

Proposed Patrick Geddes Centre at Riddle's Court, Edinburgh

Riddle's Court, a venerable old house in the heart of Edinburgh

Riddle's Court is one of the most important historic buildings still extant in the Old Town of Edinburgh. On the Southside of the Lawnmarket in the Old Town of Edinburgh, an arched pend leads you through to Riddle's Court.

Slide 1 Riddle's Court



In 1590 at the south end of the close, Baillie Mac Morran, reputedly the richest merchant of his time, petitioned the town council to demolish a ruined building in order to build a grander house on the site away from the noise of the Lawnmarket. He built the two L shape three story blocks, each containing a house and enclosing three sides of the tiny court. In the first floor (west room of the north range) there is a room with an open beam ceiling painted in tempera with a stencil pattern of cherubs' heads and double headed eagles not much later than 1590. Elsewhere, the interior retains magnificent ceilings, fine panelling and plasterwork.

In 1598 The house was used to host a magnificent state banquet, for the wedding reception of King James VI and Queen Anne of Denmark. An eye witness recorded that "The King and Queen were present with great solemnity and merriness". This courtyard house is one of the best preserved examples of mercantile high life domestic architecture remaining in Edinburgh from the 16th to the 18th centuries.

1726 George Riddle, a wealthy tradesman of the town, reconstructed the parts of the building facing the Lawnmarket. The property then became known as Riddle's Court.

In 1751 David Hume the famous eighteenth century philosopher took up residence in Riddles Court. He wrote to a friend: "I have now at last-being turned forty....arrived at the dignity of being a householder. About seven months ago I got a house of my own, and completed a regular family, consisting of a head, viz. myself, and two inferior members – a maid and a cat".

1825 Riddles Court becomes home to the Edinburgh Mechanics Subscription Library.

The Old House was restored by Henbest Capper in 1893 and made into flats for student accommodation as University Hall as part of Patrick Geddes' regeneration of the Old Town.

In 1887 Professor Patrick Geddes the Scottish polymath, chiselled his motto "Vivendo Discimus" (by living we learn) on the archway leading into the inner courtyard of Riddle's Court. In 1890 Riddle's Court was declared open as a self governing student University Hall of Residence. Four years earlier Geddes had organised the Edinburgh Summer Meetings aimed at widening access to higher education and the first gathering of its kind in Europe one of them at least held at Riddles Court.

1947 Riddles Court was taken into the care of the City of Edinburgh Council.

In 1964 Riddles Court was rehabilitated by J. Wilson Paterson for the Edinburgh Corporation for educational purposes. Riddle's Court is currently owned by the City of Edinburgh Council, and used by the Workers Educational Association as their head office in Edinburgh, with lecture rooms for adult learning and a café for young people.

Threats to the building

Recently, the very survival of the building was threatened by the decision of City of Edinburgh Council, anxious to reduce their financial responsibilities in old properties of the Old Town, to sell Riddle's Court.

A group called FORCE or Friends of Riddles Court Edinburgh was formed led by the present tenant the Workers Educational Association. They alerted us to the threat to the building, the Sir Patrick Geddes Memorial Trust together with the Saltire Society, the Old Town Trust and others offered their support to save the building.

The main threat has been staved off by the action of FORCE and for the moment the Council has decided to keep the building in their ownership.

The survival of old buildings depends on a mixture of constant vigilance and a methodical programme of constant maintenance. This of course means a sizable investment both for the restoration of the building and for its maintenance programme in the future.

Plans for the restoration of Riddles Court have been proceeding with the help of funds mainly from the Cockburn Conservation Trust and the Alba Trust. Feasibility studies for restoration and upgrading to modern standards have been done and now the crucial need is to find a sustainable activity that will bring in the necessary revenue to maintain the building in good shape for the years to come.

The search for a new sustainable use for Riddle's Court

Problems

Funds for the restoration and upgrading of the building in many ways are easier to find than revenue to sustain the building in good use for a foreseeable future.

The main tenant of Riddles Court at present is the WEA. This organisation has been providing for many years a service of courses for adult education with subsidy from the council but its appeal and public support have been in general decline. The activities of WEA alone, as they are at moment, are unlikely to bring in the necessary revenue so the search is on to find other complementary activities capable of bringing in a greater interest in the building from the general public.

Possibilities

A week end event at Riddles Court called "Re-thinking the City" organised by FORCE in October to celebrate the birth of Patrick Geddes was very successful and attracted people from a great variety of interests and backgrounds.

The renewed interest in Patrick Geddes and his work in the Old Town brings the possibility of saving Riddles Court by linking it into PG's heritage.

Since we have lost the Outlook Tower as a Patrick Geddes Centre in the Old Town, here is a possibility to create a new Patrick Geddes Centre in Riddles Court. I have therefore proposed to FORCE that a revamp of the activities in Riddles Court that could include:

A Patrick Geddes Memorial room where stained glass windows and other artefacts surviving from Geddes' time could be housed.

A place where lectures or seminars on the life and work of Geddes could take place. A PG visitor centre where people from Edinburgh or international visitors could learn in a multimedia environment who he was and what he did for the Old Town.

A weekend venue for historical re-enacting of Edinburgh occasions like the royal banquet could be enacted in present day real weddings. As Simon Jenkins said in a recent lecture of the National Trust in the 21st century: "Let them run their own events. They'd love it!"

A scholar's flat or flats where international scholars could be accommodated when coming to Edinburgh to do research. A Patrick Geddes Centre for evolutionary education to complement both the present activities of WEA and the formal education offered by the Local Authorities with a more agile mixture of short courses, visits and practical projects paid for by subscription and by private and public funds.

Geddes' Evolutionary education

Patrick Geddes lived at the dawn of an era dominated by the new ideas in biology and the concept of evolution proposed by Charles Darwin. For him education was not to be seen as one of his manifold activities, because for Geddes education was "the activity" that would move forward the Ascent of Man towards a better future.

PG proposed that if we studied our society in depth (social history) it is possible to find out what are the trends for the future, like the buds in spring will tell you what the summer crops will be like.

Geddes was sure that human potential could be improved through education, therefore education was the key to rise quality of life in the future.

Geddes saw that new technology would bring about rapid development. He was not anti-technology as such, but he foresaw that technology would give us the means to kill and pollute our natural environment on an ever greater scale than before. In order to avoid the inevitable doom, he devoted his life to try to see a way forward to a new cultural era. He had to go on hoping that the environment could be controlled by conscious and well informed choices made by informed individuals.

His quest for a new kind of evolutionary education and the nature of knowledge therefore became first priority. He went back to first principles about how people learn and about what methods are most appropriate. His motto "Vivendo Discimus" or "By Living We Learn" was meant to be a spur for action, there was no end to this search.

The main reason for organising his famous Summer Meetings in Edinburgh, indeed some of them in Riddle's Court, was to test his ideas and methods on real people hoping to help the participants understand more about themselves and their environment.

Geddes Summer Schools were different from the beginning. It was clear that they were seen as eccentric and somewhat for a minority interest. They reached their peak in 1890's and at the most they had 120 people.

He was standing at the cusp of a new cultural era and because of his objectivity and creativity, he tried to create a new subject which he called "Civics". This was a discipline directed both towards reclaiming human individual creativity and the improvement of the environment.

In some of his thinking machines he tried to plot the interaction between the structure and the process in a system of education. In his model he included the feelings, the thoughts and the experience of individuals because it is feelings and sense and thought which are important in realising creativity.

Geddes, in his Summer meetings, prepared a magnificent banquet of lectures, visits excursions, concerts and practical work and invited people to tuck in and enjoy it. After all this was holiday time.

It was as far away from any formal school than you can ever imagine.

The objective was not to train in some skill or other and get a piece of paper or certificate at the end of it. Far from it. This was education where the students could choose their own courses and preferences freely, or change them every day if they so desired. This kind of freedom would be unthinkable for the rigid programmes of formal education.

FOURTH THOUSAND

A Summer School of Art and Science



Edinburgh Summer Meeting (*Vacation Studies*)

Seventh Session, July 31–Aug. 26

(Part 1. July 31–Aug. 12) 1893
„ 2. Aug. 14–26



PRICE THREEPENCE

To be had of Wm. Wilson, University Hall, Edinburgh

MARCH 1893

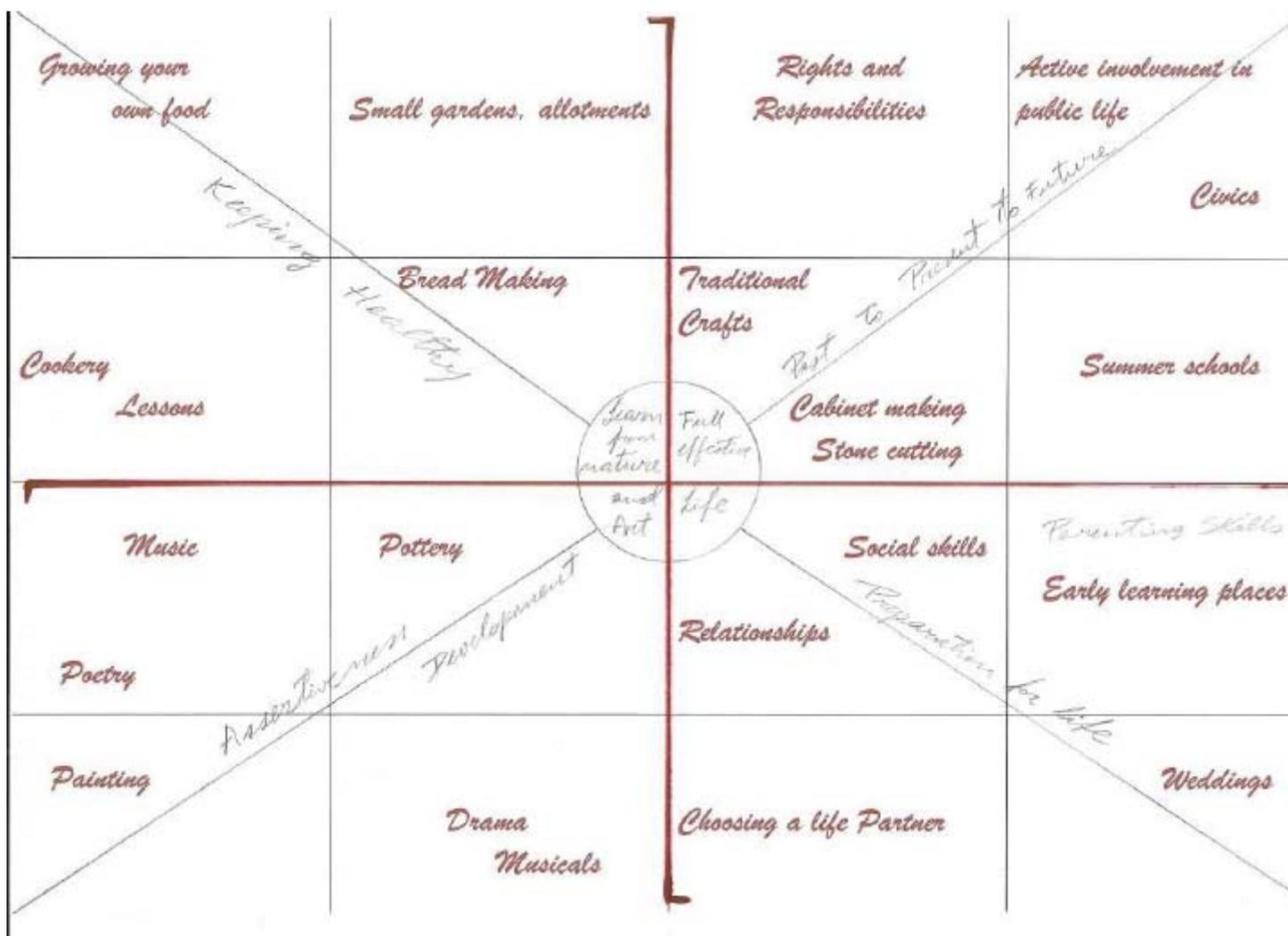
What was the legacy of the Edinburgh Summer Meetings?

The legacy for education was immense. The excitement and the buzz of the Summer Meetings must have lasted for a long time in people's memories.

What we know is that the Geddes Schools were the origin of: The introduction of Social Sciences in the University curriculum. The concept that society's progress can be studied and eventually guided. (Planning) The importance of environmental education involving the individual in the care for its own environment The importance of health as wealth and learning to keep a healthy body and a healthy mind. The importance to bring up the new generation responsibly (lasting stable relationships, parenting and child development). The creation of a new subject which he called Civics, a discipline which was directed towards a double objective that is reclaiming human individual creativity and improving the environment through carefully guided and informed action.

Being a follower of Geddes, I have made my own thinking machine to describe what could be the model for the new Patrick Geddes Centre for evolutionary education at Riddle's Court.

Slide 3 Thinking machine for Riddle's Court



In summary

THE VISION

The vision is to establish in Riddles Court a world class learning Centre to contribute to the creation of a learning society promoting active, critical citizenship informed by a twenty-first century dialogue around the principles of the Geddes' evolutionary education.

A Patrick Geddes Heritage attraction/ Visitor centre

A Memorial room/ Small Museum of Geddes surviving artefacts for the Sir Patrick Geddes Memorial Trust (SPGMT)

Sofia G. Leonard
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