

Opinion – Friends of Craighouse Campaign



by Rosy Barnes of The Friends of Craighouse

A recent sale of the land at Craighouse to a developer has resulted in the formation of a campaign group who want to preserve the green space and safeguard public access to it.

Craighouse is one of Edinburgh's hidden gems – a cluster of historic buildings from the oldest building on the site, Old Craig, to the celebrated Sidney Mitchell mansionhouse of New Craig – complete with beautiful grounds and spectacular views. Until recently it was home to Edinburgh Napier University, but they are now moving out little by little.

This is the landscape that the Save Our Craighouse campaign is trying to protect, since it was bought by property speculators Mountgrange Real Estate Opportunity Fund in 2011, who are seeking planning permission for 160,000 square feet of new build across some of the most beautiful parts of the site.

With over 460 active supporters and a petition of over 4,000 signatures, The Friends of Craighouse is a community group of local people – mainly from Craiglockhart and Morningside but also neighbouring areas. A protest on the hill saw 300 people (including families, children and pets!) all turning out on a bleak Sunday to show their love of the orchard and their refusal to stand by and let it be obliterated by three storey housing.

Children made banners and painted signs. People in their eighties made their way up the hill with walking aids. This is a place that inspires great strength of feeling.

Hundreds of people joined the Friends after they saw what was proposed at the developers' exhibitions last September. 160,000 square feet of new-build development (more than all the listed buildings put together), three storey houses across the beloved orchard, an excessively huge development around the existing entrance across the car-park, green space and part of the woodland – roads moved, 400 car-parking spaces, 600 residents... in an area of the city that already struggles in terms of traffic, parking and schools.

Every day locals from the communities around Craighouse walk out of the woods at the top of the site and cross into the historic orchard to have their breath taken away. Before them is one of the finest views in the whole of Edinburgh. To the left the Firth twinkles in the winter sun, to the right, on a good day, you can see North Berwick Law's distinctive cone reaching to the sky, with Arthur's Seat, the castle and the rest of the city in between.

It is a view that never fails to surprise and enchant. Described in the developers' architects' own conservation audit as "spectacular, unrivalled within Edinburgh" – it is one of the reasons, along with the 50 acres of woodland – that Thomas Clouston described Craighouse as one of the "most beautiful sites in Edinburgh" and decided to site his grand hospital here.

That these views and this landscape would be good for mental health and well-being (not to mention good for physical well-being) was an idea that Clouston recognised and helped to pioneer. So it is sad that we now seem to lack a proper appreciation of these benefits in a country that struggles to keep up with Europe on health and well-being statistics, where more and more of our green spaces and wild sites fall to developers.

The most important thing of all to our campaign is the threat to the protected green space. Let me say that again –

protected green space. Mountgrange wants permission to build across green Open Space of Great Landscape Value in a Conservation Area, and some local nature conservation sites. If this is granted, green space all over the city will be under threat from development, whilst brownfield sites remain undeveloped – in some cases half-developed or abandoned. The build on this area is completely against policy and contrary to Edinburgh's Local Plan. Building on this incredibly sensitive site will put the rest of the city's green spaces under threat.

The “developers” – and I'll explain the inverted commas in a bit – want to make the community believe it is a choice between excessive new-build and the listed buildings falling derelict. This threat should not be bowed to. We have found out there were, in fact, six bids to Napier. The “developers” knew this was protected land before they bought the site. Indeed, further research into Mountgrange's past projects have not proved reassuring. Over 20 years, we have been unable to find a large residential development taken to full development .

So what are the developers up to? Are they really intending to fund a full development at Craighouse or are they, in fact, speculating on the land – with the intention of selling it on with planning permission for new-build – taking money out of the site and making it harder for the next developer who takes on the site to realise a profit without yet more new-build?

And what of the argument that we need more housing? People always seem to assume more housing is always needed? However, statistics show that what we need is more affordable housing. Do we really need more luxury housing for the super-rich? (For anyone who believes that Old Craig, proposed to be kept as just one family dwelling won't be worth several millions – think again. The people who buy this “dwelling” will be very rich indeed!)

And what about when these incredibly rich people with access to their very expensive lawyers move in? Will they really want to look out their sitting-room window onto the site of a massive new-build housing estate? Will they really want the general public walking through green space just outside their door? Or will they build more walls and impose more restrictions to keep the public away?

£14m of public money has been poured into the site – largely from Historic Scotland due to the site's significance to our Scottish Heritage. That heritage should not be experienced by just a privileged few.

The proposals make no sense. It is against the Local Plan, it is against the protections on the site, it is bad for green spaces across Edinburgh and it is against all sense and logic.

Any development at Craighouse needs to recognise this site's unique relationship between public and private. It needs to restrict the amount of new-build to keep risks down and for the sake of the old buildings – and it needs to recognise the right of the general public to enjoy the beautiful grounds and keep accessible the external enjoyment of these extraordinary buildings – into which so much public money has been poured for the sake of our Scottish heritage.

We believe there is a positive solution to the problems at Craighouse. But it will take someone serious about creating a workable reasonable development, working in proper consultation with the general public, and with a strong track record of success to make it work.

Not a property speculator who wants to take money out of the site and sell it on.

Friends of Craighouse [have a website here.](#)

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