

RFS Edinburgh Conference

Friday 12 July 2013

For a fortunate few, including some members of Council, the Edinburgh Conference actually started on the Thursday afternoon with a visit to Malleny House, on the outskirts of the city. Malleny was the home of David Learmont (1935–2009) and where his widow, Anne still lives. David was the first curator of the National Trust for Scotland and a keen RFS member; in many ways the Conference was a tribute to David's work and legacy led in part by Christopher Hartley who with John Batty formed a curatorial triumvirate and we visited a number of houses in which they were involved.

Those sleeping in Pollock Hall were roused at 6 a.m. by a curious intermittent rhythm attributed to wheeled luggage being trundled across the wooden bridge that traversed the imaginatively planted gardens. It took some moments to recall that we were staying on a Campus of Edinburgh University, a short way out of the City – spectacularly sited under Salisbury Crags.

The modern campus, occupies the grounds of St Leonard's Hall, a baronial style mansion built in the in 1869 for the Nelson family of publishers, whose printing works stood across the road. The site was initially developed as a village to accommodate the athletes competing in the 1970 Commonwealth Games, alongside the airy Commonwealth Swimming Pool – recently re-opened after a magnificent three-year restoration and considered one of the finest examples of post-war Scottish architecture designed by John Richards of Sir Robert Mathew & Partners. Not bad for a man who started his career-designing pithead baths for the Scottish coal board!

Breakfast was a major event of the day with multiple choices including three types of Haggis – lamb, beef or vegetarian. Observing young language students from newly rich nations navigate the cornucopia was rewarding. My prize went to the young Asian with a 'Full English' (or should it be Scottish?) that he carefully garnished with a kipper.

The first day of our Edinburgh sojourn was devoted to exploring the development of the urban city, it's merchants and tradesmen, whilst on Saturday we were to leave the urban heat and bustle for the Country houses built by generations of the new-rich professional classes and aristocracy in East Lothian. The brilliant northern sunlight that blessed our weekend, enabled members to view rooms and contents with rare clarity; for once, torches were not required!

The Royal Borough of Edinburgh was founded in the 12th century on a ridge between the Castle, commanding it's rock to the west, and the abbey of Holyrood in the

separate borough of Canongate on low ground to the east. These twin towns were created to attract craftsmen and merchants who settled along the High Street, which ran unbroken along the ridge, known as The Royal Mile.

By the end of the 15th century the High Street was almost entirely built up with 'tofts' of land running down either side of the ridge. Many of these tofts were subdivided to provide 'forelands' fronting the street or 'backlands' reached by a 'pend' or passage to the side.

The city was walled until the 18th century. With a growing population and a system of land ownership known as 'feuing', (the right to use land in return for a payment); shortage of space led to dense development of buildings of immense height, with multiple occupation, given dramatic impetus by extensive rebuilding following the sack of the Edinburgh by the Earl of Hertford in 1544.

Buildings on the North side of the High Street were allowed to encroach the street by 20 ft allowing wooden galleries to be cantilevered out over the street and to the rear. However fear of fire brought increased town council control in the later 17th century and these galleries were generally re-fronted in stone with arcades to the street level.

Our day started with an introduction to Edinburgh by David Jones at **Riddles Court** entered through a pend from the Lawnmarket at the top of the High Street. Built by Baillie John McMorran, the richest merchant of Edinburgh, despite much alteration, it is a rare example of a courtyard house c. 1590, the preferred choice of those, whose wealth allowed them, to build a short distance from the noise and smells of the High Street.

Riddles Court, now in the care of the Scottish Historic Buildings Trust, retains some fine original plaster ceilings, an example of a Scottish tempera painted wooden beamed ceiling and a spectacular painted ceiling commissioned by the Scottish polymath and town planner Patrick Geddes in 1893 when he regenerated the Old Town. Whilst we were unable to view these ceilings, they are well displayed on the SHBT website, which also has links for those interested to learn more about the fascinating Mr Geddes.

From Riddles Court our party of 50 split into two, alternating with visits to Gladstone's Land and the Thistle Chapel at the Cathedral of St Giles.

Having all split into groups as the next visits were to small buildings some went to **Gladstone's Land** set on the opposite side of the Lawnmarket to Riddles Court. Along with the eighteenth century house in Charlotte's Square, described below, Gladstone's Land is a 16th- to 17th-century house on 'The Kingis Hie Street' now part of what is known as The Royal Mile, and they form the principle urban house displays of the National Trust for Scotland. Although this early house brought by the Trust in 1934 to

save it from demolition it was not properly conserved until the late 1970s when it was then furnished by David Learmont's team of Christopher Hartley and John Batty.

Built, like most medieval city houses on a deep site with a narrow frontage but unusually it is built on the side of a hill so what one sees on the front is a house of six floors and three bays wide is actually an astonishing thirteen floors high at the back. Thomas Gladstane – after whom the house is named – brought the site in c. 1617 and soon afterwards extended the building forward by twenty-three feet into the road, as all the other householders were doing at the time. The present day ground floor is recreated as the arcade front that it had in Gladstane's time which gave access to the ground floor shop area while access to the domestic upper floors was via an outside staircase to the left of the 'shop'. Such buildings were known as a 'land' hence the modern name Gladstone's Land.

The ground floor is furnished as a textile shop, after Gladstane's own trade, so it has a box-bed, wrought iron crusic-lamps, a spinning wheel while outside underneath the arcade resided the family pig that was intended to root around the urban detritus to partly feed itself – it was made by local theatrical staff for the opening in 1980 and is still snoozing away outside. Upstairs was a more mixed and smarter furnishings of later in the 17th century. The finely fitted out kitchen contained amongst other things a wrought-iron waffle iron and this led to a fascinating discussion, in true RFS fashion on exactly how waffles were made then. There were also, like Riddles Court, fine painted ceilings in the principal rooms.

As some went to the Riddles Court and Gladstone's Land, the third group went to St Giles' Cathedral to see the **Thistle Chapel**. St Giles', with its distinctive Crown Spire to the central tower, is the principal church for the Church of Scotland in Edinburgh; established over 900 years ago the present building dates from the late 14th century.

The Thistle Chapel is the designated chapel of the Most Ancient and Noble Order of the Thistle, Scotland's premier order of chivalry. In a very real sense it is the Scottish equivalent of St George's Chapel, Windsor, spiritual home of the Most Noble Order of the Garter. When established in 1687 by James VII of Scotland or James II of England it was based in the Palace of Holyroodhouse but its first chapel in the Abbey Church was destroyed during rioting soon after. It was not until 1909 that the decision was taken to build a chapel for the Order in St Giles' and Robert Lorimer (1864–1929) was appointed architect.

Lorimer was a fine architect and designer in the Arts & Craft manner and for the Thistle Chapel he created a rich interior that was 'a most remarkable revival of medieval

crafts'. The chapel has stalls for 16 knights plus two Royal stalls and one for the monarch. As befits an ancient Order there is much Scottish heraldry along with religious symbols of St Andrew while the bagpipe playing angels perhaps combine the two while the many thistles reflect the name of the Order. Nathaniel Grieve and the Clows Brothers, using maquettes from Louis Deuchars, to designs by Lorimer carried out the carving.

With six tall spiky stalls each side and four at the west end the small chapel looks immensely high and a fan vault spreads across the ceiling. Each stall has an enamelled badge of its present incumbent and predecessor from 1911 and a colourful heraldic helmet adorns the top of each stall's spire; the names of all the previous holders of the Order before 1911 are engraved on a panel by the entrance to the chapel.

We then all gathered together to walk down to St Cecelia's Hall for a talk by David Jones and a picnic lunch.