



Edinburgh Festival Voluntary Guides Association

Newsletter

Spring 2024

From the Editor – Olwyn Alexander

Welcome to the April 2024 newsletter. Allow me to introduce myself as the new Editor, taking over from Jim Eunson, who continues to manage email communication with guides, setting the rota for the August tours and Social Media.

I trained as a guide in 2022, mentored with wonderful support from Gill Davidson, and led my first tours in 2023. I offered to join the committee in September 2023 and took on editing the newsletter at the committee meeting in January 2024.

I would describe myself as a 'passionate Scot'. Originally from New Zealand, I have lived in Edinburgh for 45 years and have forebears from Shetland and Fife as well as many other parts of the UK. I've really enjoyed exploring Scottish history and the colourful characters that lived in our city in times gone by.

If you have suggestions for the newsletter or responses to anything, please get in touch.

Annual General Meeting

The Annual General Meeting was held in the European Room of the City Chambers on 14th February with twenty guides attending. The Lord Provost was represented by Baillie Pauline Flannery who joined the meeting to formally present badges to new guides, Fiona Watt and Jock Anderson. In her speech, Baillie Flannery commented on the warmth, character and enthusiasm evident among guides in the room and thanked EFVGA for their continuing dedication in making the visitor experience in our city a memorable one.

In recognition of the close relationship with City of Edinburgh Council, EFVGA made a donation to Edinburgh's social inclusion charity, The OneCity Trust.

Treasurer, Jim Eunson, reported the balance of £4690, more than double the 2021 balance. The increased income was due to the rise in donations for walks.

Christine Stevenson and Richard Richardson have indicated that they wish to retire from active guiding. They were put forward by the Chair for honorary membership, unanimously agreed.



Fiona Watt and Jock Anderson receiving their badges from Baillie Flannery with Bernard Heavie.

Correction: in the Summer 2023 newsletter, guides who received their badges included Colin McKerchar.

Festival and Year-round Custom Tours

Festival tours in 2023 attracted 1009 visitors, which is 68 % higher than 2022 and the highest number since 2013. Morning attendance (average 30) was almost twice afternoon attendance (average 16). This is likely due to competition with afternoon Festival events, with over 100 shows starting between 1 and 5pm. On 15 days out of 22 not all guides were needed for afternoon tours.

We will take this into account in planning the rota for 2024. We will allocate four guides in the morning (for a 10.30 start) and two in the afternoon. The coordinator will be expected to take a tour if needed (either afternoon or morning).

An agreement with St Giles gives us short slots for both the morning and afternoon walks. We made a donation of £100 to St Giles in recognition of their co-operation.



As well as delivering guided tours in August, EFVGA also offers privately booked tours throughout the year. These tours provide valuable income for the Association and the Committee would like to encourage more guides to give it a go. We ran 21 of these in 2023 between April

and November, typically for two to four people. There was a diverse mix of people: from an American University and a German Grammar School to 52 people from Spice Social Scotland. The tours usually last longer than our free Festival tours and can cover other areas of the Old and New Town depending on what interests the party.

Some requests are definitely more challenging than the August tours and it's not just the number of people you have to consider. In early September Vic Aitken took a tour with a blind Vietnamese student and his sighted companion around the Old Town and Greyfriars Churchyard.

Our most challenging request in November came from the global accounting network MGI Worldwide, who asked us to take 100 delegates on a 90 minute pre-dinner walk between the Caledonian and George Hotels. The timing of the event, on a Thursday evening in late autumn, gave us a lot of factors to consider but after a couple of productive planning sessions we had routes and contingency options available. On the night we were lucky with the weather and received some very positive feedback from MGI.

We hope if you've not taken a private tour before and feel inspired to take on a new challenge, you will get in touch and give it a go. We're happy to organise shadow-guiding and practical support to help you get started, or as a brush-up on places you've not guided in for a while. Let us know and we'll be delighted to help.

Reflection on Portrait Gallery Visit by Jim Eunson

Our visit to the National Portrait Gallery in Queen Street happened to coincide with Burns Day so we focused on portraits of our national poet. We had an excellent guide from the staff, who met us in the Grand Entrance Hall, where the historical frieze of famous Scots includes Burns. The frieze was the work of Sir William Hole, who also did the historical scenes in the City Chambers which will be familiar to guides.



The visit began in front of the man himself, sculpted by John Flaxman in 1824-6. I learned two new things about the statue: from the plaque on the side, the funds were initially raised in Bombay (Mumbai) in India, and our guide pointed out the ploughshare, Tam O'Shanter and thistle lying at the poet's right foot. He has a mountain daisy in his hand.



The Portrait Gallery had not been built in 1826 and I wondered where the statue had been previously; it is quite a saga. It was first housed inside the Burns Monument on Regent Road. In fact, the statue came first, with enough money left over from the public appeal to build the Monument. This was completed by 1836, and the statue was duly installed there. However, due to the poor air quality, e.g. from the breweries in the Canongate, the statue's surface was deteriorating and many, including Lord Cockburn, urged that it be moved. It was handed over to the Council in 1846 (which still owns it) and moved to the Playfair Library in Edinburgh University, where it stayed until 1861. (There were some in the University who resented this as Burns had not been university-educated, although others pointed out that neither

had Shakespeare!) It was then moved to the recently-completed National Gallery, where it stayed until 1889, when it was moved to the Great Hall of the newly opened Portrait Gallery.

We saw the famous portrait of Robert Burns by Alexander Nasmyth. It was painted to be engraved as the frontispiece of the Edinburgh edition of his poems, which made him famous, and the image may be seen on biscuit and shortbread tins the world over. Seen in the gallery, it is quite modest in size (only 38.4 x 32.4 cm). Most of the other portraits in that room are much bigger. By tradition, the portrait was painted quickly and left unfinished as the artist was afraid of losing the likeness. Burns and Nasmyth became firm friends, sharing a love of nature as well as an interest in radical politics.



There is another Nasmyth portrait of Burns, painted after his friend's death and based on his earlier portrait. In this idealised scene, the poet stands in front of the Auld Brig o' Doon at Alloway in Ayrshire, near where Burns grew up. Without the immediacy of the earlier portrait, it is more of a 'Romantic' idea of how a poet should be portrayed.

However the smallest portrait of Burns in the Gallery is in the Library, a fascinating place. Here there are many drawers with wonderful miniatures in them. One such contains Alexander Reid's miniature portrait, quite a different image from Nasmyth's, and one which Burns himself called 'the best likeness' of him ever to be made. It is tiny, only 7.6 x 6.3 cm, painted in watercolour on ivory, showing him in profile in 1796, the last year of his life.



Spotlight on guides

Richard Richardson is a former Treasurer of EFVGA and was made an honorary guide at the AGM in February. Here he reflects on his involvement with EFVGA.

How long have you been a guide?

Around 13 years. I had been guiding on Edinburgh Bus Tours but it's much more satisfying guiding on foot than hurtling down the Royal Mile on a Routemaster Bus! My interest in the Old Town goes back to a sixth form study at school, which involved a survey into the Industries and People of the Canongate. It has changed somewhat!

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

In my early years guiding I recall a tour with senior citizens in the Canongate Kirkyard. I was worried when one lady lay down on the grassy slope and began to roll downhill. She was reliving her childhood. She had been brought up in the 1930's along with 5 siblings in a tiny flat in Dunbar's Close.

Who's your favourite Royal Mile or Edinburgh character?

John Knox. I used to enjoy spending time in Parliament Square when I would read

an excerpt from Knox's pamphlet the "First Blast". A number of years back with my predecessor as Treasurer Kathleen Hart, we led a party of Anglican and Lutheran Bishops into St Giles - not only a record number but several were women! Knox must have been turning in his grave! I find "The wee book of Calvin" by Bill Duncan to be a good resource.

What advice would you give new guides?

Keep it light – and as you introduce yourself, find out a little about who you are guiding. It's amazing the connections and common interests you will find with our visitors. And be flexible - experience of being stuck in traffic on the top deck of a bus during tram works resulted in a need to *haver*, to expand into other topics, such as Scottish terms, popular culture, even politics (with care!)* I recommend viewing the Youtube video of the Proclaimers "Streets of Edinburgh" for motivation.

What have you found most rewarding about EFVGA?

Being an ambassador for our incredible city. We are privileged to live in one of the world's great cities. Hearing "Wow!" for example as you enter Parliament Hall... and above all the genuine appreciation of our customers.

2024 illustrated talks

The Porteous Riot, Old Town Disasters, John Kay and Robert Louis Stevenson feature in talks given by Eric Melvin and Michael Lewis in collaboration with the City Arts Centre.

12th July 2.00pm City Arts Centre **The Porteous Riot** *Speaker Eric Melvin.*

1st August 2.00pm City Arts Centre **19th Century Old Town Disasters - the Great Fire and Paisley Close** *Speaker Eric Melvin.*

20th August 10.30am Lauriston Castle **John Kay: recording the golden age in Edinburgh** *Speaker Eric Melvin.*

13th November 10.30am Lauriston Castle **Robert Louis Stevenson's Road to the Pentlands** *Speaker Mike Lewis.*

Preparation for 2024 Festival Season by Frances McDevitt

EFVGA is all set and raring to go for this year's Fringe! EFVGA appears in the first tranche of the 2024 online Fringe programme which was released on 22 February 2024. People can now book for our August tours. The printed programme is released in mid June.

As in recent years, EFVGA is listed in the Events section of The Fringe programme [Search | Edinburgh Festival Fringe \(edfringe.com\)](https://www.edfringe.com) and will be 'free but ticketed'. Of course, we'll also continue to welcome people who don't have tickets but who turn up on the day! EFVGA has 44 'performance slots' in August 2024, two each day from Sunday 04 August to Sunday 25 August inclusive. The Fringe Box Office has 40 tickets available for each 'performance slot'. which, very neatly and appropriately, gives a possible total of 1,760 sales - one for every yard of the Royal Mile!

What the papers said by Mike Lewis

This photo from the Evening News shows an EFVGA guide leading a tour in 1954. We were certainly not short of press coverage in those early days. During our very first season in 1947, the Scotsman reported that "Voluntary guides, selected because of their knowledge of the city and who have attended a special course of lectures, are now in attendance each day to conduct parties of visitors down the Royal Mile."



Two years later, the Lord Provost, Sir Andrew Murray, was quoted as saying that he had "received many appreciative letters from people who had been in Edinburgh for the Festival, and who had been brought into closer touch with Edinburgh through the services of the guides".

That same year, the Scotsman reported that "Forty temporary guides drawn from various departments of the city have been employed during the Festival in accompanying visitors from the Castle Esplanade down to the Palace of Holyroodhouse". That report brought an immediate response from our then Honorary Secretary, A.M. Smith, who pointed out that the guides were not from council departments and were most certainly not "employed", being all volunteers.

Sir Andrew was quoted again in 1950, when he thanked the EFVGA for "the services they have given in conducting parties of visitors, giving them historical facts concerning the Old Town and its buildings". The Scotsman reported that we received around a thousand visitors that season.

Unfortunately, we no longer get as much press coverage as we did in those early years. But at least we now have Tripadvisor.

Royal Mile News

Nicola Benedetti receives Edinburgh Award



Nicola Benedetti, 2021, Calum Stevenson
© Calum Stevenson

NATIONAL GALLERIES SCOTLAND

Nicola Benedetti CBE was presented with the Edinburgh Award 2023 by the Lord Provost, Robert Aldridge, at a civic reception in December 2023 at the City Chambers. The Award was launched in 2007 to recognise individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to the city. Recipients have their handprints reproduced on a flagstone in the City Chambers quadrangle.

Nicola Benedetti is a classical solo violinist, who regularly plays with some of the world's most prestigious orchestras. She won the BBC Young Musician of the Year Award at 16 and is the youngest of twelve recipients of the Queen's Medal for Music. She was awarded a CBE in the 2019 New Year Honours list. She established the Benedetti Foundation in 2019 to provide transformative experiences through mass

music events and equal access to music participation and appreciation for all. She became the first woman to lead the Edinburgh International Festival when she was made Festival Director in 2022.

Nicola Benedetti joins authors J.K. Rowling and Ian Rankin, scientists Professor Peter Higgs and Sir Geoff Palmer, sportspeople Doddie Weir and Sir Chris Hoy and her predecessor as Festival Director Fergus Linehan among others as recipients of the Edinburgh Award.

A new vision for Greyfriars Kirkyard



Greyfriars Kirkyard is one of Edinburgh's most iconic spaces. However, its multiple roles as a burial site, tourist destination, heritage site, green space, and more, mean that its management is becoming increasingly complex. Recognising the need for a new strategy Edinburgh World Heritage and the City of Edinburgh Council have commissioned Kirkyard Consulting to develop a new graveyard Conservation Management Plan.

To have your say about your experience of Greyfriars, and how you would like to see it managed in the future, please complete the following short survey. The survey closes on 15th April.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/R/GREYFRIARS-CMP>