



Edinburgh Old Town Association

Convener's Report 2020

How things changed dramatically in 2020! The members of the Old Town Association enjoyed a very successful Christmas party in December 2019 at St Augustine's and in February 2020 on behalf of the Association I attended a meeting of the Old Town Community Council where Adam McVey, leader of the City of Edinburgh Council, outlined the Council's plans for the future and answered questions from those attending the meeting. However, soon afterwards, the arrival of the coronavirus pandemic meant unprecedented restrictions were introduced. The ban on the meeting of large groups meant that the OTA annual general meeting scheduled for March 2020 had to be cancelled, the planned activities for our members had to be postponed and the way in which our Committee meetings had been organised successfully for many years had to be rethought. The latter problem was addressed by the introduction of Zoom meetings which, though not ideal, allowed the business of the Association to carry on.

The consequences of the lockdown can be seen in the photographs published in the April 2020 newsletter. Places like the Grassmarket and the Chambers Street Museum that are usually busy were empty – both of tourists and local people. The Edinburgh International Festival, the Fringe and other Festival events were cancelled for 2020. When restrictions started to be eased at the beginning of the summer visitors began to return but not in huge numbers. The issue of 'overtourism' with which the Old Town Association has been concerned for many years was not a problem! The fact that the Old Town had become very different was highlighted by the number of bars and hotels, including the Balmoral, that were boarded up.

The effects of the events or non-events of 2020 caused by the pandemic and its repercussions will require thought and perhaps a reassessment by the City of Edinburgh Council of its plans for the future of the city. It could be argued that Edinburgh would be a more pleasant city for having fewer tourists in which case there would be less need for more hotel developments. A case could be made for reducing the size of the Edinburgh Festival and the Fringe and Hogmanay celebrations. A different balance would be struck between residents and tourists. The serious financial impact of lockdowns on the business of the city will need to be considered. The issues of Airbnb and Student Housing particularly in the Old Town still need to be addressed.

Despite the difficult circumstances the OTA were able to maintain links with local Councillors, the Old Town Community Council, The Cockburn Association, the City of Edinburgh Council, the Royal Mile Business Group, the Scottish Civic Trust and with Edinburgh World Heritage Trust where Christina Sinclair has recently taken up the post as Director. Committee members attended virtual meetings of the Civic Forum where issues of planning were discussed. It has been a relatively quiet time for major planning decisions but the rejection of the appeal to transform the Royal High School Building into a luxury hotel was welcome. The building is not in the Old Town but is a prominent feature looking over from the Old Town to Regent Road. It would make a fine Music School if the hotel developers would only admit defeat.

In May 2020 the Honorary President of the Old Town Association, Anja Amsel, died. Anja had been involved with the OTA for many years and was still an active member of the Committee. She is missed. As the current Convener I knew I could rely on her experience and knowledge of the Old Town. Robin Tait, a former Committee member and Newsletter Editor, also died this year. Although he had retired from the Committee he still took an interest in the OTA.

The work of the Association is dependent on the commitment and support of the voluntary members of the Committee. Gavin MacDougall and Helen McBride were welcomed to the Committee in 2020. Katie Kerr resigned from the Committee to pursue other interests and we wish her well. On behalf of the membership of the Old Town Association I would like to thank past and current members of the Committee for their work and goodwill over what has been a trying time. Current members of the Committee are:

Barbara Logue (Convener)
 Naomi Richardson (Vice-Convener and Events Secretary)
 Jean Fairbairn (Minutes Secretary)
 Rosemary Mann (Treasurer and Newsletter Photographer)
 Bill Cowan (Planning Secretary)
 Eric Drake (Newsletter Editor)
 Laura Harrington
 Kate Marshall
 Gavin MacDougall
 Helen McBride

The financial position of the OTA at the end of August 2020 (its financial year-end) was:

Summary Accounts for year to 31.08.20		Receipts	Payments	Surplus/ (Deficit)
Events		1,312	701	611
Donations		151	-	151
All other receipts and payments		850	778	72
Total		£2,313	£1,479	£834
Balances	31.08.19	Receipts	Payments	31.08.20
	£6,727	£2,313	£1,479	£7,561

The surplus is skewed as tickets were sold for events that were postponed; event costs were not incurred and refunds will not be made until the events are rescheduled or finally cancelled. It will take a couple of years until the balance of ticket sales and event costs is re-established. Fortunately, the Association's reserves are sufficient to see it through a number of years without surplus-generating activities.

When it is possible the Old Town Association intends to campaign to increase its membership – currently at 194 individual members and 6 corporate members. Thanks to Eric Drake and Rosemary Mann we were able to produce our three newsletters as usual to keep members informed. Our Events Secretary, Naomi Richardson, has some activities in mind for when we can meet in groups again. It is good to have something to look forward to, so, thanks to Naomi.

Barbara Logue
 Convener