



The Chronicle



Sept. 2020

The newsletter of the Fettes Row & Royal Crescent Residents Association

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» NEWS: Massive buildings are a threat to fragile Park p.4
» OPINION: “Developer mediocrity” vs “exceptional vision” p.8 «

PLANS THREATEN OUR TREE-SCAPE



>> Dundas St is one of the greenest streets in the New Town. Inset shows the developer’s vision for the corner of Dundas St and Fettes Row.

London-based developer wants to cut down 69 of 145 trees on site

SAVOUR this leafy scene on the corner of Dundas Street and Fettes Row because, if the London-based company developing the former RBS site gets its way, the trees will be chopped down and the traditional iron railing will be torn out.

Instead, glass, steel and concrete office and apartments will dominate

the corner and run along Dundas Street.

Ediston, the Edinburgh-based developers employed by London-based property investment company Orion Capital, have said that they have a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform this empty space into a world class development for Edinburgh’s city centre” but community groups have said that their plans lack empathy and

understanding and will be too densely populated.

“The site needs to be developed, no doubt, but the current plans are simply not good enough,” said Judith Symes, the chairwoman of the Fettes Row and Royal Crescent Residents’ Association.

Ediston and Orion want to build 349 flats, office space for 750 people, a 116-room hotel and shops on the site.

>> Turn to page 3 for more

Poetry and art from the New Town

>>Two neighbours on Fettes Row have combined to produce a book of poetry and art anchored in the New Town.

On Calton Hill

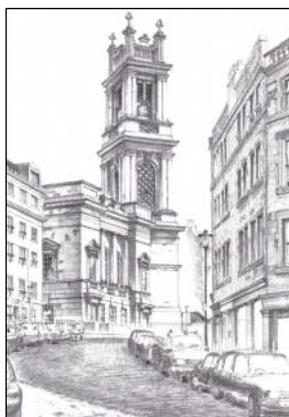
They populate the skyline, some in furry boots, others precarious on stilettos; woolly bunnets the order of the day, yet the lassies' skirts so short you can all but see their bottoms; couples incessantly photographing themselves, against the consenting city. At one point an elderly Japanese gentleman bows courteously, says "Excuse me", then grasps my wife by both arms and firmly moves her sideways, so that with no need to change his vantage-point, his view is unimpeded.

The National Monument, that never completed Parthenon with its stone slabs, is a constant source of attraction, its imposing structure strung with sagging saltires and banners, one group handing out leaflets, another lighting a brazier as if by rote, all part of an age-old ritual. As the shadows lengthen, we become aware of singing: a backward glance reveals happy youngsters gyrating in the sun's rays, while its fluted columns seem to bend in the light.

A moment later the haar rolls in, erasing the slopes and paths below, then the world around us, undoing time; a headless Montrose, Deacon Brodie, Porteous creaking on his rope, interweaving with such fictions as Jekyll and Hyde and occupants of not just the city's dungeons, but the reaches of our imagination; each footfall striking a chord, inducing fear of absorption, as though a giant cat were about to lap us up with its soft, moist tongue.

Instead the mist miraculously clears. It is as though the city were unveiling, the setting sun discharging quivering rays of light; the Castle rock caught in such effulgence the walls seem to levitate, only in no time to be consigned to darkness. But glance north-west: a span of the Forth bridge is just visible, Scotland spread out beyond like a great plaid, Edinburgh the glistening clasp that fastens it, that pins it in place.

>> 'Aspects of Edinburgh' by Stewart Conn and John Knight was published in 2019 by Scotland Street Press. It can be bought at Blackwells on South Bridge or from scotlandstreetpress.com. Conn was Edinburgh's first Makar (poet laureate). Knight is an architect who has sketched Edinburgh for 50 years.



Chairman's Note

Welcome to our unprecedented Summer news update. These are unusual and testing times. We, therefore, wanted to reach out to all of you with some news and thanks.

The last few months have been difficult and stressful for all of us and sad for some. Whilst we have all worked very hard to protect ourselves and our loved ones from Covid-19 and its effects, we need to keep going and keep looking out for one another. I was overwhelmed by the local response to the virus with a number of you reaching out to us to offer support for any neighbours who might need it during the lockdown.

Now we are beginning to emerge from lockdown, our local businesses are beginning to open up. We would ask all of you to do what you can to support local businesses wherever possible. 'Try local first' as they say.

Now onto the focus of this issue. A planning application for the 'New Town North' site, formerly occupied by RBS, has now been filed. We have been liaising regularly with the new owners, Orion Capital/Ediston, to try to understand how their plans will affect our community. Despite reassurance by the developer, we continue to have major concerns over the density of the development and the strain it will put on our local schools, medical and other services.

The current plans are for the introduction of close to 400 apartments, a hotel and an office blocks but minimal parking, little or no new public space will be created, and buildings will overlook the George V Park.

We all need to give careful consideration to the plans. Think carefully how they will affect you and your community for good or for bad. More than 650 local people commented on the last application for the site. They had an impact. Make sure your voice is heard, it is important and valued.

Meanwhile, please take good care of yourselves and stay well.

Judith.

349 flats, 750-person office block and 116-room hotel planned for RBS site

Coronavirus: Developers considering dropping hotel for more flats

DUBBED ‘New Town Quarter’ by its developer Ediston, the former RBS site on the corner of Dundas Street and Fettes Row is the largest mixed-use development around Edinburgh’s World Heritage zone for a generation.

Its impact will be felt for decades. Developed sympathetically, and residents and constructors agree that the site will enhance the area. Developed without due care, it will scar and overcrowd.

Ediston, which is acting for London-based Orion Capital, has held three public consultations on the development.

“Research highlights the significant investment benefits that this high quality development would bring to the Edinburgh economy, as well as helping to meet the pressing need for high quality new homes and office space,” said Ross McNulty, development director at Ediston.

But residents are concerned. They have said that the site is too dense and that its buildings will dwarf the Georgian buildings across the road and dominate the neighbouring George V Park. Ediston also wants to chop down all the trees along the front of the site on Dundas Street, including five whitebeams which the Woodland Trust describes as “charming and domestic”, and 69 out of the 145 trees on the site. It has said that most of these trees will be replaced by new plantings.

This is the second attempt to get development plans passed for the 5.9 hectare site, roughly the size of six



>> Developer's impression of how the site will look from the corner of Henderson Row

football pitches. In 2018, a year after it moved out of the 1970s site, RBS withdrew its attempt to win planning permission after 664 objections.

A key influence is believed to have been an objection to the RBS plans by Historic Environment Scotland, the state’s conservation agency. It said that it would have “adverse impacts on the settings of the Old and New Towns of Edinburgh World Heritage Site”.

Under Ediston’s plans, the RBS site had been dubbed New Town North, although this has now been changed to New Town Quarter. It will contain 117 flats for sale, 144 flats built for rent and 88 affordable flats. Most will not come with a space in a planned 164-space underground car park.

As for the planned 116-room hotel, the coronavirus pandemic is forcing a rethink and it could be dropped for more flats. A 7,430sqm office block, enough for around 750 workers, on the

corner of Dundas Street and Fettes Row will go ahead, though.

Local businesses have generally welcomed the plans but the Fettes Row and Royal Crescent Residents’ Association is worried about their impact.

“We are in favour of developing the site but we have our concerns about this plan,” said Association chairman Judith Symes.

As well as the size of the development, she referenced a lack of car parking space and the extra cycleways into George V Park.

In response, Mr McNulty said residents have been listened to.

“We firmly believe that now is the right time to move forward with our proposals and deliver further significant investment in the heart of the nation’s capital,” he said.

He also said that the project will create 700 jobs during construction and 60 full-time jobs afterwards.

Want to comment on the plans? There are two applications. The first is to demolish the RBS buildings; the second is to construct new buildings. Click on these two codes – [20/03034/FUL](#) and [20/03825/PAN](#) – to view the applications or use the codes to search the council website.

Developers and residents differ over impact on George V Park

THE planned apartment blocks on the former RBS site will dominate the neighbouring George V Park and the developers are essentially treating it as a nice-to-have freebie for future residents, concerned park-users have told The Chronicle.

Orion/Ediston want to build six-storey blocks holding 349 apartments partly on an area that had been used as a car park by RBS. Their balconies will look directly over the park.

“They will treat it as a nice-to-have benefit,” a resident said. “It’ll become a sort of additional and unpaid for benefit. They’ll be able to have a BBQ in the park and just nip inside for that bottle of wine.”

Residents said that pressure on the park pushed it to breaking point during the government-imposed coronavirus lockdown when people needed a close-to-hand green area to take their daily exercise. With hundreds more people living next to it and a cut-through developed to Dundas Street, park campaigners say that the developers’ plans will erode and destroy the park.

But Orion/Ediston have defended their plans and said that “considerable effort has gone into ensuring that additional green space is created within the development and that it blends well with the park.”

The developers also said that soft landscaping on the development will increase the park area by 25%. Residents living around the site said, though, that many of the planned gardens were for the exclusive use of its residents.

The George V Park is one of Edinburgh’s youngest parks. It was opened by the Duke of Buccleuch in 1950 to mark the death of George V, in 1936.

New apartment blocks will have “brutal” effect on park, writes Friends of George V Park in five-point response to developers



>> *The Friends of the King George V Park, a community group, believe the New Town North development is likely to have a highly regrettable effect on the park. Our main concerns are:*

- 1. Trees: The trees in the park badly need management but we believe only nonviable or unsafe trees should be felled and none to facilitate the development.*
- 2. Buildings: Six-storey buildings placed close to the south and west boundary of the park will have a brutal effect on it. Maximum tree screening is essential. The conflict between the interests of park users and those of developers who wish to provide the purchasers of their flats with an unimpeded view of the park must be resolved in favour of the former.*
- 3. Scale of development: 349 new residences are currently envisaged. This will bring an influx of several hundred new residents. This would create undue pressure on the park when it is already half the recommended area in the Council’s Open Space Strategy.*
- 4. Movement of cyclists and pedestrians through the park: Friction can occur between these different park users. If the proposed new entrance to the southwest of the park receives consent, careful consideration will be needed to configure the way cyclists and pedestrians access the park and the National Cycle Route.*
- 5. Boundary definition: We believe that it is imperative that there is clear distinction between public (the park) and private (the development) space. It must be defined by a fence and ideally trees and shrubbery.*

Want to see more developer photos of the plans? Go To:
<https://www.skyscrapercity.com/threads/new-town-quarter-canonmills-planning.1854296/page-4>

The billionaire fund owner of RBS site

Your new neighbours have deep pockets and towering ambitions

EDINBURGH-BASED Ediston may be the public face of the redevelopment of the RBS site but the real power behind the project is London-based Orion Capital Management, a European property investment fund.

Orion bought the 5.9 acre site in 2019 for £36 million after development plans put forward by RBS for its former data centre had been rejected. But, although the site can accurately be described as “as one of the biggest brownfield site developments in Scotland”, it is still small fry for Orion which is more used to closing deals to buy sites in glamorous Milan and Paris.

Based in Cavendish Square, Mayfair, Orion has 43 employees. It is into big retail and office parks and has been eyeing up “distressed assets” recently including an audacious attempt to buy Intu, the owner of 20 shopping centres such as the huge Lakeside in Essex and Manchester’s Old Trafford Centre, before it went into administration.

Orion’s most high-profile sites include the Quartz shopping centre in Paris and The Glebe in Chelsea, described as an enclave for the super-rich, and this year it also mulled over a £400 million takeover of Hammerston, troubled owner of seven shopping centres. In Scotland it already owns the East Kilbride shopping centre near Glasgow.

In 2017, Orion was reported by news agencies to have celebrated the successful launch of its fifth property investment management fund after it



>> The Bull Ring in Birmingham was part of a group of shopping centres Orion bought this year

raised a reported 1.5 billion euros (£1.4 billion). Its fourth property fund had been set up four years earlier and was worth 1.3 billion euros.

On its website, Orion Capital Management described itself as a “European commercial real estate investment management on behalf of major investors from around the world”.

Orion has been eyeing up “distressed assets”

The three owners of Orion are Americans Aref Lahham, Van J. Stults, and Bruce C. Bossom. They set it up 20 years ago after leaving US property company Jones Lang Lasalle. Mr Lahham won some notoriety in 2017 in a court case, which he lost, to defend his plans to knock together two £4.5 million houses in Kensington into one.

As for Ediston, it was founded in 2004 by Danny O’Neill, its current CEO, who lists rugby, Formula-1 and football as his key interests on his Twitter account.

Ediston is based in Edinburgh and describes itself as a “property investment, development and asset management company” managing over £750 million of assets for institutional investors across the UK. It said that it does “clever deals” and that it disinvested before the 2008 market collapse.

Over the past couple of months, Mr O’Neill has warned of the economic damage of the lockdown. He said that the economic damage caused by the coronavirus pandemic would be far worse than the financial crisis.

“When we come out of lockdown, and the furlough oxygen is switched off, it’s then that the real impact will start to be felt,” he reportedly said.

For news on the RBS site development and for advice on how to comment go to: <https://www.facebook.com/FettesRowAndRoyalCrescentAssociation>

Bus crash

A doubledecker bus operated by Lothian Buses skidded at the corner of Howe Street and South East Circus Place on July 27 and crashed into a pair of New Town houses. Emergency services said that it was remarkable that nobody was seriously hurt in the 7am crash. Pictures from the crash showed that the bus had smashed through railing, straddled the cellar area and scraped the wall of a house. Bus drivers have previously complained that the tight corner, paved with traditional setts, is particularly dangerous in the wet.

Shop graffitied

A boarded-up shop on Dundas Street was graffitied after a Black Lives Matter demonstration on June 8. "Son of slaver Dundas and colonialist profiteer" was sprayed across the front of the shop. The shop, formerly a newsagents owned and run by Mr and Mrs Lal has been closed for the past year for renovations. It is not thought that the owners of the shop were the direct target of the attack.

Traffic diversion

York Place will be closed for traffic from Aug. 17 - Oct. 12, pushing cars along a diversion deeper into the New Town because of works to extend the tram line down to Leith. From Queen Street the diversion will run north

down Queen Street Gardens East, then east into Abercromby Place, across Dublin Street and down Albany Street to Broughton Street. It then turns south, up the hill, towards the end of the diversion.

Crime levels drop

The coronavirus pandemic helped to dampen crime in Scotland, police said in a report for April, May and June. They said that crime for this period was 9% lower than during the same period in 2019. "Police recorded crime at one of the lowest levels since 1974. Recorded crime is down by 27% since 2009-10," the report said. It did acknowledge, though, that unrecorded crime, such as domestic abuse may have risen during the government imposed anti-coronavirus lockdown. It also said that suicides increased

Pubs under pressure

Some of the area's pubs have reopened after coronavirus pandemic restrictions were eased but social distancing means that standing at the bar is banned and that seating is limited. Residents in the northern area of the New Town have complained that students are dominating pubs before heading back to their flats for long, late-night parties. Nightclubs remain shut, increasing the prominence of house parties.

Hogmanay cancelled

Edinburgh's Hogmanay street party that was loved and loathed in equal measures has been cancelled because of the coronavirus pandemic. Its organisers, Underbelly, said that social distancing and restrictions on numbers mean that the parties simply could not go ahead. Hogmanay has been praised by local businesses and shops for bringing people into Edinburgh but residents have complained about noise levels and the proliferation of short-term lets that have sprung up across the area.

Centrum House plans

The owners of the Centrum House office block on the corner of Fettes Row and Dundas St. have applied for permission from the Council to demolish the 4,180sqm building and construct a "mixed-use development including residential, office, retail and café/restaurant uses". When MMMARS Dundas Ltd, a partnership of several different companies which is registered in Rutland Square, bought the building for £10 million last year there was no suggestion that the company was planning a major redevelopment. The application to demolish the current building has been posted on the council's website with code: 20/03923/PAN. Architects Scott Hobbs Planning have promised an online consultation session from Oct. 26 to Nov. 13.



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Black Lives Matter campaigners want New Town streets to be renamed

THE New Town, built between 1767 and 1850, is home, as Edinburgh World Heritage says, to houses that “speak of ambition and confidence”. Conceived in Hanoverian times, under George III, its street names reek of overseas conquest and Empire, plus subjugation and slavery. Inevitably, in the current political climate, renaming some of these august streets is being talked of.

One of the great South-North axes, Dundas Street is named after Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville (1742-1811), once described as King Harry the Ninth and known and, or perhaps feared, as the most powerful man in Scotland. His statue, of course, sits atop the great monumental pillar in St Andrew Square where a new plaque will be erected later this year which will say: “dedicated to the memory of the more than half a million Africans whose enslavement was a consequence of Henry Dundas’ actions.”

The latter refers to his ministerial decision to delay abolition of the Atlantic slave trade by 15 years yet Dundas, a supporter of the Enlightenment who nevertheless clamped down on dissent, is also renowned for telling a court during his defence of the fugitive former slave Joseph Knight that no human being could own another. Opinion is divided on his motivation for delaying the abolition of slavery by 15 years. Was he trying to protect the slave trade or was his intervention the mechanic that the abolitionists needed to push through their reform agenda?

In the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter protests in London in June, a shop on Dundas Street was graffitied and a new road sign appeared on the street, Emancipation Street.

But there are other potential targets in the New Town too. Abercromby Place, after all, takes its name from Sir Ralph Abercromby(-ie), an acolyte of Dundas and key naval architect of British success in defeating the French in the Caribbean and colonising parts of the West Indies. Howe Street is named after the First Lord/Admiral of

New Town street names under fire



>> *Emancipation Street: An Alternative name for Dundas Street appeared after the BLM protests*

the Fleet active in the time of Horatio Nelson and in the wars against revolutionary America and France. St Vincent Street/Place is named after another imperial commander. Even Dundonald St was originally Duncan St, after the Admiral who beat the Dutch fleet at Camperdown in 1797.

Targets include other imperial commanders

Indeed, with Scottish independence gaining in public support, a prime candidate for rebranding must be Cumberland Street, named after the “Butcher of Culloden” who put paid to the Jacobite rebellion under Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745. Or Royal Crescent, an imperial genuflection after the visit of George IV, organised and immortalised by Sir Walter Scott.

There are, of course, plenty of local dignitaries such as in Drummond Place, named after six-time Lord

Provost George Drummond who was the driving force behind the New Town and whose house sat on what is now the private gardens in the centre. Fettes Row owes its name to Sir William, another former Lord Provost, whose bequest funded the (relatively far-off) College. Heriot Row, where Robert Louis Stevenson once lived at No 17, is named after George, goldsmith to Anne of Denmark, James VI and II’s Queen, and city benefactor. And Eyre Place/Crescent, where once stood Cannonmills House, owes its moniker to a brewer, James Eyre, who had decamped from the stinking Cowgate.

But is renaming really necessary? After all, Sir Geoff Palmer, Scotland’s first black professor (of life sciences at Heriot-Watt) and Jamaica-born, frequently argues the statues to Dundas etc should remain.

“My ancestors had to face the slavers and fight. And I think I can face the evil face of a statue and fight,” he said.

David Black and Ross McNulty debate the plans to develop the former RBS site

The Dundas Street former RBS site is currently proposed as a development for around 350 homes, 100,000 sq ft of commercial office space and the inevitable hotel, all in a dismal trachle of retro 1950s neo-Stevenage facades which insult the character of the New Town.

Naturally, in a city where economic development fetishism has trounced sound principles of planning there is scant interest in aesthetics or community building and much drivell about the 'annual GVA (Gross Value Added) economic uplift of £34.4 million to the regional economy' which developer Ediston claims will be generated.

This might impress in the Bean Counter's Almanac, but is it acceptable in a location where a contextual unified facade on the street line should be a sine qua non? At the very least, a cue should be taken from Oberlander Architects' St Vincent Place nearby. Dundas Street's neoclassical tenements could be continued as they are – an option Patrick Geddes described as 'urban darning'.

Such suggestions infuriate modernist ideologues with their 'bold intervention' obsessions', yet why must they and their developers always triumph? Consider the precedents. A 1985 infill block in Clarence Street which adopts the designs of its neighbouring originals. Another in Dublin Street by developer John Kennedy, Richard Branson's former project manager on Necker Island. Then in 1990 came 3 Glenfinlas Street by Covell Matthews, a sympathetic infill beside Charlotte Square.

The time has come for Edinburgh to reject developer mediocrity and rediscover the quality of design which made the city exceptional.

>>David J Black is an author, playwright, and journalist. He has campaigned for the historic environment for more than four decades and was a co-founder of both Edinburgh's Southside Association and Old Town Association.

Ediston and Orion Capital Managers have undertaken one of the most comprehensive consultation programmes ever delivered in Edinburgh. The main themes brought to our attention during this process and key responses are:

- Height and Scale: The proposals are in keeping with the character and density of the surrounding area.
- Public Spaces: Available green space and soft landscaping will increase by as much as 25%.
- Pathways/Cycling: Proposals for pathway access have been reduced to help manage the interface between cyclists and pedestrians and to prioritise pedestrian movement.
- Trees: Extensive work has been undertaken by two independent tree specialists to make sure the proposed approach has been fully informed, to maintain and promote a healthy balance of tree resource throughout the entire site.
- Overshadowing: Not only do our plans comply with Council guidelines they will in some locations offer a moderate benefit.
- Parking: Our proposals comply with Council parking standards and include a significant amount of cycle spaces following Council guidelines.
- Eyre Place: We are proposing an expanded courtyard adjacent to Eyre Place, which will be 50% larger than the existing space.

Moreover, the development will provide a stimulus to the economy and provide new jobs. The proposed uses will provide much needed office space and new homes, which will help to cater for Edinburgh's housing supply shortage, particularly affordable housing.

It will bring back to life a redundant site, and the ambition is truly to create an exceptional development which will be a positive legacy for the City of Edinburgh.

>> Ross McNulty is development director at Ediston



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