

Fettes – over and out at 50

Tom Wood, author and former Edinburgh police officer, inspects for one last time the landmark building which was home to the city's police force

It had been over 20 years in the planning but when the Fettes Avenue headquarters of Edinburgh City Police opened for business on Saturday 18 May 1974, it was state of the art.

Gone was the old Victorian HQ in the city's historic High Street – now all policing services would be in one modern building – and there was space aplenty. It was just as well, for only a year later Fettes became the headquarters of a much larger organisations when police forces were amalgamated and Lothian & Borders Police came into being.

The second largest force in Scotland, "L&B's" 3000 officers and 1500 support staff covered a vast area stretching from the Scottish Borders to East and Midlothian, The City of Edinburgh and West Lothian, altogether a population of one million people.

Whether by accident or design Fettes was big enough to cope. The building was ultra-modern with a bespoke Operations Room, cell complex, and a dedicated Identification Parade Suite. In the separate CID Tower were housed all the city's detectives as well as specialist units that served the entire Force.



The former Fettes Police HQ is now surplus to requirements –
Picture Alan Simpson

Criminal Intelligence, the Serious Crime Squad, Fraud Squad and Special Branch were all located near each other and close to a specially designed suite built to accommodate major incidents and murder investigations.

These facilities were to be well used as the new Force soon faced two long running hunts for serial killers Robert Black and The World's End killer Angus Sinclair. Between them these investigations were to span over 30 years.

On the top two floors of the CID Tower were the Criminal Records Office and behind locked doors, the Forensic Laboratory & Fingerprints Department. In other parts functions of the Force Headquarters included Planning, Firearms, Licensing and Lost Property and there was even a modern print room and a large canteen.

On the second floor was housed the Executive Suite where the Chief Constable, his Deputy and three Assistants all had their offices. This opulently carpeted sanctum was viewed with trepidation. It was usually very good news or very bad news when you were summoned to the red carpet.



Tom Wood, author and former Deputy Chief Constable of Lothian & Borders Police – Picture Alan Simpson

Outside the main building was a large garage complex housing the Traffic Department, vehicle workshops and luxurious accommodation for police dogs and horses. So grand were the stables that when Queen Elizabeth formally opened the building, the equine expert monarch commented that the stables were better than hers.

Elsewhere was housed a radio workshop and the complex outdoor facilities included large playing fields and top class sport

and recreation facilities. There was even a licensed bar on the premises – open at lunch times and evenings from Monday to Friday – and many a lengthy social evening was kicked off from the bar at Fettes.

The 1980s and '90s was a time of huge advances in police use of computers and forensic science, but Fettes coped well and bulky computer equipment was successfully accommodated.

But if the facilities in the building was revolutionary, the build quality was pure 1970s. Brick-built with flat roofs and poorly fitted metal framed windows, it was practical rather than beautiful, especially when compared with the gothic Victorian splendour of the adjacent David Bryce designed Fettes College.

In the early hours of 19 July, 1992, the design shortcomings of the building comprised the security of what should have been Edinburgh's most secure institution – apart from possibly HMP Saughton. The metal framed windows had always been difficult to secure properly and it was through a ground floor window that a thief entered the ground floor offices of the Scottish Crime Squad to steal secret files. The ensuing scandal, nicknamed "Fettesgate" by a jubilant media, was one of the most embarrassing in the history of Lothian & Borders Police.



Fettes under construction



Queen Elizabeth at the official opening

Eventually in 2013, Lothian & Borders Police disappeared when the national force – Police Scotland – was formed and Fettes lost its headquarters function. Gradually, many of the support functions moved out, leaving the building as an administrative hub.

Time was catching up with the 1970s building. Leaks in the flat roofs affected the lightweight concrete used in the construction, with parts of the building deemed unsafe and closed and repair costs would have been prohibitive.

Besides, use of police buildings was changing so it was only a matter of time before Fettes was declared obsolete and

scheduled for disposal. In due course the old building will be pulled down and the site redeveloped – leaving no trace of its former existence.

- Fifty years to the day of the opening of Fettes Police Headquarters – Saturday 18 May – Police Scotland and The Retired Police Officers Association are inviting **serving and former officers** back to Fettes for the last time. Photographs and displays covering the half century at Fettes are bound to jog old memories, as will the many old colleagues who will gather on the day. For more information contact elbphs@gmail.com



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Picture Alan Simpson

Aerial shot of Fettes HQ Police Scotland