



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

April 2022



At the time of writing spring is very much in the air with daffodils in bloom and a run of several sunny, relatively warm days (for which, no doubt, we will pay). Yet such simple joys are overshadowed by the horrors currently being experienced by Edinburgh's twin city Kyiv and the rest of Ukraine. Against that backdrop it seems almost comforting to turn to local concerns: various sources of disruption in the Old Town (see image above), the forthcoming local elections, the Scottish census, short-term lets, and drinkers' pens on the streets. We also have our usual round-up of places to visit and things to do and information about forthcoming Old Town Association events. For the first time in over two years these include live (and hybrid) events. The Convener's Review of 2021 accompanies this newsletter.

A New Great Disruption?

The Great Disruption, of course, took place on 18 May 1843 when 121 ministers and 73 elders marched out of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in George Street and down the hill to gather at Tanfield: an event which led to the establishment of the Free Church, as recorded in David Octavius Hill's vast painting in the Free Presbytery Hall on the Mound.

Over the last two and a bit years Covid-19 has brought vast disruption to everyday life across the globe. But as we return to something approaching normality in many aspects of life it seems Edinburgh is experiencing its own, non-covid, great disruption, one with particular impact on the Old Town.

As the Covid restrictions eased, museums and galleries began opening, but not all at the same time. At first all required pre-booking. Then some dropped that requirement, but others didn't. All very confusing. Now, of the museums and galleries in the Old Town, the Museum of Scotland, the Museum of Edinburgh, the City Art Centre and the Fruitmarket Gallery are all open and don't require pre-booking. But the Council-run People's Story, Museum of Childhood and Writers' Museum remain closed.

Edinburgh Central Library and most branch libraries have now been open for some time. Initially it was necessary to book an appointment to borrow books but now at the Central Library it is possible to browse and borrow books, return books, pick up sanitary products, use a study space and collect hearing-aid batteries without an appointment. However, it is necessary to book a slot to use a public computer and print and to apply for a National Entitlement Card (bus pass). Also, the Central Library is undergoing major building works which will mean that there will be times when parts of the building will have to close. There will also be a short period when the whole library will be closed to allow some of the programme to take place.



The impact of uncertainties about library, museum and gallery openings are perhaps no more than a minor irritation.

Rather more central to everyday life are the disruptions caused by roadworks both in the Old Town and elsewhere in the city. The very necessary upgrading work on North Bridge (unavoidably delayed by the pandemic) currently means that it is only open to southbound traffic. That situation is likely to continue well into the summer.



Meanwhile, at the bottom of the High Street, work is progressing slowly on a major relaying of the setts.



The work completed so far looks very impressive. Some people have expressed concern that the brass markers showing the outline of the Netherbow Port have disappeared from the roadway. A Council spokesperson has given assurances that they will be replaced. In fact work on that section of the road has been completed but it is not yet open to traffic, which would seem to be an ideal time to reinstate the markers. At the time of writing it hasn't happened. Watch this space...

The Bridges and High Street roadworks have led to major disruption of buses in the Old Town. The Lothian 35 has been routed away from the Canongate along Holyrood Road and then looping around the Pleasance and West Richmond Street before getting back to its normal route on Chambers Street. Buses which would normally run northwards along the Bridges are now re-routed along Chambers Street and George IV Bridge.



To add to the confusion tram work around York Place means some southbound buses have been rerouted away from the Bridges. And the trams themselves stop at the West End, leaving a walk to get into the Old and New Towns. So public transport is currently a bit of a magical mystery tour.



The fit and mobile among us can grin and bear it (though it becomes less funny when there is wind and rain to contend with). For those with limited mobility the loss of all the northbound bus stops on the Bridges is a real issue.

Even those used to walking have to make diversions: the high path through East Princes Street Gardens, a favourite route which brings respite from hard surfaces and traffic, has been closed for years while the National Gallery gets an underground extension, work that has also led to the closure of Playfair Steps.



Meanwhile West Princes Street Gardens south of the railway is closed long-term due to the risk of falling rocks; the daffodils will have to be admired from a distance.



Another view admired from a distance is of the Old Town skyline from Princes Street. This is now obstructed by the top-hamper on Princes Mall.



Things are no easier for car drivers. Savvy locals might think they can use Calton Road to avoid the Bridges and High Street blockages. But work on the rail bridge at the foot of New Street means traffic there is controlled by lights with the inevitable hold-ups.



And, as if to keep everyone on their toes, other road works appear and disappear with baffling rapidity. For example, there were briefly roadworks at the west end of Holyrood Road and shortly after they were completed another set popped up just to the west in the Cowgate.





And a new challenge for motorists is looming: the City Council's plan to introduce, by 31 May 2022, a Low Emission Zone including the Old Town. The background to the plan is the indisputable fact that air pollution is harmful to health, especially for children, older people and people with existing heart and lung conditions including asthma. The Council says that Edinburgh has made good progress in reducing levels of air pollution but that there are still areas where certain pollutants, including nitrogen dioxide (NO₂), are higher than the legal standard. The Council maintains that as road traffic is the main source of pollution, they need to take action, hence the plan for a low emission zone.

The aim is to discourage drivers with the worst polluting vehicles from entering the zone. The zone will operate continuously, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, all year round. Automatic Number Plate Recognition in the zone will detect vehicles which do not comply with the minimum emission standards. If a driver with a vehicle that does not meet set standards for exhaust emissions drives into the zone area, they will receive a fine (penalty charge). Broadly speaking, most petrol cars and vans registered since 2006 and diesel cars and vans registered since September 2015 should meet the emission standards. More information about the scheme can be found at [Low Emission Zone – The City of Edinburgh Council](#).

More Disruptions

Most of our photo-essay on disruptions is incorporated into the article above, but we are not short of examples, so here are a few more:



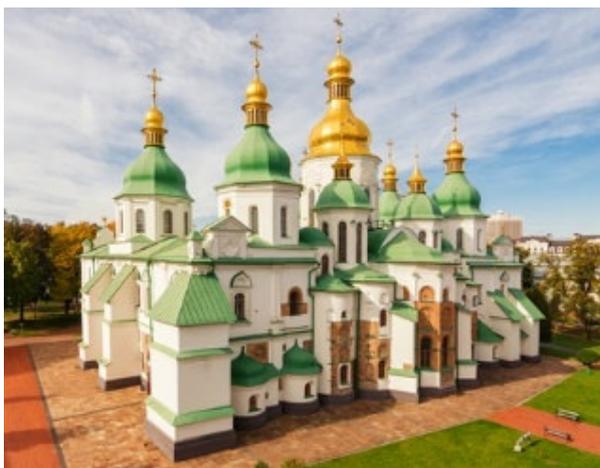


In the first image of the works at the Netherbow junction, the signs read: “road on left closed” and “road on right closed”; pedestrians can get through, but note the rubbish bin obstructing the pavement. Other images are of a works compound outside New College affecting the route into Milne’s Court; scaffolding for replacing the cladding on the Radisson Collection blocking the pavement on the Lawnmarket; the pillar box on the Lawnmarket surrounded by scaffolding; the one-way system for building the hotel behind the Central Library; temporary lights for building work in Calton Road; South Gray’s Close blocked off for building work on the Tannery Site; and long-term closure of the steps at High School Yards.

Meanwhile in Kyiv...

While we may grumble at current and prospective disruption, what we are experiencing pales into utter insignificance when set against the sufferings of the people of Kyiv and the rest of Ukraine in the face of Russia's invasion. The Ukrainian capital and Edinburgh have been twinned since 1989. That was the year the Berlin Wall fell, followed two years later by the collapse of the Soviet Union and, in December 1991, Ukrainian independence.

The twinning of Kyiv and Edinburgh makes sense. Both are ancient, historically important cities (Kyiv somewhat older than Edinburgh). And it could be said that Kyiv and Edinburgh are alike in being the capitals of nations with shared borders with a larger neighbour with which there are close cultural and personal links but also historical tensions. Both Kyiv and Edinburgh contain UNESCO World Heritage Sites. In the case of Kyiv these are the St Sophia Cathedral and the Monastery of the Caves, both founded in the 11th century, a little before David I began his great campaign of church building in Scotland. At the time of writing these two monuments in Kyiv are unharmed. But if the Russian attacks continue ...?



St Sophia's Cathedral, Kyiv (photo Wikipedia)

Edinburgh Lord Provost Councillor Frank Ross has written to the Mayor of Kyiv saying "During the pandemic our cities have supported each other, and rest assured that as a city, I want to offer Edinburgh's future unqualified support for Ukrainian independence, sovereign integrity, and to

reassure you that we stand in solidarity with you and your people. This is a difficult and deeply troubling time for Kyiv, your city, Edinburgh's cherished twin city and the capital of the democratic independent country of Ukraine. Again, I want to assure you that we stand ready to provide whatever support we can, as we have since our twinning in 1989."

At the time of writing there are Ukrainian flags flying all around Edinburgh including on the City Chambers and, as shown in this picture, the Tattoo offices at the foot of Cockburn Street.



Those offices have also posted a notice which explains how Ukrainian churches and community organisations in Edinburgh have united to work with accredited charities to provide medicines, food and critical services to those most in need in Ukraine, and goes on to set out how to support those efforts. The response to such appeals has been heart-warmingly generous.

And did you know ...

... Kyiv is one of ten cities which are officially designated twin or partner cities of Edinburgh? The full list (in the order in which the twinings took place) is Munich, Germany; Nice, France; Florence, Italy; Dunedin, New Zealand; Vancouver, Canada; San Diego, USA; Xi'an, China; Kyiv, Ukraine; Aalborg, Denmark; and Krakow, Poland.

In some cases, as with Kyiv, the connection is fairly obvious: Vancouver and Dunedin have strong Scottish roots (Dunedin being originally settled from Edinburgh and named after it).

Three of the ten, like Edinburgh, include UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Florence, Kyiv, and Krakow). Two, like Edinburgh, are UNESCO Cities of Culture (Dunedin and Krakow). In other cases the only apparent similarity is that they are popular tourist destinations, or educational centres or have notable festivals.

Council elections

Elections for the City of Edinburgh Council (and other Scottish Councils) take place on Thursday 5 May. The deadline for registering to vote is 17 April. For those who do not wish, or are unable to vote in person the deadlines for applying to vote by post or by proxy are 19 April and 26 April respectively. If, after the latter date, something happens which prevents you voting in person (for example, having to self-isolate with Covid) it is possible to apply for a proxy vote up until 5pm on the day of the election.



Election information posted under North Bridge.

Events in Eastern Europe should make us all aware of the importance of democracy. It is to be hoped that the 5 May elections will see a better turnout than in recent local elections. At the last council elections in 2017 turnout in the City Centre Ward, which includes the Old Town, was 43.7% while across the City as a whole it was 50.5%.

The Scottish Census

The census has taken place in Scotland once a decade since 1801. The 1941 census was cancelled because of World War Two and Covid-related disruption in 2021 led to the census due to be taken on 21 March that year being deferred. The new Scottish census date was Sunday 20 March 2022. Returns can be

made up to 1 May although households which have not submitted returns by the end of March are likely to get reminder letters from the census team. The census form this time contained a number of new questions. Anecdotally, it seems that the one over which many people have agonised is “can you understand Scots?”.

Individual census returns remain closed for 100 years. The 1921 census returns for England and Wales have now been released (via a subscription genealogical website). The National Records of Scotland plan to release indexed images of the 1921 Scottish Census “in the second half of 2022”.

Statistical information derived from the census is released much more quickly. The City of Edinburgh Council published statistics derived from the 2011 census in January 2014. These included breakdowns by Community Council area. For the Old Town and Abbeyhill Community Council area the total population was 7,785 with a much higher percentage in single person households than across the city as a whole. 68.2% of households in this area were without cars as against 39.9% across the city. 2.2% of dwellings were vacant (the same as across the city) and 4.4% were second residences (0.9% across the city). In this area full-time students made up 12.2% of the economically active population (5.5% across the city) and 30% of the economically inactive population (10.3% across the city).

It will be interesting to see how statistics from the 2022 census compare with those from 2011. It seems a pretty safe bet that the total population of the Old Town will have gone down and that the proportion of students and vacant/second homes will have gone up.

Short-term lets

For many years we have been concerned by the growing number of residential properties in the Old Town being turned into short-term holiday lets. Two recent events give some grounds for hoping that this trend may be halted.

The first is a decision in February by a Reporter of the Scottish Government’s Planning and Environmental Appeals Division rejecting an appeal against the refusal of

planning permission for change of use of a flat in the Grassmarket from residential to short term business / holiday accommodation. The flat is in a tenement of eight flats which shares access with other flats. The main ground for the Reporter's decision was that "the noise and disturbance within the open courtyard and the uncarpeted stairwell generated by the arrival of strangers unfamiliar with the property (potentially at unsociable hours), the movement of luggage associated with that and the intervening visits from cleaning staff would intrude into the quieter environment enjoyed by the rear of the property. This would also have an adverse impact on the residents' privacy and the sense of safety offered by the security systems. This activity could happen at regular intervals throughout the year and with greater frequency than a residential let". The decision is useful in setting out clear grounds for the refusal (which certainly would apply to other tenements); and exploring how these are relevant, even in what the Reporter acknowledges is an "area [that] has a lively atmosphere where noise and disturbance from passing traffic and visitors to the facilities forms part of its character".

The other encouraging event, also in February, was the City Council's decision to ask the Scottish Government to designate the whole of Edinburgh as a short-term let control area. In such an area a property owner letting out a residential property as a short-term let would have to apply for change of use through the planning system, allowing for greater control and for enforcement action against short-term lets which adversely impact on neighbouring residents.

Drinkers' pens

We mentioned these on-street enclosures in the last two newsletters. They were originally introduced in response to Covid-related restrictions on the numbers of customers allowed inside pubs and restaurants. But as restrictions were progressively relaxed the case for the pens became weaker. They do not enhance the streetscape, can obstruct traffic and deliveries, and potentially provide a haven for vermin.



The Old Town Association was pleased that early in the year the City Council refused planning permission for several of these structures. The report on one of these applications set out the arguments clearly: "The proposal is not acceptable in principle and would be harmful to the Edinburgh World Heritage Site and the Old Town Conservation Area. The proposal is likely to lead to an unacceptable impact on residential amenity and is not acceptable in terms of its impact on road safety. It fails to comply with the Local Development Plan, associated guidance and the principles of sustainability as set out by Scottish Planning Policy. There are no material considerations that outweigh this conclusion".

We were therefore baffled that at the end of February the Council's Planning Committee agreed "that a relaxed approach to planning control will continue in respect of seating structures and it is intended that this approach will remain in place until 7 October 2022". In other words, even where planning permission is refused, no enforcement action will be taken. It seems that the Council felt obliged to adopt this approach given that since March 2020, the Scottish Government has encouraged a relaxation of planning control where doing so can help business and services to diversify and continue to operate during the pandemic and that in November 2021, the Scottish Government's Chief Planner stated its advice on enforcement relaxation will continue to the end of September 2022. The Old Town Association will be keeping an eye on developments, particularly after 7 October.

All photographs in this newsletter are by Eric Drake and Rosemary Mann unless otherwise credited.