



Edinburgh Old Town Association Newsletter

January 2021

*A Happy New Year
to all our readers!*



After the year we have just been through we must all be hoping fervently that 2021 will be happier. At the time of writing Edinburgh is experiencing Tier 4 Covid restrictions – very close to the lockdown we had in the spring of 2020. Only essential shops are open, and other shops and all museums, galleries, libraries, gyms and bars are all closed down again. But vaccination against the virus has started so perhaps there is cause for hope. Maybe Martin Creed's work on the portico of the Gallery of Modern Art is pointing the way:



Thoughts as we leave 2020 ...

Christmas 2020 was like none other in recent memory: none of the usual festive season events could take place; there was no Christmas market, no fairground rides, no ice rink. Yet all credit to the City Council, individual traders and others, the festive lights in the Old Town were much better than they have been in recent years. The photographs overleaf give a glimpse of what was on offer.



Images (from top left) of festive cheer on The Mound (including NHS rainbow), Victoria Street and Teviot Row, followed by cheerful shopfronts and window displays in Cockburn Street and The High Street.

Anyone walking down Jeffrey Street recently is likely to have spotted a rather more controversial (and long-lasting) addition to the Edinburgh scene – the hotel in the new St James Centre development.



It has been dubbed the golden Mr Whippy and other more scatological epithets. Seen from the western end of George Street it looks like an alien tentacle reaching out to snatch the Dundas statue from its column. This seems oddly appropriate given the controversy surrounding that statue at the height of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the summer of 2020.

Turning your eyes to the east from Jeffrey Street gives a view of the old Royal High School:



October brought the welcome news that Scottish Ministers had turned down the appeal against the City Council’s rejection of proposals to turn the site into a hotel. Ministers decided that “the proposed development would not preserve the former Royal High School building or its setting and would neither preserve nor enhance the character and appearance of the Edinburgh New Town Conservation Area”. Depressingly, it seems the would-be developers may come up with an alternative hotel scheme, so continuing to block the much more appropriate option of making the building the new home for St Mary’s Music School.

And what we might see in 2021 ...

This time last year we looked at the City Council’s draft tourism strategy for the period to 2030 which we felt was a bit of a curate’s egg. It contained some encouraging statements such as ‘Our guiding principle should always be to ask: “how can we improve the quality of life for residents and contribute to the city’s broader economic goals?”’. But the strategy also contained worrying indications that the City Council remained wedded to the notion that more was self-evidently better when it came to tourism. The passage from the draft consultation document which was chosen to flag the consultation on the Council’s website began “Tourism is one of the city’s biggest success stories, attracting 4.3 million visits a year”.

How ironic that such a statement was made just before Covid effectively brought tourism to a halt. Some visitors, mainly from elsewhere in the UK, were back in the summer of 2020 but at the time of writing the streets of the Old Town are again pretty much tourist-free. As we noted in the September 2020 newsletter, it is widely predicted that the number of international flights will not return to pre-Covid levels for several years – if at all. So it does seem likely that for the next few years tourism in the Old Town will look very different from how it has been in recent years. This creates a welcome opportunity to discuss a more sustainable community-friendly tourism model. The next year or so might be a particularly fruitful time for such discussions.

Scottish Parliamentary elections are scheduled to be held on 6 May 2021. Council elections, which were to have been on 5 May 2021, are now scheduled for 5 May 2022. Cynics say that it is only in the run-up to elections that politicians really pay attention to electors. To take such a view would do a dis-service to those of our elected representatives who are always attentive to constituents’ concerns. But there is no denying that politicians are motivated to pay particular attention to the views of electors in the period before elections. So now seems a good time to engage them in discussions of the future of tourism in the Old Town. The Association looks forward to contributing to those discussions.

Auld Reekie Retold

While museums and are closed, this does not mean they have shut down completely; much is still going on behind the scenes as well as information being made available on-line. The City Museums and Galleries are embarking on Auld Reekie Retold, the biggest collections project ever undertaken by Museums & Galleries Edinburgh.

Museums & Galleries Edinburgh is the custodian of over 200,000 items relating to the civic and cultural history of the city. The objects are in storage connected with the whole group of the City's museums, from the Museum of Childhood to Lauriston Castle. With funding from the City of Edinburgh Council and Museums Galleries Scotland, a team has been appointed to work through these objects, checking records, photographing objects and researching the stories which bring the City's collections to life. The aim of the project is to better understand these objects so they can be preserved for the future and to find new ways to interpret them, including on-line through blogs, podcasts and streamed lectures (see page 8).

Physic Garden Open ... and Shut

The 17th-century physic garden in the grounds of the Palace of Holyroodhouse was the first of its kind in Scotland, and the second botanic garden to be established in Britain. A modern interpretation of a physic garden has been created in the triangle of land behind Abbey Strand.

The gardens were opened to the public in November to be enjoyed by the people of Edinburgh as well as by paying visitors to the Palace. Visitors will see seasonal planting inspired by some of the earliest recorded gardens on the site. The garden will also be used by school and community groups to explore how plants have been used to improve health and wellbeing.

Unfortunately, the winter wave of coronavirus means that the new Physic Garden is currently closed, but you can get sight of the raised beds through the fence next to the pink-harled Abbey Strand.

Looking up in Lockdown

Inspired by the sight of weather vanes standing out against bright winter skies, a little quiz. Can you pinpoint where these weather vanes (and similar structures) are to be found? The cryptic clues may or may not help.



1. Oxbridge types might sound foolishly tearful or sentimental in naming this chapel.
2. On a church whose abbreviated name might strike chemists as golden.





3. A new addition to an old building (and a convenient perch for a crow). Strictly speaking, not in the Old Town, but what's 440 yards between friends?

4. A surviving cockerel on the tollbooth of a defunct burgh whose name has nothing to do with big guns and field entrances.

5. On the corner of a street named for the patron saint of the kirk across the road.

6. Successor to a golden cockerel whose spectacular fall was described by Lord Cockburn.

7. To plate vice? (anagram)



8. Jingling associations here, but nothing to do with sleigh bells.

9. A weather vane on top of a metal crown – appropriate given the name of the office below.



Answers

1. Magdalen Chapel in the Cowgate. Here, “Magdalen” is pronounced as it is spelled, unlike Magdalen College Oxford and Magdalene College Cambridge, both of which are pronounced “Maudlin”.

2. Augustine United Church on George IV Bridge. Au is the chemical symbol for gold.

5. The old Royal Infirmary, now part of the Quartermile development. For those not used to Imperial measurement, one mile is 1760 yards, so a quarter mile is 440 yards.

9. Canongate Tollbooth. The civic offices for the Burgh of the Canongate until its merger with Edinburgh in 1856.

7. St Giles Street, across the road from the High Kirk of St Giles.

8. The Tron Kirk. The kirk’s original spire, topped by a golden cockerel weather vane, was destroyed in the great fire of 1824, witnessed and vividly described by Lord Cockburn.

6. Teviot Place. Teviot Place (and Row) are named for Mount Teviot, one of the seats of the Marquis of Lothian, whose nephew, Lord Ross, was the owner of the land outside the Bristo Port.

4. George Heriot School, founded by James VI’s goldsmith whose wealth earned him the nickname Jinglin’ Geordie.

3. The Crown Office on Chambers Street. The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service is responsible for the prosecution of crime in Scotland, and the investigation of all sudden, suspicious, accidental or unexplained deaths.

Grants and Donations

The Old Town Association has given a grant to the National Library of Scotland towards conservation of non-photographic items in the Patrick Geddes Collection.

This assortment of photographs, drawings, maps and prints, was gathered by the polymath, botanist and proto-town planner Patrick Geddes for the 1910 Cities and Town Planning Exhibition organised by the Royal Institute of British Architects to mark the passing of the Housing and Town Planning Act 1909. The exhibition was shown in Edinburgh, London, Dublin, Belfast and Ghent. The next stop on the tour was to be Madras, but the ship carrying the material sank en route, meaning it was five years before the exhibition made it to India.

Once conserved, the items will once again be on display, but only within the confines of the National Library ... with no risk of shipwreck!

The Brownlee Old Town Trust has donated a number of musical instruments to the Cowgate Under-5s Centre. The photographs show some of the wooden percussion and woodwind instruments donated and a member of the Centre enjoying the musical bells.



Lower photo from Cowgate Under-5s Centre.

Notice of AGM

The Annual General Meeting of the Edinburgh Old Town Association will be held on Thursday 4 March 2021, starting at 18:30 hrs. The meeting will be held by remote access using Zoom; the link will be sent to all members for whom we have an email address. We hope that you will join to hear the reports of the last year, agree an amendment to the constitution and raise any issues or concerns with the committee.

And Finally ...

Early in the pandemic your editor was inspired (if that is the right word) to a bit of poetic parody. All these months later it still seems relevant and is reproduced below with apologies to Lewis Carroll.

CORONAWOCKY

Tis covid, and the virus roves
And rages all across the globe;
All locked-down are we in our droves,
Alas the claustrophobe!

Beware the covid bug, my son!
The sneeze that comes, the breaths that catch!
Beware coronavirus, shun
The pub and soccer match!

He took his vaccine tests in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought-
So rested he in his laboratory
And stood awhile in thought.

And as in uffish thought he stood,
The Coronawock, it was no game,
Came whiffing through the neighbourhood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vaccine strong went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, with no more said
He went galumphing back.

And hast thou slain the virus dire?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!
He chortled in his joy.

And when the virus no more roves
And rages all across the globe;
We'll not be locked-down in our droves,
Alas the agoraphobe!



Jabberwocky, as drawn by Tenniel

Places to Visit and Things to do

Right now, other than outdoor exercise, these are pretty limited! As things stand, the Association is unable to restart its programme of events and the same is true for other organisations. Many organisations are holding online events and this is an option your Association is looking at.

Galleries, museums and other visitor attractions are currently closed and it is unclear whether, when they are able to reopen, their programme of events and exhibitions will remain as previously scheduled. So all we can suggest is watch their websites which will provide information about their activities as and when restrictions ease. Meanwhile, there are prodigious efforts being made to put interesting stuff on-line. Here are some on-line activities you might enjoy:

The Old Edinburgh Club: <http://www.oldedinburghclub.org.uk/lectures/> for monthly lectures on Zoom. Free for members, £4 for non-members. There are four remaining in the 2020-21 season.
Wednesday 13 January 7.00 pm, Terry Levinthal: 170 Years of Agitation: Lord Cockburn and the Founding of the Cockburn Association.
Wednesday 17 February, 7.00pm, Ian Levitt: H.M.Treasury and the University of Edinburgh 1840-1900.
Wednesday 17 March, 7.00 pm Sheila Collins: Who is your Captain? The Edinburgh Riding of the Marches.
Wednesday 14 April, 7.00 pm, Clarisse Godard-Demarest: John Ritchie Findlay (1824-98): Architectural Patron and Benefactor

Auld Reekie Retold: <https://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/stories> for podcasts including past talks available to download. See how a small, unassuming object can convey a huge story. For other Museum and Galleries activities see <https://www.edinburghmuseums.org.uk/whats-on>

National Library of Scotland: <https://www.nls.uk/events> for free online events including lectures. Book on-line to be sent a link to join the Zoom webinar.

Queen's Gallery: <https://www.rct.uk/whats-on> lists activities and by burrowing into the events listings you can find a free virtual tour of the current exhibition at The Queen's Gallery at Holyrood: *Eastern Encounters* at <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=GrzW6BLbTFX>

The **National Museums of Scotland:** <https://www.nms.ac.uk/museum-at-home/watch-and-listen/> for links to loads of stuff online including virtual tours of galleries, podcasts, short films, and blogs.

The **National Galleries of Scotland:** <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/> home page has links to information about art and artists in the collection and to the NGS channel on YouTube.

If we have an email address for you, we will have sent you all these links in an email along with a link to the newsletter on the OTA website. If you would like to receive the OTA newsletter and links by email, and to be sent the link for the AGM, just send an email to us at info@eota.org.uk and we shall add you to the list. We only use your email address to send you information about the OTA and its activities; we do not use your email for any other purpose, and we never pass members' emails to any other person or organisation.

We are aware that not all our members have email or are happy clicking links on the World Wide Web so we have decided to continue to print the newsletter in colour. As the weather may not encourage too much walking, here is a reflection of Edinburgh ...



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