



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

April 2010

Edinburgh is a very special place. It would not hold World Heritage status otherwise, and the Old Town is perhaps particularly special for its sheer age. The twelfth century layout is still in evidence in the form of the Castle, the Royal Mile with its Closes and buildings, and the remains of Holyrood Abbey. Tourists from all over the world come to visit us, contributing greatly to the economy of the City. In general they are not particularly wealthy, but they are discriminating people. If we disappoint them, they won't return.

There is growing feeling that the way the Council controls Old Town development has put overmuch emphasis on short term economic gain rather than future prosperity. A number of examples come to mind. Large scale buildings and building groups are permitted which hasten the fragmentation of our Site, and are allowed to dominate their neighbourhood. The World Heritage authorities have had their say about this. Again, lack of control of the way some retail outlets conduct their business is rapidly damaging the unique Old Town appearance. The Royal Mile still contains many good quality shops selling a wide range of goods, but they won't stay for ever as the environment deteriorates, and it is surprising that they haven't already made more fuss about what is happening around them.

There is another rather more subtle, but still important factor. The Old Town has a resident population. Many of us are beginning to believe that we take very much second place to economic development in Council policy. Meanwhile our living conditions have deteriorated greatly in recent years, not the least on account of the booze culture. We provide a most important vitality to what otherwise would be a purely commercial environment as can be experienced in an ordinary city centre. The Old Town is emphatically not an ordinary city centre.

The two Council enquiries under way are an encouraging move, as long as the problems are acknowledged to be important and to need urgent solutions. In addition, the Council is considering bringing greater control of the conditions under which it leases its own properties in the area. This too could be helpful.

It is not clear however that changes will take place in the ways that many of us hope. Residents feel left out of things. Our neglect in recent years is typified by a recent quote by a Councillor along the lines that we shouldn't live in the

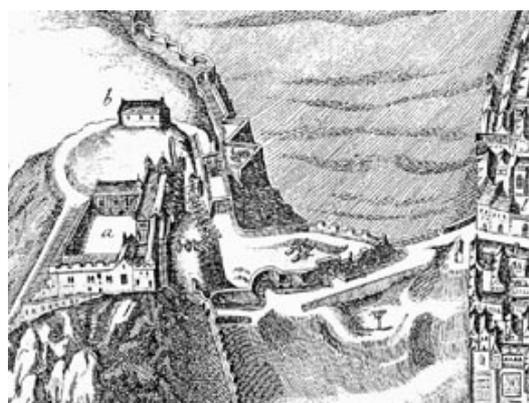
Old Town, unless we are willing to put up with its disadvantages and inconveniences. Another, admittedly minor indicator is the description of the Council's enquiry into the present alcohol based problems as the 'Evening Economy'. If you live in the middle of it, noise and disturbance up until 3.30 or 4.00 am, night after night make for long, long 'evenings'. All credit is due meanwhile to our City Centre Councillors David Beckett, Charles Dundas and Joanna Mowat who have put a great deal of effort into seeking improvements on our behalf.

More digging

We have recently had a talk on some of the archaeological finds which have resulted from the preparatory work for the new tram system. The digs never stop however, and the most recent announcement comes as a result of work at the Castle Esplanade.

We are used to seeing a large, relatively level area where the Edinburgh Tattoo takes place every summer, but the Esplanade was actually created by levelling the ground in the 1700s in order to provide a new parade ground. Before that, there was a narrower area, sloping away on each side, which had been occupied by massive low forward defences for the castle. These were developed to meet the ever increasing destructive power of cannons in the 1500s and 1600s. They extended quite far down the site of the esplanade. James Gordon's map of 1647, a source of so much detail of Edinburgh's appearance in his time, gives a good view of the feature.

There was concern about the design of the new stands, but the project is going ahead, and the foundations came to light buried at a level well below the present surface, while work for the foundations of the new Tattoo stands was underway.



Acheson House Revamp

A bit of really good news. Acheson House which is next door to the Museum of Edinburgh in the Canongate has been sitting empty for a number of years. It has now been announced that restoration is to take place and it will become part of the Museum next door.

The house was built in the 1600s by Sir Archibald Acheson, Senator of the College of Justice in Scotland and Secretary of State when Charles I was crowned in Edinburgh in 1633. At that time Canongate was a favourite location for the grand town houses, gardens and orchards, of many important Scottish families. Acheson's family, later the Earls of Gosford, had already owned the lands of Gosford in East Lothian for many years. The new and impressive residence was fully at home in that environment. Building was under way in 1633 but sadly Acheson never saw

the completed building as he died in the following year.

Acheson House is an example of a courtyard mansion, being built around three sides of an enclosed courtyard, the fourth side being a wall flanking an entrance gate. Entering this gate from Bakehouse Close, the impressive main doorway is on the left hand side of the courtyard.

Our photograph, complete with a Victorian lady, was taken in 1855, in the early days of photography. The building date is to be seen flanking the initials of Acheson and his wife Dame Margaret Hamilton, with the family crest of a Cockerel and a Trumpet above. This splendid display of pomp and circumstance is still there to see after all these years.



The grand old building followed the fate of so many Old Town houses in later times, coming very much down in the world. It is claimed that in the early 1900s there were fourteen families living in it. It was finally rescued by the Marquis of Bute in the 1930s.

Restoration was perhaps somewhat over-enthusiastic by present standards, but it saved the building from complete dereliction. It was last used as a craft centre. Work has already started on the building but it is expected that operations will continue for some time.

Old Town Gardens

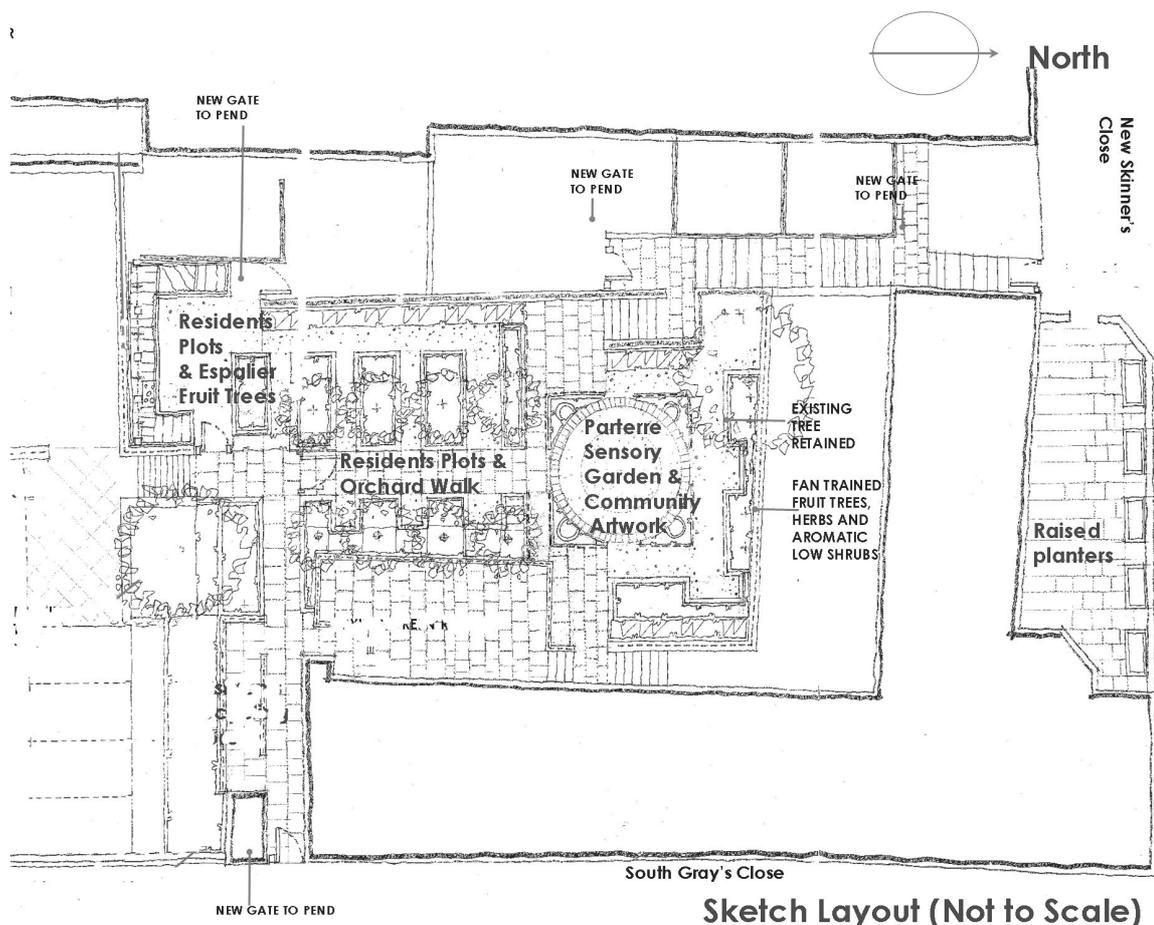
There has been a growing interest in developing or improving gardens on the backlands of the Old Town. The Council has taken a strong lead, with Edinburgh World Heritage support, and in Tron Square (down Old Assembly Close), Coinyie House Close (between Blackfriars Street and in South Gray's Close) and Brown's Close (almost opposite the new Parliament building) the results are impressive.

In each case the support of the residents has been essential to success, and the local enthusiasm has been a particularly encouraging feature of the project.

At each site the Council is performing a general make-over with suitable plants shrubs and trees, but individual residents have taken responsibility for the tending of particular sections where planting can be of a more ambitious nature. These sections have been provided with protective railings to prevent damage – these are, after all public areas. Support sessions dealing with relevant gardening topics have been well attended.

The design for the Coinyie House Close garden (overpage) gives an idea of this ambitious project. The drawing was kindly provided by Steven Pike in the City Centre Neighbourhood Office.

One can never escape from historical associations in the Old Town. In Coinyie House Close, information panels are to be put in place, telling the story of the Coinyie House, the Royal Mint, which produced the coinage of the realm there for many years from the late 1500s.



Who's a Dizzee Rascal then?

We are getting used to pop 'artists' having daft names, and Dizzee Rascal, addressed as 'Mr Rascal' by Jeremy Paxman on TV recently, now has a most unexpected linkage with the Old Town.

Canongate, our highly successful Old Town publishing house, came into prominence in recent years with Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, the Booker Prize winner. More recently it secured the publishing rights to Barack Obama's memoirs. They have now announced a new and unexpected departure. They are to collaborate with Mr Rascal and his record label *Dirtee Skank* in the

production of his autobiography, or perhaps what may be his biography. This is obviously an exciting new venture, and one can only wish Canongate the best of luck with it.

An examination of a dictionary of the Scots Tongue fails to reveal the word 'skank' but puts forward 'skink' – 'a thin oatmeal water gruel'.

In fact, joking apart, Canongate continues to go from success to success. It must be one of our most productive Old Town enterprises, bettered perhaps only by the Scottish Parliament down the road which produces a vast annual output of hot air every year.

Summer Activities 2010

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly – Parliament Close in 1795. Wednesday 5th May, Quaker Meeting House, 7.00 pm. Join us for a talk by writer and historian Sheila Szatkowski as she looks at the characters who lived and worked in and around Parliament Close at the end of the 18th century, with reference to the composite painting entitled "The Parliament Close and Public Characters of Edinburgh 50 years since" by Sir David Wilkie, Alexander Nasmyth and others.

Members' guests welcome, tickets £4

Patrick Geddes Gardens walk. Wednesday 19th May, 6.00 pm. Meet at the Hub. Led by Jean Bareham of Greenyonder Tours, this walk will follow in the footsteps of the Scottish environmentalist and social reformer Patrick Geddes, and discover some of the sites he made into children's gardens, find out what today's residents are doing about green space, and explore the normally-locked Johnston Terrace urban wildlife garden.

Members only. Numbers limited, tickets £5

Strictly come swimming! Monday 24th May, 7.00 pm. Quaker Meeting House, Victoria Terrace. Over 15 years Annie Scanlon, self confessed 'collectaholic' and member of the Costume Society of Scotland, has amassed a collection of over 140 swimsuits, hats, shoes, bags, parasols and everything to do with fun in the sun. Do bring any of your own memorabilia too.

Members' guests welcome, tickets £3. There will also be a voluntary collection for Annie's twin school in Kenya.

Calton Hill and its monuments. Tuesday 8th June, 6.30 pm **AND** Thursday 24th June, 2 pm. Meet at the Nelson Monument. A gentle stroll round the top of the hill to look at the monuments led by expert Dorothy Marsh, Senior Conservation Officer for CEC Museums. Walks will go ahead whatever the weather; so please wear suitable jackets and shoes. There is no vehicular access up Calton Hill, and please note, this walk does involve a lot of stairs and is not suitable for the non-ambulant.

Members' guests welcome, but numbers limited, tickets £4

Members' Meeting & Talk by Lyall Downie. Thursday 17th June, 7.00 pm. Quaker Meeting House, Victoria Terrace. This is your chance to hear about current developments and concerns in the Old Town and put questions to the committee. It will be preceded by a talk by Lyall Downie, our local Community Police Officer for the Old Town, who will bring us up to date on the work he and his colleagues have been carrying out in our area.

No cost, but please let us know if you want to come.

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

Other events and happenings

Edinburgh Film Screen night. If anybody has a spare ticket to return, please contact the Cockburn Association 557 8686.

Tesco / Sainsbury vouchers. Please collect them to be passed on to Old Town nurseries.