

# **Is this Edinburgh's best charity shop?**

**There are few things which have changed more in the last few decades than the character and status of charity shops. There are now well over 100 of them in Edinburgh and they can be some of the liveliest shops in the city.**

The preserve of behatted ladies of a certain age, charity shops used to be somewhat drab, cluttered and fusty places. These shops were a far cry from the carefully curated shelves we now see, with arty prints, vintage items and designer clothes. The whole sector has moved upmarket with 'boutique' charity shops now common. A relatively new one, Cattitude Boutique on Dundas Street, has an active Instagram presence. Indeed many 'lifestyle vloggers' have fetishised the charity shop as brimming repositories of quirky, vintage curios. They often feel like small museums of the recent past, providing nostalgia for older generations and vintage thrills for the young.



Photo by Artificial Photography on Unsplash

This is the trend characterised by Mary Portas' makeover of the Save the Children store in Stockbridge in 2009, which sought to 'create a real buzz around second-hand shopping'. Certainly, a sojourn through the charity shops in Stockbridge has become something of a cultural activity for some. Similar agglomerations of charity shops can be found in the Southside, Tollcross, Leith Walk, Dalry and Morningside. Previously a proliferation of charity shops might have been considered to characterise a somewhat down-at-heel area. They are now believed to add lustre and to draw people towards an area. Clusters of charity shops are seen as an enticing destination.

Charity shops used to be great places for bargain-hunters. While bargains are still to be found by the eagle-eyed, most of those who work in charity shops are now savvy to the vintage market and what things are worth. As a result, charity shop prices are far more realistic, with quality items being sold at premium prices. This is surely a good thing for the charities but it does limit opportunities for bargain-finding.

Most people looking for genuine bargains and things to 'upcycle' tend to visit auctions.

Charity shops are now well-ordered and professionally managed. Managers are more discerning in what they accept and what they put on display, but that can lead to a sense of a creeping homogeneity. The closure of the St Columba's Hospice shop in Stockbridge seemed to signal the end for one of the more traditional shops. It was old-fashioned in its appearance and layout and was staffed by a group of chatty mature ladies, but they have now reopened on Hamilton Place. The Lothian Cat Rescue shop on Easter Road is another of this type left in the city. The charity shop sector now resembles many others with a great deal of turnover. Tired and unprofitable stores tend to disappear quickly rather than limping on.

Looking at the Edinburgh Charity Shop and Reuse Map (last published in 2012), many shops have disappeared, though many new ones have popped up in the intervening decade. Charity shops are increasingly found in new locations, taking advantage of empty units in the city centre and shopping centres, such as at Ocean Terminal. The large Salvation Army Donation Centre in Piershill is another example of the trend. Similarly, many stores have undergone substantial makeovers in this period – staying the same no longer seems an option.

Many businesses closed during lockdown and that also affected the charity shop sector. The Debra shop in Marchmont was one victim. In similar fashion, Pregnancy Counselling & Care (Scotland) made the 'difficult decision' to close its shops in Gorgie and Leith. Their shops were of the old-fashioned variety. The pandemic was the final straw as their financial situation had been 'precarious for several years'. The income at both of its stores had been declining for some time, 'in line with similar operations within the charity sector'. In short, their shops have been the victims of the increasingly competitive environment charity shops now have to operate in.

Charity shops therefore reflect wider economic and social changes. As part of their changing character, the staff found in most are generally younger. They include a lot of youngsters working there as part of the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. You will also find a fairly multinational mix. For many newcomers to Edinburgh from abroad, it's a way to gain job experience and deal with the catch 22 situation they often face where their lack of experience of working in the UK can make it difficult to enter the world of work. There certainly seems to be a new energy on the charity shop scene. At the same time, the sector seems to be moving towards greater uniformity, and it is easy to feel that in doing so some of the chaotic charm of charity shop shopping has been lost.

One outlier remains Thrift Shop 2 in Lochrin Buildings, Tollcross. It is run by the small [Birthlink](#) charity, which supports the well-being and welfare of all people affected by adoption. Birthlink is currently marking the 40th anniversary of the Adoption Contact Register, which 'invites adopted people, birth parents, adoptive relatives and other birth relatives to register their details in the hope that there will be a link allowing future contact'.



Thrift Shop 2 strikes a nice balance between the charity shops of the past and those of today. Like the charity shops of

yesteryear, it is groaning with stuff, but the general quality is higher. The bookshelves are full of interesting tomes and good editions of classic novels; not the fairly rubbishy paperbacks, outdated travel guides and yellowing cookery books which used to dominate in charity shops.

This narrow Aladdin's cave of a shop is packed with a multiplicity of interesting and useful items – as well as several slightly bizarre ones. These generally appear on the shop's entertaining social media output. Their enthusiastic and engaging manager Neil Gascoyne clearly revels in his role. His passion is exemplified by the creative window displays (which he put together with his colleague Fiona). These attract attention and praise for their imaginative use of vintage items. A memorable one made brilliant use of an old Picca projector with coloured threads flowing out of it onto a white screen. As Neil puts it, Fiona has "brought her own brand of chaos to the window displays". There seems to be a particular obsession with strange and upsetting dolls(!). This weirdness is one of the things that makes Thrift Shop 2 stand out.

Neil admits that the distinctive character of the shop is as much due to circumstances as conscious planning. Thrift Shop 2 is 'slightly tucked away on a side street and because we're not a big name charity, we've got to do something different to stand out'. Plus, 'the shop has been like this for many years anyway', so 'if we change now it would upset a lot of people. Here Neil is referring to the large band of very loyal customers and donors who visit the shop. He is also referencing the fact that the Thrift Shop was opened in the late 1950s, originally as The Thrift Centre. This makes it the oldest charity shop in Scotland. Thrift Shop 2 started in 1976 (the premises left to the charity in someone's will), initially as a bookshop before morphing into the idiosyncratic store we know today.





These days, Thrift Shop 1 on Bruntsfield Place focuses more on clothes and books, while Thrift Shop 2 is for those looking for 'bric a brac' and things difficult to classify and indeed on some occasions difficult to determine what they actually are! Often appeals are made by Neil on social media for followers to help work out what a particular item is and what it might be used for. As Neil puts it, 'you never know what you're going to find' – it's like a treasure hunt – there's a great chance of a 'random find'. The serendipity factor is particularly strong in a shop like this. Others which seem to

do the same include the five Bethany shops, which are certainly some of the best places to pick up quality vintage items.



For Neil it's difficult to compare the Thrift Shops with other charity shops, which often have fairly tough targets to meet. Most charity shops are parts of large charities with dozens or even hundreds of shops (Oxfam have about 750 in the UK). As long as the Thrift Shops make 'enough for the charity to function' then that is sufficient. This is also one reason why the shop is somewhat cheaper than most charity shops. The overheads are low and they own the premises, so are not paying rent. This creates a lot of turnover and means it's worth visiting the shop regularly – there are always new and interesting items. The amount of stuff donated and Birthlink's



desire to avoid chucking stuff out means it's a 'constant battle fighting the tide of stuff'. Because they accept most things, this means 'the weirder and more unusual items often end up here as they know that they will appreciate it. We are a good home for sinister dolls and other strange items'.

Neil doesn't feel that the other charity shops are really direct competition. Indeed, having other charity shops nearby provides a 'halo' effect as people are attracted to areas with a gaggle of charity shops, as people 'do the rounds'. Certainly, Thrift Shop 2 nicely complements nearby places such as Shelter on Home Street which is a stylishly curated shop, typical of the 'post-Portas' variety.



Charity shops have taken on a role previously fulfilled by the



eccentric 'junk shops' which used to proliferate in areas such as Gorgie, Dalry and Leith. They largely died out in the late 1990s. Here you would find a wide range of miscellaneous items, much of it taken from house clearances. The Wee Man shops on Easter Road are perhaps the last of this breed. They were great places to track down spare parts for audio equipment and the like. Like a charity shop such as Thrift Shop 2, they were also great places to pick up unique objects - things you didn't even know existed or knew you might need.

Charity shops have become a prominent and rich part of Edinburgh life, Some bemoan their proliferation but many more donate to, browse and buy from them on a regular basis. It's great that places such as Thrift Shop 2 continue to thrive, adding variety and charm to Edinburgh's charity shop scene.

Sometimes the best way to be different is staying the same.