

EDINBURGH OLD TOWN AND NEW TOWNS WORLD HERITAGE SITE REACTIVE MONITORING REPORT ON FIRE IN DECEMBER 2002

1. This report on the impact of the fire which took place in the Edinburgh World Heritage Site in December 2002 has been prepared by Historic Scotland on behalf of the UK state party.

2. In the UK, responsibility for the built heritage in Scotland has been devolved to the Scottish Executive, which is answerable to the Scottish Parliament. Historic Scotland is the part of the Scottish Executive with responsibility for the preservation of the built heritage of Scotland.

Edinburgh Old and New Towns World Heritage Site

3. The historic centre of Edinburgh, including the Old Town, of which the present plan has its origins in the 12th century, and the New Town, which began in the mid 18th century, was inscribed on the World Heritage Sites list in 1995 on the basis of cultural criteria (ii) and (iv) as it represents a remarkable blend of the two urban phenomena: organic medieval growth and 18th and 19th century town planning.

The Fire

4. A major fire broke out in a part of the Edinburgh Old Town on the evening of Saturday, 7 December. The fire was tackled by 80 firefighters in 19 appliances, and was only brought under control early on Monday 9 December - some 36 hours after it started. The cause of the fire has proved impossible to identify.

Impact of the Fire

5. Thanks to the efforts of the emergency services in mounting a very effective fire control operation, the impact of the fire was limited and the most important historic buildings in the area escaped damage. Moreover, the overall impact of the fire on the World Heritage Site as a whole was limited, contrary to some media reports circulating at the time. Only 2 Listed Buildings (buildings identified by the state as meriting particular individual protection) out of some 3500 Listed Buildings in the World Heritage Site were directly affected. The limited extent of the area affected by the fire may be seen from the map of the World Heritage Site (Annex A). It is worth noting that the affected area covers less than 1% of the area of the whole World Heritage Site.

6. That said, the fire did destroy an important part of the Edinburgh townscape at the junction of the two streets: Cowgate and South Bridge, involving buildings on different levels with a complex history of development (Annex B). Indeed, the area had been the subject of significant 18th and 19th century urban design projects. The largest building to be damaged formed a key part of this development. However it had been very much altered in the two centuries since it was built and at the time of the fire was considered only to merit the lowest level of state protection afforded to individual buildings, as did the neighbouring complex of buildings onto the Cowgate.

7. All of the buildings were privately owned.

Management of the World Heritage Site

8. Day to day responsibility for the management of the Edinburgh WHS rests with the City of Edinburgh Council, which recognises the outstanding universal value of the World Heritage Site in its conservation and design objectives and policies detailed in the Central Edinburgh Local Plan and Conservation Strategy. The Edinburgh World Heritage Trust, an independent voluntary organisation, has responsibility for assisting with the repair of historic properties in the World Heritage Site and delegated responsibility for monitoring issues. Individual property owners within the WHS are responsible for the maintenance of their respective properties, including arranging adequate buildings insurance to cover damage in the event of fire, flood etc.

Demolition and recording

9. The condition of the buildings affected by the fire was assessed by the City Council's structural engineers, in consultation with the City Archaeologist and Historic Scotland Buildings Inspectors. The majority of the buildings were subsequently substantially demolished in the interests of public safety. However, proper arrangements had been put in place, by the City Council to record the buildings that were to be lost and to record the underlying archaeology in advance of the redevelopment of the site.

10. The ground floor arcade of one of the demolished historic buildings, home of the well-known Gilded Balloon Theatre, an Edinburgh Festival venue, has been preserved in situ and will be protected during the continuing clearance works. Material from the demolished buildings is being removed from the area under the watching brief of the City Council, and the Edinburgh World Heritage Trust.

11. An Outline Historical and Analytical Assessment has been prepared for the Edinburgh World Heritage Trust and a plan and statement of significance is being prepared. This will inform those responsible for the clearance of debris from the site and the development brief for its redevelopment. A laser digitised plan of the site has been prepared and the site is being continuously photogrammetrically recorded.

Disaster planning

12. The general disaster planning arrangements operated by the City Council operated very well, but the organisations responsible for the day-to-day management of the site will be reviewing their disaster planning procedures in the light of experience. It is also proposed to add risk assessment to the management plan for the World Heritage Site. Advice on fire detection and fire suppression in historic buildings in general has been published by Historic Scotland. A database of outstanding historic buildings in Scotland is being compiled as a joint project with Scottish Fire Brigades to guide fire fighters in such emergencies. Historic Scotland are working on a Technical Advice Note that will provide information to historic buildings owners, and others, on damage limitation strategies, such as liaison with Fire Brigades and other issues.

Redevelopment of the area

13. Edinburgh City Council, is working with Historic Scotland and the Edinburgh World Heritage Trust to develop a plan for the area affected by the fire. There are issues of insurance to be determined and it is too early to say exactly what form the plan will take.

14. The re-development of the site very quickly became a subject of public debate, focussing on the arguments for either a modern intervention or a more contextual building. The reconstruction of some of the demolished buildings or reinstatement of the frontage to an earlier appearance are among the options which may be considered in the development plan. Other options should also be explored, not least because reconstruction on site of entirely lost buildings is not usually considered good conservation practice and is discouraged by international conservation charters.

15. However, redevelopment will not commence until a proper assessment of the remaining structures and the archaeological and architectural significance of the site has been carried out and a development plan agreed with the City Council.

16. The City Council is committed to ensuring that any redevelopment of the area will take full account of the character and the surviving medieval street pattern of this part of the World Heritage Site.

Conclusion

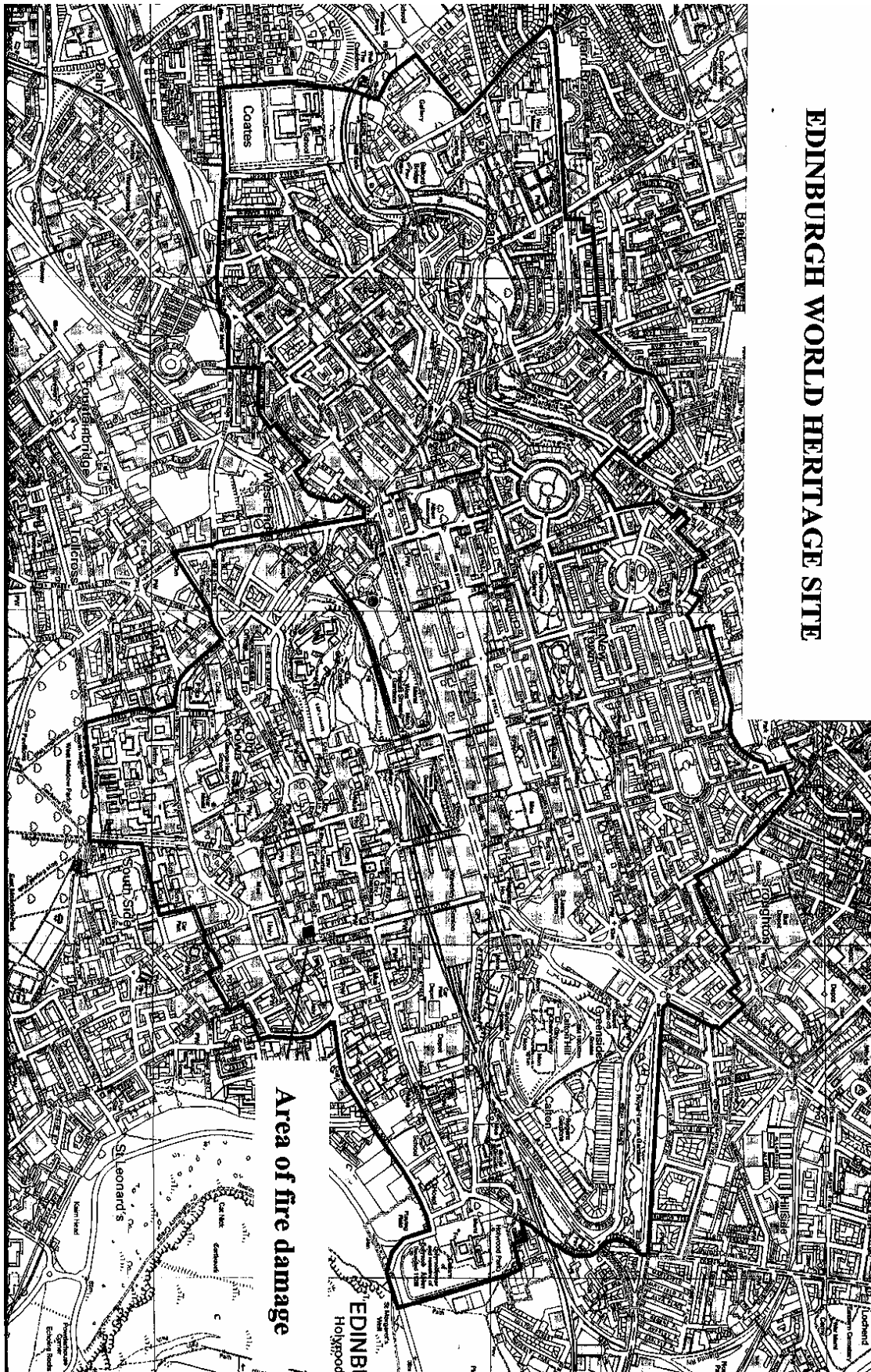
17. The impact of the fire was limited both in terms of the overall area of the World Heritage Site and the number of buildings of outstanding historic or architectural importance.

18. The overall international architectural and historic quality of the World Heritage Site remains intact.

19. The redevelopment of the demolished properties will take full account of the character and archaeological, architectural and historic significance of this area of the World Heritage Site.

Historic Scotland
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EDINBURGH WORLD HERITAGE SITE



Architectural history of the site

The Cowgate follows the line of a medieval thoroughfare in a valley running parallel with the High Street to the North and linking the Grassmarket with the Cowgate Port (St Mary's Wynd) at the eastern extremity of the Old Town. With the later growth and subsequent overcrowding of the city in the later eighteenth century the Cowgate lost much of its status. Consequently it was spectacularly bridged in 1789, with a 19-arched structure which simply bulldozed its way through the district in a straight line to link up with the recently built North Bridge.

However, this was a Bridge with a difference. Houses and shops were planned to be built up against the structure so that only one arch, the Cowgate Arch, remained open. The result was an astonishing 'megastructure', conceived by Robert Adam but built by Robert Kay. Adam had proposed and built such self-financing 'bridge streets' elsewhere, including most famously at Pulteney Bridge, Bath. The planned street around the Edinburgh structure reflected the Bridge Trustees' ability to buy up the land. On the west side of the bridge they were more successful than elsewhere, and so they created Blair Street which leads straight down to the site of the fire.

On South Bridge itself what was built was a long street of ashlar stone houses in a simple style but, crucially, to a comprehensive design. This was the first time that 'palace-fronting' on this scale had been achieved in Edinburgh. Some of these buildings have since been altered and the SW end pavilion was demolished altogether in the creation of Chambers Street in the 1870s.

The South Bridge building demolished after the fire was fundamentally a steel framed rebuilding, with a new frontage to South Bridge of 1929 with an original pedimented 7 storey gable to the Cowgate attached and the rear elevation surviving in part. This has all been completely lost.

Moving 'below' to the Cowgate itself, the collection of fire damaged buildings remaining includes the ground floor arcade of an 1823/4 warehouse, designed to mesh architecturally with the South Bridge. There are various earlier but probably not medieval structures behind this long facade, built on their medieval burgage property lines. There is a possibility also that there exists on the site a remnant of Adam Square, designed by John Adam in 1760-5 and also that of a 19th Century dissenting church.