



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

April 2016

A major theme in this newsletter is movement around the Old Town, both by vehicles and on foot. We look at some of the problems and consider possible solutions.

We are now well into the year which sees the 40th anniversary of the Old Town Association. As was mentioned in the last newsletter, your Committee would welcome ideas on what the Association might do to mark the anniversary. We would also be delighted to welcome new members to the Association. Word-of-mouth recommendations from existing members are the most effective ways of recruiting, so please think whether you might encourage any of your family and friends to join.

Looking back 100, rather than 40, years there are more sombre anniversaries to mark. 1916 was the mid-point of World War I. The early “it will all be over by Christmas” optimism was long gone but as yet the end was not in sight. In this edition we consider two of the key events of 1916 – the Easter Uprising in Dublin and the Battle of the Somme – from an Old Town perspective.

This edition also contains the usual mixture of updates on things happening in and around the Old Town and information about forthcoming events run by the Association and others. The photo essay this time looks at some of the amazing variety of animals depicted on buildings around the Old Town.

The streets of the Old Town

Bill Cowan is the member of the Association's Committee with particular responsibility for planning matters. He also chairs the Old Town Community Council. In the latter capacity he wrote to the City Council in February setting out a number of concerns about the streets of the Old Town. The Association shares those concerns. Here is the substance of what Bill wrote:

Here is a whole catalogue of problems which applies to the whole Old Town, but most of which is at its worst in the Cowgate:

Certain streets need to be traffic-calmed or fully **pedestrianised** – Victoria Street, Lawnmarket, east part of Johnston Terrace.

Some streets need the **footpath widened**, the kerbs repaired and straightened, and vehicle access to closes, car parks etc. brought up to level (so the cars have to cross the pavement, rather than the pedestrians having to cross the entranceway) - Candlemaker Row, Cowgate.

With the **Cowgate**; our main concern is the dangerous state of the footways. The Cowgate has of late become a major pedestrian artery, and a very unpleasant and unsafe one indeed. Apart from being dangerously uneven, the whole north side and many parts of the south are too narrow for people to pass each other safely without stepping into the roadway, never mind navigating a double buggy or a wheelchair. In addition the kerbs are all broken and often there are vehicles obstructing the footways. We suggest that the footpath on the north side between Candlemaker Row and Blackfriars Street be widened a little, and that parking and loading on this side be prohibited at all times. Also, given the traffic volume that it is forced to carry, the roadway needs to be resurfaced.

Traffic that is excessive in volume and vehicle size is a major factor in unpleasantness for pedestrians:

Traffic volume: All the east-west traffic south of Queen Street and north of the Meadows is now funnelled through the Grassmarket and Cowgate, and after 10 pm when Cowgate closes, all the eastbound element of that is forced to go up Victoria St. Every time some brilliant traffic management 'solution' is implemented, or there is a street closure to allow for construction or for an event elsewhere in the City, we take the brunt. The Old Town has a unique set of problems; our medieval thoroughfares are narrow, often steep or twisting, and crossed by bridges. But as we understand it, the Council has no Traffic Management Plan in existence that relates specifically to the Old Town. It is high time some effort was made to sort out what can only be described as a total mess.

Vehicle size: All the above problems of collapsed roads and traffic volume are exacerbated by the excessive size of many of the vehicles trying to use our unsuitable streets. This has become much worse since delivery services, and particularly waste collectors, have tried to keep costs down by using larger vehicles. These and tour buses designed for motorways (many being left-hand drive) frequently become stuck and totally block all traffic for considerable periods (the turn on Victoria St is the worst).

It is worth mentioning here that our sister city, Florence, does not permit HGVs or tour buses within its Heritage Site at all. True, the solution probably has to come from Holyrood or Westminster, but the Council should at least recognise the problem and see what can be done within existing powers.

Commercial vehicles parking/loading on pavements: whilst the threat of a possible £30 fine is enough to deter the ordinary visitor or shopper from parking illegally (or sadly coming into town at all) it is no deterrent at all to the large delivery vehicles and tour buses, merely an insignificant operational expense. We propose that the penalty needs to be TEN times this amount. We note that waste disposal lorries are allowed to infringe all sorts of traffic regulations because they are supposedly 'public service vehicles'. But Biffa, Allied etc. are private companies collecting private waste.

Recently a 'white van' was reportedly half on the Cowgate pavement for a whole week without being towed away. Below are images of some tour buses, one parked the wrong way up a one way street during hours restricted to pedestrians, the other containing a band 'camping' on Victoria St.



You [The City Council] imply that you are especially looking for ‘**Quick wins**’ by which we assume you mean things that don’t cost much to implement. Well for a start, our narrow and uneven footways could be rendered easier to negotiate if:

- **Advertising boards.** These were supposed to be limited in size, number and location. But this has proved unenforceable. We propose that they now be banned entirely over the whole Old Town.
- **Licensed table** areas that creep. We propose better enforcement together with the sanction of temporary withdrawal of licence from offenders.
- **Redundant street furniture;** poles for notices that could be fixed to buildings or removed entirely, temporary sign poles on yellow ‘900kg’ blocks that have now become permanent. In addition, obsolete phone boxes should not be sold off to businesses, they should be removed when they no longer provide a service.
- Worst of all: **temporary** barriers, gates, signs, cones, sandbags etc. that have been forgotten. In some cases barriers placed to protect from some hazard have through neglect become a greater hazard in themselves. Barriers from Hogmanay were still in evidence three weeks into the year, and so on.

Most of this clutter belongs to the City Council or its contractors; if ordinary businesses abandoned things like these on the street, they would be fined.

Bill Cowan,
Chair,
Old Town Community Council

Bill says that so far the response from the City Council has been “pretty nebulous”. Both the Old Town Community Council and the Old Town Association intend to keep up the pressure on these important issues.

Photos in this article by Bill Cowan

And the Closes

In the last Newsletter we mentioned that Edinburgh World Heritage had launched the Twelve Closes Project intended to bring a series of bespoke improvements to selected Old Town closes, including new artwork, lighting and interpretation, to encourage greater use by the public. At that stage the final selection of closes was under discussion. Now the selection has been made. The twelve closes are Stevenlaw’s Close, Riddle’s Court, Carrubber’s Close, Trunk’s Close, Fleshmarket Close, Chessels Court and Pirrie’s Close, Bakehouse Close, Crichton’s Close, Fountain Close, North Gray’s Close and Old Playhouse Close.

More information can be found at www.ewht.org.uk/news/542/102/Twelve-Closes-Project-to-Light-Up-the-Old-Town.

Adam Wilkinson, the Director of Edinburgh World Heritage, will talk about this and other projects at our Members’ Meeting on 18 May (see OTA Activities on page 6).

Calton Hill – what next?

As the last newsletter went to press the City Council Planning Committee had just rejected – by a narrow margin – the application to turn the Old Royal High School buildings into a luxury hotel. The developers behind the application have now appealed against that decision. The appeal will be considered by the Scottish Government’s Planning and Environmental Appeals Division, a process which is likely to take some months.

Meanwhile, the Royal High School Preservation Trust has submitted its proposals for planning permission and listed building consent to convert the buildings into three new public performance spaces and a new home for St. Mary’s Music School. These plans are detailed and fully funded. The Trust has said it will hold open its proposal until the process of considering the hotel application is complete. Watch this space!

1916: all changed

On Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, Irish Republicans launched an armed rising in Dublin, occupying key buildings including the General Post Office. The rising lasted until 29 April and between the 3rd and the 12th of May fifteen of its leaders were executed by firing squad. Although the rising was, in the short term, a failure, it is generally regarded as a key event in paving the way for Irish independence. As W B Yeats wrote in his poem Easter 1916 “all changed, changed utterly”.

The Edinburgh Evening News reported the rising and subsequent events in a generally low-key and sober way. On 8 May it wrote that “James Connolly, one of the ablest of the Irish rebel leaders, was at one time in the employ of the Edinburgh Corporation as a carter and stood unsuccessfully as a Town Council candidate”. On 13 May, the day after Connolly’s execution, the *Evening News* wrote that he was a Cork man who came to Edinburgh when he was young and was one of the first Socialists to stand for the Town Council, coming third out of four candidates for the St Giles Ward in 1894. In fact, James Connolly was born in Edinburgh on 15 June 1868, the son of Irish immigrants living at 107 Cowgate in an area then often referred to as Little Ireland because of the concentration of poor Irish people there. According to one of his recent biographers it was James’ father who worked for the Council, carting animal manure away from the city streets. The first job James himself did, after leaving St Patrick’s School at the age of 11, was as a printer’s devil at the *Evening News*. Perhaps in 1916 the newspaper was unaware of this or perhaps it was something they chose not to publicise!

Another defining event of 1916 was the Battle of the Somme which began on 1 July and lasted until 18 November. The Allies’ aim was to win ground from the German Second Army and relieve pressure on the French forces around Verdun. The *Evening News* was relentlessly upbeat in its reports of the battle with headlines such as “British ‘Big Push’ Begins”, “German Front Line

Occupied” and “The Great Advance: Allies Doing Well”. In fact, although there were Allied gains, the cost was enormous. On the first day alone the British suffered some 57,000 casualties. These included over a thousand men missing, wounded or killed from the two Edinburgh “pals” battalions of the Royal Scots: the 15th (Cranston’s) raised by former Lord Provost Sir Robert Cranston and the 16th (McRae’s) raised by Sir George McRae with Hearts players among its first volunteers. The impact of these losses soon began to show in the columns of the *Evening News*. Since early in the war the paper had been publishing photographs of “Scots who have died for their country”, usually between four and nine in each issue. By August 1916 the numbers were more like 48 per issue with Old Town addresses like Castle Wynd, Canongate, Dunbar Close, Blair Street and Lawnmarket cropping up again and again.

Scottish Poetry Library

The Scottish Poetry Library writes: “We are very grateful to the Brownlee Old Town Trust for the kind donations towards its resources for children. The library box on wheels and children’s chair are proudly on display in the family corner of the newly reopened library. Story bags (including a wonderful array of props to complement our books) and a display stand have been put to excellent use in the Scottish Poetry Library’s new Poetry for Peanuts sessions – family poetry hours for under 6s. Warmest thanks for helping us bring poetry to more children across Edinburgh, and for helping us to give them a colourful and comfortable welcome during their visit.”



Photo: Scottish Poetry Library

Old Town Menagerie

Many buildings in the Old Town are adorned with animals, both heraldic and purely decorative. Here is a selection you can see on a walk from the Castle to the Palace:



OTA Activities

Members' meeting and Edinburgh World Heritage talk. Wednesday 18 May, 7.00 pm. Quaker Meeting House. Edinburgh World Heritage director Adam Wilkinson will give an update on current EWH initiatives in and around the Old Town, including the Twelve Closes and the Tron projects, and will be interested to hear the thoughts of residents as to how they would wish to benefit from the projects. Members & friends welcome; no charge, but please let us know if you are coming so that we can set out chairs.

Magdalen Chapel. Thursday 9 June, 7.00 pm. Take this opportunity to visit the only chapel in Scotland still to retain its pre-Reformation stained glass windows and learn about its fascinating history, inextricably linked with the Incorporation of Hammermen. Members & friends welcome, tickets £3

Buildings of the NMS. Tuesday 21 June 11.30 am; Wednesday 22 June 2.30 pm, or Saturday 25 June 2.30 pm. The National Museum of Scotland in Chambers Street is full of objects of interest, but the buildings are of great interest as well. The Scottish collection was given its own building in 1998 after sharing the same building as the Portrait Gallery for most of the 20th century. The Victorian building, beloved from our childhoods, was upgraded for the 21st century by architect Gareth Hoskins. Come on a tour of both buildings led by OTA committee member and NMS volunteer guide, Rosemary Mann. Tours last one hour, members and friends welcome. Tickets £5 (includes a donation to the National Museums of Scotland). Please indicate on the ticket form which tour you wish to take.

Canongate Curiosities. Saturday 16 July 11.00 am or Tuesday 19th July 2.00 pm. The Canongate kirkyard is the last resting place of famous people including Adam Smith and Mrs. Agnes McLehose (Burns' 'Clarinda'). Join this tour to find less well known but equally interesting people such as the pioneering female novelist whose life sounds like something out of a romantic novel; and the highlander who narrowly escaped execution when he was 18 and went on to become a Swedish Count. Led by Eric Drake and Laura Harrington, guides for the Friends of Canongate Kirkyard and OTA committee members. Members and friends welcome, tickets £3. Please indicate on the ticket form which tour you wish to take.

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

Other events and happenings

Beltane Festival. Thursday 30 April. Parades through the Old Town and lots of fireworks and flames on Calton Hill!

Raise your glass! The current exhibition at the Museum of Edinburgh on the Canongate, running until 25 June, is called *Raise your glass! Celebrating Scotland's Brewing Heritage*. The Canongate in particular was once a centre of beer production with many breweries. The exhibition tells many fascinating stories including how the price of beer once led to public riots. In conjunction with the exhibition, John Martin of the Scottish Brewing Archive Association will be giving a series of talks and guided walks. Details at www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/getattachment/Venues/Museum-of-Edinburgh/Exhibitions/2015-16/Raise-your-Glass!--Celebrating-Scotland-s-Brewing-/6348-SBH-Invitation_Talk---Tour.pdf

Both the National Library of Scotland and Edinburgh Central Library are running their usual varied (and free) series of events. Details at www.nls.uk/events and www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/edinburgh-reads-1650684470 respectively