



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

April 2011

This front page aims to present a wide range of topics associated with the Old Town and its happenings, but frequently seems to end up complaining about something. So - here we go again!

This time last year we wrote to the Council Leader providing a list of the obvious Old Town problems and asking the same very simple question regarding each – was there adequate legislation in place for dealing with it, taking into account the present economic climate? If the answer was ‘yes’, then would the Council now take the problem in hand? If ‘no’, then would the request go to the Scottish Parliament to produce such legislation? The response was at best vague, and simply recommended contact with Council staff for further information. In practice, the staff are obviously trying to do their best, and have made some small steps forward but over the past year there has been no visible improvement.

In the January issue we discussed the problem of buskers. At a recent Safer Neighbourhood meeting, a senior Police officer explained that as busking was not a specific offence, a person could only be taken to court for Breach of the Peace. This would involve much time and cost, and the case might well be dismissed by the Sheriff. It was suggested that there was a clear and simple solution to the problem, and that was to ask the Scottish Parliament for a Byelaw making busking an offence under specified circumstances.

In practice, there is a similar problem in dealing with a number of other frequent causes for complaint. In other cases, far higher fines are needed to deal with the present generation of affluent offenders.

None of our ‘leaders’ in Parliament and Council actually denies that there are obvious problems in the way the Old Town is developing and functioning. On enquiry most MSPs simply state the obvious, that is, that these are Local Authority matters. By way of contrast, Sarah Boyack MSP has been very supportive over Old Town problems and has expressed her concerns to the Council on more than one occasion.

As for the Council itself, the Councillors seem to have forgotten that they were elected to represent their constituents, not powerful financial lobbies.

The influence of business would certainly explain the curious lack of action; for example, to limit excessive consumption of alcohol in the Old Town, or to place firm controls on the activities of property developers. In one way or another, the Council is presently at risk of slowly killing the Goose that lays the Golden Eggs.

Specific powers are about to be provided to curb the activities of stag and hen parties, and the Police have now advised that additional powers should be sought to control busking. Has not the time come to request new legislation to cover all the various problems in our World Heritage Site? Enforcement would then be simple and straightforward, and we could have a friendly and orderly environment to which to welcome our tourists, as is encountered at so many other centres of tourism.

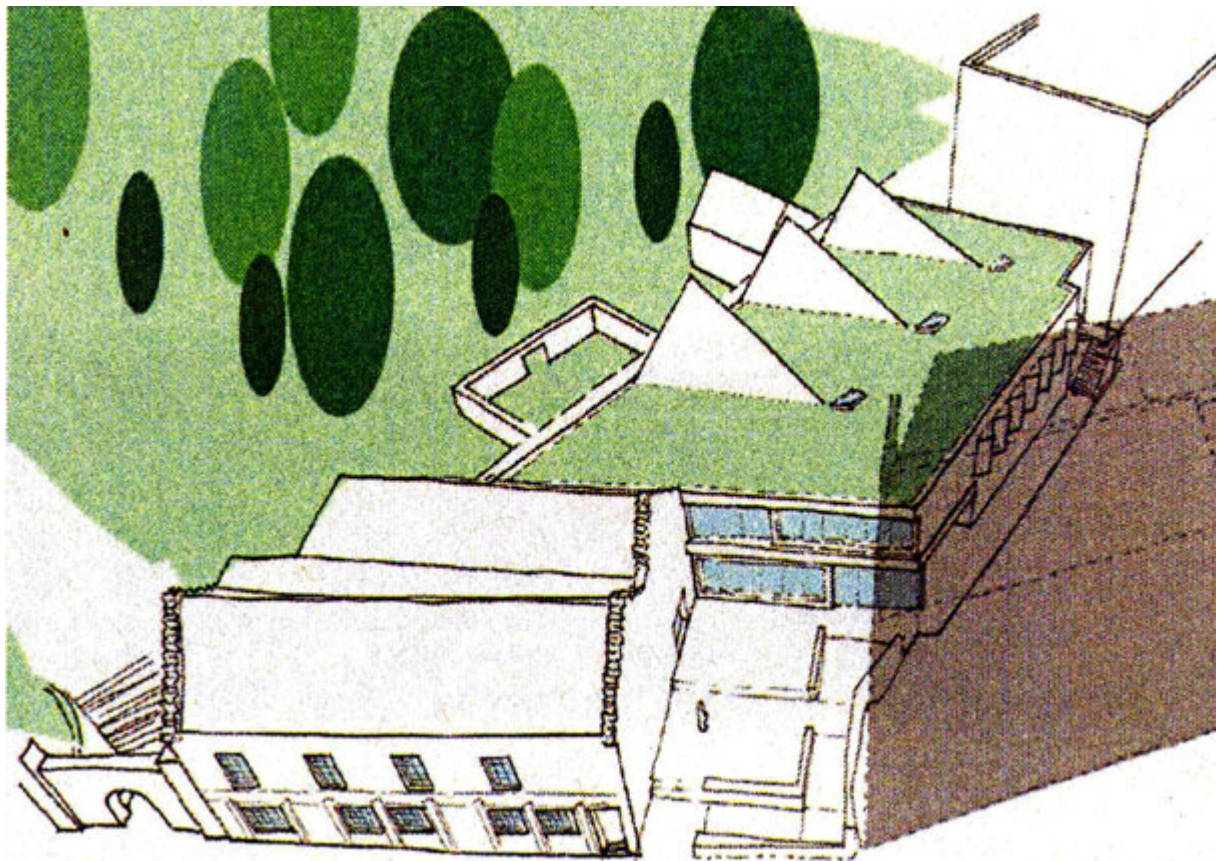
Candlemakers' delight

There was concern a couple of years ago regarding the proposal to demolish the old Kirkhouse which is located at the foot of Candlemaker Row. Objections centred on the demolition proposal, but also on the application to replace the building complex with a bulky, tall building which would have intruded into the almost rural view of the Old Town and the Castle from Greyfriars Kirkyard to the south. Financial problems ensued and the project was

delayed, but is now expected to go ahead in a revised scheme.

This retains the Kirkhouse and associates it with a generously sized two-storey building located behind it. It will no longer interrupt the view from the churchyard.

The development has been put forward by the Grassmarket Community Project which is a partnership between the long established Grassmarket Mission and Greyfriars Kirk.



The Project is aimed at supporting 'disengaged' people, having for example, alcohol or drug problems, while they struggle to move on. The centre already provides meals and drop-in services in the refurbished Kirkhouse, as well as running a centre which recycles high quality wood from church pews and other sources, to produce new furniture, and which gives experience of cultivation in the herb gardens in Greyfriars Kirkyard. The proposed new buildings, to be located behind the Kirkhouse, would greatly increase the facilities. Apart from peer support groups, there will be drama, music, arts and crafts, cooking and fabrics classes. Local community groups will also be able to use the facilities.

A perspective view, looking down at the buildings, shows the Kirkhouse in the foreground, with an open courtyard to the right and the steps and entrance to the Kirkyard to the left. The trees beyond are indicated symbolically. The new building, including a green fabric roof, can be seen behind the Kirkhouse and beyond the courtyard.

One gets the impression of a well planned and organised project. Just the sort of new scheme that we should welcome in the Old Town.

Moray House

There is good news about another proposed Old Town development that was causing concern. With the changed economic climate, Edinburgh University has modified its plans for its site located close to the Moray House premises located between the Canongate and Holyrood Road.

The new scheme is on a somewhat reduced scale, concentrating on student accommodation, and no longer including private dwellings. Significantly, the heights of two of the buildings are to be reduced. These were features on which much criticism centred in the earlier proposal.

Holyrood horrors

The aesthetic merits of our Parliament building are viewed subjectively, generating a corresponding spectrum of opinions. What is indisputable however is that the project famously over-ran its budget and that the buildings are so designed as to be extremely costly to run and maintain, and all this, at our expense.

There were other problems with the project at a purely practical level. For example Holyrood Road, a public thoroughfare, was diverted, presumably for security reasons, so that busy traffic streams were sent on a significant detour through Holyrood Park, where they disturb the enjoyment of open air enthusiasts. The latest indignity to which we have been subjected is, again for security reasons, rows of bollards, apparently costing millions of pounds, which have been installed in the Canongate along the pavement by the side of the Parliament buildings. The pavement is not wide there and the bollards cause a real obstruction, particularly to those getting on or off buses.

Scotsman Steps

Many people will not have seen these splendid steps in their earlier days, and some may not even be aware that they are there.

Located on the north side of the old Scotsman Newspaper building, they provided a quick and useful link connecting North Bridge to Market Street and Waverley Station below. They have been in a poor state of repair for some years now, presenting something of a no-go area to potential users, but Edinburgh World Heritage and the City Council have almost finished a full restoration, and the steps will soon be open again.



Much of the carved decoration on the stonework has required restoration or replacement, and marble treads to the steps will soon be installed. These are to be in varying colours. Fine wrought-iron gates are to be placed at the top and bottom of the stairs, and these will be closed overnight in order to limit misuse of the stairs. The gates are presently under construction by Ballantine's of Bo'ness and thanks are due to them for providing a photograph of work on a gate in progress, the vertical bars yet to be added.

Magnum Opus

This sign was spotted in Dublin Street outside the Magnum Bar. While we applaud the sentiments, we wonder what Dublin Street has that the Old Town doesn't. Are residents in the New Town more worthy of a good night's sleep than we denizens of the Old Town? We note that the sign bears the logos of the City of Edinburgh Council and Lothian & Borders Police. Perhaps they can tell us why every street in the Old Town which has a licensed premises (are there any that don't?) is not embellished with one (or several) of these signs.



Lions in Springtime

Some readers might remember a spring event a few years ago when we visited Holyrood Park to see a collection of sculptures set out there. The artist concerned was Cramond-based Ronald Rae. He took us around to look at them and explained how he selected the granite boulders that he uses, or as he expressed it, how they selected him. Granite is a particularly hard medium to work, and each item took him many hours of time to create.

Apparently the most popular of the Holyrood sculptures was the Lion of Scotland. It sat, along with the others, in the Park near Holyrood Palace and the Parliament building from 2006 through to last year.

The Lion, weighing a massive twenty tons, was carved out of a granite block. It has now been installed in the popular St Andrews Square Gardens and our photograph shows it in Spring last year. An indication of just how popular it is, particularly with children, is the worn state of the grass around it a year later.

Go along to see it if you haven't done so already. It is there on a temporary basis, but in view of its popular reception, would it not be a good idea for the Council to give it a permanent home?

High Street site development

The development of the extensive site stretching from the High Street down to

Market Street and to the lower end of Cockburn Street started with the conversion of foreland and backland buildings at the High Street end of the site into well-designed and appointed flats. The project then became a victim of the financial troubles, and has been at a standstill for a couple of years. Recent reports suggest that a new developer has now been found, and that a German-based organisation wishes to establish a two hundred bed budget hotel there.

The site is right in the heart of the Old Town, and contains a building near the top of Advocate's Close which is the most complete domestic dwelling house of the late fifteenth century in Edinburgh, if not in Scotland. It is not clear just which part of the site is intended to accommodate the hotel, but the Council really ought to ensure that the activities of the developer respect the unique qualities of the site. If they don't, it would certainly be a strong second candidate for referral to the World Heritage authorities, who might not be as light-handed in their decision this second time.

The question arises as to what 'respect' entails in this situation. For a start the pattern of tenements and closes, dating back nine hundred years, should be protected and the many buildings of good quality should be retained and converted with sensitivity. Finally, modified or new buildings should not be permitted to tower above their surroundings to provide those special panoramic outlooks, or to spoil the view of the Scott Monument, New Town and beyond from the top of Advocate's Close. That view is photographed by several hundred tourists each day in the peak season.

Digging up the University

We had an article in the last Newsletter announcing a verdant future for the University's Old Quadrangle. The transformation is soon to be completed, but meanwhile the archaeologists have been at

work and found evidence of the rich history of the site. The church known as Kirk o'Field was located here. No remains of the building were found but part of the graveyard was located. The church was damaged by the English in 1544 and was a ruin by 1559. Nearby some relatively early walls were encountered, probably part of the Prebendaries' Lodging where the murder of Lord Darnley, second husband of Mary, Queen of Scots, took place in 1567.

The University was granted the site in 1583 and the remains of the old library of 1617 and the new one of 1642 were found in the expected locations. These buildings were later demolished and replaced to the designs of Robert Adam (1789) and William Henry Playfair (1816).

New arrivals in the Royal Mile

As a postscript we can note two new arrivals. Menu lecterns are appearing on the pavements. Undoubtedly they add to the clutter, but do they not also come under the category of advertising? Also, a pub is now displaying flags on its frontage, just like the ones over the souvenir shops. You can hardly blame these folk. They just look around them and do the same!



Summer Activities 2011

Portrait of the Nation. Monday, 9th May, 6.00 pm. Quaker Meeting House, Victoria Terrace. Join us for a talk by James Holloway, Director of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, to hear about progress on the work to extend and refurbish this magnificent building, and some of the exciting developments for the future.

Members' guests welcome, tickets £5 (includes a donation to the Portrait of the Nation fund)

Inch Nursery. Wednesday, 18th May, 2.00 pm. Inch Park, Old Dalkeith Road. Edinburgh is one of the contenders for 'Britain in Bloom' this year. Come and see the work of the city's Parks and Green Spaces Department at the Inch Nursery, where all the plants for the City of Edinburgh parks and gardens are grown. Jim Carlyle, Nursery Training Officer, will show us around, and you can take the chance to make up your own hanging basket to take away. The charge is £5 if you bring your own basket or £8 if one is supplied by the nursery.

Members' guests welcome, tickets £3

Enlightenment Tour of the Royal Mile. Thursday, 16th June, 7.00 pm. Meet at the statue of David Hume, outside the High Court of Justiciary in the Lawnmarket. Angus Gillon will lead us on an informal guided walking tour of the Royal Mile. It will illuminate one of Scotland's most important historical periods and the circumstances that gave rise to some of Scotland's intellectual giants, including Adam Smith, David Hume, and others. Come and be enlightened!

Members only, numbers limited, tickets £7

Burns Monument and Poetry Garden. Wednesday, 6th July, 2.00 pm. Burns Monument, Regent Road. Paul McAuley of the CEC Museums Department will show us around the recently renovated Burns Monument and the adjoining garden, now planted with flowers and shrubs which commemorate the poems of our national bard.

Members' guests welcome, tickets £3

Please remember to send a stamped addressed envelope for your tickets!

Other events and happenings

Saturday 7th to Monday 9th May: Lafayette weekend, Festival Theatre – many events to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the death in a fire of the great magician.

Saturday 25th. June: Armed Forces Day. This will include parades through the Old Town.

TESCO and SAINSBURY'S "VOUCHERS FOR SCHOOLS" VERY MUCH APPRECIATED FOR THE OLD TOWN NURSERY SCHOOLS –IF YOU DON'T NEED THEM, JUST HAND THEM TO A COMMITTEE MEMBER.