



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

September 2013

Considerate Constructors

The large scale development around Advocate's Close, unlike others, has been well received. It is of interest to ask why this is. Developer Chris Stewart and Architects Morgan McDonnell had contact at an early stage with both the Planning Department and community bodies. Guy Morgan of Architects Morgan McDonnell reports "the final scheme submitted for approval reinstates the scale of buildings that existed in about 1900, before many old buildings were demolished, although care was taken to preserve the view of the New Town from the top of Advocate's Close. We have tried to take a very historical view but a very progressive one. The Old Town is not some medieval set-piece, it is an ever-changing feast of eclectic styles that has grown organically with each layer reflecting its point in time. What we have done is add another layer to that collage."

The site, opposite St Giles, stretches from the west side of the City Chambers at Warriston Close to the east side of Byre's Close and a carefully selected blend of apartments, commercial offices and restaurants is included. The proposals passed relatively rapidly through the planning system and work began on site in 2009. Logistics have required particularly careful attention. Wheeled transport is not in general practicable over much of the site so a great deal of manual handling has been necessary, with delivery of materials and components concentrated whenever possible on early mornings in order to avoid the crowds of passers-by later in the day.

The project has gone well and Motel One, on the Market Street/Cockburn Street corner, opened earlier in the year, as was reported in our last issue. The extensive Chambers Apartments and Zizzi's latest Italian Restaurant, accessed from Roxburgh Court off the High Street, have both opened recently and the building work in Advocate's Close will be finished by September. With its suitably scaled buildings and a broad commercial base this new development is set to re-invigorate a large Old Town site in just the right way.

Another construction project where the sensibilities of the area and inhabitants have been considered is the redevelopment of the buildings on the western part of the Moray House campus. Several large concrete and steel buildings of the 1970s have been taken down with the minimum of disturbance. Even the large chimney was not blown up but was nibbled to bits. The current pile-driving is no picnic, of course, but the contractors keep to their work times – times that are intimated to the neighbourhood in a regular newsletter.

Not with a bang ... but a nibble!



Lesson from Tollcross

Tollcross has stolen a march on the Old Town in producing an admirable information and publicity booklet (DISCOVER TOLLCROSS). The booklet features some of the many and varied businesses and traders in Tollcross and includes attractive photos and a location map.

The enterprise is funded 60% by City of Edinburgh Council, the remainder from the businesses and traders detailed in the booklet. The fact that the quality of the booklet is of such a high standard gives an overall impression of style and so does great service to the area.

It's a case of "every area of Edinburgh should have one" and especially the Old Town where the quality of retail has become seriously compromised. This is an opportunity for the Old Town to advertise and promote what still exists in terms of variety of shops in the area

and to present a better image. We would strongly encourage shops and businesses in our area to get together – with the Council – and do likewise.

Slow Landslides

The zig-zag paths that descend from the Castle Esplanade to Princes Street Gardens and onward to the West End provide a most enjoyable walk, especially at daffodil time. There is a problem, however. All the access gates have been locked since some time last year with notices provided 'explaining' that this was due to 'path subsidence and a landslide'. Looking down from the Esplanade one might expect to have seen that tons of soil and debris had cascaded down the hill leaving behind a massive, unstable cliff. In fact only a slight dip in the path was visible.

Nothing appeared to be happening, but there was apparently good news a month or two

later when a second notice announced that 'work was now commencing'. All this was last year, but the gates still remain closed.

These paths are normally popular with tourists and residents alike. Why the delay, we might ask? Some people are saying, just rumour of course, that the long delays are because m'learned friends the lawyers have now been called in for some reason. Perhaps a bit of common sense might have resolved problems more quickly and at little or no cost. Just rumour of course, but such rumours don't circulate if the public is kept properly informed.

If you can't beat them...

A recurring theme of recent newsletters has been the seemingly unstoppable tide of tartan tat that is swamping our pavements and obscuring our shop-fronts. But not all street clutter is related to 'heritage memorabilia'. On the grounds that "if you can't beat them, join them", providers of services to visitors have taken to adding to the street clutter in the hope of being noticed. Below is a selection of non-retail street clutter noticed between the Esplanade and the City Chambers on a weekday in June:







Walls and Anniversaries

Here's a brainteaser: what do Potsdamer Platz in Berlin and Forrest Road in the Old Town of Edinburgh have in common? On the face of it, not a lot. One, surrounded by towering new buildings, is the ultimate symbol of Berlin's recent reinvention of itself as capital of a newly reunited Germany. The other is a product of Edinburgh's quieter changes at the end of the nineteenth century, concentrating on slum clearance and improved communications.

But they have one specific thing in common. In both the observant pedestrian may notice a narrow line of stones running at an angle to surrounding paving. The one in Potsdamer Platz marks the line of the former Berlin Wall. The one at the north end of Forrest Road, as a discreet metal plaque explains, marks the line of the Flodden Wall "the necessity for which arose from the fear of imminent English invasion following the disastrous Battle of Flodden in 1513".

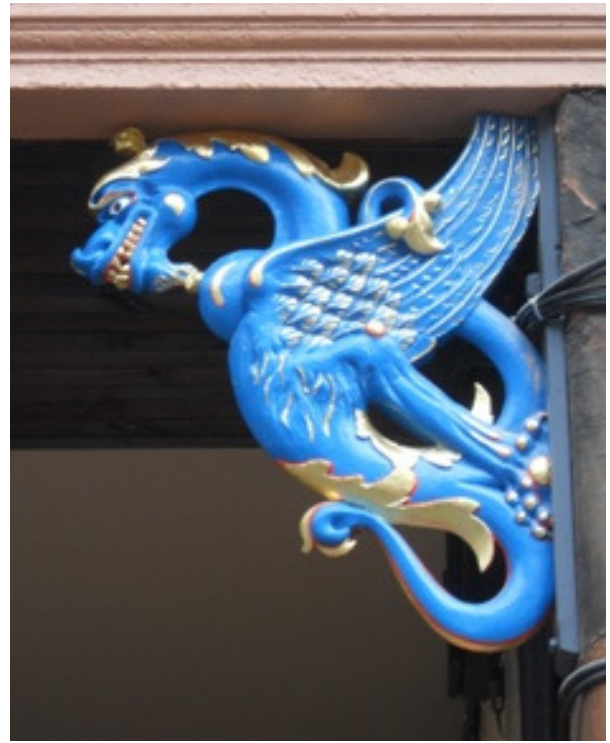


The 500th anniversary of that battle falls on 9 September. It was indeed a disaster, with perhaps 8,000 Scottish casualties: the flowers of the forest commemorated in the old song. As well as James IV and many of his nobles, the slain included Sir Alexander Lauder, the Lord Provost of Edinburgh and many of his fellow citizens. But those left in Edinburgh pulled together and built new defences around the south of the city: what we now call the Flodden Wall. And unlike the Berlin Wall much of the Flodden Wall is still standing. It is generally only where it got in the way of later developments – like Forrest Road – that it was taken down.



Good places to see surviving stretches of the Flodden Wall are in the Pleasance and in the Vennel running between Lauriston Place and the Grassmarket. A new notice on the latter stretch records that it is part of the Flodden 1513 Ecomuseum. This is an interesting venture linking twelve sites, both in Scotland and England, which are connected with the battle.

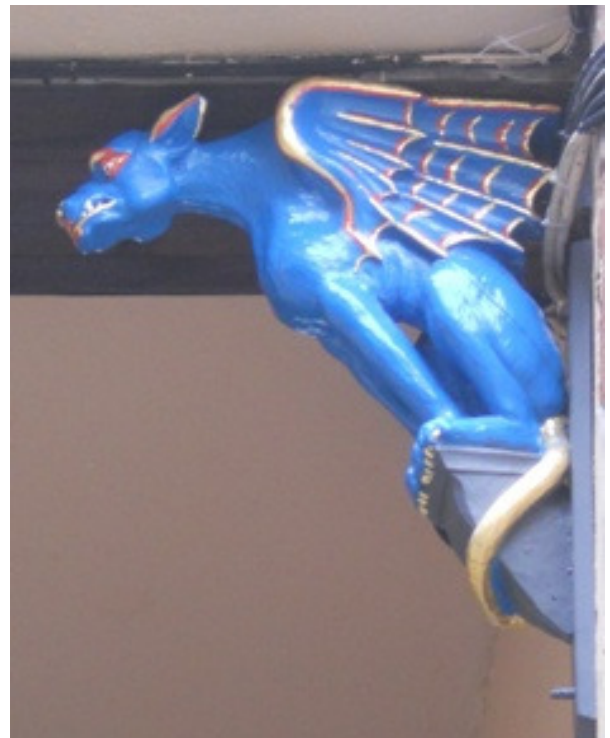
More information at www.flodden1513.com

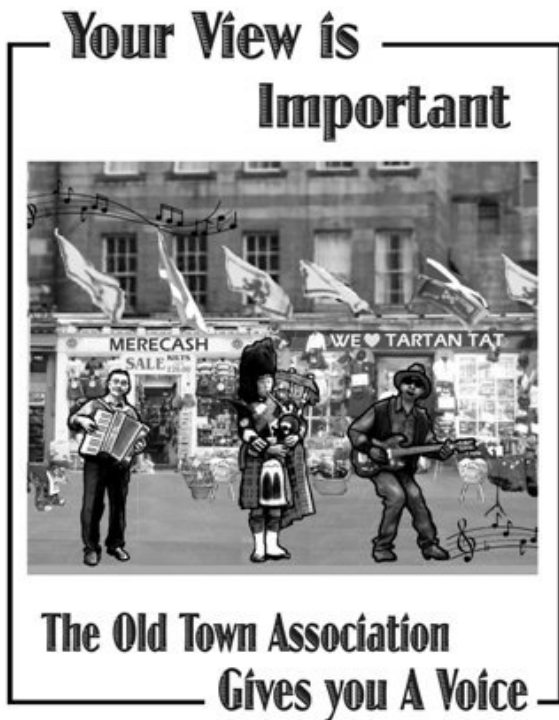


The Dragons are back!

In our newsletters of January and April 2012 we reported the story of the dragon brackets of Wardrop's Court in the Lawnmarket. The brackets had been taken away for repair – thanks to the initiative of Claire Geddes, grand-daughter of Patrick Geddes, and whose father, Arthur Geddes, carved the pair of dog-headed dragons on the Court side of the pend. The pair of dragons on the Lawnmarket side of the pend are by J S Gibson.

The restoration of the dragons was complete by the spring of 2012 but Paul McAuley of the City Museums Collections Centre wanted the walls and lintels of the pend repainted before the refurbished dragons were put back. This little job has taken over a year, so it was not until 8 July this year that the dragons were tenderly lifted back into their lair. They look very happy to be back and even happier to be restored with missing woodwork replaced and resplendent in their original colours.





Enclosed with this newsletter is a copy of our latest leaflet. We hope that you will pass this leaflet onto anybody whom you think would enjoy belonging to the Old Town Association. Remember, you do not have to live in the Old Town to join!

The Committee had fun finding quotes to use in this, and earlier, leaflets. Below are some that we found, though not all were used!

The old town, with its irregular houses, stage above stage, hardly resembles the work of men; it is more like a piling up of rocks.
Dorothy Wordsworth, Journal, 1803

I wish you were in Edinburgh with me—it is quite lovely—bits of it. *Oscar Wilde, 1884*

From Holyroodhouse to the Castle the ridge runs, hard and high, like the rough spine of Edinburgh, and the tall houses are its vertebrae, and in its marrow is a wilder life than that which animates the dignified terraces and sedate Georgian houses below.
Eric Linklater, 1934

Edinburgh presents outwardly the face it had a hundred years ago, while within it is worm-eaten with all the ingenuity in tastelessness which modern resources can supply. *Edwin Muir, Scottish Journey, 1935*

Windy toon o'clouds an' sunny glints;
pinnacled, turreted, stey an steep grey toon.
George Campbell Hay, 1948

It seemed to him a very Edinburgh thing.
Welcoming, but not very. *Ian Rankin, Exit Music, 2008*

This was a townscape raised in the teeth of cold winds from the east; a city of winding cobbled streets and haughty pillars; a city of dark nights and candlelight, and intellect.
Alexander McCall Smith, The Sunday Philosophy Club, 2013

Increase in Subscriptions

Also enclosed with this newsletter is your subscription renewal notice (except for those of you who are long-term members). You will see that we have increased our subscriptions. Not by much, and we believe that the new subscription rates still represent very good value, especially if you renew as a long-term member as we now offer ten years' membership for the price of nine.

The increase was prompted by the hike in postage rates last year. The increased income will not only cover the higher cost of postage but will enable the Old Town Association to continue to support good causes within the Old Town.

Old Edinburgh Club

We often include in our newsletter information about the lecture programme of the Old Edinburgh Club. Lectures are given by guest speakers each month from October to March (the Winter Programme). They cover a wide variety of topics relating to Edinburgh's history and development. The lectures take place in the Augustine United Church, 41 George IV Bridge, Edinburgh at 7.00 pm, usually on a Wednesday.

This year, however, the publication of the programme is later than usual so we are unable to include details. But do check www.odedinburghclub.org.uk/activities as these lectures are often of great interest, and the cost for non-members is very reasonable.

Autumn Activities 2013

Powderhall Bronze. Thursday 19 September, 6.30 pm. 21 Graham Street EH6 5QN. Join us for a visit to Scotland's premier art foundry. Learn about the age-old process of bronze casting, see current projects and view completed works in their gallery ... all finished off with a glass of wine! Members' guests welcome but numbers are limited, tickets £12

Members' Meeting and Talk by Robin Tait on The King's High Road: from village street to grand thoroughfare in six centuries. Monday 7 October, 7.00 pm. Quaker Meeting House, Victoria Terrace. From the 1100s to the 1600s the people owned the houses lining the High Street of Edinburgh, but the Sovereign owned the street itself, and ensured that the houses didn't intrude. Come along to learn about the skulduggery which ensured that they eventually did! Members' guests welcome. No charge, but please apply for tickets as usual to give us an idea of numbers.

The Parish Church of St. Albert the Great, 23/24 George Square. Thursday 24 October, 3.00 pm. Stuart Allan of Simpson & Brown Architects and Friar Dermot Morrin will show us around the recently built St Albert Chapel of the University of Edinburgh. Its beautiful modern design followed a large consultation with both the worshippers and Historic Scotland, and connects the needs of a new chapel with the trees and garden in which it sits. Members' guests welcome but numbers are limited, tickets £3

Taking a knight class: Archaeology at the old High School. Tuesday 12 November, 7.00 pm. Riddles Court, 322 Lawnmarket. Just off South Bridge, the site of the 13th century Dominican Friary destroyed during the Reformation and later the 16th century Royal High School, has recently been excavated with surprising and interesting results. Come and hear Ross Murray of Headland Archaeology talk us through the results. Members' guests welcome, tickets £4

Filth, Nastiness & Stinks in 18th Century Edinburgh: Talk and Winter Party. Thursday 5 December, 7.00 pm, Scott House, 10 South St. Andrew Street. Everyone knows what the cry "Gardyloo" meant in Edinburgh Old Town. This fascinating talk by John Lowrey, senior Lecturer in Architectural History at the University of Edinburgh, delves deeper into the murky world of waste disposal in 18th century Edinburgh, and considers not only some of the practical aspects and the systems in place for both water supply and waste disposal, but also looks at the wider political and even cultural aspects of these notorious practices. Followed by wine and nibbles. Members and friends welcome, tickets £6

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

Other events and happenings

Mary Queen of Scots. Until 17 November. National Museum of Scotland. The story of the tragic and controversial queen told using artefacts, jewellery, textiles, furniture and documents and covering the major events of her life, many of which took place in the Old Town of Edinburgh.

Riding of the Marches: Sunday 8 September – finishes with ride of about 200 riders up the Royal Mile and a ceremony at the Mercat Cross. This year they will be commemorating the return from the Battle of Flodden.

Flodden 500. 9 September. Quincentenary of the Battle of Flodden

Edinburgh Doors Open Day 2013. Saturday 28 and Sunday 29 September. Leaflets available from your local library or from Trunk's Close. This year's theme is *Natural Edinburgh*.

Samhain Festival: 25 October – procession and street theatre in the High Street.

Previously! Festival of History, 13 to 30 November. www.historyfest.co.uk/events/

Historic Scotland: Free weekend entry to Edinburgh Castle around St. Andrew's Day.