Gallery – The Thistle Property Trust & the Top of the Town

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Stirling City Heritage Trust (2003)

Stirling City Heritage Trust is an independent charity that aims to work in partnership with local and national organisations in order to promote and encourage the protection and preservation of the architectural, cultural, and landscape heritage of Stirling. The Trust is:

- One of seven City Heritage Trust’s in Scotland
- Established in 2004 after Stirling was awarded city status in 2003
- A Scottish Charity
- An independent company limited by guarantee
- Core grant from Historic Environment Scotland
- Partnership grant from Stirling Council
- Governed by a Board of 11 volunteer Trustees
- PT Trust Manager, PT Office Manager, three FT staff
- Offers repair grants, outreach and delivers the Traditional Buildings Health Check
Figure 1. A Drone Demonstration at a Local High School as Part of SCHT’s Educational Outreach Programme

Drone Demonstration. 2020, Stirling City Heritage Trust, Stirling.

Figure 2. View of King Street, the Athenaeum and Looking towards the Top of the Town

View of King Street. 2015, Stirling City Heritage Trust, Stirling.
The Top of the Town: Early Development

The development of Stirling is inextricably linked to Stirling Castle, which sits on a volcanic outcrop known as Castle Rock. This easily defensible area has been inhabited for thousands of years. By the twelfth century, Stirling had become a Royal Burgh with a marketplace located in Broad Street. During the sixteenth century, the Castle was transformed and became a palatial residence of the Stuart Kings. To be close to the Royal Court, nobles and wealthy merchants established residences in the Top of the Town, and during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the earlier timber framed buildings of the town were gradually replaced in stone. Several buildings from this period survive including Norrie’s House, Darnley’s House, Spittal’s House, and Cowane’s Hospital.

Figure 3. Stirling Castle Today, atop the Formidable Castle Rock
The Top of the Town: Decline

In 1603, King James VI of Scotland was also crowned King James I of England. He promised to return to Scotland every three years after his coronation at Westminster, but he only returned once before his death in 1625. Without a monarch and a court, the noble residents of the Top of the Town departed, and the area began its slow decline. However, the population of Stirling continued to increase as Scotland became more industrialised in the nineteenth century. Stirling was then advertised as a healthy alternative to living in cities like Glasgow and Edinburgh, and travel became much easier when a railway station was open in 1848. New suburbs were created for the city’s middle-classes, and tenements and cottages were built for the less wealthy inhabitants. Despite the increasing wealth of Stirling’s middle classes, conditions in the Top of the Town worsened. By the 1920s, the medieval buildings were crumbling after years of neglect and the area had become a densely populated slum.
In the nineteenth century, several prominent architects emerged in Stirling and shaped the architecture of the burgh, including John Allan (1847-1922) who had moved from Fife in 1870. Living at the Top of the Town, he became a vocal advocate for housing improvement and social reform. Around 1883, he published *A Practical Guide on Healthy Houses and Sanitary Reform*, a book specifically written to be “available for all classes”. He felt that physical and mental health went hand-in-hand with improved and affordable housing for all.

There are dwellings in Stirling, where in these days of cruelty to animals is forbidden, no-one would house a dog, or a horse, if he wished to maintain its health. Fancy infants born, dying and bred up under such conditions?

Letter from John Allan to Stirling Observer, Saturday 17 Jan.1914
Figure 6. Mona Place, a Tenement Building Designed by John Allan in 1897

Figure 7. The Top of The Town ca. 1950 Showing the High Density of the Area before Many of the Buildings Were Demolished
The Creation of the Thistle Property Trust (1928)

On 7 December 1928, Scotland’s first property trust was formed in Stirling. The Thistle Property Trust (TPT) aimed to restore and refurbish historic buildings in the Top of The Town to create sanitary housing for its inhabitants. The TPT evolved from the Stirling branch of the National Council of Women. Founded in 1895 in response to poor working conditions for women, they campaigned for equal pay and for other social issues concerning women. It still exists today as the National Council of Women of Great Britain (NCWGB). The President of the Stirling Branch of NCW, as well as the TPT, for many years, was Lady Kay Blair of Blairdrummond.

Figure 8. Children Living in the Top of the Town, ca.1930s

The Work of the Thistle Property Trust

In April 1929, an appeal was launched by the TPT “to raise £20,000 for re-conditioning work on old houses” to “roll away the age-old reproach of our miserable slums”. Although 500 new houses had been built by Stirling Council for low-paid workers, with 88 more “planned or nearing completion”, nothing was being done about the state of existing housing in the Top of the Town. With the help of local architect Eric S. Bell (1884-1973), an additional £2,000 had already been spent by the TPT in the creation of better living conditions for 40 families through “reconditioning” a small number of buildings. They were selective; they did not “take over any and every property”, it had to be “bad enough to need overhauling” and also “good enough to be worth the effort.” They believed that “such old property when rendered sanitary is better that any new
‘flimsy’ which can be offered as an alternative”, as the traditional buildings were “stronger, less liable to be damaged”, cheaper than constructing new housing, and more convenient as they were located nearer to their tenants’ work.

Excerpts from The Scotsman, Monday 29 April, 1929, “New Housing Crusade in Stirling”

Figure 9. Properties Owned and Reconditioned by the TPT. They were Later Demolished to Make Way for Modern Housing.

Properties owned and reconditioned by the TPT. Ca. 1930s, The Stirling Smith Art Gallery & Museum, Stirling.

Eric S. Bell (1884-1973) and the Thistle Property Trust

By 1933, the TPT had reconditioned a total of 44 houses, housing 55 people. At this point, inhabitants of the Top of the Town were moving out to newly built council housing, also designed by TPT architect Eric Bell. Born in 1884 in Warrington, Bell’s father was Colonel William Bell of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, who had been stationed at Stirling Castle since 1881. In 1903, Eric Bell began working for Glasgow architects John Burnet & Son whilst studying at Glasgow School of Art and, during the First World War, he served as Captain in the Gordon Highlanders. Post-war, Bell began practicing as an architect in Stirling; he became the architect for the Thistle Property Trust and was the first President of the Stirling Society of Architects. He was also a Trustee of The Stirling Smith Art Gallery & Museum. He died at his home in Stirling in 1973 and is buried in the Valley Cemetery in the Top of the Town.
Women Property Management and Octavia Hill (1838-1912)

The TPT was unusual as it was run by women using the Octavia Hill method of property management. Octavia Hill (1838-1912) was a social reformer and property manager from London. Hill also reconditioned housing for the poor, but she is best known for her pioneering views on property management. She put in place weekly rent collections for tenants and was adamant that this was a job for women only. These visits created positive personal relationships between property managers and tenants. In 1939, the TPT and the National Council of Women’s Stirling branch held an exhibition and lecture at Stirling’s Municipal Buildings, celebrating Hill’s centenary, as well as the work of the TPT. In the 1930s, Miss Katharine M. Curror, who was the TPT’s Property Manager, became Stirling Council’s Property Manager and the first woman to be appointed to this role in Scotland. Katharine Curror died in 1965 and is buried in the Valley Cemetery in the Top of the Town.
Frank Mears (1880-1953) and Town Planning

With the increasing realisation that extensive work was needed to tackle the slums, pioneering town planner Frank Mears (1880-1953) began work on redeveloping the Top of the Town in the 1930s. Mears was inspired by the work of his Father-in-Law, Patrick Geddes (1834-1932), whose work in Town Planning in Edinburgh made him renowned internationally. The works were completed by his partner Robert Naismith (1916-2004) and Stirling Burgh Architect Walter Gillespie (1913-83) in the 1950s. The regeneration of the area focused on providing social housing which followed the lines of the earlier streets. The designs by Mears incorporated vernacular features like crow-stepped and Dutch Gables and used traditional materials such as slate so that the new fitted in with the old.
Post-War Demolition in the Top of the Town

Despite the efforts made by the Thistle Property Trust, Stirling Burgh, the local authority, made a compulsory purchase of the properties which were beyond saving on the Top of the Town.
Figure 13. Demolished Buildings on Broad Street

Damley’s House, a late sixteenth to early seventeenth-century townhouse, to the right of the image narrowly escaped demolition.

A series of photographs were taken of the buildings being demolished in the Top of the Town in July 1953. They were taken by Alistair Cruickshank on behalf of his father who was Sanitary Inspector for Stirling Burgh.


**The Top of the Town Today**

Whilst the work carried out by Frank Mears and his colleagues in the middle of the twentieth century was pioneering, the approach taken would differ from current planning ideas. If it was designed today, a residential area like this would have more mixed-use commercial units on the ground floor, as well as more public green spaces to encourage a vibrant community.
In 2021, Historic Environment Scotland awarded Stirling Council with over £1.3 million funding for a Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme (CARS). The scheme aims to repair two priority projects – the Alhambra Theatre and Arcade on King Street as well as John Cowane’s House, the ruined seventeenth-century home of one of Stirling’s wealthiest merchants in the Top of the Town. Ten buildings will be subject to repair through HES’s small grants scheme. Walking routes will also be created within the city to improve connections between the commercial and historic centres. Building on recent work carried out by Stirling City Heritage Trust, the CARS project – due to be completed in 2026 – will further regenerate the city. No doubt, those who set up the Thistle Property Trust in 1928 would be pleased to see that regeneration of the area continues almost 100 years on.
Figure 16. Stirling Conservation Area Scheme Boundary Plan

Stirling Conservation Area Scheme Boundary Plan. 2022, Stirling Council, Stirling.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIXES

Further Reading


ABSTRACTS

The Thistle Property Trust (TPT) was established in Stirling in 1928. They aimed to restore historic and traditional buildings which had become dilapidated slum housing in Stirling’s Top of the Town area. One of the first building conservation trusts, the TPT improved the living conditions of the city’s poor whilst conserving Stirling’s historic built environment. They were a forward-thinking organisation, employing and training women property managers, inspired by the work of Octavia Hill (1838-1912). The legacy of the TPT lives on in Scotland’s contemporary City Heritage Trusts.

INDEX

Keywords: Stirling, heritage, building conservation, historic built environment, property management, restoration

Mots-clés: Stirling, patrimoine, conservation des bâtiments, patrimoine bâti ancien, gestion immobilière, restauration

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