



Edinburgh Old Town Association

Convener's Report 2023

This is my first report as Convener of the Old Town Association, a role I have taken over from Barbara Logue who was Convener for ten years and has given even longer service to the Association. I am very pleased to have her continuing support on the OTA Committee.

2023 in many ways saw the Old Town return to a status quo ante, "ante" meaning before Covid, lockdowns and all that. The numbers of tourists, if not quite back to old levels, were certainly well up on the previous couple of years. The Festivals were firmly re-established in the real world, having had to be entirely virtual in 2020 and with a substantial virtual offer in the following two years. The Book Festival had happily relocated from the New Town (Charlotte Square) to the Old Town (College of Art). 2024 is due to see it flit again, across Lauriston Place to the Quarter Mile (the old Royal Infirmary). 2023 saw work continuing on North Bridge. Indeed, it feels as though that work has become a permanent feature of Old Town life. Perhaps 2024 will see it completed. Or perhaps not.

For the Association it was largely back to business as usual in 2023. We considered and commented on many and varied planning applications, with towards the end of the year, a positive flood of applications relating to short-term lets. We continued to liaise with organisations like the City of Edinburgh Council, the Cockburn Association and Edinburgh World Heritage and were in touch with local councillors over local issues. We also continued to participate in the Edinburgh Civic Forum, the purpose of which is to strengthen the dialogue between civic groups in the capital and the City Council.

The Association also returned to a full programme of live visits, guided walks and talks (with a Zoom option for some of the talks). Helen McBride led a tour of St Giles High Kirk and I led a tour of items in the National Museum of Scotland relating to Edinburgh. There was a visit to the fascinating Zachs book Collection and at our AGM there was a chance to see some of the treasurers of the City Library. We had an interesting visit to Edinburgh Printmakers in their new Fountainbridge premises and a visit to the City Archives was oversubscribed (with further visits set up in 2024). What was intended to be a summer garden party in Chessels Court was rain-blighted but still enjoyed by the members who attended as was a Christmas party, also in Chessels Court. Professor Ed Hollis led an enlightening guided walk on Patrick Geddes and equally enlightening was a talk by art historian Dr Elizabeth Cumming on Phyllis Mary Bone RSA whose animal sculptures feature in the National War Memorial in Edinburgh Castle. Finally, we had a chance to see inside the renovated Abbey Strand buildings and hear from Malcolm Mathieson about the work that has been done there.

The financial position of the OTA at the end of August 2023 (its financial year-end) was:

Summary Accounts for year to 31.08.23		Receipts	Payments	Surplus/ (Deficit)
Events		932	715	217
Donations		472	1,200	(728)
All other receipts and payments		1,587	1,098	489
Total		£2,991	£3,013	(22)
Balances	31.08.22	Receipts	Payments	31.08.23
	£9,029	£2,991	£3,013	£9,007

This healthy financial position allowed the Association and its sister organisation the Brownlee Trust to make several grants and donations in 2023. We provided support for the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust's Spring Lecture programme, including the screening of *The Ballad of a Great Disordered Heart* which was largely filmed in the Old Town during Lockdown. The Brownlee Trust was able to respond to a request from the Central Library for materials for the Music Library by funding a selection of percussion instruments.

Another donation was made possible by the generosity of the family of the late Robin Tait, a long-standing OTA committee member who died in 2020. Robin was a respected local historian and had an interesting collection of books relating to Edinburgh and Scottish history. His sons kindly offered these to the OTA and we were able to find permanent homes for them: some in the Edinburgh and Scotland Room of the Central Library; some with the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust at Riddles Court and the Leith Customs House.

The OTA Newsletter continues to be the main means of communication with members and 2023 saw three issues, as is normal. We have continued with the practice, started in 2020, of printing the Newsletter in colour. The OTA now also has a social media presence (Facebook and Instagram) thanks to committee member Fiona Cameron. In the summer of 2023 Fiona was interviewed by the Scottish Civic Trust about the work of the OTA and that interview can be viewed on the Trust's YouTube channel.

The day-to-day running of the OTA is in the hands of a committee of members. The full Committee of the Old Town Association is currently:

Eric Drake (Convener and Newsletter Editor)
Naomi Richardson (Vice-Convener and Events Secretary)
Helen McBride (Minutes Secretary)
Rosemary Mann (Treasurer and Newsletter Photographer)
Fiona Cameron (social media)
Barbara Logue
Laura Harrington
Kate Marshall
John Bowles (joined January 2024)
Hilary Swanston (joined February 2024)

The constitution agreed when the OTA was set up in 1976 provided for a committee consisting of four officers (Chairman, Vice-chairman, Secretary and Treasurer) and up to 15 other members. As recently as 2014 there were eleven members of the committee but by 2020 there were just six. It is gratifying that membership is now up to ten. But members vary in the amount of time they are able to give to committee business so we would welcome more members to progress the work of the Association. If you feel you might enjoy getting involved (and the committee is a very sociable bunch) please get in touch via our website (www.eota.org.uk).

Eric Drake
Convener