

The Importance of Being Awkward – The Broughton Spurtle Stirs it up!

✖ After 16 years, The Broughton Spurtle – one of Edinburgh's oldest hyperlocal papers – is still making waves. Alan McIntosh – a longstanding contributor – explains why:-

"I didn't get involved in community journalism until after the birth of my first child. In the course of a few weeks, I stopped seeing Edinburgh as a scenic playground and realised queasily that it was a gigantic conspiracy bent on ruining my family's life and prospects. Helping out with The Broughton Spurtle seemed a good way of discovering what was going on and magnifying local voices in response.

That was in 1996, two years after the paper first emerged out of a successful anti-Poll Tax campaign and an unsuccessful battle to preserve London Street Primary School. Since then – always produced by volunteers and not for profit – it has appeared almost every month, researching and sharing hyperlocal news in an area roughly bounded by Leith Walk, Pilrig Street, Broughton Road, Canonmills, Dundas Street and York Place. Our readers and interests occasionally stray wider, but the nuts and bolts of our coverage comprise Broughton's planning, transport, environment, culture and history.

We also report the fascinating minutiae which interest locals and do not concern remoter organs. I would argue that such shared hyperlocal experience – however seemingly trivial – binds communities together, makes neighbours more mutually accountable and willing to stand up for each other. Take graffiti, for example. For the last few years, Spurtle has bucked the trend of endlessly lambasting young people who

scribble on buildings. We are as heartily sick of tags as anyone, but we celebrate creative, well-executed, daring graffiti which comments upon or beautifies odd corners in this part of town. In recent months there has been a mysterious proliferation of high-quality works here, which we have gratefully featured. The Scotsman doesn't care about Audrey Hepburn appearing on a wall; locals do – it reminds us that we're from Broughton.

I say 'we', but there is no permanent or closed panel of authors/editors with a fixed agenda. Spurtle is the sum of its parts, with a wide variety of people coming and going, contributing time, expertise, ideas, articles, and contrasting opinions.

The paper's self-imposed contentious brief quite often makes waves. We have, for example, irritated swathes of New Town readers by putting the case for wheelie-bins. In the last few days, we found positive things to say about redevelopment at Canonmills. We have more than once enjoyed prickly relations with residents associations and community councils. Spurtle's usefulness lies in causing debate, in occasionally being awkward, 'generally stirring things up a bit'.

The paper tries to make engaging with urban life, civic processes, the general hurly-burly and argy-bargy of shared spaces as accessible and enjoyable as possible. We are pro active citizenship. We are against passivity. We dislike the negative, opportunistic, too-often inaccurate and derivative cynicism of a certain evening newspaper. And if all that sounds smug, I should also point out that we're also pro having a laugh. We laugh often and loudly at pomposity, including our own.

In October 2009, the paper launched a website carrying back issues and additional articles to those appearing in the printed edition. The site has mushroomed, greatly increasing our circulation and streams of revenue, and introducing us to

a new audience seeking online sources of news and entertainment.

Most of these new readers live or work locally, but our impression is that they are predominantly in their 20s and 30s and negotiating adult relationships with the political and social city for the first time. Online social and news media allow them to do so selectively, across new pathways of time and space which have not been explored before. I find this a fascinating environment – a 21st-century agora in what Cllr Dundas memorably describes as ‘the mind hive of the Edinburgh people’.

Spurtle aims to be at its centre. It is ‘Broughton’s free, independent stirrer’, and remains the city’s only publication to rhyme with turtle.

[Issue 188 of the Broughton Spurtle will appear in print (pubs, clubs, cafés shops, galleries) on Monday 1 November.

It is also available online by clicking [here](#) And you can follow it on Twitter @thespurtle.]