

Case Study – Edinburgh Graveyards Project

1. Rationale and Catalyst for the Project

In 2009, Edinburgh World Heritage (EWH) and the City of Edinburgh Council made a successful application to the World Monuments Fund for five historic graveyards located in the Edinburgh World Heritage Site to be included on the 2010 World Monuments Watch (a list of internationally important heritage at risk). This marked the start of a collaborative project between the three organisations to find sustainable solutions to the stewardship burdens and missed opportunities presented by the graveyards.



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The five sites are Greyfriars, Canongate, St Cuthbert's Kirkyards and Calton Old and Calton New Burial Grounds. These exceptional burial sites record the transition of Edinburgh from a medieval Burgh in the 15th century to an Enlightenment European city in the late 18th century, and their monuments are significant architectural objects of great aesthetic merit and cultural value.

Each of these sites was at risk: suffering not only at the hands of weathering and erosion but also from limited resources and anti-social behaviour. However, it was also recognised that the graveyards presented major unexploited assets which provided an opportunity to:

- Increase community involvement in their management and restoration;
- Raise awareness of their historical and amenity value for the benefit of their local communities; and
- Become 'must see' tourist attractions.

2. Project Planning & Development

Project Scoping Report – in Sept 2011 a research report was commissioned to identify the strategic priorities for improving the care and enjoyment of the graveyards (published July 2013). This was led by Dr Susan Buckham and involved significant community engagement, local volunteer inputs and the identification of good practice from established graveyard projects in England.

A key element of the work was a fact-finding mission, to learn from local communities what social and public values they placed on the graveyards. This early community engagement led to some important volunteering input. One volunteer in particular developed a very keen interest in the project and took on the role of 'champion'. He saw the potential to tackle anti-social behaviour and identified the opportunity to form a Friends Group. He raised awareness and acted as a spokesperson on behalf of the local communities.



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The report's 18 recommendations included the appointment of a Development Officer, the formation of a Trust to lead the project and the active engagement of volunteers through the formation of 'Friends of' groups.

Graveyards Development Officer – the first recommendation to be implemented was the appointment of Dr Susan Buckham as the part-time Graveyards Development Officer, funded for 1.5 days/week for a period of two years. The cost of this post was shared between WMFB, EWH and The Pilgrim Trust. Her remit was to implement the report's recommendations.

3. 'Friends of the Canongate Kirkyard'



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The Development Officer focused on the establishment of friends' groups as the top priority. This was seen as critical for the following reasons:

- The need to secure community engagement and inputs. A friends' group was seen as the best model for achieving this (drawing upon the lessons from England)
- The need to recruit volunteers to help deliver practical support for the graveyards to complement the work carried out by the City of Edinburgh Council
- The need to ensure the sustainability of the project once the Development Officer's funding expired in 2015.

As a consequence, a major focus of the Development Officer has been her role as catalyst of, and support for, the 'Friends of Canongate Kirkyard'. This group originated from people who attended a local public meeting to discuss the Kirkyard. Volunteers quickly took on several projects, including a planting project, as well as recording the stones and researching the stories of those buried in the graveyard. The success of this work, as measured by the engagement and commitment of the volunteers, generated the confidence required for the formation of the Friends of Canongate Kirkyard.

4. The Engagement Process for Canongate Kirkyard

A key learning lesson from this project is the importance of the underpinning driver for a friends' group. The experience from England is that it is often a response to a major external threat to the graveyard which leads to the formation of a friends' group – such as the threat from development/demolition. This is likely to trigger a faster and more committed response



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compared to the more ‘softly softly’ top down engagement process which was required for the Edinburgh Graveyards Project.

The key elements of the Canongate Kirkyard community engagement were:

- *Step 1 – Initial engagement* – the Development Officer started with an invitation for local people to meet up to discuss the Canongate Kirkyard and its requirements. Around 20 – 30 people participated in the initial meeting. This was followed up by regular fortnightly meetings attended by 8-10 people.
- *Step 2 – Project work* – the next stage was individuals stepping forward to take on specific tasks such as social media. The specific project work which generated a volunteering ‘team spirit’ included recording, planting and interpretation. The latter was a real success and involved the writing, design and printing of five self-guided trail leaflets; podcasts; and an interactive web-based map. The Development Officer provided information directly to help develop volunteers’ skills and knowledge– but also looked for opportunities to support their learning not in an overt way, but rather ‘by stealth’.
- *Step 3 – Formalisation of roles* – as the volunteers’ engagement increased, their confidence grew and eventually 9 individuals made the commitment to take on formal roles to launch a new Friends Group. The Group comprises a Chair, Vice-Chair, Treasurer and six Committee Members.



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This engagement process all sounds logical and quite straightforward, but there are important lessons from the Canongate Kirkyard experience. Firstly, it has taken a lot longer and more time from the Development Officer than originally envisaged. Secondly, the project had no budget which contributed to further delays as the Friends Group had to get involved in fundraising. It is now over two years since the appointment of the Development Officer, and the Friends of Canongate Kirkyard is the only friends’ group to have been established out of the five graveyards in the Edinburgh Graveyards Project. Thirdly, volunteers need to be able to tackle practical projects at the same time as developing governance and good practice.

5. The Contribution of the Friends of Canongate Kirkyard

In addition to the recording, planting and interpretation tasks described above, the Friends of Canongate Kirkyard have been actively involved in fundraising – they have generated funds through the Canongate Church coffee morning and silent auction, which raised £700. They have also undertaken tours of the graveyard – for example, they have been actively involved as part of the ‘Doors Open Day’ initiative.



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The impact of their work has been significant in the following areas:

- Conservation of the historic environment: the volunteers are fundraising to restore an A-Listed mausoleum
- Recording and research: providing a history of the gravestones and the people buried. These stories provide a rich addition to Scotland's intangible cultural heritage.
- Landscape and amenity: the Friends Group has made the Kirkyard more attractive and ecologically diverse while respecting and enhancing its status as a historic site of Christian burial. They have improved the garden around the Mercat Cross and planted bare areas at the front of the church, using plants donated by the City of Edinburgh Council.
- Public access – they have made the graveyard more inviting and accessible to the public, which has also helped to reduce the problem of anti-social behaviour during daylight hours.

6. Volunteering Contributions across the other Edinburgh Graveyards

The case study has focused on what has been achieved at the Canongate Kirkyard. However, the Project has generated other significant contributions, including:

- Calton Old and New Burial Grounds – the Development Officer is working with an initial team of five volunteers who have already completed an interpretation project for the graveyards; securing funding from the City of Edinburgh Council and developers Artisan to undertake a visitor survey and improve public use; undertaking a planting scheme with students; and developing an 'Education Pack' for youth groups such as the Guides and Scouts. The aspiration is that this embryonic group of volunteers will over time mature into a friends' group.
- University of Edinburgh Volunteer Group – a team of about 25 students undertake a project each year to support the Edinburgh Graveyards Project by undertaking graveyard recording or biodiversity projects
- Other volunteering contributions include research and interpretation projects and fundraising to restore a mausoleum in Greyfriars Kirkyard; volunteers who work alongside the Development Officer in the EWH office to help with community events and fundraising.

7. Challenges and Lessons Learned

Partnership working – this has been critical to what the Edinburgh Graveyards Project has achieved to date through the contribution of partners towards funding, resources and skills. In addition to the core funding partners supporting the costs of the Development Officer post (EWH, WMFB and The Pilgrim Trust), the Project has worked closely with the City of Edinburgh Council – in particular their Bereavement Services and Parks and Gardens Department who are responsible for the graveyards; and the University of Edinburgh.



Stakeholder management – it has been necessary to manage expectations and different cultural perspectives across key stakeholder groups. For example, the public expect the Council and others to take responsibility for the graveyards; but the Council is under significant budgetary pressure.

Funding – the lack of a budget for operational expenditure has been a significant constraint in the rollout of the development plan.

Formal volunteering structures – it can take time and often significant support to move from a group of willing volunteers to the formation of a sustainable friends' group which is autonomous.

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