

Edinburgh takes on the world

David Hicks is the Communications Manager for the Edinburgh World Heritage Site. Here he explains how the designation helps interpret this historic city.

When the combined Old and New Towns of Edinburgh were inscribed by UNESCO on the World Heritage list in 1995, they joined places such as the Great Wall of China and the Pyramids of Giza as one of the world's most significant cultural locations. The inscription recognised the unique quality and contrast between the medieval Old Town, with its tall tenements and narrow closes, and the grand spacious squares and terraces of the Georgian New Town.

Edinburgh's World Heritage Site is relatively unusual in encompassing most of the city centre. It is home to around 20,000 people, a place of work for around 73,000, the second most popular tourist destination in the UK. The majority of the built heritage is also in private hands, which gives residents and property owners a very real stakehold in the site.

Edinburgh World Heritage (EWH) was formed in 1999 by the City of Edinburgh Council and Historic Scotland to monitor development, fund conservation work, and promote the site. The World Heritage Promotions Group (WHPG) co-ordinates the interpretation of the site. The city council, as the planning authority, looks to raise awareness and support for the conservation of the site; Historic Scotland has devolved responsibility for World Heritage; Visit Scotland views the built heritage as a vital asset in attracting tourists.

A good working partnership has also developed with Edinburgh City of Literature, a UNESCO designation awarded in 2004. Edinburgh's built and literary heritage have strong links, and these have been a source of inspiration for writers from Robert Louis Stevenson to Ian Rankin. In 2007 EWH and Edinburgh City of Literature devised a Stevenson trail through the Old and New Towns, and plans are now underway to produce a series of audio downloads giving a tour of the World Heritage Site.

The value of World Heritage status in interpreting the city really lies in making these connections, and bringing organisations together. However an audit commissioned in 2006 shows that whilst there are a number of heritage attractions in the city centre, the interpretation available is usually specific to each site. This is where the World Heritage Site has a key role to play, and an interpretation strategy is now being prepared.

The strategy identifies that the World Heritage Emblem, which all sites are allowed to display, is a key tool. The Emblem acts as a quality mark, and there is wide scope to increase its use. This globally recognised branding can be used to bring a wide variety of projects under the World Heritage banner.

The established events programme will be expanded to target the local audience. World Heritage Day is celebrated around the world on 18 April, which provides a good focus for highlighting the international significance of the Old and New Towns. EWH also supports the Old Town Festival in collaboration with the Scottish Storytelling Centre. In 2007 the festival included a story tour of the closes and wynds of the Royal Mile in the company of Deacon Brodie, a respectable 18th century tradesman who led a double life as a daring thief. Doors Open Day too is an important part of the calendar, and for the last two years the programme has included a family trail of the World Heritage Site.

Calton Hill is perhaps the best location to understand the World Heritage Site, and an EWH funded project is currently underway to improve public access. Interpretation and viewpoint panels will be installed, highlighting the two contrasting sides of the city.

A recent survey showed that only 56% of residents and 41% of visitors were aware of Edinburgh's World Heritage status. When the survey is repeated in 2009 the results should be vastly improved. The key will be to demonstrate to everyone that Edinburgh's built heritage is not only beautiful but world-class.

*David Hicks, Communications Manager,
Edinburgh World Heritage Site
www.ewht.org.uk*

**Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie.
*William Shakespeare***