

Things we didn't learn at school

Despite a long tradition of community participation and campaigning, activism has been in decline in north Edinburgh. A group of long-time activists decided to do something about it, telling the story of their community and its struggles and showing the wider community that, together, they can make a difference. By **PAUL STANISTREET**

In areas like ours, everything we've ever had we fought for. It wasn't just handed to us,' says Anna Hutchison, a community activist and one of founders of the North Edinburgh Social History Group. For decades, Anna tells me, the community has had to struggle for the basic amenities others in the city take for granted, waging campaign after campaign for better housing and community conditions, better play facilities for children, and battling to keep vital local services alive. It's an amazing story of resilience and creativity in the face of injustice and indifference. But in recent years community participation has been declining, with many older activists walking away, frustrated by an 'engagement' agenda which seemed to them designed to manage dissent and control communities. There was a need, says fellow activist Roberta Blaikie, to remind themselves and their community what they were capable of achieving. 'Local people have always had to fight for the services they have,' Roberta says. 'It hasn't always been the way it is now. People don't realise that. We wanted to show people – including ourselves – all the things that people like ourselves have achieved, all the battles they have won, to give us the projects we have now.'

Anna and Roberta got together with three other veterans of north Edinburgh activism, Ian Moore, Brian Eddington and Brian Robertson, and, working closely with Edinburgh Council Community Learning and Development Worker Lynn McCabe, developed a project that, they hoped, would provide a lasting record of the community's struggles, while also reinvigorating the spirit of activism, particularly among younger people. The group set about researching and recording the history of community activism in the north Edinburgh communities of Pilton, Drylaw, Muirhouse, Granton, Royston and Wardieburn. Over a year, they collected a vast amount of material, including press cuttings and

photographs from 30 years of back issues of the *North Edinburgh News*, campaign footage and recorded interviews. The more they gathered, the more ambitious they became, eventually bringing together material on 70 years of activism in a book, *Never Give Up: A community's fight for social justice*, a short film and an exhibition of photographs. The book's launch, held at a community arts centre, was attended by more than 100 people, including old and new activists, and led directly to the founding of a new campaigning group, North Edinburgh Fights Back. It was, says Brian Eddington, 'a fantastic event, probably the biggest event there has ever been at North Edinburgh Arts'. Eager to build on what they had learned, and to engage others in the study of social history, the group worked with Lynn McCabe to develop a new course, Power to the People, charting the history of protest in Scotland.

Movements of social protest

The course, which has evolved through discussion with students and is supported by the Workers' Educational Association, uses film, literature, photography and song to explore some of the great movements of social protest. On the day I visit, Lynn and WEA tutor Derek Suttie are leading the class in discussing the Scottish Enlightenment. It's a vibrant, revealing session, getting to the heart of the group's interests and concerns and effectively dissecting some of the tensions at the heart of the Enlightenment in Edinburgh. Ian Moore, a local historian who has lived in north Edinburgh most of his life, talks about how, in the eighteenth century, Edinburgh's Old Town was home to rich and poor alike, a boisterous, boozy and unsanitary nest of closes and wynds, where prostitution was rife – the Royal Mile, he says, was home to 117 brothels – and where the 'literati' rubbed shoulders with the city's most impoverished. Pigs were driven from the fields and



△ Students from the group on a visit to Greyfriars kirk in Edinburgh

penned in the Canongate each night, and, despite the wealth in the city, the poorest ‘were still living like pigs’, Ian says. The divide between rich and poor was further cemented when the wealthy moved to the spacious and better-planned New Town, leaving the poor to the squalor of the Old Town. Undoubtedly, Enlightenment was for the rich, Anna says, but it was, nevertheless, ‘a turning point for Edinburgh’ with people all over Europe looking to the city for intellectual guidance.

Edinburgh was, and remains, a city of contrasts. One of the themes of the discussion is the divided character of Edinburgh society, which left poor people, faced with a daily struggle to survive, little option but to fight. Poverty made people angry, Lynn says, but often the only way working people could express their feelings was through violent struggle, as in the Porteous Riots of 1736. That struggle though is inadequately recorded. Ordinary people did not have the time to reflect on their lives or on the way society is structured, often telling their stories orally through poetry and song. Even now, Anna says, people do not know the real history of Edinburgh. Many in the group knew little of the Enlightenment before they started the course and most feel Scottish history is not properly taught in school or at university. Derek reads out a letter from a history graduate who, despite spending his academic career in Scotland, was ‘never allowed to study a word of Scots history’. ‘These are things we didn’t get at school,’ Ian says. ‘We got the Battle of Bannockburn, the Battle of Hastings; then they told us to get off and do your homework.’ The

class concludes with a discussion of Robert Burns’ great political poem, *A man’s a man for a’ that*. The group explores some of the themes of the poem – class, poverty and equality – and the session ends with a sung rendition of the poem.

The class is passionate about its subject. There is plenty of opinion and conjecture, but also camaraderie and a willingness to listen. The students bring their own knowledge, experience and insight to the course and there is a genuine sense of excitement at discovering more of the hidden history of Scotland. For some in the group the course has revived a lifelong fascination with history. ‘I wasn’t interested in much else at school but I was always interested in history,’ says Anna. ‘I left school at 15 and did menial jobs, factory jobs, but I always liked history and always wanted to better myself. I remember my father saying, “There’s nobody better than you and you’re no better than anyone else,” and he instilled that in me.’ When Anna was 49 she took an access course at college and went on to do a history degree at Edinburgh University. ‘I’m not saying it was easy. I found the learning quite hard. But I thought, “This is mine, I taking this, this is my turn”. I didn’t do it to get a job out of it. I did it purely for me. I found out about the areas of history that aren’t taught in schools that should be on the school curriculum, not just the Enlightenment but things like the Porteous riots, the bread strikes, the malt strikes, the red Clydesiders. It’s important to keep that history alive.’ A love of history is in Ian’s blood too. ‘I was born in Tanner’s Close [in the West Port area of Edinburgh], in the same building Burke



△ Class discussion at Royston Wardieburn Community Centre

and Hare stayed in,' he says. While his interest in local history was always keen, working on *Never Give Up* rekindled it. He found he was stimulated by each new thing he discovered. 'I take a great deal of pride in knowing something about the area in which I live,' he explains. 'I realised the status that being born in Edinburgh gives you in the world, the education and the innovations that have come of that. I like talking about Edinburgh and get a lot of enjoyment out of astonishing people with my knowledge of this part of the world.'

Joining the social history group was an important step for Ian. 'I had a brain haemorrhage on 26 March 1991,' he tells me. 'When I was released from hospital they diagnosed a left-sided homonymous hemianopia, which means I cannot see the left section in both eyes. I was working onshore on an offshore project – gas lines for the North Sea – but the hemianopia meant I couldn't work in an engineering environment. That was quite a blow.' With the support of his wife – a 'brilliant carer' who has survived her own struggle against breast cancer – Ian recovered but, unable to work, felt something was missing in his life. 'When I came home from hospital, I started evaluating myself, my situation, my condition. I was bored out of my skull. There's a lassie down the road, a cleaner in the school, and she comes across and says, "Instead of hanging about after you've finished your housework, why don't you go down to school and do one of the classes?'. Ian went along and ended up with three certificates, including two Highers – a notable achievement for someone who, in his own words, 'couldn't leave school quick enough'. 'It gave

me the confidence to realise I can listen, I can still store things. And it gave me an awful lot of pride.' He started to do his own research in social history, developing an interest which *Never Give Up* further stimulated. 'It's given me a new zest for life,' Ian says. 'I wanted to prove something to myself. When I was in recuperation seeing some of the brain injury patients made me think, Jesus Christ, how lucky am I? And I thought to myself, I've got it, why don't I use it? And I got off my arse and I did this.'

A long career in activism

Each member of the social history group can reflect on a long career in activism and community engagement. Anna got involved in activism following a family tragedy. 'I lived in a council high-rise flat in Edinburgh. The window was faulty and I had three small children at the time. I kept asking the council to repair the window, and it ended up my three-year-old son fell 180 feet to his death through the pane not getting fixed. I got really angry and the anger really got me into activism.' Anna took a lead in demanding repairs and improvements and set up a tenants' group which is still running today. 'Sometimes I do jump in; I'm not going to deny that,' Anna says. 'I demand to get things done and I think that our elected councillors should be there to listen to us, to take on board what we have to say and fight for the community.' North Edinburgh, she says, gets a bad press. 'You don't hear many success stories. But there are a lot of good things happening. What we want to instil in people, and especially young people, is that you're better than that. I do voluntary work with young people,

teenagers leaving school, and it's sad because they've got no hope. If you've not got any hope you turn to crime. It happens in every area, not just here.' Understanding the history of the place you come from and seeing that positive change is possible can help change that, Anna believes. *Never Give Up* gave her the confidence to take the message to a wider audience. 'Roberta and I did a session at a local high school and they couldn't believe the things we had achieved. We encourage them to be proud of where they come from. It's not all bad. It's changing slowly. We've got a lot more young people involved in campaigns and activism now, and that's through local people going into their schools, into youth clubs, and telling them how it's done.'

One of the best nights we've seen

Roberta has been active in the community since the late 1970s. 'I always felt that something had to be written down about the area,' she says. 'Things come and go, and with these cuts projects are starting to disappear. A lot of things have happened here that should be recorded. People don't realise these projects had to be fought for. And activists like me are getting older. If they don't record all this stuff now, it will never be recorded.' In recent years, Roberta says, activism in north Edinburgh has 'died a death' – people were walking away, disillusioned – but there are signs of a revival in groups like North Edinburgh Fights Back, which came about as a direct response to *Never Give Up*. The launch event reunited old activists but also brought them into contact with younger ones. People had a rare chance to talk about old times, reflect on what had worked and what hadn't and to think about how things might develop in future. 'It was one of the best nights this community had seen for a long, long time,' Roberta says. One activist wrote on one of the event feedback cards:

This gathering has reactivated the feeling that you are part of something – be it a group or a cause – that fights for what it believes is right for the benefit of the whole community. Well done to all you timeless grafters who must have put in a huge amount of unseen work, judging on the attendance, quality of DVD, dearth of photographic evidence and, most of all, the passionate atmosphere of our community this evening. I found myself checking for a draught but it was just the hairs standing up on the back of my neck! Such was the 'feel good' factor of coming across like-minded individuals. The talk should now be to harness this feeling of positivity and resurrect the North Edinburgh Community Alliance for the benefit of all who care about this community. Let's use our drive and experience and put it to good use for the activists of the future.

Since the launch Roberta and Anna have spoken to schools to raise awareness among younger people of what has been achieved in the area. Scran, the Scottish online learning resource, has helped the group put the material it collected into an online exhibition so anyone can view it, and almost a thousand copies of *Never Give Up* have been distributed. Some social history is now being taught in local schools as part of the Curriculum for Excellence, Anna says, in some cases supported by community-produced resources such as *Never Give Up*. 'Teachers are getting

youngsters to interview their grandparents to see what it was like when they were young. The message is getting passed on. It's to do with the way it is taught. If it's something to do with your area, you'll be more interested than if it's something that happened in London. I've even got my 12-year-old grandson doing it now. He tells his teachers about the Enlightenment. When they ask him where he learned that he says, "From my granny". My aim would be to get it taught in schools. I think every area should be like that.'

It's clear that the group has met both the initial aims of the *Never Give Up* project: to capture the history of community activism in north Edinburgh 'before it was too late'; and to reinvigorate the spirit of activism in the area. Power to the People has provided an extension of the space *Never Give Up* created for reflection and debate about things that matter to the community, wider this time and more diverse. Creating that space, and giving people an opportunity to reflect on and talk politics, was critical, Lynn explains. 'For a lot of people who have been active in groups for a while there's less and less space for people to have the discussions about politics. This is a luxury for a lot of people who have been involved in tenants' groups, campaign groups, all these kinds of things. It's a luxury for people to sit back and to reflect and think and read and discuss and debate. Although this is a course I want to see something coming out of it where ideas and education are informing action. It's also about remaking the connections in that community, which were fractured and have been fractured for years. And it's about building the alliances again, building the bridges, building the connections, and making new ones as well.'

WEA Scotland has supported both projects and sees a clear fit with its own work on political education, which has included work for Education Scotland developing online resources for political literacy and *Bathgate Once More*, a project looking at the story of the British Motor Corporation factory in Bathgate, for 25 years the centre of Britain's motor vehicle industry. *Bathgate Once More*, like *Never Give Up*, gave students a chance to draw on their own 'real, lived experience' and to direct their own learning, producing materials that can be used by teachers, linked to Curriculum for Excellence areas. 'I think it's important for children and families to be learning about Scottish history and identity,' says Elizabeth Bryan, Edinburgh Area Tutor Organiser for the WEA. 'The Curriculum for Excellence gives more scope for teachers to deliver history that is close to people's experiences, and, certainly, for the WEA, Scottish history has always been a popular topic. Planning our programmes around learners' interests means it can be personal, it can be to do with family, it can be to do with community and society or their work – and that's a great strength.' Jayne Stuart, Director of WEA Scotland, agrees. 'It's an area that is very dear to our hearts. As the world changes and financial models change, it is very difficult often to keep the focus on these areas that are really important in terms of community and society. It's where we see ourselves at the forefront of social change and social movements, something we are retaining through very tough economic times, as part of contributing to democratic society. I see education as very much part of that. It's an essential, particularly at this time in Scotland when we are on the threshold of making a major decision about our future.'

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