

CRAIGMILLAR PARK ASSOCIATION

Registered Scottish Charity No.SC027293

HISTORICAL NOTE

By Allan Blacklaws March 2003

Earlier this year, Merrilie Cameron, our Secretary, asked Allan Blacklaws who has lived in the area for many years, to give his personal view of significant changes in the area over the last twenty years:-

Changes in our neighbourhood over the past two decades

St Margaret's School figures prominently in the changes that have taken place during the period under review — indeed it could be argued that, for them, events have turned full circle. In 1983 the former Oratava Hotel was purchased and, after an ambitious and lengthy conversion programme, provided up market study bedrooms for boarders, plus the state of the art facilities required by a modern Senior Form College. At time of writing this, along with the former Arranmore Hotel and Stewart House, both purchased in the mid 1980s, are in process of being sold.

An integral part of the School's strategic plan is to consolidate the campus around the East Suffolk Road area. Two major steps were made towards implementing this in 2002 with the completion of the Morton Link - the School Reception Centre - and the subsequent acquisition of the Suffolk Hall Hotel, itself the subject of considerable expansion only a few years ago. It is planned to utilise this for younger pupils and to provide boarders with improved facilities, including immediate access to modern technology.

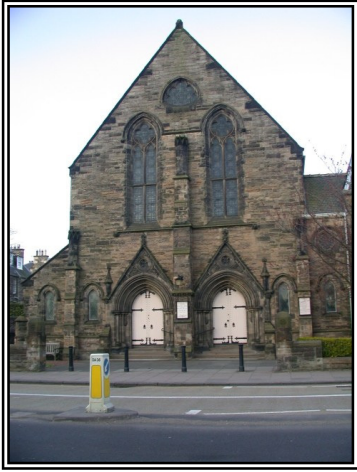


Our arrival at Craigmillar Park in 1982 just preceded the opening of the Cameron Toll Shopping Centre. This was a significant development for the area. Apart from the obvious convenience factor, it provided competition in the retail sector since both Savacentre and Safeways had stores within the complex. Alas the latter departed the scene some six years ago and the competitive element has been lost. But looking back, the incident most people are likely to remember is the flood that occurred some weeks after the official opening. The Braid Burn burst its banks yet again and the low lying centre was immersed in several feet of water with motor cars floating around in the car park.

The new Retail Park has proved to be a more than useful amenity, partly because the area was not well served by small shops. Of those around Newington Station twenty years ago, none has survived. It was sad that the wee hut leased from British Rail by a grandmother to provide a job for her granddaughter in the late 1980s had to close because of spiralling costs. It was a unique form of job creation and also served as the unofficial tuck shop for St Margaret's pupils.

Across the road, the long established newspaper and tobacconist business was sold, only to be sold again after a relatively short period and replaced by a small, attractive Indian restaurant. A ladies fashion department store failed to attract sufficient custom and presently the site is occupied by a business specialising in gadgets and equipment for the medical profession.

More significantly, in 1991 the friendly local bank on the corner suffered from the dreaded rationalisation saga that has bedevilled the banking industry throughout the country in recent times. This policy is publicised under the banner of improved customer service but is, in reality, the need to sustain profitability in order to maintain share price. It is somewhat ironic to find its successor is from one of the few growth industries, namely the Security Sector.



Craigmillar Park Church has many claims to fame and two at least come within the orbit of this article. First, following the retirement of the Rev. Bill Patterson in 1993, the congregation, despite being faced with an unusually high standard of candidate, had the good sense to flout convention by appointing its locum, the Rev Sarah Nicol as one of the few Church of Scotland lady ministers in South Edinburgh. Second, in 1996, the Kirk Session decided to sponsor annual lectures to which speakers of outstanding ability would be invited. In recent years statesmen of the calibre of the controversial Bishop of Durham, the Rev. David Jenkins, Lord Mackay of Clashfern and Sir David Steele have enthralled audiences, who were by no means restricted to church goers. Local residents are urged to support this venture.

Muirhead Lodge — the Royal Blind School's Specialised Unit for visually impaired and multiply disabled children — became a victim of its own success. Such was its reputation for pioneering work in this field that it became overcrowded and overstretched. In 1990 this quite unique facility was transferred to the purpose built

Canaan Lodge Centre in the grounds of the Astley Ainsley Hospital. But history has repeated itself and a financial appeal is presently underway for facilities to almost double the number of very disabled children who can have their lives transformed. Its replacement in Craigmillar Park was none other than Maclean House of St Margaret's School. The common threads linking the two are high quality education and the happy shrieks from children as they slide down the chute in the garden.

The Kildonan Lodge Hotel earned a somewhat mixed reputation under the auspices of a variety of owners, but standards have improved considerably since the present residents took over in 1993. Now they have built a dwelling house in the grounds for their own use which signifies their intention to remain. A useful additional community amenity was introduced two years ago by Don Potter, who leases the kitchen and dining room and serves high quality evening meals; this has just been extended to include Sunday Brunch. The fact that Potter is also the Chef is reassuring from the customers' viewpoint.



A necessary social service was performed by the Link Housing Association, who for many years provided sheltered housing accommodation for adults with special needs — in a transitional stage between being totally dependent on others to inter-dependence before finally moving on to independent living. However the premises were sold in 1998, and converted into a hotel. This may well have been an added amenity, but the price paid by the community was the loss of a number of well established trees in exchange for a private car park. Whatever happened to Conservation Area Status? The good news is that the present owners, who only took over last year, are using the building primarily as their family home, with bed and breakfast facilities provided under the auspices of the Alba Hotel.

The name FBI International could be regarded as an unusual designation for a hotel, even if it's full title —Forall Business Investments — was known. However premises with that name provided tourist facilities for many visitors until 1980 when a change in ownership coincided with a change to the Northumberland Hotel. New occupants arrived in 1983 with no name change and the clean looking building with its neat garden and original conservatory coupled with excellent function room facilities, continues to serve its customers well.

An interesting feature of recent times is the return to family home status of premises used formerly for communal purposes such as guest houses or student apartments. This trend may well continue, given the low cost accommodation available from Travelodge and similar companies nearer to the town centre and the capital that can be acquired in current market conditions compared to the meagre profit margins available from the running of this type of small business. Local examples include Edinburgh University's decision to dispose of accommodation occupied by students in 1995 and again in 1997. Both of these are now in private hands. Additionally, the South House Guest House reverted to dwelling house standing early in 2002.

The saga of the ill fated Miller Homes/Newington Campus development plan is known to most readers. Relief is tempered with the knowledge that, although the future of the playing fields has been assured, for now, and the historical buildings are to be put to good use, a careful eye will need to be kept on any dangers that may emerge

from future development plans. Perhaps the day will return when local residents will be free again to enjoy an evening constitutional, wandering through the grounds and round the perimeter paths.



Towards the end of the century, the large and somewhat neglected looking villa at the corner of East Suffolk Road was completely renovated and restored to its former glory. This took a period of years, but when the building was ready for occupancy it enhanced the appearance of the neighbourhood. Adjoining it, an environmentally friendly apartment block was completed in 1997. This brought more families to the neighbourhood as well as conveniently filling the space leading to St Margaret's School House.

All these improvements are positive indications of a progressive community, indeed the only negative sign in the area is the increase in the volume of traffic on Craigmillar Park. And this is likely to worsen with the forthcoming Miller development and the opening of the A & E Unit at the new Royal Infirmary. Already the noise of sirens from ambulances has increased dramatically with the obvious prospect of more to come. On the credit side the new layout at Lady Road seems to be working well and our brand new road surface has meant farewell to pot holes at least for a wee while.

It could be argued that of all the changes that have taken place during the past twenty years, the most significant ones occurred in 1996. In March there was the formation of the Craigmillar Park Association, whose prime aim is to safeguard the character of the neighbourhood. Later in the year came confirmation of a decision to confer Conservation Status on the area, thus providing the Council with additional planning powers relating to building work and landscaping. Having regard to our experience during the Newington Campus Inquiry, the lesson to be learned is that all residents must remain vigilant. We are fortunate to live in such a pleasant part of the City of Edinburgh. We must all strive to ensure it remains so.

Allan Blacklaws, March 2003