



ABERDEEN CIVIC SOCIETY

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Coming Events

Wednesday 24th October 2012: our annual Awards Ceremony. An illustrated presentation relating to the new buildings and conversions in Aberdeen, with our Awards and Commendations as appropriate. All members and their guests are very welcome! In the Town & County Hall, Aberdeen Town House, at 7.30 for 8 pm.

Wednesday 21st November 2012: Restoring Duthie Park To Its Former Glory. An illustrated talk by Tony Dawson, Chairman of Friends of Duthie Park. At the Royal Northern & University Club, No. 9 Albyn Place, at 7.30 for 8 pm.

Editor's News And Comment

George Street: more than once I have set out for a look around George Street and have had real difficulty even finding my way there, partly because of an aversion to enclosed shopping centres. This time, I started off in Gallowgate and went down Berry Street. After wandering around various rear access and unloading bays, I hit on the John Lewis building and at last found myself in something recognisable as

George Street. I was favourably impressed that all the ground-floor premises are occupied and open for business, with the sole exception of the former MacRitchie's Newsagents. In fact, a remarkable array of businesses are in operation here. This locality seems at last to have regenerated itself quite well, bearing in mind the devastation wreaked on it during the 1980s. No doubt the proximity of Aberdeen College contributes to a healthy rented property sector and engenders a youthful and outgoing community and customer base for local businesses.

Less positively, the Lochside Bar is being demolished. The name indicates proximity to the one-time Loch of Aberdeen, described as "the Marsh formerly known as the Loch" in Parson Gordon's Map of 1661. By 1800 the Loch had shrunk to about the area of present-day Loch Street and it had disappeared completely by 1838, basically because more water was being abstracted from it than flowed in from the north & west, as by the Flour Mill Burn - hence street names like Flourmill Brae and Flourmill Lane. The reclaimed area became known as the Lochlands and was developed as George Street, Charlotte Street, St Andrew Street and John Street.

Spot The Deliberate Mistake: sharp-eyed readers have pointed out a reference in our June issue to 'the former 'Machar Bar' in Gallowgate, which should of course have read as 'the former Marischal Bar'. Either way, the premises are now operated by Brewdog, the highly successful and innovative Fraserburgh-based brewery. Another mistake was my reference to the Oxfam Bookshop as the last second-hand bookshop remaining in Aberdeen. There is also the Mercat Bookshop in Castlegate, operated by the VSA charity. I should have remembered this one because I was there quite recently - good value and friendly & knowledgeable volunteer staff.

Criterion Bar, Guild Street: the *Evening Express* of 14th August reports that the Criterion Bar is to become a Rice & Spice food shop. This is part of a continuing trend for pubs to close and be converted into a supermarket or similar - see the former Beluga bar at Holburn Junction, now a Sainsbury's supermarket. Going by the Tesco in Holburn Street, adjacent to Great Southern Road, a large part of the sales of these new down-town supermarkets is of alcohol, but at supermarket prices rather than pub prices, and presumably to be consumed at home rather than in the sociable context of a pub. The Criterion Bar had been a nice Edwardian-style wood-panelled pub with brass fittings and etched windows and it occupied a prominent site at the corner of Guild Street & Wapping Street, opposite the railway & bus stations. Latterly it was owned by the pubco Punch Taverns, who are trying to sell off part of their huge pubs estate - much of it purchased with bank loans at the peak of the property boom - so as to pay down overdrafts currently estimated as totalling some £3 billion.

The former Capitol Cinema, Union Street: by A. Marshall Mackenzie & Son, 1934. Latterly converted & horizontally divided into two nightspots, Chicago Rocks and Jumpin' Jaks, one upstairs, one downstairs. The impact on the original *art deco* interior and upstairs restaurant is unknown. The Compton theatre organ, one of the last such in Scotland remaining in its intended location, is thought to be boxed in and unplayable but otherwise undamaged. The two nightspots folded some years ago. A proposal to extend the building rearwards to Justice Mill Lane for use as an hotel - and to reinstate the upstairs restaurant - appears to have fallen through. It is now proposed to create an office development. This, however, would require that the existing building be largely demolished. The development lobby, *via* its favoured organs, is dismissing the Capitol building as 'an eyesore', but it isn't. It is the product of the distinguished Aberdeen architectural practice of Mackenzie & Son, and is in the recognised *art deco* style of the inter-war period. What we must hope for is that a use can be found for the building & site which at least preserves the impressive neo-classical front elevation to Union Street.

Holburn Bar: at the corner of Holburn Street & Great Southern Road, this 1960s building, variously described as a shoebox, a Portacabin or a temporary classroom, has undergone yet another makeover. Lots of exterior woodwork in what appears to be stripped pine - high-maintenance and easily vandalised - and some kind of rustic dry-stane dyke effect on either side of the doors to Holburn Street and Great Southern Road. Also an innovative use of what appears to be Astroturf beneath the long horizontal windows on the upper floor. This treatment seems completely

inappropriate to a prominent corner-site building in what is otherwise a wholly intact late-Victorian residential area of granite-built tenements and villas.

Contributed by Alex Mitchell.

Aberdeen's Granite Festival 2012
by Irene Cormack

From an initial atmosphere of scepticism, there now seems to be universal approval in Aberdeen for the restoration and re-use of Marischal College; but generally speaking the city does not seem to be doing much to acknowledge and celebrate its magnificent granite heritage, in spite of its constant claim to be The Granite City.

As a councillor from 1999 until this year, I was often asked why we didn't do more to recognise the contribution made by the granite industry in the historic development of the city. So, in November 2009, I put a motion to the council requesting that it commission a report listing options on how it could, with partners, "properly acknowledge the key contribution that the use of granite has made to the built environment of Aberdeen and the wider North-east region".

With the support of the then Director of Education Culture and Sport, Annette Bruton, a report was written by Christine Rew, Art Gallery and Museum's Manager, outlining possibilities – including a series of granite-related lectures, a granite month and the development of granite interpretation panels. Knowing of my long-standing personal wish to see a granite museum in the city, council officers gave costings, ranging from £750,000 to £4million – figures that did not carry much hope in the then-prevailing economic

climate! However, the council approved the idea of a granite month, and the first Granite Festival took place in 2011 including lectures and walks.

Partners in this project now include Aberdeenshire Council's museum service, Aberdeen University's Geology department, the RGU Scott Sutherland School of Architecture and local granite merchant Graeme Robertson, who was particularly enthusiastic. Aberdeen City Heritage Trust (on whose Board the Civic Society is represented by Alex Urquhart) kindly agreed to fund a reprint of the council-produced "Granite Trail" leaflet.

The second Aberdeen Granite Festival took place over seven days in May this year and the events, again superbly organised by Jenny Brown, the council's industrial and social history curator, were adapted and developed the ideas from the previous year, based on feed-back from participants.

Favourites from the previous year were included, such as the architectural walking tour of central Aberdeen, led by Douglas Campbell of Aberdeen City Heritage Trust and the fascinating *Minerals to Monuments* lecture by Dr Malcolm Hole of the Geology department at Aberdeen University.

In 2011, Jenny Brown gave a talk on Rubislaw Quarry, which was so popular that it had to be repeated in larger venues. This year, the Cowdray Hall was packed for the same topic – those present perhaps enticed along by the presence of the quarry's new owners Sandy Whyte and Hugh Black. Sandy and Hugh revealed their plans for the quarry and those attending left with the exciting thought that they might be able, once again, to view the imposing quarry site, although it is unfortunately no longer a 450 ft hole in the

ground but now a rather impressive “loch”. As I write, I hear that they are about to start pumping out the water. This year’s programme also included highly popular free bus tours to Craigenlow Quarry at Dunecht, courtesy of Mike Macaulay of Breedon Aggregates, current operators of the quarry which opened in the early 1800s to provide building material for Dunecht House.

Other lectures included *Circles, Buildings and Balls: Granite in Aberdeen before the Industrial Age*, given by lead curator Judith Stone who looked at the use of our distinctive stone from long before Aberdeen became the Granite City; and the innovative *Granite – a Hot Topic for Renewable Energy*, given by Iain Todd of Aberdeen Renewable Energy Group.

It was clear that Aberdeen Art Gallery should be involved, given the crucial role played by Alexander Macdonald, whose success in the granite industry led to the creation of a first class art collection and to the establishment of the gallery. Drop-in events relating to art and granite were also additions in 2012.

The attendances at most events were usually at capacity for the venues, with over 180 people going on tours and over 430 attending lectures. There is no doubt that there is a huge interest in the city in the topic of granite - from the geology through to the industrial processes introduced by the granite merchants, the lives and work of the masons and the inspiration of architects whose work is all round us in the city. If any members have any ideas for topics or events which could be included in a future festival, do contact Jenny Brown (jenbrown@aberdeencity.gov.uk).

Earlier I mentioned interpretation panels – you may have seen some of these on the Deeside walkway – and although the granite theme has not been pursued throughout the city, you will be able to see four panels giving the history of granite in the reception area of Marischal College - thanks to Andrew Sproull, the engineer who oversaw the Marischal project, and the art gallery team.

I think it would be a wonderful addition to the Marischal College project if the city could acquire the adjoining Greyfriars Church and turn it into a granite museum, showing the rich variation of the area’s geological structure and the intriguing story of the granite industry’s progress throughout the years, in Aberdeen and throughout the world.

Footnote: Diane Morgan’s books, as one might expect, are rich in references to granite, e.g. *The Spital, The Spital Lands, From Sunnyside to Pittodrie, The Granite Mile* – focussing on Union Street - and *Lost Aberdeen: The Freedom Lands*. Another interesting read is John McLaren’s *Sixty Years In A Granite Yard*, which is of special significance to me as it mentions my step-father, George Gavin, who was a monumental mason in John’s yard, Bower and Florence, on the Spital.

Contributed by Irene Cormack.

Disclaimer

The various items in our Newsletters are intended to stimulate discussion and debate. They reflect the views and opinions of the individual contributors and are not necessarily to be regarded as representing the settled position of Aberdeen Civic Society.