



Edinburgh Festival Voluntary Guides Association

Newsletter

Summer 2023

Plus ça Change

Welcome to the 2023 Summer EFVGA Newsletter. Here we are again, although it is sobering to think that at the end of the last Festival in August 2022 the reigning monarch was Queen Elizabeth II, the UK Prime Minister was Boris Johnston (Liz Truss had not even been made PM) and the First Minister of Scotland was Nicola Sturgeon.

As a result of the death of Queen Elizabeth II at Balmoral in September the attention of the world was for a short period focused on Edinburgh, in particular Holyrood Palace, the Royal Mile and St Giles Cathedral. We expect to see some increase in interest in our tours-please see the item about St Giles Cathedral on this page for some welcome news. It should be noted that, although people may well be interested in the actual place where the late Queen's coffin lay in state, there will be no indication in St Giles as to where this was.

Personally I fulfilled an ambition to see a proclamation from the Mercat Cross, I had never managed to be there at the right time before, but this was the opportunity to see one with full pageantry. The last Accession proclamation took place in 1952, and it is interesting to compare old black and white photos from that event. The photo on the right shows the Lord Lyon and Lord Provost at the Accession Proclamation.

Jim Eunson



St Giles Cathedral

The EFVGA has been in touch with the people responsible for St Giles and the good news is that we can now include St Giles on our tours. There are just a few points to note:

- Not on Sundays
- No tours during the midday service from 12 - 12:15pm, Mon - Fri, as it can be disruptive to the service.
- Fewer than 10 per group (unlikely to be a problem for us)
- The guide must announce themselves to the staff member or volunteer at front desk.
- It would be appreciated if you suggest donations towards St Giles can be made at any of the boxes around the building, if they enjoyed their visit.

Committee Members needed!



We need some volunteers for Committee membership, as there have been a couple of resignations recently. This has left us short of the numbers of Committee members we need to operate the EFVGA efficiently. The workload is not high, there are about 4 Committee meetings a year and you would be asked to act as Co-ordinator during the Festival season.

PLEASE give this some thought and let either Eric or Bernard know if you are interested.

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Evening tour of Canongate Brewery Heritage

Fifteen of the Edinburgh Festival Voluntary Guides braved the miserable and very cold evening weather to enjoy a very interesting tour of the Canongate Breweries.

John Martin of the Scottish Breweries Archive Association led us around and about Canongate for an hour and half telling stories dating back to and even before the formalising of brewing beers by the monks and sold to the people of Canongate and Edinburgh in the 16th century. There were over 40 breweries in Edinburgh at one time, mostly in the Canongate. Although no breweries now exist in the area, many of the buildings are easily recognised as maltings and warehouses, and many street names betray their past association with the trade. The tour was fascinating and we all learned a lot. John had actually worked in some of these buildings and knew a great deal about their recent history as well.

One interesting thing was a detail of the Deacon



Brodie trial. As you will all know Brodie and his gang were brought to justice as a result of a bungled raid on the Excise Offices in Chessel's Court. It was reported later in the Scots Magazine that they "met in an upper room in Smith's house, and had some herrings, chickens, gin, and black cork, which last he explained to be Bell's beer..." John very kindly brought the only remaining

bottle of a special brewing of this beer, sadly not to sample but to admire.

The photo on the right which probably dates from no more than 25 years ago, shows the large 1971 office block associated with the Abbey Brewery which stood where the Scottish Parliament is now.

Such names as Sugarhouse Close and Cooper's Close, although not breweries, were associated with the brewing trade. The student accommodation blocks now in both Cooper's and Sugarhouse Close clearly betray their previous industrial use as does the name. Sugarhouse Close was the courtyard of the Commercial Brewery, established by J. & J. Morison in 1868. It was acquired by Scottish Brewers Ltd in 1960, and became the centre for their experimental brewing. Thanks to John for a fascinating and very informative tour.

Val Baker



Where the Scottish Parliament is now



Sugarhouse Close



Cooper's Close

AGM and New Guides



Our AGM was held in March in the City Chambers, and was well-attended, members appreciated the chance to meet in person, and we also appreciated the attendance of our Lord Provost, who spoke well and later very kindly let us examine his magnificent chain of office, the photo does not do it justice.

Presentation of New Guide Badges

Three new guides were presented with their badges by Lord Provost Aldridge, left to right, Jock Anderson, LP Aldridge, Olwyn Alexander, and Lynn Aylward. Since the AGM we have also welcomed Fiona Watt to the EFVGA although we do not have any photos of Fiona unfortunately.



Phoebe Traquair Murals -Song School

Late last year we had a very enjoyable soiree to celebrate our successful season at the Song School of St Mary's Cathedral in Palmerston Place, decorated with the wonderful Phoebe Traquair Murals. We were given a fascinating tour of the murals as well. The lighting in the room meant the murals displayed rather better than the people in the photos.

Kate Dick, former Chairman of EFVGA, a very enthusiastic person and full of life, died quite suddenly in March. There were many members of the EFVGA present at her funeral in Warriston. Following this the Committee donated £50 towards St Columba's Hospice in her memory. A collection of her Edinburgh books was donated by her son to the Oxfam Bookshop in Morningside (where Eric Melvin volunteers) and about £600 was raised from the sale of these for charity, some at least of which was to our own members.

In March we also learned of the death of Olive Morrison, former EFVGA Treasurer at the age of 93.

The sign for Oliver and Boyd Publishers is still in place in Tweeddale Court. There are many books that they published still around, but few of them have this rather attractive little design of the view from the entrance.

St. Cecilia's Hall Visit

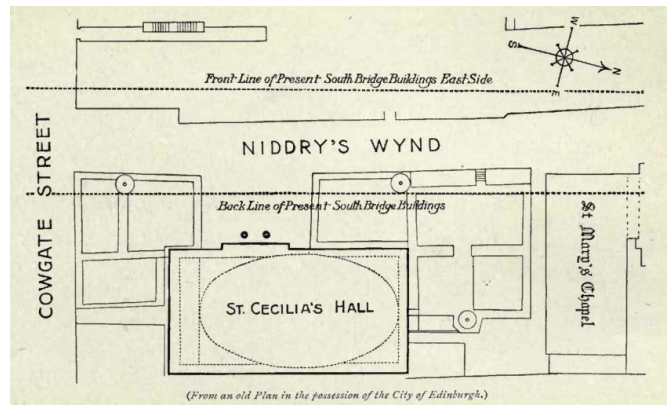
The EFVGA paid a visit in June to St Cecilia's Hall, the oldest purpose-built concert hall in Scotland, and the second oldest in the British Isles. The original building dates from 1763 when it consisted only of the Concert Room, the Laigh ("Lower") Room and the Foyer. Many structural alterations and extensions have taken place to complete the complex we have now, with the most recent, Heritage Lottery Fund funded, redevelopment completed in 2017.

The original Hall was designed by the young architect Robert Mylne for the Edinburgh Musical Society, one of Edinburgh's many Societies of the period, and by the 1750s the Society had wanted to build a concert room of its own. Mylne was one of the remarkable dynasty of Scottish master masons and architects-royal. The Robert Mylne of Mylne's Court was his great-grandfather.

The original seating consisted of up to five rows of tiered covered benches built around the walls, with an oval space in the centre. It was said that around 400 people would squeeze into this space during weekly concerts. Overall the audience was limited to the male members of the Musical Society and their guests, but women were invited to attend the 'Ladies Concerts', which occurred three or four times a year. At these very crowded concerts the ladies were asked not to 'wear their hoops or men their swords'. The current seating plan is an homage to the original layout, but today capacity is set at 200. It is quite hard to envisage 400 people in this space.



Despite all the above, St Cecilia's Hall was essentially built in the wrong place at the wrong time. Within 20 years of its opening work had started on the massive piers of the South Bridge which now tower above it. Niddrie's Wynd was replaced with the narrower Niddry Street. The plan on top right shows the two superimposed. The original courtyard would have extended to the edge of the bar in Bannerman's opposite. In the



eighteenth century, it formed the east side of a courtyard set back from Niddrie's Wynd but



everything apart from St Cecilia's Hall, was demolished in 1785. *The original main entrance (left) is still visible on Niddry Street and in the historic foyer.*

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the Musical Society went bust in about 1800, sold up to the Baptist Church, who used it for the next nine years, selling it to the Freemasons who added an

extension on the Cowgate. Outside, at roof level, their plaque "Freemasons Hall 1812" can be seen. There were shops on the ground floor of this extension. In 1821, part of the building was rented by the newly established Edinburgh School of Arts, a forerunner of Heriot Watt University. In 1844, the entire premises were sold to the Town Council for a school based on the system of Dr Andrew Bell. The council sold the building in 1890 to a bookbinders, with associated shops, eventually this part became the Bridge Bar.

The rest of the building went through another dramatic transformation into the popular "Excelsior Ballroom", which flourished throughout WW2 and into the 1950s.

The owner Miss Cairns, however, had wanted to return the room to its original purpose as a concert hall. This she achieved in April 1959 and then she sold the building to Edinburgh University which needed a suitable site for the Russell collection of early keyboard instruments, and reopened in 1968 as St Cecilia's Hall and Museum.