



Edinburgh Festival Voluntary Guides Association

# Newsletter

April 2025

## From the Editor – Olwyn Alexander

Welcome to the April 2025 newsletter.

Following a successful series of four walks led by active guides in 2024, a similar programme is offered for 2025. Walks will take place in June with two evening walks.

Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> June 10.30am – *Memorials and Monuments on Calton Hill*. Meet at the Duke of Wellington statue in front of General Register House. Graham Sutherland

Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> June 6.00pm, an evening walk – *The historic area of Broughton*. Meet at the Sherlock Holmes statue in Picardy Place, finishing point Canonmills. Jim Eunson

Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> June 6.00pm, an evening walk – *Gaels in Edinburgh*. Meet at Old Stamp Office Close. John Masson

Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> June 10.00am – *Grassmarket*. Meet at the old well at the foot of the West Bow. Eric Melvin

## Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting was held in the European Room of the City Chambers on 12<sup>th</sup> March with 17 guides present. This attendance was disappointing so the committee will look to see how we can improve attendance at these events.



The Lord Provost was represented by Baillie Dan Heap, who joined the meeting to formally present her badge to new guide, Anne Craig.

Baillie Heap sits with the Green Party group on the Council. In his speech, Baillie Heap congratulated EFVGA on providing a welcome to the city for visitors and specifically commended our organization for offering free tours in August which enhanced access to tours for a wide variety of visitors and locals.

Treasurer, Jim Eunson, reported the balance of £5220. In recognition of the close relationship with City of Edinburgh Council, EFVGA made a donation to Edinburgh's social inclusion charity, The OneCity Trust, of £100. The same amount was also given to St Giles to allow our tours limited access without needing to make individual donations.

Gill Davidson has indicated that she wishes to retire from active guiding. She was put forward by the Chair for honorary membership of EFVGA.

Nine trainee guides have recently joined, some of whom were volunteers at the National Museum of Scotland, which has discontinued volunteer guiding. They bring established knowledge and skill to EFVGA and are likely to be ready to join the rota this August.

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## Jock Anderson follows in the footsteps of Rebus

Many guides will regale visitors with the gruesome stories of Major Weir, Deacon Brodie and Burke and Hare or recount grim tales from Walter Scott or Robert Louis Stevenson. We might showcase Edinburgh as the inspiration for J.K.Rowling or Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander*, but perhaps we ignore a writer whose novels have put the modern City of Edinburgh on the map by exploring in graphic detail the schizophrenic nature of the city and the darker aspects of Scottish society today.



Sir Ian Rankin is credited with being one of the pioneers of *Tartan Noir*, a genre which often delves into issues such as class struggle, political corruption, and the personal demons of its characters. In his

Inspector Rebus novels, readers are shown Edinburgh as a city haunted by its past, whose problems are repeatedly swept underneath the city's metaphorical carpet. Rankin urges us to view the duality of Edinburgh: its light and dark, its affluence and poverty, its Jekyll and Hyde. Indeed, Robert Louis Stevenson is an acknowledged influence on Rankin's writing.

The first Inspector Rebus novel, *Knots and Crosses*, was published in 1987. His 25th, *Midnight and Blue*, came out last October. The novels gave rise to a long running TV series, starring first John Hannah and then Ken Stott, who brought a gritty debauched style to the role of Inspector Rebus. In May 2024, a TV prequel of the young Rebus was

broadcast. On his website, Sir Ian commented: "Gregory Burke did an amazing job with the script and I found actor Richard Rankin (playing the lead role) mesmerising on screen – so much seemed to be happening behind his eyes".

The impact of these novels on the portrayal of Scottish cultural life was recognized in 2007 when Sir Ian became the inaugural recipient of the annual *Edinburgh Award*, given by the city to a resident who has "made a positive impact on the city and gained national and international recognition for Edinburgh" - his handprints can be found in the courtyard of the City Chambers. He received a knighthood from Princess Anne in the June 2023 honours list.

Sir Ian has made a number of broadcasts (available on YouTube) which show him roaming through Edinburgh to explain how this town and its real-life characters continue to influence his prolific and popular writing. However, there is currently a lack of high quality walking tours for fans of the novels. Rebus literary tours were established in 2000 by John Skinner, and endorsed by Sir Ian, who attended a number of them for charitable purposes. After Skinner's death, these were continued by his friend Colin Brown but are no longer available. Currently, *Edinburgh Expert Walking Tours* offers a bespoke Rebus tour and has published [a blog](#) of some of the locations in the novels A [BBC Documentary](#), narrated by Sir Ian, explains the inspiration for many of the stories

So for guides who are also Rebus fans, there is an opportunity to bring the murder and mayhem of the historical city to life with modern stories.

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## Festival and Year-round Custom Tours

Festival tours in 2024 attracted 963 visitors, just slightly fewer than 2023 (1009). The trend of higher numbers in the morning (average 25.4) than the afternoon (average 16.4) continued, albeit less markedly than in the previous two years. Most of our walkers came from the UK (58.2%) with over a quarter of this total from Scotland. Of the non-UK visitors (41.8%), just over half came from North America (US/Canada) and one third from Europe.

Elsbeth McLean reports on the year-round tours. Firstly a huge thank you to John Masson, who took over organising private tours this past year at such short notice and who has been so successful and efficient in sorting them all out.

2024 was a good year for private tours, which were well spread out throughout the year from 31st March until the end of October. Perhaps surprisingly, the busiest month was October.

In 2024, we had 20 private walks booked for a total of 93 people. Twelve were for Americans and one for Canadians. Four of the booked groups took not just one but two tours. Encouragingly, a recent booking for a couple from the Isle of Skye will be their third tour in a year with us. It's a great testament to our guides' knowledge and their engaging way of leading walks and telling historic stories, that this couple are looking forward to discovering more about Edinburgh.

2025 is already shaping up well for private tour bookings. An international conference taking place in April, for teachers of English as a foreign language, has requested a presentation and walking tours on 2 evenings. Other bookings are already being taken for later months, so we're optimistic that this year will be as successful as the past one has been.

## Report on visit to Riddles Court by Val Baker

A group of EFVGA Guides enjoyed a visit to Riddles Court on 5th November, 2024. Following the substantial renovations in 2017, there is plenty to see and learn.

Our informative and enthusiastic guide, Taylah, led us through Riddles Court, which is the building furthest back in the two courtyards that make up the close. The house was built in 1587 by merchant John MacMorran. Over the years, it has been occupied by high status residents as well as a range of community uses. It is now known as the Patrick Geddes Centre for Learning.

We were guided through The MacMorran Room, Seton Room, Norie Room, Geddes Room and the Library. Each of those has a fascinating history, a different style of architecture and a range of uses through the centuries. Taylah explained to us the styles of art work, stories of the ceilings and frequent changes to the buildings. It is hard for us to imagine now, the length of the gardens at the back for instance which disappeared when Victoria Street was constructed.

Unfortunately we did not get to see the magnificent ceiling of the Kings Chamber as this part of the building is now reserved for AirBnB guests. However we did visit the original 16th century stove and bread oven which was discovered during the renovations when space was excavated to create a disabled toilet.

Scottish Historic Buildings Trust which owns and operates Riddles Court, plan to open the building to interested groups such as EFVGA during 2025.

See also [A Historical Guide to the Rooms at Riddle's Court – Scottish Historic Buildings Trust](#)

[Riddles Court: Edinburgh's UNESCO World Heritage Site](#)

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## Image teaser



This image shows the top of the Prince Albert sundial at the west end of the Meadows. It commemorates the Edinburgh

International Exhibition of Industry Science and Art, which ran from May to October 1886 and attracted 2.7 million visitors to the city. It was opened by Prince Albert Victor, grandson of Queen Victoria.

An enormous pavilion to house exhibits stretched from Brougham Place to what is now Jawbone walk. The domed roof was 120 feet tall. An 1827 Act of Parliament prevented permanent structures from being built on the Meadows so the pavilion was demolished. For more information see



<https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/surviving-relics-of-the-1886-edinburgh-international-exhibition-605784>

## The next challenge



This stone house has two carved ornamental features at each end of its façade. Do you know where

they came from originally and where they are now? Thanks to Jim Eunson for this idea.

## Spotlight on guides

Gladys Bain

Gladys became a guide in 1982 after answering an advertisement for trainee guides in the Edinburgh Evening News. She was encouraged to apply by her husband. Her mentor was Jean Thomson. She served on the Committee from 1987-98, and as vice-chair from 1995-98.

*What prompted you to become a guide?*

When I was only 3 or 4 years old, my father would take me on walks around Edinburgh. He was interested in the history of the city and told me some of the stories. Then in 1967 there was an exhibition\* at the Waverley Mall (now the Waverley market), which further sparked my interest.

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

People sometimes join your tour as you go down and when you have time you might ask where they are from. One particular time I was in full flow when someone joined so I welcomed her but I didn't ask that question. As we were walking down, I was chatting to a couple who had limited time in Scotland. They wanted to know whether they should visit Glasgow. I told them about the rivalry between Edinburgh and Glasgow and jokingly said, 'Oh I wouldn't bother going to Glasgow!' Of course, I later discovered the woman who had joined was from Glasgow. It was embarrassing for me but I explained I was joking and she took it in good part.

*Who's your favourite Royal Mile or Edinburgh character?*

It has to be Lord Provost George Drummond. I admire him for what he did for the city. He was six times Lord Provost; influential in developing the New Town; drained the Nor' Loch; changed the Toun's College to a proper University



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under the Chair of Medicine. He laid the foundation stones for the North Bridge, the City Chambers and the new Law Courts. He was a visionary who changed Edinburgh completely. However, I've only recently discovered that allegedly he was involved in the slave trade.<sup>†</sup> He was the deal broker who helped to secure ownership of 39 slaves, the new hospital benefiting from the profits of their labour. I suppose he was a man of his time but I don't condone these actions and it has tempered my admiration for him.

*What have you found most rewarding about EFVGA?*

Meeting lots of new people, both guides and visitors, and seeing the enjoyment of people on the tours that I take. Some years ago I received a Christmas card from a Chinese couple, who had somehow found my address. On the back was a letter saying how much they had enjoyed my tour. I sometimes have local Edinburgh people on tours, which can be daunting. But I take them down some of the closes like Dunbar's Close that they haven't explored before.

*What advice would you give new guides?*

Be interested in your party. Because they've given up their time to take a tour so you owe it to them to take an interest in them: where they come from, why they're in Scotland, what their plans are. Some people will walk with you down the Royal Mile while others hang back so you don't press yourself on people but at least show interest. Have a good background of Scottish history. You can't go into everything but you need to be able to give a succinct version of history when people ask you. And finally be as enthusiastic on every tour as you were on your first tour. You may be tired, or have a large party or the Mile may be very busy but again, you're an actor and you owe it to your audience that every performance is as good as the first one.

\* This exhibition was called *Two Hundred Summers in a City* and took place between 16th August and 16th September, for the 200th anniversary of the founding of the New Town.

† Information about the NHS project to uncover links to slavery can be found here [Atlantic Slavery and the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh - NHS Lothian Charity](#)

## End Notes

We were sad to learn of the deaths of Barbara Gibbons, Sandy Cameron and Hamish Coghill.

Barbara became a guide in 1982. She served on the committee from 1989 to 1997 and was Secretary from 1995-97. She retired as a guide in 2016. Together with her husband she was a prominent member of the Scottish Country Dancing scene.

Sandy became a guide in 2003 and brought his years of experience as a secondary teacher to his role. He joined the committee in 2016 and served briefly as Secretary. Sandy was a popular member and sometime president of the Braid Bowling Club. In younger days, he had been a very capable distance runner. After giving up competitive running he officiated at athletic tournaments. Sandy and his late wife Joan were very keen Scottish Country dancers.

Hamish Coghill became an honorary guide in 1999. He worked on the Edinburgh Evening News for over 40 years and was remembered as an 'archetypal gentleman of the press' and a 'true guardian' of Edinburgh's traditions. He ran classes on Edinburgh's history for 25 years as part of the council's adult education programme. He was the author of several books about the city's past, for example, 'Lost Edinburgh'.

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## Jim Eunson considers public executions Edinburgh

The last page is an appropriate spot for a story about public hangings. This article was prompted by last September's filming in the Old Town for Guillermo del Toro's *Frankenstein* which included the erection of a gibbet in Makar's Court.

Elsbeth McLean took this photo of the



gibbet. Now of course there were several places of execution in Old Edinburgh, but not here. As you will

know, the last public execution in Edinburgh, was of George Bryce the Ratho murderer on Tuesday 24 June 1864. The scaffold was specially erected at the former head of Libberton's Wynd, now the corner of George IV Bridge and the High Street, and there is a plaque at the site commemorating this.

Other sites were used at different periods but after the Tolbooth was demolished in 1824, executions were held at the head of Libberton's Wynd. William Burke was hanged there in 1829, but work had started on George IV Bridge by then, so he may therefore have been the last person executed at Libberton's Wynd. This is not certain as there were about 13 other public executions in Edinburgh between 1829 and the completion of George IV Bridge in 1836. At some point during the construction of George IV Bridge, the execution site moved slightly.

However in the period 1840-1864 there were only 4 executions carried out in Edinburgh, with none at all between 1854 and 1864. In the circumstances, it is not surprising that the Council decided that having a permanent hangman on the payroll was no longer necessary.

So for George Bryce's execution, the Council had to import a hangman from elsewhere, in this case a Thomas Askern from York. In retrospect, it seems that he either overegged his CV to pretend he had more experience than he really did, or got so drunk the night before that he was in no fit state to do the job. Whatever the case, Askern did not calculate the drop correctly, and as a result the unfortunate Bryce did not die quickly of a broken neck but slowly suffocated for a number of minutes in full view of the watching crowd.

While initial feelings towards Bryce were fairly hostile because of the nature of his crime, the crowd became angry and chased the officials and hangman from the scaffold with a barrage of stones. Askern was smuggled on a coach back to York first thing the next day. This fiasco is why the Council decided to stop public executions, which subsequently took place in the Calton Jail. When this was in turn demolished and Saughton Prison built, hangings took place there. There were 4 such hangings, the last one in 1954.



There is an image of Bryce's body in the sketchbook of John Smith, President of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (and Dentist to Queen Victoria) who sketched the only known image of George Bryce. I was able to take the picture above during an open day at Surgeons Hall a couple of years ago. Note that the sketch is dated the day of the hanging at 10 am.