

# The Story of the Society

## The Georgian Group of Edinburgh and the Scottish Georgian Society

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*'Whatever is good of its kind ought to be preserved in respect of antiquity as well as our present advantage, for destruction can be profitable to no one but such as live by it.'*  
Hawksmoor 1714.

*'Regulations give the force of law to the folly and limitations of the present.'*  
Isumbard Kingdom Brunel.

It is appropriate that there should be a synopsis of the AHSS prehistory in the fortieth year since its invention in 1956. I shall deal with the period during which I was actively involved: 1956-64 as its secretary and 1964-74 as its chairman. It is necessarily a personal history. I hope that the subject of George Square, over which the society began, may sometime receive scholarly treatment, but it seems important now to set down what I remember.

Arriving here as a foreigner in 1946 I became conscious of some of the differences between English and Scottish Georgian Architecture. I found a lack of awareness of its value, greater I think than even that in England at the time, and the threat to the survival of George Square seemed the most conspicuous example. Efforts to interest such older and established figures as I knew largely failed, with the exception of Robert Hurd.

Ten years later the threat had developed but there was more awareness. Further more the apparent lack of architectural historians had been remedied, because there was Colin MacWilliam. The (English based) Georgian Group, of which I was a member, offered no support. I believed that to reduce the threats to George Square it was necessary to start a society to foster awareness. And, knowing how crucial to the success of any campaign the availability of accurate information is, I asked Colin what he thought (realising that he was as fanatical as I was and much better informed). He agreed that this was the way forward, so Colin's impeccable scholarship was available to the society from its beginning. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Colin was not a committee member until he succeeded me as the society's secretary in 1964. He was its *éminence grise* without whose advice the society could not have become what it is. He was also an invaluable link with the National Trust for Scotland at that time.

We both believed that a *national* society was required but realised that to attempt to form one at that point was impractical. The George Square threat was immediate and in people's minds, it was a live Edinburgh issue.

Anyone thought likely to be interested in saving George Square was invited (postcards individually typed, no photocopying in those days) to meet in my drawing room at 10 Buccleuch Place on 20th March 1956. One of them coming up the common stair was heard to remark: 'Hm, same old stage army'. Colin's paper *Georgian Architecture in Scotland* was distributed. The decision to found an Edinburgh society, 'The Georgian Group of Edinburgh' was taken by twenty-five people.

The three George Square ward councillors attended the next meeting. Chairman and office bearers were elected, Councillor Patrick Murray (the creator of the Museum of Childhood) was elected chairman. I inevitably found myself appointed secretary. Without Patrick's advice at this point the society would probably have met the fate of most such

drawing room initiatives, he said 'You are the secretary but you were not taking notes. It's all right because I was, but in future you must do so. A meeting without minutes might just as well not have taken place'. Without going as far as the man who said 'Don't mind what the bloody fools decide as long as I write the minutes', I have found that there are advantages in being secretary.

We were a small body, easily dismissable, but that changed. We succeeded in establishing ourselves as a voice to be listened to very quickly. In 1957 the late Earl of Haddington agreed to become our first president. People had to take us seriously after that. He possessed the two major virtues, intelligence and goodwill, and was held in great public esteem and affection.

He made himself available to us in all sorts of ways. He had much good sense and practical knowledge.

The York Georgian Society gave much support. Its secretary, Miss Pressley, lent me its constitution; our one was based on it, it served, not much altered, for many years. Its chairman, George Howard, was our guest speaker at our first AGM. His address, drawing on his experience both as its chairman and as owner and guardian of a great country house, set out what the aims of a preservation society should be and how realised, and has as much relevance now as it had then.

Many people asked: 'why another society?' The answer was that those which existed had appeared unable to concentrate on the threat to George Square in an effective manner. Our existence concentrated the minds of the Cockburn Association and the National Trust for Scotland. Joint action became possible. A society with limited aims, the conservation of Georgian architecture, had its place, it could focus attention. We widened the aims later perceiving the need for a national society devoted to the conservation of all historic architecture.

George Square is long ago. What is not realised now is what a close run thing it was. In 1958 the Secretary of State refused the request by the Cockburn Association, supported by the National Trust for Scotland, the Saltire Society, the Ann Street Society and ourselves, for a public inquiry. In 1959 as a result of questions in both Houses of Parliament promoted by our society, the Secretary of State agreed to meet representatives of the amenity societies. The University of Edinburgh was forced by its graduate council to agree to the setting up of a joint working party to try to evolve an alternative plan for preserving George Square.

Our representatives were Robert Hurd and AT MacIndoe. No plan was evolved, but on the basis of information supplied by the University and funded by a gift of £1,000 by Eric Ivory, Robert Hurd and AT MacIndoe were able to work out an alternative scheme preserving and adapting the east and south sides, providing more accommodation than was provided by the University's scheme at considerable estimated saving of time and cost. Their alternative site for the library, adjacent to decayed buildings, would have provided room for future expansion not provided for by that projected in the plan, bounded as it is by new University building and the Meadows. Basil Spence was heard to say that the Meadows only presented a moral barrier.

The Secretary of State refused to intervene on grounds provided solely by the University which revealed its ignorance on matters of conservation and preservation. The amenity societies were not consulted. Had it come to a public inquiry the result might well have been different. The University paid for its intransigence. It was reported that the appeal

which it launched at that time evoked the response from many alumni that they would not contribute because of the University's vandalism in the matter of George Square. We lost but we had made our mark.

In 1959 we had our first request to report on a matter outside Edinburgh and felt justified in changing our name to the Scottish Georgian Society.

The next issue, in 1960, was the Edinburgh Corporation's plan to incorporate Randolph Crescent into a traffic roundabout. The view was advanced by the scheme's advocates that as the buildings would be untouched, the destruction of the garden was immaterial. Patrick Nuttgens gave evidence on our behalf. Fortunately the scheme collapsed when it was demonstrated by AT MacIndoe that the traffic engineer employed by the Corporation had miscalculated his weaving angles and that it would not work. But without a public inquiry this might have been revealed too late.

Road works in Charlotte Square for which planning consent had not been required had damaged its unity. Our request to the City Council that Charlotte Square and other New Town areas should be zoned as being of great architectural importance, as could have then been done under town planning law, was refused.

Then George Burnet became our treasurer. He undertook much of the administration, the membership list, the mailings and reinforced the society by his sound advice on many occasions. He made the alterations to our constitution which made it possible for us to qualify as a charity for tax purposes and negotiated our becoming one with the Inland Revenue. Later his firm, Murray Beith and Murray provided us with our first office.

In 1961 the main issue was St George's Parish Church. An appeal had been launched and money collected but not enough to pay for complete restoration. There was a likelihood that the congregation would be united with that of St Andrew's, George Street, thus making St George's as a church redundant, and so the Kirk Session did not feel justified in using the money for its restoration. This society and the Cockburn Association called a meeting of representatives of the National Trust for Scotland, the Charlotte Square Proprietors, the Saltire Society, the Ancient Monuments Society, the Patrons of the Appeal, the Pilgrim Trust, together with the Session Clerk, the architect and the City Planning Officer.

The meeting took place in the board room of the National Trust for Scotland and Lord Haddington took the chair. Universal goodwill was expressed but no action followed. I circulated the minutes. Providence intervened, however, because the Kirk Session found that as they might be held responsible for a dangerous building. They realised that they could use the money raised to make it safe and time was gained for an alternative use to be found. Lord Cameron at a meeting of the council of the Cockburn Association opined that Mrs Robertson might have been getting at the telltales, a proud day for her.

We were asked by the City Planning Officer to define an area of great architectural and landscape value in connection with the quinquennial review and our proposals, which were accepted, included the New Town with its outlying areas and a large proportion of early nineteenth century Newington. This marked rapid progress (in 1961) since the refusal in 1960 to zone Charlotte Square and other New Town areas as of great architectural importance.

In 1962 we gave evidence at the public inquiry at Kelso which arose over the County Council's proposal to widen the Rennie Bridge, re-route the approach road and demolish Georgian buildings in Kelso Square and that over the proposal to sweep away the Old Kirk, Town House and graveyard at Newton on Ayr, a uniquely interesting group of buildings which had not been listed, to accommodate a road scheme. The reporter found in our favour, but the Secretary of State did not. As part of our programme of lectures and visits, site visits had been paid to both of these places.

In 1962 we also gave evidence at the City Council's invitation at the planning inquiry which arose from Eglinton Hotels Ltd's appeal against the City Council's refusal to give planning permission for the building of a tower block as part of their expansion to the George Hotel, in close proximity to St Andrew's Parish Church. The Secretary of State turned down the proposal. This put a stop to the threat of tower blocks in the New Town and marks progress in the perceptiveness of both the City Council and the Secretary of State. It is unfortunate that we were not clued up enough to perceive the threat inherent in the redevelopment of the St James Square site (for the St James Centre), we would have lost but we should have fought it.

In 1965 William Dickson, our chairman for seven years, resigned. I succeeded him as chairman and Colin MacWilliam succeeded me as secretary, a new era for the society. Colin's knowledge of buildings, of the legislation which affects them and his talent as an educator were revealed in his annual reports. Though we had started to be consulted about cases outside Edinburgh, our substantial extension as a national society was made possible by his active involvement as secretary. His knowledge and concern were nationwide and the foundations of effective case work were laid down.

Colin drew attention to so many aspects of conservation and the criteria for it: architectural significance, the quality of the environment, its creation and preservation, and the group value of a building which might not have seemed important in itself had it been the only one of its kind in an area. He was able to express so much that many of us can sense but not make articulate.

Our familiar motif, the drawing of the Town House in Old Aberdeen from a sketch by W Wandesforde Fenwick, started to be used in all our publications and stationery. He had taken an active part in the society, leading expeditions and visits. He resigned in 1966, unable to accept our widening scope to include distinguished works in architecture, landscape architecture and planning beyond the Georgian period. The need for this became clear over the threat to the New Club (Burn and Bryce) and the Life Association Building (Barry and Rhind). Thirty years later it seems incredible that they should have been allowed to disappear, this is in a way a measure of a swing in public opinion which we have helped to create.

The Civic Amenities Act 1967 recognised the need for the preservation and enhancement of whole areas and conservation areas began to be designated in Scotland, though delays occurred occasioned by fear of what the financial implications might be. Damage went on happening in the New Town which really only ended when the 1970 Scottish Civic Trust Conference on Georgian Edinburgh bore fruit in the founding of the Edinburgh New Town Conservation Committee, the situation then taken sufficiently seriously for effective government action on the scale needed. Such political action is the result of pressure brought about by bodies like ourselves.

It became clear from an early period that we needed a programme of lectures and visits to attract members and, more importantly, to define our role publicly, and one was started in 1958. It was never exclusively conservationist, town planning issues were also addressed. This programme has continued with only one break. The break had great significance for the society as will be seen later.

There were high points. In 1960 we made our first visit to Ireland. Arrangements were made by the Irish Tourist Board, with advice from the Irish Georgian Society who made an expedition here the following year. In 1962 we visited York and we learnt about the use of photogrammetry in the reconstruction of the burnt out dome at Castle Howard. Our programme in York was designed by Patrick Nuttgens, later director of the York Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies. In 1962 Professor Youngson gave us a preview of his book *The Making of Classical Edinburgh*. This proved so enthralling that, egged on by his audience, the lecture spread well over its allotted time. But such programmes depended on individuals to propel them and in 1969 it ceased.

Providence intervened. I had told Alistair Rowan that he must join the society of which he hadn't then heard and that he was needed on its committee and gave him the date of the next committee meeting at which he should show up. That same day Margaret Gilfillan, who had joined the society being interested in conservation, but heard nothing further because of the collapse of the programme, rang up to ask about society activities and could she help in any way? So I asked her to come to the same committee meeting.

The result was that between them they set and ran a much enhanced programme. I overheard two ladies whom I didn't know agreeing that the Georgian Society had not had very much to offer before the advent of this wonderful young Irish doctor. I was puzzled for a moment thinking of a medical doctor. But Alistair's and Margaret's contributions to our society go far beyond the recreation of the programme, splendid though that was.

In 1970 we needed a new secretary and Margaret cheerfully took that on. She provided the society with the sound administrative base it needed and in her immaculate servicing of the cases work set a standard which earned us the grant from Historic Scotland. Her work in establishing the society in public and official esteem was later recognised by her MBE.

Under the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1969 notification of applications for planning consent to add to, alter or demolish listed buildings had to be given to various bodies, a responsible opinion having to be offered within twenty-one days of the application. Colin was opposed to our undertaking this on the ground that he couldn't do it all himself and if not done by him it would be done badly and would bring the society into disrepute. I said that, though mistakes would no doubt be made, if we didn't accept this challenge we would have to write ourselves off as being an effective national society.

My view prevailed and it has been justified by events. Case work brings us into constant dialogue with planning authorities and thus makes us more able to influence decisions. Nevertheless Colin's other warning issued at this time should be heeded. He said that case work did not cover every issue and that we should not feel it was all that was required of us. Our involvement in it should not make us less aware of other threats. Case work, essential though it be, is not enough.

A small cases committee started to meet in the office provided for us by Murray Beith and Murray, organised by George Burnet. The North East Group, the society's first local group

able to undertake case work, was founded that year so the foundation of what has proved to be one of the greatest strengths of the society was laid, its tough regional based organisation. Local groups attract members, make possible the spread nation-wide of responsibility and public opinion, breed initiative. Some degree of autonomy is essential, irritating though this is to tidy minded people who aspire to run the society entirely from a national centre.

I want to give one example of what case work can achieve. In 1972 Crailing Bridge, Roxburghshire, became redundant because of a road straightening scheme. Money was available for its demolition in excess of what was required for its adequate repair. The local authority, in the grip of the regulations found themselves unable to use part of it for repair. We continued to press very hard and eventually the Government Minister intervened and Crailing Bridge was repaired at a fraction of the cost of demolition. An example of 'that which is good of its kind' being preserved by intelligent bending of foolish and limited regulations. But without us it would not have happened.

Colin became involved with the *Buildings of Scotland* and had to give up case work, most of which he had done. We compiled a list of people across Scotland who were prepared to do it and Margaret undertook the administration.

In 1973 our chronic shortage of finance (not aided by the birth of the *Bulletin*) had to be addressed. A gift of £1,000 towards the expenses of the fund-raising campaign was offered by Eric Ivory. Decision as to how to use it took much committee time. Knowing that no campaign succeeds unless there is an effective individual to propel it and, having identified a capable and concerned individual, Sylvia Stevenson, I managed to persuade the committee to appoint her. Few fund-raising campaigns can have been so successful. She maintained it for a year and raised £30,000, equivalent to approximately £240,000 nowadays, a working capital. On the whole attempts to erode this for speculative exercises or for running costs have been resisted, not without difficulty. Extra funds made possible the great expansion of case work and the foundation of the Strathclyde Group.

In 1973 Colin succeeded me as chairman which is where I shall end my part in writing the society's history. This piece is intended for the members of our society, and I have not hesitated to express personal views, not all of which will be shared.

In concluding I want to return to George Square because I think it exemplifies in microcosm problems which are still alive. George Square and its surroundings represented and fixed in stone the transition between Edinburgh's Old and the New Towns. When it was being built the idea of the Old Town was not quite abandoned. The New Town as we know it was not yet conceived, although its conception had become inevitable. George Square was an example of the now lost Scottish quality to create good urban space, it catered for a wide range of economic classes, it housed a community.

There were many good vernacular, low rise, high density buildings in the vicinity, the merits of which were revealed when they were briefly occupied in the late 1960s as student accommodation. What replaces them is a parking lot. These handsome earlier buildings were lost and are probably unrecorded. The University was not the only vandal. Much of it fell victim to various sorts of planning blight.

Both the quotations I started with are apposite. Eminent architects appear to have felt themselves threatened. Hawksmoor is relevant here, how else to account for the *animus* in

promoting George Square's destruction? IK Brunel defines the state of mind which produces the destructiveness of planning blight.

These buildings could have been rehabilitated and continued their useful life. Some progress has been made, it might not happen now. But how capable are we of creating urban space? Housing developments proliferate without sense of urban space or amenities, commercial developments are inhuman in scale. Nothing relates. The causes seem to be, amongst others, bad planning law, planning officers not visually trained, lack of visual training in our schools, our inability to prevent unsuitable legislation, the system of planning gain, akin to bribery. I believe that the future of our society depends on our identifying and tackling them.

Conservation still requires endless vigilance but in a sense it is no longer controversial. What is required of us is that we bring our minds seriously to bear on creating the urban space in which we are all going to have to live, to ask the relevant questions. For instance why do so many of the people who have a choice about where they live choose to do so in the New Town or the Colonies? What sort of urban space fosters a sense of community? How can we learn from the past in this respect?

The future of the Architectural Heritage Society must be in the effectiveness with which we deal with such issues. It will, as it ought to, be a controversial one.

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This paper is based on Eleanor Robertson's talk to the Forth and Borders Group entitled *George Square and the origins and development of the AHSS*, given on Monday 21 October 1996 at the Glasite Meeting House.