



# **ABERDEEN CIVIC SOCIETY**

**Registered Charity Number SC003089**

## **Newsletter No. 78: June 2012**

### **Coming Events**

**Saturday 23rd June 2012:** our Summer Outing to Lauriston Castle and Gardens, near St Cyrus. Whyte's coach departs Harlaw Academy at 1 pm prompt and returns about 6 pm. Details have been mailed out separately.

**Wednesday 24th October 2012:** our annual Awards Ceremony. An illustrated presentation relating to 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.

### **Planning Matters**

**Nos. 47-53 Market Street:** this is a fairly comprehensive refurbishment of the building - a splendid corner feature by Archibald Simpson. However, our submission: "The placing of advertising within the window openings at first floor and over the whole of the first floor quadrant is unacceptable on a building of this quality in an important Conservation Area and would be detrimental to the amenity of both".

**Chaplain's Court, No. 20 The Chanonry:** internal alterations, creation of Garden Room and garage. This Category B-Listed building dates from several periods and displays a variety

of architectural styles. The proposal is to add a 'cloister' at the rear, which will be seen only from the garden and presents no problems. The garage, sited on the north gable with a door on to the Chanonry and purporting to be a 'wing' of the original, is not satisfactory. An attempt should be made to re-site the garage to reduce its impact on the house and the garden wall.

**The Monkey House, Union Street/Terrace:** a proposal to extend the existing office area at third floor level, involving the placing of a glazed 'penthouse' on top of this striking Category A-Listed building, an exercise in the Baroque by A. Marshall Mackenzie. The proposal intends to maintain the viability of the building. Our submission: "The replacement third floor should be so designed as not to be visible from street level".

### **Editor's News And Comment**

**Saturday 19th May 2012:** the first sunny day for ages, so left the car at Union Square and went for a wander. The handsome Archibald Simpson building (former Employment Exchange) at the north-east corner of the Market Street & Virginia Street crossroads has been stone-cleaned to useful effect. Similarly the Tivoli on Guild Street has benefited from its restoration. More stone-cleaning is being undertaken on the Carmelite Hotel on Trinity Street. The rectangular enclosures along

Carmelite Street are now filling up with shrubs. The trees planted along both sides of Rennie's Wynd are taking hold now and doing their bit to enhance this otherwise fairly grim length of streetscape alongside the Trinity Centre car park.

Into the Green. The shop premises formerly occupied by Coco Violet, just east of the Back Wynd stairs, remain untenanted. Similarly the former butcher's shop next to Correction Wynd and the large former sportswear shop on the south side. Café 52 seems busy, but otherwise few people to be seen at 2.30 pm on a sunny Saturday. The south side of the Green is already in deep shade. The Green and the surrounding area are characterised by very tall buildings and narrow streets and wynds, the unfortunate effect of which is to shut out the sunlight in the afternoons, even in the summer months. Along Hadden Street. The trees planted in the rectangular enclosures alongside the Aberdeen Market are now protected by elegant & substantial black wrought-iron tree-guards, which create a welcome impression of regularity and symmetry. Similarly the Rox Hotel up ahead on Market Street, its 1845 premises and frontage elegantly restored. But the Market Arms pub at the corner of Hadden Street & Stirling Street is looking very shabby these days. Down Market Street and along Shiprow Lane.

On Shiprow itself, the Ibis Hotel and the huge office development beyond, apparently still unoccupied. The lights are on, but nobody is at home. Across Union Street and along Broad Street. The restoration and stone-cleaning of Marischal College really show up to good effect on a sunny day and the statue of Robert Bruce is also highly effective. The restored Marischal College has become the 'iconic' backdrop of choice for any TV news item about Aberdeen and it does our town credit. Along Gallowgate. The Brewdog premises in the former Machar Bar have become something of an institution.

Down Littlejohn Street, across King Street and along East North Street to the Castlehill roundabout. We lost the Timmer Market car park some time ago, to the huge disadvantage of

businesses & residents in the Castlegate, and now the East North Street car park is closed down and being redeveloped as part of the new Health & Care Village on Frederick Street. Nobody much in the Castlegate - a clutch of alxies are disporting themselves between the Sally-Ann and the Portals Bar, not doing anything particularly exceptionable, but hardly conducive to the ambiance of this historic locale or its tourist-related potential.

Down Marischal Street - a spectacularly dilapidated shoppie just up from the bridge over Virginia Street, still with its window display from about 30 years ago. Back to Guild Street, where the forecourt of the Union Square complex seems to have become the favoured place for kids to hang out and throw litter around.

Holburn Junction - the premises of the former Beluga café/bar are now occupied by a Sainsbury's Local, directly across this end of Union Street from a Tesco Metro in the former Bank of Scotland premises. It seems that conversion of pubs into supermarkets does not require planning permission for change-of-use, and there are a lot of redundant pubs these days. These new small supermarkets are the one positive development in High Street shopping locales these days, being convenient of access and encouraging people to walk to their local shops and on a regular basis instead of driving to an edge-of-town superstore once a week or so.

Out the Lang Stracht to Dobbie's Garden Centre on the western outskirts of the city. The Garden Centre incorporates a substantial retail operation including books & magazines, leisure/outerwear - frankly, most of the togs a chap needs - plus a café/restaurant, delicatessen, butcher, baker etc. Garden centres have a fairly banal image, but one can see the attractions of free & accessible parking, a clean, well-maintained environment, decently-behaved customers, clean toilets - it is easy to see the appeal compared with going into town. And it's somewhere to go in the car, and not too far away. The danger is that Dobbie's may be the thin end of a wedge deployed to justify further retail development, followed as

surely as night follows day by proposals for residential development and inexorable urban sprawl whilst retail activity continues to drain out of the city centre.

**Saturday 26th May 2012:** brilliantly sunny weather all this week. Left the motor in the Denburn car park and walked down past His Majesty's Theatre, under the Denburn Viaduct and into Union Terrace Gardens - full of people, many with small children - this is one of the very few down-town locations where kids can be allowed to run about without fear of traffic. And not an alkie or smackhead in sight. The 78 large mature trees are looking wonderful just now. Every aspect pleases, other than that of the Triple Kirks, its crumbling tower & spire now further enhanced by unpainted wooden boarding to shut out the peregrine falcons which were nesting there until recently. The peregrines are a top predator, indicative of a whole food chain of wildlife species below them.

Belmont Street is full of people, checking out the monthly Country Market. On the brow of Schoolhill, looking towards Marischal College, where the Mitchell Tower is now conspicuously dirty-grey and unrestored. This view of the College has been obstructed these last 40-odd years by the jumble of concrete rubbish at the Upperkirkgate end of the St Nicholas House complex - the octagonal structure, the long-redundant Post Office and the untenanted shops. Into St Nicholas Kirkyard via Back Wynd. Clumps of bluebells between the gravestones. Lots of people enjoying the tranquillity. The anti-social element seems to have moved to the Castlegate these days.

To the Oxfam Bookshop, the last second-hand bookshop remaining in Aberdeen, where I obtained Misha Glenny's magisterial history of the Balkans @ £3.99. Bookshops and record shops used to be a principal attraction of town centres and High Streets, a reason for going into town, and now they're almost all gone. What, if anything, will replace them? Back over Union Bridge and down through the Gardens; again, every aspect pleases - the granite balustrading,

originally matching that on both sides of Union Bridge, the Tuscan-style *palazzi* along Union Terrace, the statues of Edward VII, Rabbie Burns, Prince Albert and William Wallace, and the wonderful and truly iconic vista of His Majesty's Theatre, up there on the Viaduct.

**England Their England:** I was talking to Caroline Gimmingham recently about her very interesting article in our last Newsletter *anent* the Aberdeen writer, A. G. Macdonell (born Poona 1895, died Oxford 1941), and his attempts, like many another of the period, to pass himself off as a pukka English gent. I remarked that in the company of the English middle classes I always felt as if I had somehow wandered on to the set of a low-grade amateur dramatic production of some dreadful, creaky old stage-play, *The Mousetrap* or something, in which everyone else seems to be acting a part, that of some upper-middle class stereotype from about fifty years ago - the Major, the Vicar, the heartless young cad - and that in such company one always felt a bit out of place, in imminent danger of being 'found out' and detected as a fraud and impostor, as John Betjeman put it.

For all that, London was the real global capital and place of opportunity for ambitious Scots from the Union of 1707 onwards, Edinburgh being a place of largely historical interest to such as James Boswell. Novels, films and television would routinely depict high-status professionals like doctors, civil servants and engineers as Scottish. The character actor James Robertson Justice springs to mind. Similarly the life and times of John Buchan (1875-1940) and the Scottish orientation of his novel *The 39 Steps* and film treatments thereof. Significantly, Buchan remarked of the Scottish *diaspora*: "We do not want to be like the Greeks, powerful and prosperous wherever we settle, but leaving a dead Greece behind us". In 1707 the population of Scotland was about one million compared with 5 million in England. Nowadays there are about 5 million in Scotland compared with over 50 million in England, almost 10 million in London alone. There are nearly twice as many people living in London as in the whole of Scotland.

London is now substantially detached from and unlike the rest of the UK, virtually a country within a country, sometimes described as the first-world capital of a third-world hinterland. Much the same could be said of New York, or of *fin-de-(19th)-siècle* Vienna or Berlin. Neil O' Brien in *The Spectator* of April 14th makes the point: London has effectively left the UK; it belongs instead to a loose confederation of global cities united by their economic dynamism and cosmopolitanism and the people who flit between them. The politicians, civil servants and journalists who make up Britain's governing class have their world view shaped by living in the capital and its wealthy satellites. The effect is that they run one country but effectively live in another.

Back in the late 1970s you would have struggled to argue that London was a successful global capital. It had declined a long way from its heyday as the Capital of Empire depicted by Arthur Conan Doyle and John Buchan (both Scottish). Its population had shrunk relentlessly since the 1930s. Yet in March 2012 the EU named London as far and away the richest of all the 271 official euro-regions - a fifth richer than its nearest rival, Luxembourg. If you flew in to City airport, visited Canary Wharf and flew out again, you would think Britain was a tremendous economic success story. But London is like a Potemkin Village for visitors; its population does not represent that of the wider UK at all. Half of working-age people in London have degree-level qualifications, compared with just a quarter in the rest of Britain. Years of trying to help the regions catch up with quangos and development agencies have failed and not just because their policies were duff. They have been trying to fight the overwhelming gravitational attraction of the capital, now the largest financial centre in the world, bigger than New York or Tokyo, vastly larger than Frankfurt, Zurich, Paris or Milan.

In his recent book *The Triumph Of The City* the brilliant US economist Ed Glaeser has shown that the bigger a city is, the more it boosts the

productivity of the people living in it. Specialisation is greater, competition and the economies of scale increase and ideas and innovation spread faster. 'Clusters' of specialist firms take form. In the modern 'knowledge economy' these factors are more important than ever, which is why the whole world is urbanising. The top 600 cities in the world contain just 20% of global population, but create 60% of global GDP or output by value.

But how much bigger can London grow and still function, e.g., in terms of transportation, getting from home to workplace or shops and back again? A shortage of building land is manifest in unaffordable house prices and rents, exacerbated by an influx of foreign capital - not least from Italy - looking for a safe haven as confidence in banks fades and contributing to the rising Sterling/Euro exchange rate. London may already have reached that tipping point of population beyond which there is no remaining margin of surplus capacity as regards housing, transport, schools, hospitals etc, partly through the inability to attract and retain staff. Government will need to look towards establishing 'growth poles' (as in magnetic poles) in propitious locations outwith the Wen. These 'growth poles' are likely to be university cities with airports and good transport links with London and Heathrow, e.g., places like Cambridge, Edinburgh and Bristol and other cities talented people like enough to want to move to and/or stay in.

Elsewhere in *The Spectator*, Alex Massie points out that Scotland is more prosperous than England outside of London. By most measures Edinburgh is the second-most successful city in the UK and one that, despite the recent hit to its banks and the tramways fiasco, remains well-placed to excel in the modern economy. As in London, half its working-age population have degree-level qualifications (this is also true of Aberdeen and Cambridge) compared with one-quarter for the UK as a whole.

There is much to be said for cities which are big enough to achieve necessary economies of scale and support a decent standard of infrastructure,

services and amenities, without being so big that you can't get out of them, as during Bank Holidays. In my experience Cambridge at 100,000 wasn't really big enough and even Aberdeen at 200,000 is lacking in some respects. Edinburgh, Glasgow and Liverpool are about right at about 500,000 each, give or take. And Edinburgh and Glasgow are increasingly merging into one, or at least becoming two halves of a single entity, like Buda and Pest.

It has often been remarked that historically Scotland was a country of burghs, almost all of them east-coast seaports, whereas England was a country of villages, many of them inland, hence the mental image of 'Englandshire', as depicted in ITV's popular *Midsomer Murders*. A similar impression is created by a spate of property shows with titles like *Escape To The Country*. It seems that the country lifestyle is only available to those with upwards of half-a-million to spend on a house. Those with less than £350,000 at their disposal need not apply. And all these shows present a Marie Antoinette view of country lifestyles, whereby we dress up in silly clothes and ape the landed gentry of the Edwardian period. The effect is exacerbated by *Downton Abbey* and an unstoppable deluge of antiques shows. They never produce shows called *Escape To The City*, although many people do precisely that, including older folk who sell a family-size house in the suburbs and downsize to an apartment in town.

The problem is that village communities generate little of significance, much as - despite the 'Highland Myth' - nothing very positive came out of the Highlands & Islands of Scotland as compared with the east coast burghs and seaports such as Aberdeen. Economic progress, in terms of increased productivity of labour & capital, higher real incomes and increased choice as to employment, consistently seems to be associated with a move from the rural hinterland to the city and from agriculture into manufacturing & services, whether in C.18th Scotland or in C.21st developing countries. Sarah Beeny, in her recent series *Village SOS*, reluctantly came to accept that the underlying problem is that communities of a few hundred

people have no base of population, income or expenditure capable of generating business & employment opportunities or of sustaining anything much - not even a pub or a fish & chip shop. The recent report on Scottish small towns, especially in relatively depressed regions like the south-west, makes similar points.

*Contributed by Alex Mitchell.*

### **Disclaimer**

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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.