

## The hole

This short piece has nothing to do with science, but it has everything to do with an Edinburgh summer.

The window of my 'office' - actually a converted store room next to the lab – looks out across a narrow, cobbled lane to the back of Edinburgh's Victorian-Gothic student union building. The lane may be narrow but it can be busy with delivery trucks and noisy with escaping liquid nitrogen, revving diesel engines and the merry cries of delivery men who have dropped yet another heavy parcel on their toes. For most of the year, the noise and the view from my room amuses the students and post-docs in my group, who share well-appointed, carpeted offices beyond the opposite side of our labs and enjoy magnificent views southward to the Pentland hills. For one month, though, their gentle mocking turns to envy and my place seems like a haven of peace.

The month is August – the time when Edinburgh hosts the Edinburgh Festival and its (much larger) 'Fringe', and various Acts of Art are committed all over the city. 'All over' but especially, it seems, in George Square, right outside this building. The students' view is now of the legs and udder of a massive, inverted purple cow the inside of which is a cabaret venue; the place is full of tents, there is music everywhere – LOUD music – and a generally carnival atmosphere. The place is thronged with people from the crack of dawn as arty-types measure it (i.e. about 11am) until about 2am, and walking out of the building one has to have the swerving skills of a Rugby international to avoid people giving out leaflets for their shows. Many of us do end up going to some shows, of course, but in that upturned-collar way that people enter betting shops, hoping not to be seen by more resolute 'none-of-that-arty-nonsense-for-me' colleagues in our department. If the image of an upturned coat collar seems unrealistic for August, remember this is Edinburgh.

This year, the regular pattern of the rest of the lab wearing ear defenders at their desks while I enjoy the relative tranquility of the back lane was broken by a *whoosh*, a big drop in water pressure in the lab, and a new fountain appearing unexpectedly in the lane. The water company came quickly, dug a small hole, shut the water off and, as I passed on my way home, stood about peering into their hole looking perplexed. The next morning the hole was a lot larger, and a small nucleus of workmen worked among the huge and ancient-looking iron pipes with picks and shovels while others came

and went carrying mysterious pieces of equipment. By lunchtime, when I again passed on my way to a deli, a crowd had gathered. Curious, I hung about behind them wondering what was happening. All I could see, between the legs of the onlookers, was an occasional glimpse of harassed-looking workmen down the hole, muttering and trying not to swear. Puzzled, I left. On my return there were even more people, including photographers and at least one news reporter. I still could not see why.

Next morning, all became a little more clear: next to the still open hole was a notice “This is not a Fringe Event – kindly f--- off”. At lunchtime, the notice was still there, but barely visible beyond an even larger throng of people crowding to the taped-off edges. The three chaps in the hole were getting really annoyed by now, but their occasional outbursts of frustration – and if you have never heard a wet-through Glaswegian workman expressing dissatisfaction with life then you do not really know what an 'outburst of frustration' is – were greeted with thunderous applause by the delighted onlookers. More men outside the hole tried in vain to shepherd the audience away but the harder they tried to explain, the more applause rose. Some young women caused a minor stampede trying to get a selfies taken next to a workman on the surface, whose physique suggested that he either did a lot of shovelling or spent a lot of time in the gym. It did not help that some quick-thinking fast food sales-people had begun to work the audience, selling soft drinks and hot-dogs from their trays, bringing yet more people in. I had to leave for a resit exam board over in the hospital site just as the police arrived, to be greeted by the audience applauding them too, and clearly taking them as yet part of this amazing expression of physical theatre.

I am sad to say that I missed the denouement. The next day, the still-open hole was covered with very solid-looking steel plates: perhaps the final filling in will wait for the comparative sanity of September.

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August 2016