Heave Awa Hoose

Marlene:

Hi, welcome to Walking Woods. I'm Marlene Cramer and I'm taking you for a walk. Not in the woods, but in Edinburgh.

You are now standing in a relatively unassuming spot where Royal Mile meets Paisley close. Look at the sign that says Paisley close. Any idea what we're looking at? Well, actually we're going to hear about the building that is not here, or at least not anymore. You can only see one sign of the fact that it stood here before.

Susan:

Well, they would see a beautifully carved figure above the close, which, I believe, says: Heave awa chaps, I'm not dead yet. And it refers to a disaster that happened in that close when the building fell down.

Marlene:

This is Susan Morrison, who told us about the Great Michael, again. This time she is telling us about the Heave Awa House, a seven-storey building…

Susan:

This is a house on the High Street which has been in floors. And then the floors are separated, not as we know them today in nice, neat little apartments, but in rooms and then even the rooms are sublet, so you can have entire families in 1/2 of a room, and it was very, very, very crowded.

Marlene:

And this very crowded seven-storey high building collapsed here on the 24th of November 1861. Let's see how this could happen.

Susan:

The thing to know about the High Street Edinburgh and the Old Town is it's built upward because they couldn't expand outwards. They're just they stayed within the city walls as much as they could. So wood was a commonly used building material, as you will know.

Marlene:

But the collapse of the building was, of course, not the Timber's fault.

Susan:

It's not the construction. Several witnesses, oh, quite a lot of people go: Oh, there’s nothing wrong with that building. It was that it wasn't looked after properly. That's what everyone complains about the fact that… the damp, it smells, the wood… the building is buckling, and, everyone, they're going: You need to fix this.

Marlene:

A resident detailed this in an interview for the Caledonian Mercury later.

Susan:

And he says that he was very angry because it was visible, sinking in the roof of his shop. To the extent that the wood did smell damp and could be pulled away. And a lot of people who live in the house are complaining about this. Mrs Baxter, who was one of the survivors, said that she couldn't, for some time, she couldn't open the door of the house because the frame, which is part of the construction of the building, remember, the door frame is actually the front of the building, and she can't get the door open because it's buckled.

Marlene:

This should all have been cause for concern. But then the straw that broke the camel's back…

Susan:

There's also been a baker next door, and this is just not going to help. He's decided to expand his bakery by knocking through a wall, which people can do.

Marlene:

Removing a structural wall just like that was not the best of ideas.

Susan:

And then on that particular night the building starts to weigh.

Marlene:

And that's not all of it.

Susan:

When the building collapses, it doesn't just fall down. Puf. Like that. It actually begins to tremble. There's a lady on the 2nd floor and she is talking about how the building is shaking beneath her feet. But she started to run, and the door flies open and she runs through it and she gets out into the street.

Another family wake up. Don’t forget this happens in the middle of the night. The people are in their bed. Another family, the mother and the daughter were sitting by the fire. The rest of the family's gone to bed. The building starts to tremble and dust comes down on their heads, and so she shouts to her husband to get the two children who are in bed. He grabs the younger children, her and her daughter hold hands and they start running. At that point the floor opens up beneath our feet, so the mother and the daughter are on one side of this expanding gap. And the husband is on the other side and he throws the two children and she catches them and he jumps across what he describes as the “widening chasm”. And I would imagine that it was. And they scrambled into the stair and as they're running down the stairs, the doors are breaking and smashing around them and they get out into the street.

So it doesn't happen suddenly. It takes about 10 to 15 minutes before the building actually completely gives way.

Marlene:

But even though this must have been really terrifying, it probably saved a lot of people because it gave them time to escape. This might also be one of the reasons why people took such an interest in this particular collapse, because people lived to tell the tale. And their story caused some outrage because the terrible condition of the building had been known for so long, but had now led to the death of 35 people.

Susan:

Because of the death toll and the way that it happened, the procurator fiscal, Scotland's legal establishment, took more of an interest in the case and at this point they start to go: No the, you know, the… you can’t have… the stone building becomes insistent upon and wood is then only used as scaffolding.

But it's because of the number of people who die. And it's also because there are people there who have… who are of some substance in the town. Some of the people who live there, coopers, policemen... If it had just been a lot of poor folk, they would probably just go: Ah well there you go... But it was very traumatic.

Marlene:

And so it was that we learned at least some lessons from the story.

Susan:

Building regulations, I think, are changed. Legal action is taken to prevent subletting in quite the same way, but the the city is deeply shocked. It's a very modern story. People getting worried about things, not being listened to, and then the thing that they feared happens and it collapses.

Marlene:

It is a modern story, indeed. Some of our modern building regulations had to be written in blood. Timber and the structures of buildings in cities was banned for a period of time after many buildings and lives were lost in the Great Fire of London, but nowadays many buildings can be built in timber, and our research at Edinburgh Napier University and research all around the world keeps making wood construction safer and more efficient at the same time. Recently, wood construction has found its way back into the focus of architects and many impressive and sustainable construction works. We will see one example of modern construction that involves… some timber… at the last stop of the tour. What remains of the tenement that stood here as the plague above Paisley close that reminds us of the tragedy with the famous sentence:

Susan:

“Heave awa chaps, I’m not dead yet”. The phrase comes about because it's a laddy, a boy, who's buried under the rubble. And as they're digging for survivors as the days go by, there are fewer and fewer survivors. It’s just bodies get brought out. And suddenly they hear a voice shouting. “Heave awa lads I’m not dead yet.” They dig in and they get him out.

Marlene:

And this is the story of the Heave Awa house. You can now make your way further down Royal Mile to our next stop.