

Paying respects to The Queen – a glimpse of history

After a restorative break following the end of the Festival, Edinburgh again became the focus of national and international attention this week.

The city centre swarmed with visitors and locals drawn into town to catch a glimpse of Queen Elizabeth II's cortege, following its 180 mile journey from Balmoral. On Monday, The Queen's coffin was taken to St Giles, allowing those in Edinburgh to pay their respects as she 'lay in rest'.



HM The Queen – the cortege leaves Holyrood to travel up the

Royal Mile to St Giles, 12th Sept 2022 © 2022 J.L. Preece

It is often said that queuing is a national sport in the UK. The walk to St Giles was certainly an experience that required patience. Periods of momentum and steady treading forward, were followed by others standing still.

As we arrived at The Meadows, there was a sense of energy and excitement with the queue lengthening rapidly. At 5.15pm it was clear many had come straight from work. Others had travelled to Edinburgh specifically for the event "I thought of going to Balmoral. But Edinburgh's set up for this sort of thing", said one. Indeed it is.

There was a clear sense of being part of something significant. The long hours it would take to reach the destination were only in the back of people's minds. Even at the start, the extent of the queue was worthy of remark. "Holy Moses, where's the end of it?!". Many were already committing to the long haul, with one lady near us saying "I'll stay here all night if I need to". There was also an awareness that the experience of seeing the coffin would be fairly fleeting but that this was not the main point. As one gentleman near us put it, "it's more what you feel than what you see". The lovely evening light which bathed the queuers at this point helped keep spirits up, as awareness grew of the long hours ahead. As forward progress became somewhat glacial, one of the stewards admitted that "you're in for a late night".

Comradeship had built in the queue. Snacks were beginning to be shared, as were snippets of information. This conjecture all added to the slight sense of confusion and uncertainty. It slowly dawned on people that this initial queue in the Meadows was something of a preliminary. We were merely waiting to be given the wristbands that would allow us to join the main queue from George Square to the High Kirk – "then the real queue starts". Concern spread that it would take more than two hours in the 'real queue'.

As we passed the public tennis courts, many were struggling to emulate Swiatek and Alcaraz in the cooling breeze and darkening sky. Returning errant tennis balls gave those in the queue something to do, something to loosen their tiring limbs. We walked along Archers Walk into a stiffening breeze. The Royal Company of Archers, who have their headquarters nearby at 66 Buccleuch Street, have been thrust into the limelight over the last few days. They have played a leading role in the various ceremonies this week.



The coffin of HM The Queen processing up the Royal Mile to St Giles Cathedral guarded by the Company of Royal Archers 12th Sept 2022 © 2022 J.L. Preece

At the East End, opposite Summerhall, some entered the Meadows blinking. Blinking in the low sun and in amazement at the length of the queue stretching out before them. At 7 o'clock, with the sun dipping and an autumnal chill in the breeze, the mood became a little bit more fractious, especially when a few grumpy cyclists struggled to get past "you're taking over the whole path!". Some entrepreneurial students were deliberately emphasising the length of the queue in order to drum up sales

for the 'kit kats, water and cupcakes' they were offering for sale. Business picked up as peckishess took hold.

The density of the trees next to The University Library added to the darkness. A few jolly stewards tried to inject some optimism and a sense of momentum: "you're nearly at the wristbands...wristbands are good!!". The process of having the wrist bands affixed jumbled up the order of the queue somewhat, and new chatting partners were formed. How long was it now until we reached St. Giles? "How long is a piece of string?" became a common response. Thoughts went to those near the rear of the queue, who still had many hours ahead merely to reach 'the wristbands'. The street lights around George Square created a dreamlike feel.

In the underpass at Potterow Port, the chatter became loud, echoing through this 'retrofuturist' spot. On West College Street, there was a cinematic feel, the street lights creating atmospheric noirish shadows. However, the rather uneven setts were starting to bring aches and pains to the fore "I'm not sure how I'll get out of bed in the morning", "my knees are killing me". The bottleneck on Chambers Street was significant. At 9.30 progress stalled as we peered into the empty museum beside us. The lack of momentum was really testing: "if only we could just keep walking, we'd be okay". For those who lived outwith Edinburgh, there were encroaching fears about how they would get home. When were the last trains and buses?. Some used humour as a coping mechanism. "Long live the King" was called out, as a black taxi passed.

Finally, we reached George IV Bridge, the final leg. However, the massed ranks ahead of us had a dispiriting effect. "This is the worst part", said one of those close to us, aware that we were past the point of no return. There was no point leaving the queue now and wasting four and a half hours. A firm reminder from the security staff. that no food or drink was allowed to be taken in, led to a rapid bit of scoffing. Some items were chucked away, flooding the bins. It was all

too reminiscent of the bin strike at the end of the Fringe. Around the National Library, the intensity rose, the area flooded with yellow jackets and police officers. One stated that though they had expected very large numbers, this was "more than expected". The airport style security checks were conducted thoroughly but fairly swiftly. Clearly this was the main source of the delays further down the line.



Inside St Giles

Finally, into West Parliament Square at 10.20pm, and our first view of S. Giles, looking beautiful in the light with a near full moon behind. The mood quietened and final photos were taken.

The whole reason behind our patience was sometimes forgotten

along the route. Here, the full solemnity of the situation finally dawned on people. Into St. Giles at 10.31. in single file. Immediately, we were struck by the warm glow inside. There was a great stillness and calmness as we neared the coffin. It felt like we were gliding along not walking.

Members of the Royal Archers, clearly there for some time, stood impressively still. Solemn heads were bowed towards the coffin which, significantly, had the Scottish crown on top of it. There was patience as people stopped for reflection, with several wiping away tears. As we stepped quietly towards the exit, necks were craned to catch one final glimpse. Slowly we filed out, back into the darkness though the chill had gone. Passing the Mercat Cross, there was a quiet stillness as people absorbed what they had witnessed, trying to capture memories they would carry for years.

The next morning, I walked across the sunlit Meadows. The chilliness of the preceding evening had disappeared, as had the large queues. These again were to build as others (around 26,000 people in total) were about to start their long journey to 'the wristbands' and then to S. Giles for their own glimpse of history.

In time, the convoluted journey to St. Giles will be forgotten, but the memories of St Giles and the lying in rest will surely linger.

The Queen's children hold a Vigil beside Her Majesty's coffin in St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh. pic.twitter.com/8VCF09SAp9

– The Royal Family (@RoyalFamily) [September 12, 2022](#)



St. Giles. Photo: © 2022, Martin P. McAdam
www.martinmcadam.com