



Edinburgh Festival Voluntary Guides Association

Newsletter

Summer 2024

Welcome to the Summer Newsletter with a special report on the Lord Provost's reception.

Prior to the season of Festival tours, the committee has planned a series of informal walks with café stops in July for guides to meet others and share their knowledge. Walks will start at 10am for 1 hour followed by a café stop. Look for an email with more details.

Thursday 4th Women in the Old Town with Olwyn Alexander: meet at City Chambers

Tuesday 9th Dean Village with Elspeth McLean: meet at the top of Bell's Brae

Thursday 18th New Town with Eric Melvin: Meet at statue of Wellington at Register House

Tuesday 23rd Stockbridge with Mike Lewis: Meet at Stockbridge Library, Hamilton Place

Visit to the Scottish Parliament (25 March)

By Mike Lewis

A group of EFVGA members were treated to a behind-the-scenes tour of the Scottish Parliament in March. Our guide, Amy, explained how the Parliament functions and how MSPs go about their work. Like at Westminster, a division bell sounds when it is time for a vote. But unlike at Westminster, MSPs don't crowd into a lobby where they are individually counted; they simply press a button on their desks, with the results being displayed instantly on a screen.



Another button is used to request permission to speak during a debate. The time during which a member can speak is strictly limited - usually to six minutes - with the Presiding Officer having ultimate control over the members' microphones.

Amy also explained that the building is almost entirely self-sufficient in energy. In fact, it is so well insulated that a computer-controlled system is used to automatically open windows to avoid over-heating. Further cooling is achieved by water from bore holes beneath the building, the same water being used to flush the toilets. The building is designed to have a strong connection with the Scottish landscape, as seen in the use of native stones for the floors and walls and native timber for the furniture. Above all, there is an abundance of natural light, with large windows giving dramatic views over Arthur's Seat and Salisbury Crags.

Thanks to Val Baker for organising this very successful event.

Civic Reception (19th March)

A Civic Reception to celebrate the 75th anniversary of EFVGA was held on 19th March in the Members Lounge of the Council Chambers with Lord Provost Robert Aldridge in attendance, and invited guest, Neil Ross, together with several other Council members. The Members Lounge, formerly the smoking room, is an ornate oak-panelled chamber with elaborate stained glass windows and comfortable leather seats. Glass-fronted bookcases and a magnificent grandfather clock complete the period ambience.

37 guides enjoyed a glass of wine or juice and snacks with a chance to catch up with old friends and meet some newer guides. The longest serving member present was Gladys Bain, who has been an active guide for 42 years. Her contribution was commended specially by the Lord Provost along with Sandy MacPherson, who celebrates three decades as a guide. Also in attendance were Honorary Guides Laura McMurdo Kathleen Hart and Bill Richardson.



Bernard Heavie, Bill Richardson, Gladys Bain, Lord Provost Aldridge, Laura McMurdo, Kathleen Hart & Sandy Mac Pherson.

The Lord Provost, as Patron of EFVGA but also the City's Volunteering Ambassador, spoke warmly of the contribution the Voluntary Guides make to the vibrancy of the city scene and the welcome and support for visitors. He noted the challenge of keeping the Association going for 77 years and congratulated Guides on reaching this milestone.

Chair Bernard Heavie thanked the Lord Provost for hosting the reception. He remarked that the Association had been continually present on the Royal Mile since 1947 and calculated that over the 77 years some 400 guides have taken almost 100,000 visitors on tours.



Mr & Mrs Sandy MacPherson

Bernard reflected on how different the experience of guiding would once have been. The Canongate would have been adorned with washing hanging out to dry and would certainly have fitted the description Muriel Spark gave Miss Jean Brodie: 'a reeking network of slums'. Early guides would not have had to contend with the crowds of the Fringe as it was only in the 70s that the High Street became an important focus for the Fringe. Bernard spoke for all guides when he emphasized how much pleasure and pride we take in showing visitors our beautiful city and look forward to doing so for many years to come.



Bill Richardson & Gladys Bain

Conducting a tour for a blind person



In 2023 Vic Aitken gave a tour for a blind Vietnamese student and his sighted friend and Eric Melvin led an American couple of whom the husband was blind. Vic had previous experience of leading ramblers walks for blind people and had completed intensive training delivered by RNIB to do this. Eric had led another tour accompanied by a guide dog. This article combines insights from both of them into the skills required to make a tour for a blind person a memorable experience.

Vic emphasized the importance from the start of finding out the person's blind history. Had they been blind from birth and would not have an understanding of colour, for example, or geophysical shape. Or had they been sighted for part of their life and would have some point of reference for these primary sensations. Vic's student had been blind from birth and so, in order to demonstrate the geological structure of the Royal mile in cross section, Vic asked permission, to draw an A shape on the student's hand and touch the point of the A where they were standing. He could then explain why Edinburgh had tenements (using the restricted space more efficiently) and relate the variable height of the tenement buildings to the A shape.

Eric also commented on the difficulty of describing things such as monuments or street names or architectural features: e.g. a rubble-built wall or a classical facade when the sightless person had never seen such a feature. In both his tours, he was helped by the accompanying spouse who guided him through his commentary.

Vic pointed out that the time taken for the tour lengthens because you need time to explain where you are and any interesting features that you can't just point to. The blind person needs time to touch and to form a mental image of what you're describing, e.g. Greyfriars Bobby. Although the blind person has no understanding of primary sensations, they can understand concepts such as witchcraft or fire or torture.

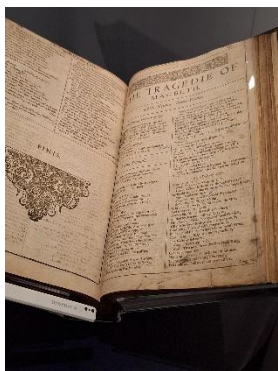
Both Vic and Eric commented on the need to pay attention to traffic, street crossings and the presence of crowds of people. It's important to constantly prepare the blind person for the environment they're walking in, e.g. the number of steps to reach the next stop, as well as kerbs or cobbles underfoot where they need to step carefully. From his RNIB training, Vic understood that you should only touch the upper part of a person's arm, e.g. to help them cross a street, but definitely not the lower part from elbow to hand without permission, as this has special connotations.

Even if the blind person has a guide dog, you cannot depend completely on the dog as the environment is unfamiliar to the dog and neither owner or dog knows where they're going. On Eric's tour with the guide dog, everything went well until they arrived at the foot of the Mound where the couple had arranged to be picked up at the end of their walk. All of a sudden the guide dog became excited and pulled at its lead. It had caught the smell coming from the hot dog van parked beside the RSA.

Vic received a five star Tripadvisor review: "Victor was our guide and he was amazing! We appreciate his caring for details like making sure my friend always stood in a place that could avoid any eager tourists accidentally touching him, which makes a huge difference for his experience as a blind person. Victor's true stories about Edinburgh helped us to truly relive the stunning history of Edinburgh. We couldn't expect better."

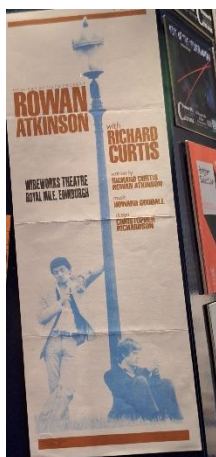
Visit to the National Library of Scotland (27th February)

Ten guides were welcomed to the National Library of Scotland on George IV Bridge for a tour with staff members Robbie Mitchell and Lorna Black. Our comprehensive tour took us across 7 floors through the reading rooms and down into the stacks, which stretch on 15 levels down to the Cowgate. We began



with an introduction to the public exhibition space to see some of the treasures held in the Library, including a First Folio copy of Shakespeare's plays, open at the first page of Macbeth. The Library has a legal right to claim a copy of all works published in Scotland and beyond, if a printer has an office in Scotland. It also collects political and cultural ephemera such as a Festival flyer advertising an early show with Rowan Atkinson.

We climbed the impressive staircase at the entrance to the glazed window, which shows significant aspects of the building's history. The Library was founded in 1925 but is based on the much older collection of the Faculty of Advocates, founded in 1689 by George Mackenzie of Rosehaugh. When this collection was gifted to the nation, a new building was commissioned, finally completed in 1956. Sir Alexander Grant of Forres, managing director of McVitie and Price, contributed the equivalent of £6 million in today's money for the new building and is also commemorated in the window.



In the upstairs reading rooms, our guide, Robbie, emphasized the open access policy of the Library. You have to become a member to use the resources but the public are encouraged to visit. For example, there is now a collection of Advanced Higher set books for school children. Jim Eunson remembers enquiring about access as an undergraduate student. In those days, access for students was only granted if your academic tutor made a case on your behalf that you required books which were not available in the Edinburgh University Library. Jim couldn't even get past the top of the entrance stairs as that is where the security staff were stationed. It really was quite intimidating.

You cannot borrow books but can only consult them in the reading rooms. Previously, readers would search through a card index and fill out a chit to request books from the stacks but now most of the catalogue is digital and can be accessed from home. We walked quietly through the Special Collections reading room for a rare view of the back wall and turrets of the old Scottish Parliament building, not otherwise visible.

The final part of the tour took us down into the stacks where the book fetchers work to find books requested by readers but also to maintain security as there are some extremely valuable books in the collection. With 120 miles of shelving, a book fetcher can easily cover ten miles in a day. The books are organized by size and type, e.g. hardback or papers stored in boxes, to make it easier to add donations as around 6,000 new works can be received each week. The stacks are air conditioned and in case of fire smoke can be sucked out. There is also a sprinkler system with water tanks stored under the arches of George IV Bridge. It is easier to repair water damage than smoke damage.

Spotlight on guides

Christine Stevenson is a former Chair of EFVGA and here she reflects on her involvement with EFVGA.

How long have you been a guide?

Since 2008. I moved to Edinburgh in 1980 and immediately fell in love with the city. Later, I became aware of EFVGA when I saw a notice in a community newspaper calling for volunteer guides. Olive Morrison was the contact and she was my mentor. Preparing to become a guide ignited my love of history.

What's the most disconcerting thing that happened to you on a tour?

I was leading a tour from Cannonball House, where the guides had their original base, and I was asked by an American tourist for information on the Bishops' Wars. I was surprised to be asked about these less than well known conflicts (which took place in 1639 and 1640 between the armies of Charles 1st and the Scots Covenanters), but fortunately I was able to say something very very briefly on the subject, before stressing that our Royal Mile tour had to be a general one. I was relieved that the American visitor seemed happy enough with that!

Who's your favourite Royal Mile or Edinburgh character?

James Braidwood. I like to contrast him with David Hume and Adam Smith, especially if I have young people on my tours. He was a practical man of action who saved many lives and revolutionized the fire service. He was only 24 when he was called to deal with the great fire of 1824 in the Old Town. He was later headhunted to London and died fighting a fire there in 1861.

What advice would you give new guides?

You obviously need a good knowledge of the history of the Royal Mile but you can start with the basics and develop your interest over time. You should relax, enjoy leading the tours and convey your enjoyment. Keep your talk light and entertaining and remember you're not delivering a lecture.

What have you found most rewarding about EFVGA?

Although the tours are hard work, especially when we used to start at the Esplanade and finish at Holyrood, it was very satisfying talking to people and answering their questions. Becoming a guide gave me the chance to immerse myself in history, which has become my passion.

Image teaser



This stone remnant was once part of a philanthropic edifice. Without consulting Google, do you know what structure it formed part of, where that was located and where this fragment is

now? Any ideas where the rest of the structure might be?

The Legacy of William and Robert Chambers

By Ken Young

In 2017, my wife and I were fortunate to acquire ownership of the house in which William & Robert Chambers were born, in 1800 and 1802 respectively. Since then, we've taken every opportunity to promote the brothers' reputation.



The Chambers' House then and now

William and Robert were two of six children and, unusually, were born with six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. Operations to correct this abnormality were only partially successful and this possibly explains why, while other boys roughed it outside, the boys tended to stay in and study books.

The family moved to Edinburgh in 1813 and William became an apprentice at a bookshop in Calton Street before opening his own bookshop in 1819 on Broughton Street. Meanwhile, Robert ran a bookshop and circulating library from 48 Hanover Street with his brother James. Eventually, in 1832, they founded the publishing firm of W. & R. Chambers.

Printing took place initially in Robert's bedroom, then at a printing office in Roxburgh Close, off the High Street. As the firm flourished, they bought a series of larger premises off the High Street between Roxburgh Close and Don's Close.

Most people will be familiar with Chambers' Dictionary, but their most enduring publication was the Chambers

Journal, first printed in 1832 and published weekly through to 1954. Whilst William focused on the business, Robert edited the Journal and wrote several books, including the well-known 'Traditions of Edinburgh'.

However, Robert was fascinated by geology and in 1844 published 'Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation'. His book promoted scientific reasons for the development of mankind, contrary to traditional Christian views and as such was very controversial. It was therefore published anonymously.

It was widely expected that Robert would be the next Lord Provost of Edinburgh but he was forced to stand down due to rumours about him writing this book. It is worth noting that 'Vestiges' was published 15 years before similar theories of Charles Darwin.

However, William was later appointed Lord Provost in 1865 and his time in office was marked by two notable events. Firstly, he paid for Greyfriars Bobby's dog licence so that Bobby was not put down after his master died. Secondly, following the collapse of Paisley Close in 1861, William realised that the Old Town needed extensive redevelopment to improve living conditions. Together with Edinburgh's Health Officer, Dr Henry Littlejohn, he persuaded Westminster to fund the implementation of the City Improvement Act of 1867.

In his final years William used £30,000 of his own money (£20 million today) to fund significant improvements to St Giles – he wanted it to be seen as the Westminster Abbey of Scotland. Sadly, William died three days before the official reopening of the cathedral in 1883 and his funeral became the first service upon completion. Robert had died in 1871. A chapel in the cathedral commemorates the work and legacy of the brothers.