



Edinburgh Festival Voluntary Guides Association

Newsletter

Autumn 2025

Welcome to the Autumn Newsletter. Guides who led the refresher walks in June have provided a brief account of their tours & the Spotlight on Guides features one of our oldest and also some of our newest guides, who joined from the National Museum of Scotland.

All guides are invited to a thankyou function at the Harry Younger Hall on 9th October from 6:30 till 8:30 pm. A finger buffet & refreshments will be provided. The Harry Younger Hall is at 3 Lochend Close on the Canongate next door to Canongate Kirk.

Refresher walks for Guides June 2025

Refresher walks this year took place in June to encourage greater participation. Guides provided highlights of their walks.

Monuments and Memorials on Calton Hill with Graham Sutherland

Graham Sutherland led a walk to explore memorials and monuments on Calton Hill. The tour emphasized the panoramic views at several points on the Hill and gave insights into structures from Classical Greece and Rome on which many of the monuments are based.

The group met at the statue of the Iron Duke (Wellington) cast in bronze by Steell (Sir John, Sculptor to Queen Victoria) in front of General Register House. This was the first purpose built records office, designed to protect documents from fire and damp. The design by Robert Adam was based on the Pantheon in Rome. There is a splendid view from there across to the North British (now Balmoral) Hotel and up to the Old Town. Waterloo Place to the left leads to Regent Bridge, a major example of Greek architectural style, designed by Archibald Elliott with help from Robert Stevenson. It was opened in 1819 by Prince Leopold of Saxe Coburg and admired by George IV when he visited Edinburgh in 1822.

The construction of Regent Road required removal of part of the Old Calton burial ground, which contains the



Political Martyrs' Memorial, the tomb of David Hume by

Robert Adam, based on the tomb of Theodoric in Ravenna, and a memorial to Lincoln and the American Civil War by George Bissell. Lincoln's great hero was Robert Burns and he had booked a passage to visit Scotland shortly before his assassination.

The tour then climbed the Calton steps to the memorial to Dugald Stewart, a mathematician, philosopher and founder member of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, for a breathtaking view over the city. This panorama is filled with buildings by William Henry Playfair, such as the Galleries and New College on the Mound and Old College on South Bridge. Playfair based his design for Stewart's memorial on a choragic monument of Lysicrates a patron of the arts in 3rd century BCE Athens. This saw the first use of the Corinthian order on the outside of a building, a widely copied design also informing the Burns monument by Thomas Hamilton on Regent Road.

Newsletter

Other buildings by Playfair on Calton Hill include the city observatory and the National Monument to men who died in the Napoleonic Wars. Playfair collaborated with Charles Cockerell, the UK expert on the Parthenon, for his design. Building started in 1826 but by 1829 funds had run out and the work was never completed leading to the structure being labelled Edinburgh's Disgrace.

Also in 1826, Edinburgh Council commissioned Thomas Hamilton to build the Royal High School, a fine monument to the Greek revival in Scotland. This together with the Burns Monument and the Playfair buildings have led to Calton Hill being known as the Edinburgh Acropolis.

Historic Broughton with Jim Eunson

We met Jim at the Sherlock Holmes statue, sited near where the Doyle family lived in a triangle of streets that included Broughton Street to the west side. We headed downhill to discover vestiges of



the ancient village of Broughton.

The tour was based on an historical

mural from 1995, which can be viewed in the McDonald Road Library.

The village of Broughton was first mentioned in a charter of King David I in the 1140s when the lands of Broctunam were granted to the Canons of Holyrood Abbey. It was then well outside Edinburgh. Some events contributed to Broughton's isolation: in 1456 King James II allowed the use of what is now Greenside for tournaments, and in 1544 Broughton was also devastated in the 'Rough Wooing' raid on Edinburgh under the Earl of Hertford, as the invaders came past it on the way.

When church lands reverted to the Crown, Broughton was granted by King James VI to Sir Lewis Bellenden, Lord Justice-Clerk, who became the Baron of

Broughton. A Tolbooth was built, and trials for various crimes including witchcraft took place there. All that remains of old Broughton nowadays are the street names of Barony and Broughton Street. Most of the village was demolished in the building of the second phase of the New Town, covering the area from Queen Street to Canonmills. We visited the site of the old village, and an old supporting wall in Dublin Street Lane North, which must date from before the building of the New Town.

In Drummond Place we saw the controversial pink door at number 9. Miranda Dickson, the owner, painted her door bright pink in contravention of planning guidance to preserve the character and appearance of a conservation area. After a battle with the Council, she was eventually given permission to keep a less garish shade of pink. The street was named after George Drummond who had a house on the site of Drummond Place Gardens. When Drummond died, it was sold to a General Scott, a very rich man and an experienced gambler. Robert Chambers tells the story of Scott gaming with Sir Laurence Dundas, in his magnificent new house in St Andrew Square. Dundas lost so comprehensively that he even lost the house they were playing in. Scott let Dundas stay on, but only if Dundas built him a new house. Thus Bellevue House was built. (The origin of the local street name of Bellevue). It was later demolished to make way for the Scotland Street Rail Tunnel.

An underground line to Waverley Station once ran through this tunnel. It was so steep that it was hauled by a stationary engine at the top but was braked manually by two men with enormous levers, sending sparks flying. The young Robert Louis Stevenson often watched its progress when he lived nearby.

We ended up opposite the picturesque but unremarkable 18th century Heriot Hill House, mentioned in all the relevant books, but merely described as 'plain'.

Gaels in Edinburgh with John Masson

Edinburgh was never in a Gaelic speaking region of Scotland; however it does have a long association with Gaelic speakers. King James IV spoke Gaelic and there were Gaelic speakers at the court of James VI such as Alexander Montgomerie who was a member of the Castilian Band of poets which included the King.

The number of Gaelic speakers in Edinburgh has always been much lower than in Glasgow with 2,300 recorded in the 1901 Census. The last Census showed 7,000 Gaelic speakers in the capital which is hugely encouraging for the language.

Perhaps the most well-known is the Jacobite heroine Flora MacDonald, who spent three years in Edinburgh finishing her education in the very heart of the Old Town and close to where many of Edinburgh's Gaelic speakers would congregate. Flora lived in Old Stamp Office Close opposite the Town Guard House where Gaelic would have been the main language. Nearby were the



Assembly rooms and the Mercat Cross where sedan chairmen would gather. This group were entirely Gaelic speaking. They were led by Edward Burke a loyal Jacobite and guide to Bonnie Prince Charlie after his defeat at Culloden.

Culture plays a huge part in the life of a Gael and education was also important, a means by which they could escape the poverty of the Highlands and Islands. In the 18th century Duncan Ban MacIntyre, one of the great Gaelic Bards, was employed as a Town Guard and is buried in Greyfriars. In the 20th century, Sorley MacLean, a native of Skye, went to Edinburgh University, qualified as an English teacher and taught in Edinburgh before returning to Skye. He is widely

recognised as one of the greatest poets writing in Gaelic.

Many Gaels entered the ministry and several became moderators of the Church of Scotland playing a significant part in Scottish life. Norman MacLeod (Caraid na Gaidheal) was instrumental in providing relief during the potato famines of the 1830's and 1840's. Another, Norman MacLean, minister at St Cuthbert's, was the convenor of the committee that provided War Memorials in every parish after WWI. Saint Giles took its time to appoint a Gaelic speaking minister but in Gilleasbuig MacMillan they had a great ambassador. His decision to allow Muslim prayers to be held in St Giles during the Service of Repentance in 1991 was courageous and right.

The next time you pause by the statue of David Hume remember his contemporary Adam Ferguson who was born in Perthshire and is often referred to as the Father of Sociology. Ferguson was an army chaplain with the Black Watch in Belgium in 1745 and later held many of the same positions as David Hume.

The Grassmarket with Eric Melvin

The group assembled beside the wellhead at the foot of the West Bow where Eric introduced Peiter Brusche, commissioned in 1674 to bring water from the Comiston springs into the reservoir on Castle Hill. Water flowed through lead pipes encased in hollowed tree trunks, which can still be seen in the Meadows and the City Museum. The Grassmarket encapsulates the history of the city as Eric explained.

The area is first mentioned in a publication from 1363 and in 1477 it was one of fifteen markets formed by an ordinance of King James III for the sale of horses and cattle. At that time it was outside the city walls. The original King's Wall ran along the line of Johnston Terrace and down the south side of the High Street. A vestige of it is still visible in Tweeddale Court.

Following the defeat of James IV at the battle of Flodden, the wall was extended

Newsletter

to provide further protection against English invaders. This did not prevent the Earl of Hertford and an English army, on the orders of Henry VIII, from burning and looting the city during the war of the 'Rough Wooing' in 1544.

The 17th century saw the religious struggles between the Stewart Kings, who wished to restore bishops and introduce a common liturgy to the Church of Scotland, and the Presbyterian Covenanters, whose resistance in 1638 ignited the war of the three kingdoms and led to the execution of Charles I. Under Charles II, preaching at field conventicles was outlawed. The Killing Times saw large numbers of Covenanters killed or captured. Many of these were held in Greyfriars Kirkyard or hanged in the Grassmarket.

The area thus acquired a gloomy character as a place of public execution. The tales of half Hangit Maggie and Captain Porteous are well known. William Burke and William Hare lived around the corner in Tanners Close, where they began their murderous careers.

Eric introduced Duncan Napier, founder in 1860 of the famous herbalist that still exists at Bristo Place and his wife Lynda's great grandfather. Lynda still has the notebooks dictated to his sons. Duncan was an illegitimate orphan raised by a local innkeeper and his wife. He later worked in a bakery where the flour dust caused him to develop a persistent cough. He became interested in herbal remedies and began studying botany, mentored by John Hope, grandson of the founder of the Royal Botanic Garden. He created a cough syrup from the lobelia herb and many other herbal remedies from plants he collected across Scotland. Eric and Lynda continue to be closely associated with Napiers.

The tour ended at a memorial plaque for a Zeppelin air raid on Edinburgh in April 1916. Many sites were damaged and 11 people died but news of the raid was suppressed at the time to avoid public alarm.

Greyfriars Kirkyard with Mark Hatton

Mark is Chair of the Friend of Greyfriars Kirkyard (<http://www.fogk.org>) and has been leading tours there for a number of years. The land and the memorials reflect so much of Edinburgh's history.



The Franciscan Greyfriars were granted land outside the city by King James II. At the Reformation, the land was given

to Edinburgh Council by Mary Queen of Scots to be used as a burial ground. Mark described it as like 'a human lasagne' with up to 200,000 burials but only 700 memorials. Many bodies were moved here from the former burial ground around St Giles with no record of who they were. John Knox ruled that burials should be in unmarked graves without ceremony, even for George Buchanan, tutor to the young James VI, whose marker wasn't added until the 19th century.

Following the succession of James VI to the English throne in 1603, Edinburgh enjoyed a period of prosperity with the rise of the merchant and professional classes. However, the distant Royal court no longer provided a basis for the social hierarchy or employment for stone masons, who switched instead to producing elaborate memorials for wealthy families keen to demonstrate their status. Mortality symbols decorate many memorials here, often arranged in a X, being a reference to Christ and a reminder to prepare for death. A head with wings extending out the sides symbolises a soul ascending to heaven, which all would hope for.

Mark showed us the Martyrs' Monument, erected in the 18th century to remember people executed at Edinburgh in the 17th century for the Covenanter cause. Following the battles of Bothwell Brig in 1679 some 1,200 Covenanter combatants were marched to Edinburgh and imprisoned in a walled area adjacent

Newsletter

to the kirkyard. Contrary to the popular account of history, they were not held in winter but during the summer months and the majority were released within days after signing an oath not to take up arms against the King. None of this cohort were tortured or executed. Some 250 who refused the oath were to be shipped to the Plantations, but most drowned when their ship wrecked off Orkney.

Perhaps the most poignant story is a very personal one of Isabella Hope, a descendant of Thomas Hope, Advocate to Charles I: both are commemorated on a memorial erected in the 19th century. Isabella married William Cullen, a colonel in the East India Company, and sailed on the Winterton to join him in India in 1792. The vessel was wrecked off the coast of Madagascar and many drowned. Isabella was one of the passengers and crew to reach land. After 14 months amid the hostile inhabitants, they were rescued by a British naval ship only to then be captured by a French Man o' War. They spent 12 months in a French penal island until the end of the war. Isabella was one of the few to survive the whole ordeal and return to Britain. Mark pointed out the inscription at the base of the memorial to her son, who was born five months before she sailed and left behind in the care of relatives. He must have been her motivation for surviving and returning home.

These stories (& 1,000's more like them) show that Greyfriars is a valuable repository of Scottish history, yet which is in danger of being lost through neglect.

Image teaser



These stones are in Morningside in the north-west corner of the Astley Ainsley hospital, near the Millbank Pavilion, which is scheduled

for demolition. There is some concern about potential damage to the stones.

Morningside Heritage Association (MHA) has been awarded a grant by the Old Edinburgh Club to explore the connection between 19th-century stonemasons and a number of ornamental stone fragments in a Morningside wall. MHA member, Jill Powlett-Brown, is searching for documentary evidence that these fragments originated from the 15th-century Trinity Collegiate Church. Following its demolition in 1848 to make way for Waverley Station, its stones were stored on and near Calton Hill, pending identification of a site for the Church to be rebuilt in its entirety. However, by 1872, when a site was finally agreed, many of the stones had 'disappeared', so that what we know today as the Trinity Apse was all that could be reconstructed. The MHA exploration is in support of a broader Trinity Network project, led by Dr Jill Harrison and also funded by the Old Edinburgh Club.

To find out more email Jill on morningsidestones78@gmail.com



The next challenge



What does this stone carving represent? Who carved it and where would you have found it originally? Where can you see this remnant now?

Spotlight on guides

Laura McMurdo was a guide for several years in the 1950s after she left school.

Laura was born in Africa in the Sudan, where her father was stationed as part of the military force. Her parents had met in Edinburgh and settled back there after 1942. She attended secondary school in Edinburgh and became a guide in 1950.

How long have you been a guide

I was a guide during the 1950s before I married in 1959 and left Edinburgh. I returned in 1998 and redid the assessment to refresh my knowledge and skills. I was living in England and although I came back regularly, I felt cut off from my 'ain folk'. English friends used to say, 'We can't understand why you haven't changed your accent.' I would reply, 'That's why I go back several times a year to get an injection to top it up'. I have a peculiarly Scottish sense of humour which can land you in trouble.

What prompted you to become a guide

I always had an interest in history and would have studied history if I had gone straight from school to university. As a mature student, I took a degree in early years education and got the opportunity for an exchange visit to America to work with pupils from ethnic communities preparing to attend school. During that visit, I was asked to stand up and talk to 700 people about my involvement in the Playgroup Movement. I was used to public speaking in my career. I enjoy meeting people and can speak to anyone.

What period of history do you most enjoy talking about?

I like the history of the kings and queens from the 1500s onwards. This period feels to me like the real beginning, when Scotland was becoming unified under the Stuart Kings and how this developed.

Tell us about your most recent tour.

I retired from leading tours when the base moved from Cannonball House to

the City Chambers. However, my three grandchildren and their partners were visiting over the new year holiday and wanted a tour. Two of the men had never



been to Scotland before. We borrowed a wheelchair and they took turns to push me down the Mile, starting from the Esplanade. I told them about the beginnings of Edinburgh and the 900th

anniversary. We went inside St Giles and down to the World's End. We could see remnants of the city walls and the buildings which proved Canongate was a separate town, e.g. the Tollbooth and Canongate Kirk, where the Royal Family attend church. One of the party said the tour opened up a lot for him. He stayed an extra day to go to Stirling Castle and will definitely come back.

Who's your favourite Royal Mile or Edinburgh character?

I have a lot of admiration for Mary Queen of Scots. In some ways she was her own worst enemy but she had people round her trying to use her for their own purposes.

What have you found most rewarding about EFVGA?

Meeting and talking to people from all over the world.

What advice would you give new guides?

You need to have an interest in the history of Edinburgh and a strong desire to share this with others. You also need to be mindful of your audience. I always adjusted my talk to the level of interest of the people on the tour. I used to assess the people in my group to see who was interested and have a bet with myself to predict who might get to the bottom of the Royal Mile and who would drop off early.

From Museum to Mile – the recent experience of our newest guides

Moira Calderwood, Jacqui Court-Brown and Rosemary Mann joined the EFVGA this summer to lead tours in August. They shared some of their experiences contrasting guiding in the National Museum of Scotland (NMS) and the Royal Mile. All three guides have more than 12 years' experience of museum guiding, where they were supervised by museum staff and given regular updates on the museum collection from curators. With three tours offered each day, they had many opportunities to lead tours of the World Museum, the Scotland Galleries (the new extension opened in 1998) or specific themed tours. They found the experience of guiding on the Royal Mile quite different, particularly in terms of the noise levels, but they enjoyed it and want to continue.

The NMS exhibits cover a wider range of Scottish and World history than the Royal Mile. The main difference is that the tours in the NMS are held indoors where 'crowd control' is easier. Guides can stand for longer in front of one display, rather than keeping on the move. In the museum, guides could cover quite a lot of detail for one exhibit, whereas on the Mile, it was important to choose a more general level when explaining the history. This was particularly important for international visitors who were not familiar with Scottish history or literature.

With the crush of visitors this summer, it became important to find places off the main thoroughfare, such as New Assembly Close, which were quiet and had some seating. In order to avoid crowds in the Lawnmarket, Moira led her tours down the Mound to New College and back up the close to Milnes Court. This gave visitors an added perspective on the New Town and Princes Street. Jacqui's favourite part of her tour was around St Giles, leading her group to find the brass setts showing the location of the old Tollbooth and Luckenbooths, and

into Parliament Square to explain the Union of the Parliaments. Rosemary led her tour down towards John Knox House and Mowbray House. She explained that destructive forces such as the Rough Wooing of 1544 or the great fire of 1824 meant that most of the buildings in the Old Town were actually newer than those in the New Town.

August delivered a variety of weather this year from wet and windy to so hot you needed to seek shade. Everyone agreed that they'd never needed to check the forecast so often before.

Development walks for guides

Val Baker has organized walks this autumn to be led by new guides, Mark Hatton and Rosemary Mann, who bring particular expertise to EFVGA from their experience of Greyfriars Kirkyard and National Museum of Scotland tours.

Edinburgh burial grounds

Monday 29th September – Mark Hatton will lead a longer tour taking in St Cuthberts Kirkyard and the Old Calton burial ground. Guides should meet at the door of St. Cuthberts Kirk (the Kirk itself not the Kirkyard), at the foot of Lothian Road, at 3.30pm. This tour will explore the history, artistry and mystery of this site. There is an extraordinary range of memorials here that reflect the changing face of Edinburgh over the 18th & 19th centuries. We will then walk down to Old Calton to visit that burial ground and show how it reflects a different face of Edinburgh with an equally fascinating but different range of memorials. This tour will take 2.5 hours in total but people are welcome to leave or join at the mid point (as we leave St Cuthbert's or arrive at Old Calton). Call Mark Hatton on 07774 499589 or email mhatton304@aol.com with any questions.

Thursday 9th October – Mark Hatton will lead a tour of the Canongate Kirkyard. This tour will explore the Canongate Kirkyard and discuss the people buried here and their memorials. There is much to learn about Edinburgh history in this place. The tour will start at 5.30pm at the main entrance to Canongate Kirk and will finish in the Harry Younger Hall at 6.30pm in time for the gathering.

Scottish Innovators

Tuesday 21st October – Rosemary Mann will take a group of up to 20 guides on a short tour at the National Museum of Scotland on Chambers Street. This tour looks at objects in the National Museum of Scotland relating to Scottish Innovators who changed the world we live in. How we live has been influenced by many Scottish engineers, doctors and scientists, many of whom are represented within the walls of the NMS. Guides should meet at 2.30 inside the Hawthornden Gallery of the Scotland Galleries - next to the Corryvrechan Tapestry. Entrance at the corner of George IV Bridge and Chambers Street.

All are welcome on these tours. However an estimate of numbers will be helpful for the tour leaders so please let Val know if you hope to attend any of these tours.

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If you have any feedback on articles in this issue or some ideas about what you would enjoy reading in future newsletters, please get in touch with the editor, Olwyn Alexander:
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Keeping in Touch

The EFVGA website www.edinburghfestivalguides.org includes a password-protected 'guides only' section, where you can find a list of current committee members & their contact details. This section is password protected. If you have forgotten the password, contact Jim Eunson.

You can also use the following contact details to get in touch with committee members:

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