

# NOOKS and CORNERS

**S**UNDAY 9 April will mark the 200th birthday of one of the most original and intriguing British architects, one of the greatest minds in Scottish architecture and one of the two designers from Glasgow who are acclaimed for their international importance: Alexander "Greek" Thomson.

So is Glasgow celebrating the bicentenary?

No. And nor is the Scottish government in Edinburgh. In fact, Glasgow city council and Historic Scotland are doing worse than nothing as they are both content to respond to the continuing decay and neglect of Thomson's finest and most extraordinary commercial building, Egyptian Halls (now reaching crisis point), shown right, with complacent inactivity.

I make no apology for banging on about Thomson and Scotland again (*Eyes* 947 & *passim ad nauseam*) as we still live (for now) in a United Kingdom, and Egyptian Halls is a building of which Glasgow (and Great Britain) ought to be proud; one which deserves to be as famous and cherished as the School of Art designed by that other great Glaswegian talent, C.R. Mackintosh.

It was built in Union Street 1870-72 as a sort of department store and exhibition gallery, complete with a progressive amenity, a "ladies' lavatory and retiring room". The façade is an extraordinary composition of exotic architectural elements which defied classical convention and logic, and employed large sheets of glass in a very inventive manner; behind, the interior was largely of iron construction. One contemporary (London) critic wrote that Egyptian Halls was: "Probably the architect's most successful effort, and we doubt if its equal, for originality, grandeur of treatment, or imposing effect, could be found in any city, not excepting the metropolis itself."

Today Thomson's façade cannot be seen as it is covered in scaffolding and hoardings, despite the fact the building stands in a handsome Victorian street in the heart of the city, next to Central Station.

Egyptian Halls has been in a dreadful state for decades, caused by problems of multiple ownership and indifference. The story is complicated. The salient points are that Glasgow

council did the right thing in 1996 and imposed a compulsory purchase order (CPO), with the eventual result that by 2008 the whole building was acquired by Derek Souter, a developer based in Dundee.

Mr Souter has devised a perfectly sensible scheme (costed at £18m last year) to have shops on the ground floor and to convert the upper floors into a hotel. He has a hotel operator on board, has hired good architects, the Morrison Partnership, and gone to one of the best conservation engineers in Scotland, John Addison, who has an impressive record saving important historic buildings.

But there seems to be antipathy to Mr Souter in Glasgow and Edinburgh, even though he has not thrown in the sponge and given up his dream of restoring Egyptian Halls and, despite rebuffs and setbacks, will not go away and is still prepared to spend a great deal of his own money on the project.

There is much about all this I confess I do not understand, not least the obscure distinction between Mr Souter's various companies – Union Street Properties, Union Street Investments, etc – which seem to have different interests in the building. When it comes to his claim that, because of an amendment to the CPO which is legally irreversible (and which was kept secret for 16 years), the council is responsible for the considerable rise in costs due to endless delay, I am out of my depth. But it is clear the council has and continues to place obstacles in his way. Why? Especially when restoration of Egyptian Halls is the key to the regeneration of Union Street.

Mr Souter seems to be the only person or concern willing to take on Egyptian Halls, but to do this he needs help – not unreasonably when dealing with a famous category A-listed building. Glasgow once offered a grant of £1m, and Historic Scotland £1.65m, toward restoration; but there is still a shortfall of more than £4m, so nothing happens and Egyptian Halls continues to decay.

Yet the city seems almost eager to throw public money at any building by Mackintosh while the Scottish government found £4m for Abbotsford House, the home of Sir Walter Scott, which was not falling down. Perhaps this is not surprising, seeing how much of Scottish tradition and identity was invented by Sir Walter, but surely a major work by "Greek" Thomson – one in severe danger – should also be important to Scottish culture.

Is there no one in the Scottish government who can bang heads together and get things moving in this bicentenary year? In fact, is there anyone in Holyrood who cares about the art of architecture in which Scots have excelled? Possibly not. But others do. "There is no question that the Egyptian Halls is the finest surviving example of an Alexander Thomson commercial building," Neil Baxter, secretary and treasurer of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, said recently. It is "of the first international importance and it would be a great pity if lack of a relatively small amount of money, in terms of public expenditure, condemned this building."

Next year sees Toshie's 150th birthday. No doubt it will be celebrated by Glasgow city council with much self-congratulatory fanfare.

'Piloti'



## Letters

Private Eye

### Osborne off-message

Sir,

Re your cover of issue 1440 – George Osborne announced as editor of the *Evening Standard* while standing in front of a TV showing an excerpt from the Tory party conference proclaiming "Our objective is to build a fairer society, where success is based on merit and not privilege." Shome mishtake, shurely?

DUNCAN SIMON.

### Article of faith

Sir,

Re *Number Crunching* (p10, *Eye* 1440); the difficulty of getting the 1993 Maastricht legislation through parliament, contrasted with the ease of triggering of Article 50, may have something to do with the fact that the former gave away UK sovereignty with no democratic mandate, while the latter is getting it back – with a democratic mandate.

NIGEL FARR-WRIGHT,  
(aka Simon Copley).

### Safety lesson

Sir,

"Dr B Ching" is correct that the RMT has a weak argument on safety in opposing DOO trains for Merseyrail (*Signal Failures*, *Eye* 1440). But rail unions have a long history of Luddite opposition to anything new.

Interestingly, the procedure for guards closing doors on Merseyrail does not help safety in the examples described. The guard closes passenger doors, steps into his/her compartment, closes the door and signals the driver to leave. So at that point the guard is inside the train unable to see anything happening as the train moves. With DOO, as the train starts the driver can look at the CCTV or mirror to make sure nothing untoward is happening. I disagree with the Dr that drivers cannot do this. So the RMT is actually opposing something which is safer.

ALISTAIR STUART,

Liverpool.

### Friendly fire?

Sir,

Your correspondent ("A police officer writes", *Letters*, *Eye* 1436) and the respondent, (*Letters*, *Eye* 1440 "Black Lives do matter") along with other readers may wish to read *New York City's review of police "Blue on Blue" shootings commissioned after two black officers were shot dead by colleagues* ([www.hks.harvard.edu/criminaljustice-backup/publications/Police-on-Police\\_Shootings.pdf](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/criminaljustice-backup/publications/Police-on-Police_Shootings.pdf)).

It may well be that attacks on officers have been launched by some claiming to support "Black Lives Matters", but the body count of black and Hispanic officers is higher at the hands of their colleagues, of all ethnicities. If you read the whole report, you will find how a white officer responding whilst distributing Christmas presents to children ended up shooting and seriously wounding a black officer whilst still dressed as Santa Claus. The black officer was in uniform.

MIKE WINNEY,

Swindon.