



Edinburgh Old Town Association

Convener's Report 2022

Having decided to retire after ten years in the role of Convener of the Old Town Association, I thought it would be interesting to look back on some of the issues that the OTA has been involved with over these years. It is by no means a comprehensive account but it will give some idea of the challenges that were faced. There have been achievements and disappointments. As far as positives are concerned the future of the Royal High School building appears to be settled. After a worrying period of time it appears that the building will at last be home to a Music School rather than another hotel. An Architecture award was given to the architects responsible for the project in Advocates Close in 2013. The project was described as 'a substantial mixed development full of interest'. The refurbishment of Riddles Court as the Patrick Geddes Centre was welcomed as was the redevelopment of Panmure House, the former home of Adam Smith. It was agreed that the Canongate Venture building – formerly North Canongate Infant School – would not be demolished but would be incorporated into the new development scheme for the area. The Crannie in Cranston Street was opened – a community hub for residents rather than tourists. The drinkers' dens which mushroomed in 2021 in areas like Cockburn Street seem to have been dismantled. The growing interest in the cultivation of green spaces has become evident in the Old Town area.

The OTA has helped by donating money to the Central Library for the repair of the print of the Panorama of Edinburgh, to the National Library to help the conservation work on their copy of Picturesque Bits from Old Edinburgh and to help with the cost of the digitisation of the indices of the Boog Watson archive to help anyone to research the history of Edinburgh more easily. A donation was given to the Cowgate Under 5s Centre to help with the restoration of the Wendy House, known as Willow Cottage, which had been vandalised.

The Association considered and commented on many and varied planning applications, liaised with organisations like the City of Edinburgh Council, the Cockburn Association, Edinburgh World Heritage and where possible with the Old Town Community Council. We were in touch with local councillors over local issues and representatives from the Association attended meetings and conferences with the Council on initiatives like Open Streets, Connecting our City, Transforming our Places and the future of Airbnb.

Unfortunately there have been set-backs too over the years. The question of busking and what is acceptable has not been resolved and there are still too many tartan tat shops in the Old Town. The related issues of Airbnb, short-term lets and tourism in general are still to be addressed properly and perhaps settled. The balance between residents and tourists is still difficult and the possibility of a tourist tax has been raised. The City Council produced a Draft Tourism Strategy for the period up to 2030 which was rather confused. Often it has seemed that the City of Edinburgh Council has gone for short-term gain rather than the needs of local people. The Old Town is home to more than tourists – there are multi-starred hotels, student housing, luxury flats, owner-occupied properties, council houses but also hostels for the homeless. The Covid pandemic and consequent lockdown restrictions led to a decrease in tourists and a chance to consider the whole issue of tourism. The photo-essays in the April 2020 and September 2020 editions of the Old Town Association Newsletters showed the effects of lockdown in the Old Town with the photos of Empty Streets and Edinburgh in Lockdown.

Since its establishment over 40 years ago as a member-led organisation the OTA has aimed to keep its members informed. Our newsletters have always been vital in communicating with our members. In each edition over the last ten years there has continued to be articles on current issues, editorials, photo-essays and a diverse programme of activities like talks, visits and walks. There are too many activities to list but there have been many. Some of the talks have been quirky like the one about Deep-fried Mars Bars, many have been educational, for instance the talk on Bees at Home and the talk on the Forgotten Polar Hero –

William Speirs Bruce. Visits included Calton Hill Observatory House, the Burns Monument and the Botanic Cottage. Walks were Patrick Geddes Gardens Walk, Greyfriars Kirkyard and a walking tour of Canongate Breweries. Newsletters also informed readers about events organised by other groups like The Old Edinburgh Club and the museums and art galleries in the Old Town. There were also reviews of newly published books about the Old Town. During lockdown events had to be cancelled and then latterly virtual talks were organised on Zoom.

The hard work and commitment of the members of the Old Town Committee over the years must be recognised. I appreciate the help, support and encouragement of all these members who worked voluntarily for the Association. These past members included Roma Crampin (former Convener), Bill Cowan (former Planning Secretary), Jean Fairbairn (Minutes Secretary), Robin Tait (former Newsletter editor who died in 2020), Rose McKenzie (former Secretary), Eleanor Peat (former Membership Secretary) Fenella Kerr and Katie Kerr. I would like to make a special mention of our Honorary President Anja Amsel who died in 2020. The Committee as a whole and I personally as Convener benefited greatly from Anja's knowledge and experience of the Old Town.

The Old Town Association has been fortunate in having talented and caring Committee members in the past and that trend has continued. Current members include Rosemary Mann, Naomi Richardson and Eric Drake who have been involved with the Association for many years. Rosemary is Treasurer and photographer of the photo-essays in the newsletters. It is to her we owe the arrangements for Zoom and hybrid meetings. She has also given talks in her role as museum guide. Naomi is Vice-Convener and Events Secretary and she has been responsible for the long list of activities and events that have been offered to members. Eric Drake is Newsletter Editor and he has produced the many successful and praised editions of the newsletters. He too has given talks and walks to members. Kate Marshall has undertaken the task of looking at planning applications and Helen McBride is Minutes Secretary who also gives talks as does Laura Harrington. We welcome new members to the Committee – Gillian Ferguson and Fiona Cameron. Fiona has become responsible for the Old Town Association's Facebook page. Thank you to all these Committee members for their efforts and perseverance.

In 2014 there were eleven members of the committee and in 2020 there were just six. For this reason we sent out an appeal to our members for volunteers to join the Old Town Committee. We still need more committee members to progress the work of the Association so if you feel you might enjoy serving please get in touch via our website (www.eota.org.uk). The OTA is grateful for the support and loyalty of our members over the years. New members would also be welcome.

The financial position of the OTA at the end of August 2022 (its financial year-end) was:

Summary Accounts for year to 31.08.22		Receipts	Payments	Surplus/ (Deficit)
Events		1,102	495	607
Donations		400	-	400
All other receipts and payments		1,498	989	509
Total		£3,000	£1,484	1,516
Balances	31.08.21	Receipts	Payments	31.08.22
	£7,513	£3,000	£1,484	£9,029

Finally I would like to mention the fate of the 35 bus in recent years. It is the only bus that takes passengers from the Palace of Holyrood up the Canongate to the High Street. Despite this it has suffered frequent diversions thanks to the City of Edinburgh Council's initiatives on Open Streets and vehicle-free Sundays when the Canongate was closed to traffic. When the work was done replacing the setts at the St Mary's St/Canongate junction the 35 was again diverted although tourist buses were permitted to drive up the Canongate. It was suggested partly in fun but partly seriously that local residents be allowed to use their bus passes to access the tourist buses to be transported up the Canongate! Mostly the diversions were via Regent Road but at one point in 2022 the 35 was sent up the Pleasance to re-join its route along Chambers Street via West Richmond Street and the Bridges. I hope that the 35 has a more settled route in future for the sake of local residents.

Barbara Logue
Convener