

# Inside the Egyptian Halls. There's hope for this place

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HERITAGE HISTORY LOCAL GOVERNMENT POLITICS

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Derek Souter in the Egyptian Halls

It's not the best start. Walls of scaffolding, swathes of graffiti, pools of God-knows-what on the pavement, and it seems the only way in is through the ground-floor shop selling sweet-smelling vapes in primary colours. On the back wall is a door to the storeroom and a dark, dusty flight of steps. Up we go.

My guide is Derek Souter, the man who owns this building and it's obvious when we get to the first floor and stand in the pool of light from his torch that someone else has been here before us. A security door has been wrenched off its hinges by intruders or vandals. It's just one of the many threats to this great old building on Glasgow's Union Street.

But is there new hope for the Egyptian Halls? Maybe. There were reports this week that the building has been put up for sale but that's not quite true: it's been listed for sale or lease or some joint venture since 2005. The real news, according to Mr Souter, is that he's working on a new planning application with the council and Historic Environment Scotland which will hopefully be submitted later this year. The exact details cannot be made public yet, he says, but one of the ideas he's proposed is a mews running from the Egyptian Halls to Buchanan Street. So let's wait and see.

In the meantime, we're standing at the top of the stairs in the entrance hall where there's still evidence of the building's previous lives. A sign in green and red propped up against the wall: "New Palace Restaurant and Lounge Bar." Another sign reveals that one of the old tenants here was an Inland Revenue training centre: turn right for the classroom and tutors' room, turn left for first-aid and the cinema.



It's also obvious when we get to the upper floors of the building that the potential of this place is still great; there are big open spaces and it's water-tight and dry and is in surprisingly good nick. Mr Souter says that over the years he's fielded more than 100 inquiries from people interested in getting involved but the problem, he says, is funding. In his view, the renovation would need grant funding as well as money from commercial interests and he says a lack of joined-up government has prevented that happening.

But I've got to be honest with him. Some people think he's the problem here and he's out to make as much as he can from the building. There have been claims he was raking in 70k a month from ads on the scaffolding but he says it's more like 100k across the whole year and at least half of that goes into the costs of maintaining the building. He also rejects the idea he's the problem. "I don't have the ability to con people," he says. "I am actually the facilitator."



It's also hard to entirely understand the way the council has handled things of late. Despite the fact, as Mr Souter says, that money from the ads is being used to pay for the scaffolding and so on, the council has told him he can't put adverts up anymore. But if the income is being used to support the maintenance of the building, cutting off that source of money is surely just going to make things worse.

Mr Souter tells me a bit more about the situation as we head to the top of the building and out on to the roof. The views are brilliant: Buchanan Street, the Lighthouse, Central Station. We look over the edge to the street below and you can sort of see what the mews idea could do. Mr Souter believes it would be a great way to pull in the millions of people who pass through the station every year and he may be right.

But the challenge is huge. This place has been vacant for 43 years and the property market has changed profoundly in that time - Mr Souter says there was a real opportunity to turn the building into a hotel about 13 years ago but the funding fell through. Then there's the crisis in the centre of Glasgow and other cities as shoppers flee to their laptops, Union Street being a prime example. No doubt the condition of the Egyptian Halls, which should be the jewel in its crown, has made things even worse.

But my visit to the building gives me some hope. The place may have been unoccupied since the 80s but, as I say, it looks to be in reasonably good condition inside. Mr Souter's mews plan also has great potential and, if it went ahead, would add something quite special to the old grid pattern in the centre of Glasgow. It might also help to revive an increasingly grotty street that's the first thing many people see when they come out of the station.

But none of it's going to happen until the relationship between the council and Mr Souter improves and I guess both of them need to want that to happen. Secondly, public money, quite a lot of it, is going to have to be committed to save the building, and if you're having a wobble about that, remember it was designed by Greek Thomson for God's sake; don't let another of his buildings in Glasgow crumble and disappear.

But the third factor is the most important. We cannot keep pretending that it's 20 years ago, or even 10. The big shops aren't coming back. **Business** rates will never again raise what they once did. And this building will not be saved until we accept city centres need to change. I've seen inside the Egyptian Halls and it deserves to be saved. But answer me this: what do we want a building like this to be for exactly?

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