharing (“using all or part of your own home for short-term lets, whilst you are there”). It is ironic that Airbnb, which has become a widely used shorthand for problematic short-term lettings removing properties from the housing stock, was originally set up to facilitate home sharing. Finally, the policy provides that: “The Council may grant temporary exemptions to the requirement to obtain a STL licence in certain circumstances as set out below:

- a During Edinburgh Festival Fringe and Edinburgh International Festival
- b During Edinburgh’s Christmas and Hogmanay Festive Period
- c For Major Sporting Events
- d For Major International Events.

## Litter is no Joke

An unwelcome side product of the Festivals (particularly the Fringe) is the tide of discarded flyers littering the streets – particularly the pedestrianised section of the High Street. The Council’s tongue-in cheek “We’ll bin our jokes if you’ll bin your litter” posters seem to have little effect.



There is a general tendency to think of litter as a “Coouncil” problem. Certainly cutbacks have not helped. One particularly conscientious streetsweeper in the Old Town sadly passed away a couple of years ago and has not been replaced, meaning his colleagues are sorely over-stretched. But it isn’t the Council that drops the litter in the first place. Sometimes

there is the excuse of overflowing bins. But often there isn’t, as these (non-Festival-related) examples show.



There may be legitimate reasons, to do with what waste can be placed in what bin, for instance, the green plastic rubbish bags being left by an empty bin in Jeffrey Street. But the flimsy green bags are an irresistible target for gulls and their contents can quickly end up scattered across the street.



There is no excuse at all for the disgusting slew of litter in front of empty rubbish and recycling bins in Gullan’s Close. This mess was very quickly cleared up by the hard-pressed street sweepers. But there should have been no need for them to do it. Perhaps we all need to be a bit braver in calling out the litter droppers?

## Best Laid Plans

Keeping an eye on planning applications is a key role of the Old Town Association Committee. We don’t comment on every application in the Old Town; most are quite innocuous. And in one case – the Jubilee Memorial gates at Holyrood, mentioned earlier – we thought it might be considered lèse-majesté to comment (and in any event, the proposals were in the best possible taste). We also occasionally comment on applications for sites outside the Old Town where they might have a detrimental visual or other impact on our patch.

All comments have to be based on valid planning grounds. It is no good just saying you don't like the look of what is proposed. For example, a valid ground of objection is that a development, including a change of use, would have a materially detrimental effect on the living conditions of nearby residents. The Old Town Association has objected to many short-term let applications on this basis and no doubt we will be making more such objections in coming months.

This does not mean that we automatically object to every application involving change of use for designated residential accommodation. One recent application on which we made no comment involved 1A Parliament Square (the former Police Chambers) where part of a residential apartment is to be converted to hotel rooms. Here the creation of the apartment was fairly recent (2000) and it was never a genuinely residential space. This particular application included a very thorough heritage statement by Historic Buildings Consultant Nick Haynes giving an interesting account of the history of the site (Ref 23/02858/FUL > Documents > Heritage Statement).

One application we did object to was the 'temporary' erection of structures on top of Waverley Mall for cafés, bars, food and drink outlets, and ancillary facilities (see photo below). Or, rather two applications. The first was in November 2022 and we objected as the shacks blocked an important view of the Old Town, took business away from catering

establishments on Princes Street and contiguous streets and in the mall itself, and created dangerous congestion on a pavement already crowded with bus stops and heavy footfall at the top of Waverley Steps. We were pleased when this application was refused ... only to be astounded when an almost identical application was lodged in June 2023. The only change in this second application being the omission of toilets and some retail from the 'ancillary facilities'. This, in our eyes, made the application worse, as the lack of toilets could lead to anti-social behavior from people after enjoying the products of the drinks outlets. This added to the unacceptable nature of the proposal. We are delighted to report that this application was also refused, though too late for the removal of the clutter to be enforced before the Festival.

Keeping an eye on planning applications is a generally unexciting, albeit important, business. But it does have its lighter moments. There is a presumption against internally illuminated advertising signs in the Old Town Conservation Area. That rule is widely flouted as one applicant sought to point out by submitting a dossier of photos of such signs with an application for a new one. The application was properly refused as it would "adversely affect the character and appearance of the building and the character and appearance of the surrounding conservation area". The Old Town Association suggested the dossier of photos could usefully be passed on to the appropriate Council staff as an aid to enforcement action.



## Small Retail Opportunity

In the Old Town we are used to seeing ‘to let’ signs appearing and disappearing as businesses come and go. But this one caught our eye:



*Right: Eric Drake, OTA convener, and John Lowrey, SHBT trustee, at the handover of books from the Robin Tait collection to Riddle’s Court.*

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

## Robin Tait Collection

Robin Tait, local historian and former editor of the OTA newsletter, died in 2020. Robin Tait’s son, Andy, asked the OTA to find good homes for his father’s collection of historic books relating to Edinburgh and Scottish history. The OTA gladly undertook this task and the books were distributed between the Edinburgh Central Library for the Edinburgh Room, the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust for the libraries in Riddle’s Court and the Custom House in Leith, with an historic book of Scottish songs given to Scottish/Irish traditional folk musician Aidan O’Rourke, and a souvenir book about Queen Elizabeth’s 1953 visit to Edinburgh presented to Canongate Kirk. Andy Tait was delighted with the outcome.





## 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 major summer exhibition is of works by Peter Howson: *When the Apple Ripens: Peter Howson at 65*. The exhibition (until Sun 1 Oct, admission charges apply) will bring together about 100 works spanning the artist's career. This will be followed from Sat 18 Oct by **Deep Rooted**, a group exhibition featuring work by eight contemporary artists, Dalziel + Scullion, Anya Gallaccio, Andy Goldsworthy, Andrew Mackenzie, Naomi McIntosh, Katie Paterson and Hanna Tuulikki, exploring the relationship between people and the natural environment using a variety of media and approaches. Until Sun 2 Jun 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. From Sat 4 Nov 2023 to Sun 3 Mar 2024 the City Art Centre will host *The Scottish Landscape Awards*, a biennial event open to anyone over 16 years born, living or studying in Scotland, and for works in any media.

The new *Scotland Galleries* at the **National Gallery of Scotland** on the Mound will open on Sat 30 Sept. Ten new galleries will provide a bright, spacious and accessible new home to works from pioneering Scottish artists such as William McTaggart, Anne Redpath, Phoebe Anna Traquair, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Glasgow Boys. Also at the National Gallery (RSA) is *Grayson Perry, Smash Hits* covering his 40-year career (until Sun 12 Nov, entrance fees apply).

Current (free) exhibitions at the **Museum of Edinburgh** are *Local Foreigners: the human face of migration* (until Sunday 10 September); *Windrush Legacy, Creative Reflections* (30 Sept 2023 until 28 Jan 2024), an exhibition by people of Caribbean descent based in Scotland to share stories of life in Scotland; and *Kyiv is the Unbreakable Heart of Europe*, (Sat 23 Sept to Sun 12 Nov), an exhibition by Ukrainian photographers illustrating the impact of war.

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.

At the **National Museum of Scotland** in Chambers Street the summer exhibition in the Special Exhibitions gallery (until Sun 29 Oct, admission charges apply) is *Beyond the Little Black Dress* which deconstructs this iconic garment and examines the radical power of the colour black in fashion. The Grand Gallery hosts *Uniquely Scottish Silver*, a display 43 items of five distinct Scottish silver designs: mazers, quaichs, thistle cups, ovoid urns and heart brooches. *Rising Tide*, in the exhibition space in the Scotland galleries, explores our relationship with the natural environment through contemporary responses to climate change and plastic waste by Indigenous Australian and Pacific Islander artists.

The current exhibition at **The Talbot Rice Gallery** (until 30 Sept) is *The Nature of Difference*, a series of twenty individual text works by Hephzibah Israel that poetically explores the nature of translation and what it is to navigate borders.. See <https://www.trg.ed.ac.uk/> for exhibitions thereafter.

The major exhibition **Dovecot Studio** is *Scottish Women Artists: 250 Years of Challenging Perception* which runs until 6 January. 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*. 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 a mix of hybrid and in-person. Talks are hybrid, being live-streamed as well as presented to a live audience. Past talks, though not all, are on the OTA YouTube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9GOPJ3iS\\_InOZtuPqJQZrA](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9GOPJ3iS_InOZtuPqJQZrA)

**Abbey Strand Talk.** Monday 25th September, 6.00 pm. The Abbey Strand buildings have been converted into holiday accommodation and an education centre. Malcolm Mathieson, the project manager for the works, will tell us something of the history of the buildings, the work that was done, and some of the challenges of dealing with a building dating back to the early 16th century. Hybrid talk. Tickets £7.

**Patrick Geddes Walk.** Wednesday 18th October, 2.30 pm. Patrick Geddes was a pioneering environmentalist, conservationist, sociologist and town planner. Ed Hollis, professor of Interior Design at the University of Edinburgh, will lead us on a one-hour walk in and around the Lawnmarket to look at the life and work of the Scottish polymath. **Members only.** Tickets £7.

**Visit to the City Archives.** Monday 13th November, 2.00pm. Edinburgh City Archives are the archive service for the city council and its predecessor authorities. The Archives also hold records relating to the Edinburgh area and the people of Edinburgh. **Members only.** Tickets £7.

**Christmas Party** in Chessels Court. Thursday 14th December, 2.00 pm. Enjoy drinks and nibbles with fellow members (and family and friends). Chessels Court was built in 1745 and 1765 by wright Archibald Chesils to provide mansion flats for the well-to-do. The flats have exuberant plasterwork by William Robertson. Chessels Court was rescued from dereliction by Robert Hurd in 1960 using the conservative surgery principles of Patrick Geddes. Guests welcome. Tickets £10.

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

<b>Abbey Strand Talk</b>	Mon 25 Sept, 6.00 pm	..... tickets @ £7.00	£.....
<b>Patrick Geddes Walk</b>	Wed 18 Oct, 2.30 pm	..... tickets @ £7.00	£.....
<b>Visit to City Archives</b>	Mon 13 Nov, 2.00 pm	..... tickets @ £7.00	£.....
<b>Christmas Party</b>	Thurs 14 Dec, 2.00 pm	..... tickets @ £10.00	£.....
		Total	£.....

Please pay by bank transfer to **Bank of Scotland**, sort code **80-02-29**, account number **00551475**, informing [info@eota.org.uk](mailto: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.