



# **ABERDEEN CIVIC SOCIETY**

## **Newsletter No. 83: September 2013**

### **Coming Events**

**Wednesday 30th October 2013:** our annual **Awards Ceremony**. An illustrated presentation relating to the new buildings and conversions in Aberdeen and 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.

**Wednesday 27th November 2013:** a panel discussion on the important and topical theme: **Is Union Street Still A High Street?** In the Royal Northern & University Club, No. 9 Albyn Place, Aberdeen, at 7.30 for 8 pm.

### **College to CALA: the Hilton Campus**

*Contributed by Alasdair Roberts.*

CALA, the City of Aberdeen Land Association, was founded by Lord Provost Sir Alexander Anderson in 1875 to acquire property for feuing, chiefly in Torry and Rubislaw. In recent years the company has

prospered at the high end of the housing market in Edinburgh, Glasgow and London. This summer Cala Homes completed their residential development at the Hilton campus of what used to be Aberdeen College of Education. In 1970 the college moved from what had been the Aberdeen Training Centre in St Andrew Street to the premises which have recently been dismantled.

I joined the staff a short time before that. While we were still in the heart of the Granite City (behind Robert Gordon's College) I introduced mini-skirted girls to the history of their institution. They were shown the statue of John Knox above the entry to the Established Church College at 56 Charlotte Street, and we made contact with ladies who had been students when skirts were ankle length. The Free Church College was on the other (western) side of Charlotte Street, south of John Street, and when the two were united in 1907 'waterproof and pair of overshoes' featured in the list of requirements. Walks to and from Marischal College were also part of the common experience until the 'T.C.' building was completed and the university connection ended.

Going back further, a splendid book dedicated to Dr Joseph Ogilvie the retiring (and only) Principal of the Church of Scotland Training College is to hand. It provides composite photographs of staff and students for all classes from the start in 1874 together with details of their homes, education and careers in teaching. Two photos show science classes in a well-equipped laboratory - obviously a source of pride. There are line drawings of the college with its neighbouring hostel for twenty-five girls, and the George Street Practising School 'surmounted by an elegant tower, long conspicuous as the only architectural ornament of that busy and extensive thoroughfare.' The high reputation of North-

east schools ('lad o' pairts' off to local university and all that) was not matched by the teaching of small children, and more of them were now compelled to attend by law. Infants as young as five – an English-imposed early start to education, nothing like it elsewhere - presented a new challenge. The college opened with thirty students ready to start a two year course with the object of supplying female assistants for schoolmasters, otherwise dominies. At the outbreak of the Great War there were five hundred students on the roll, the great majority of them female.

In that year the Aberdeen Provincial Committee for the Training of Teachers bought twenty acres of the Hilton Lands from the Orient Line shipping tycoon James Anderson. Work on providing hostel accommodation for girls from as far away as Caithness and islands beyond (but mainly four 'Grampian' counties) was postponed until after the war. No doubt the shaped stones of Hilton House, 'a pleasant residence' built from quarries on the estate, were recycled. Two sets of refurbished apartments and townhouses come last in Cala's list of 414 properties. Although attractively red-tiled above granite, they scarcely feature in the lavish advertising through video and brochure - etched 'Hilton Hostel' and 'Clifton Hostel' lowering the tone? Nevertheless they sold out early. No space is wasted by CALA, although the emphasis on landscaping and mature trees denies any suggestion of overcrowding. In college days there was a large vegetable garden to feed the occupants and more land than hockey pitches ever needed.

By the end of the sixties that great block between St Andrew Street and John Street, 'a place of dank ill lit corridors and poky classrooms',

was considered no more fit for purpose than the eighteenth-century Woolmanhill hospital which served as an annexe. With university campuses on the American model springing up everywhere it was time for a move. Principal James Scotland, drawn to drama by script-writing and allied talents, was widely believed to have created the new college around his theatre. Scotland Shakespeare productions for schools began with 'The Taming of the Shrew' and ended with the Principal as Prospero in 'The Tempest'. The Speech and Drama Department flourished, but many members of staff recruited for a wide range of talents could have been described as 'characters'.

And there were other equally impressive modern structures. The PE block contained a swimming pool and a high-ceilinged gymnasium large enough for four badminton courts. The heart of the college was entered through a spacious foyer with a steeply-tiered lecture theatre on the left. A broad corridor ahead passed the Science block and Audio-Visual Aids before turning left for the library. Shelf upon shelf of books and journals testified to the need for knowledge-based theory in what was now teacher education, not training. The Primary Diploma had expanded to three years before the move, and now a four-year B.Ed. degree was introduced for the preparation of primary and secondary teachers.

Student numbers kept rising and three new blocks were raised to the west of the hostels. In 1973 it became necessary to hold two graduation ceremonies, and staff who attended both heard two different addresses. Jimmy Scotland's trademark speeches for new members of 'a most honourable profession' have since appeared in print. This is not about what students learned at Hilton, however; it is

about buildings. Years of over-supply, when qualified teachers searched vainly for jobs may be passed over; and there is no need to discuss that implausible union with Dundee teacher-educators in the name of Northern College.

Finally Aberdeen University bought the campus so as to convey its twenty acres to Cala Homes. In a discussion of six-storey Craigievar Castle the architectural historian Douglas Simpson once wrote: 'A Scottish tower-house is really the normal medieval hall-house up-ended, just as in a modern city a tower-block of flats is nothing other than a street up-ended.' Up-ending the Hilton campus into the McRobert Building at the foot of St Machar Drive is more of the same. What was once a college is now the university's School of Education in yet another change of name.

Change of use is what struck me as I walked the streets of Scholars Gate At The Campus on a Saturday morning in May. There had been no way in through the Hilton Drive gate, my old point of entry, and a digger was growling away. I first became aware of demolition and construction on a visit to the city in February 2007, when the first three plots with detached houses had just been sold. Six years is a long time to live with noise and scaffolding, but these detached properties styled Maxwell (2,152 square feet with a 'sumptuous master bedroom suite') and Jameson (slightly smaller) were at the Hilton Place end of the playing fields and spared much of that. Five-bedroomed Lorimer houses were due to be completed by summer selling at slightly under half a million. Ten of these homes at the top of the range have their back gardens screened from passing traffic on Hilton Street. They are separated from each other by 1.8 metre palisade fences.

On the western edge of the development, back to back with bungalows on Hilton Drive, is a row of ten Mews homes which do not much resemble converted stables. Semi-detached Cottage apartments now stand where that digger was growling in May, the last unit to be completed after a block called The Reid Building. Both styles attracted purchasers with ease: customer reception on Hammerman Avenue has done its work and all the 414 properties appear to have been sold. Wrights, weavers and cordiners are also commemorated on street signs but nothing else evokes the urban working class, unless fancy likens the lesser apartment blocks to tenements. Balconies with views to Girdleness Lighthouse give a different impression. Where I mainly worked (single rooms becoming available as computers were issued to lecturers) is on the ground floor of four storeys served by a staircase: other four-storey blocks have 'lift access and underground parking'. Integral double garages for detached houses confirm the importance of the car, despite the publicity emphasising closeness to the city centre as if cycling or taking a bus might be possible.

People can live where they like, cost permitting. It is good to have alternatives to spreading commuter towns like Westhill – astonishing to this country-dweller as he drove in from the west coast. But very few people were to be seen at The Campus on that Saturday morning in May. Despite the number of homes with four or five bedrooms there were no children or prams. CALA emphasises quality of life ('More space in the city. . . prestigious, peaceful Hilton') but in the absence of anything like a community centre one might well believe, with Margaret Thatcher, that 'there is no such thing as society.' Where the college's great glass doors once had young people flocking in and out there

towers above all the five-storey Anderson Building. A new water feature softens its stark straight lines, but the once popular swimming pool has gone. The theatre is an underground car park.

*Contributed by Alasdair Roberts.*

### **Disclaimer**

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