

SCOTTISH CULTURE COURSE

# The Edinburgh Festivals

The festivals of Edinburgh: origins, money, the city and how to judge the claims

10 Chapters

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Generated with Claude

THE EDINBURGH FESTIVALS

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# The Edinburgh Festivals

Course 5 · Chapter 1 · Why Festivals? Scope & Sources

*Every August the population of Edinburgh seems to double. Stages appear in car parks, in pubs and in church halls, the Royal Mile fills with flyers, and the sound of a bagpipe competes with a comedian's microphone. How did one small northern capital become a festival city, and which of the stories told about it are documented? This first chapter sets out the scope of the course, the main festivals and their calendar, and the sources to use. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".*

## Why Edinburgh?

### A setting

A castle on a volcanic rock, a medieval Old Town and a Georgian New Town, all in one compact centre that is easy to walk (check the UNESCO listing of the Old and New Towns). Venues sit close together, which suits a festival.

### A moment

The first festival followed the Second World War, when European countries wanted to rebuild cultural life, and Edinburgh offered a city undamaged by bombing (check this claim, Chapter 2).

### A habit

Once one festival succeeded, others settled in the same weeks and months, and the city organised itself around them. A festival city is partly made by habit and by civic decisions (check).

## The Main Festivals

| Festival (check each) | Roughly when | What it is |
|---|---|---|
| Edinburgh International Festival | August; first held 1947 | A curated programme of opera, theatre, music and dance by invited artists. |
| Edinburgh Festival Fringe | August; grew from 1947 | An open-access festival, where anyone who finds a venue can perform; the largest arts festival in the world by number of shows (check). |
| Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo | August; first held 1950 | A massed show of military bands, pipers and performers on the Castle Esplanade (check the first year). |
| Edinburgh International Book Festival | August; first held 1983 | Author talks and events, held in tents in Charlotte Square for many years (check). |
| Edinburgh Art Festival and others | August | Visual art, film, jazz and blues, and more, running alongside. |
| Hogmanay | Late December to 1 January | Street parties and concerts to mark the Scottish New Year (Chapter 6). |
| Science, children's and other festivals | Spring and autumn | Smaller festivals that spread the calendar beyond August (check). |

## What the Course Covers

- **Chapters 2 and 3.** The 1947 origin, the arrival of the Fringe and its growth.
- **Chapters 4 to 6.** The Tattoo, the book, film and science festivals, and the winter festivals.
- **Chapters 7 to 9.** The city and the crowd, the money and the politics, and the pandemic and its aftermath.
- **Chapter 10.** A capstone with a method for judging claims about any festival.

## Myths to Test

| Common claim | The question a careful reader asks (check each) |
|---|---|
| The Fringe is the biggest arts festival in the world. | By what measure: shows, performances, tickets, audience, income? |

| Common claim | The question a careful reader asks (check each) |
|---|---|
| The festivals were started to bring culture to a war-weary Britain. | Whose aim was it, and what do the founders' own words say? |
| The Fringe is where careers are made. | For which performers, how often, and who tells the story? |
| The festivals bring a huge amount of money to the city. | Which study, which year, and how was the figure calculated? |
| Residents love the festivals. | Which residents, what surveys, and what do the complaints say? |
| It has always been like this. | What was it like in 1947, 1980 and 2000? |

## Sources to Use

- **The festivals' own histories and archives,** which are useful but written by the organisations themselves, so read them as one side of the story.
- **Newspaper coverage,** including local and national papers, and reviews written at the time.
- **City council and economic reports,** which give figures on visitors and spending, with different methods in different years (check).
- **Memoirs and interviews** by performers, organisers and residents, which are vivid but sometimes shaped by memory.

**A festival is a story told by many people**

Organisers, performers, critics, councillors, hoteliers and residents each tell a different version of the same weeks. A careful account asks who is speaking, what they gain from the story, and what could be checked against a record. That habit is used all through the course.

**A British comparison**

Compare Edinburgh with other British festival towns and cities, such as Glastonbury for music, Hay-on-Wye for books, or Notting Hill for carnival (check the examples). Each grew

from a particular place and moment, and each has had arguments over crowds and money.

**Check the details**

Every name, date and figure in this course comes from general knowledge and is marked "check" where it is uncertain. Festival figures change from year to year and are counted in different ways, so verify against the festivals' current reports and independent studies before quoting anything.

## Exercises

**EXERCISE 1**

Write down what you already believe about the Edinburgh festivals in five short statements, and mark each as documented, claimed or unknown.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 2**

Choose one of the myths in the table and write a short plan for testing it: what evidence you would look for and where.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 3**

Pick one festival from the table and list three questions you would ask before trusting a claim about its size or importance.

→ Solution

## Quick Reference

- **Origins:** the International Festival and the Fringe in 1947; the Tattoo in 1950 (check)
- **August:** the International Festival, Fringe, Tattoo, Book Festival and others
- **Winter:** Hogmanay and the winter festivals (check)
- **The method:** ask who is speaking, what they gain, and what can be checked
- **The caution:** size and money figures depend on how they were counted

# The Edinburgh Festivals

Course 5 · Chapter 2 · 1947 and the First Festival

*The usual story is short: in 1947 a group of people decided that Edinburgh should host a festival of the arts, the world's performers came, and some who were not invited came anyway. That story is mostly right, but it hides the people, the arguments and the doubts. This chapter looks at what the founders wanted, who they were, what the first programme contained and how the uninvited companies became the Fringe. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".*

## The Post-War Moment

### Rebuilding

In 1945 Europe's cultural life was damaged by war, and several countries were looking for ways to reconnect their audiences and artists (check). A festival of international music and drama fitted that mood.

### An idea in the air

The idea of a festival in Britain was discussed by people in the arts, and the names of several of them are attached to it in different accounts (check). Festivals such as Salzburg and Glyndebourne were models.

### A city to host it

Edinburgh was undamaged, had an attractive setting, and had civic leaders keen to host (check the weight of each reason, Chapter 1).

## The Founders

- **Rudolf Bing.** The Austrian-born general manager of the Glyndebourne opera, usually named as the festival's first artistic director and the driving force (check). He later ran the Metropolitan Opera in New York.
- **Local backers.** The city's Lord Provost, Sir John Falconer, and others in the council, in business and in the arts gave the plan political and financial support (check names and

roles).

- **The aim.** To present the highest standard of international performance, in a "festival of the flowering of the human spirit", a phrase often quoted (check the wording and who said it).
- **The caution.** Accounts credit different people with the idea, and several sources disagree on who did what.

## The First Programme

| Item (check each) | Detail |
|---|---|
| Dates | The first International Festival ran for about three weeks in August and September 1947. |
| Orchestras | The Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Bruno Walter, was a major attraction, with other orchestras also appearing. |
| Singers | The British contralto Kathleen Ferrier took part in a performance with Bruno Walter, which is often remembered (check the work and the details). |
| Opera and drama | Glyndebourne opera and the Old Vic theatre company took part, among others. |
| Venues | Halls such as the Usher Hall and the Assembly Hall, and theatres in the city. |

> **Why the Vienna Philharmonic mattered**
>
> Only two years after the war, an Austrian orchestra, with a conductor who had been forced to leave Germany and Austria, performing in a British city had a meaning beyond the music. Writers have described it as a gesture of reconciliation (check). Whether performers and audiences saw it in those terms at the time is harder to establish than later accounts suggest.

## The Eight Who Came Anyway

- **The story.** Several performing groups that were not invited to the official programme came to Edinburgh in 1947 and staged their own shows in whatever venues they could find. Commonly eight groups are mentioned, six from Scotland and two from England (check the number and the origins).

- **The name.** The word "Fringe" is usually credited to the Scottish writer Robert Kemp, who in 1948 wrote of "round the fringe of the official Festival drama" (check the wording and the source, and whether the name was in use earlier).
- **No organisation yet.** There was no organising body and no programme: the Fringe grew over years, and the formal Fringe Society was set up in 1959 (Chapter 3; check).
- **Origin story and record.** The origin story is tidy. Historians and archivists have found a more tangled record, with groups coming for different reasons, and some accounts are written long after the event (check).

**A British comparison**

Britain's 1951 Festival of Britain, held on London's South Bank, had a similar post-war purpose of lifting national spirits through culture (check the dates and aims). Edinburgh's festival was smaller, but its international programme and its later open-access Fringe let it outlast the London event, which was dismantled after a single summer.

**Check the details**

Origin stories collect later polish. Check the number of companies, the wording of the quotations, the roles of named individuals and the dates of the first programme against the festivals' archives and contemporary newspaper reports.

## Exercises

**EXERCISE 1**

**Summarise in six sentences why the International Festival began in Edinburgh in 1947, naming at least two people and two conditions that helped.**

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 2**

**Explain why the opening programme, and the Vienna Philharmonic in particular, is often described as significant, and say what evidence you would need to check that**

description.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 3**

**Write a short paragraph on how the Fringe origin story could be tested, naming two kinds of source and one weakness of each.**

→ Solution

## Quick Reference

- **Founded:** 1947, Rudolf Bing as artistic director, civic backing from the city (check)
- **First programme:** the Vienna Philharmonic, Bruno Walter, Glyndebourne, the Old Vic (check)
- **The Fringe:** uninvited companies in 1947; the name from Robert Kemp in 1948 (check)
- **Models:** Salzburg, Glyndebourne, and the Festival of Britain as a parallel (check)
- **The caution:** origin stories are tidier than the record

# The Edinburgh Festivals

Course 5 · Chapter 3 · The Fringe Grows

*The Fringe began as a handful of uninvited companies (The Edinburgh Festivals 2). Within a few decades it was larger than the festival it was named after. This chapter follows that growth: the rule of open access that made it possible, the society that organised it, the arrival of comedy and of the big venue companies, and the awards that made and broke reputations. It also asks what happens to an open festival when it becomes a business. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".*

## Open Access

### The rule

The Fringe has no selection committee. Any performer who can find a venue and register can take part (check the current rules). There is no artistic director deciding who is good enough.

### The Fringe Society

The Festival Fringe Society was formed in 1959 to give the Fringe a shared office, a programme and a box office, but not to choose what is shown (check the date and the aims).

### The consequence

Anything can appear, from outstanding to dreadful, and the audience has to choose. The festival grows as long as performers keep coming, so its size is set by demand.

- **A word of caution.** "Open access" means the festival does not choose performers, but money, venue availability and fees decide in practice who can afford to take part (Chapters 7 and 8).
- **The programme.** The printed programme grew from a small leaflet into a large book, and is now supplemented by an online system (check).

## Theatre, Revue and the 1960s

| Development (check each) | Detail |
|---|---|
| Beyond the Fringe (1960) | A revue by four Oxford and Cambridge graduates, Alan Bennett, Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller and Dudley Moore, which was part of the official festival but became closely linked with the Fringe's reputation for satire (check). |
| Traverse Theatre (1963) | A new-writing theatre founded in Edinburgh, which became a lasting home for experimental drama (check the date and the founders). |
| Student and experimental groups | University drama societies and small companies filled church halls and rooms with new work through the 1960s and 1970s. |

## Comedy and the Venue Companies

- **Comedy takes over.** From the 1980s stand-up and sketch comedy grew to become the Fringe's biggest category by ticket sales (check). Performers use Edinburgh as a place to try out and sell a new hour.
- **The venue companies.** Private companies such as the Gilded Balloon, the Pleasance, Assembly and Underbelly turned pubs, university buildings and temporary structures into venues, each with its own brand (check the founders and years).
- **The business model.** Venues take a share of box-office income and sometimes charge fees, performers often pay for accommodation and publicity, and many performers lose money (check, Chapter 7).
- **Free shows.** A "pay what you want" model for free Fringe venues grew up alongside, with the audience asked to give money at the end (check).

**Comedy awards**

The main comedy prize began in 1981 as the Perrier Award, named for its sponsor, and has been renamed several times as sponsors changed, now being known as the Edinburgh Comedy Awards (check the names and years). Winning has launched careers, and a prize shortlist can fill a venue, which is why the awards are watched closely. Their history also shows how much the festival relies on sponsors and on a few media outlets telling the story.

## What Growth Does

- **Scale.** The number of shows rose from a handful in 1947 to thousands in the 2000s and later (check the figures and how they were counted, see Chapter 1).
- **Visibility.** The Fringe is the main way many performers are seen by agents, critics and commissioning editors, a role that gives it importance beyond the city.
- **Pressure.** More shows compete for the same audiences and reviews, and costs rise. The open door remains, but the stakes are higher.

**A British comparison**

Compare the Fringe with other open-access events such as Brighton Fringe, or with the competitive stand-up circuit in London (check the examples). The Edinburgh version is distinctive because the whole city becomes the stage for a single month, which is why venues and rents matter so much.

**Check the details**

Figures for show counts, ticket sales and prize history change by year and by source, and some "firsts" are disputed. Check against the Fringe Society's reports, the awards' own history and independent accounts before quoting.

## Exercises

**EXERCISE 1**

**Explain what "open access" means for the Fringe, and give one advantage and one disadvantage of the rule.**

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 2**

**Describe how comedy and the venue companies changed the Fringe from the 1980s, in a short paragraph.**

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 3**

**List three questions you would ask before accepting the statement that "winning the comedy prize makes a career".**

→ Solution

## Quick Reference

- **Open access:** no selection; the Fringe Society formed in 1959 (check)
- **1960s:** Beyond the Fringe (1960), the Traverse Theatre (1963) (check)
- **1980s on:** comedy, venue companies, free shows, the main comedy prize from 1981 (check)
- **The pressure:** more shows, higher costs, performers often lose money (check)
- **The caution:** "open" does not mean equal; money shapes who takes part

# The Edinburgh Festivals

Course 5 · Chapter 4 · The Tattoo and the Castle

*While the International Festival and the Fringe argue about art, the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo offers something quite different: bands, pipes, drums, dancers and fireworks on the Castle Esplanade, watched each night by thousands in a grandstand. It is one of the most recognisable images of Scotland abroad, and also one of the most debated. This chapter looks at where it came from, how it is put together, what it says about Scotland and who criticises it. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".*

## What a Tattoo Is

### The word

"Tattoo" is usually traced to a Dutch phrase meaning to turn off the taps, a signal to soldiers to return to quarters at night (check the derivation). It came to mean an evening military ceremony with music, and then a public show.

### Military music

Massed bands of pipes, brass and drums, marching displays and ceremonial, performed by serving units and invited groups from other countries (check the make-up of a typical show).

### An older tradition

Military tattoos were held in Britain long before Edinburgh's, as displays for the public and for charity (check the earlier examples).

## The Edinburgh Tattoo

| Item (check each) | Detail |
|---|---|
| Beginnings | An early show, "Something About a Soldier", was held at the Ross Bandstand in 1949, and the first Tattoo on the Castle Esplanade took place in 1950. |

| Item (check each) | Detail |
|---|---|
| Connection to the festival | It began a few years after the International Festival and in the same weeks; the two are organised separately (Chapter 2). |
| Setting | The Castle Esplanade, a sloping parade ground in front of the gatehouse, with a temporary grandstand built each summer. |
| Format | Massed pipes and drums, military bands, visiting international performers and a closing sequence that ends with a lone piper on the Castle ramparts and fireworks. |
| Audience | Hundreds of thousands in a season, with a large share from outside the UK, and a television audience in many countries (check the figures). |
| Charity | The Tattoo is run by a charity that donates money to service and other causes (check the status and the amounts). |

## What It Presents

- **The piper.** The lone piper at the close is perhaps the most photographed image of the show, and stands for a particular idea of Scotland (check).
- **Tartan and pageantry.** The uniform, kilt and bagpipe are central. Many historians point out that much of the modern image of "tartan Scotland" was shaped in the nineteenth century, partly by the army and by royal tastes (check, and see the point on invented tradition below).
- **The military.** The Highland regiments' role in the British army gives the show a link to Scotland's military history, including the history of the British Empire (check).
- **International guests.** Bands from many countries take part, so the show presents itself as a gathering of nations as well as a Scottish event.

**Tradition and invention**

Historians such as Hugh Trevor-Roper and others in the "invention of tradition" debate argued that parts of Highland dress and clan identity were shaped or created in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (check the authors and the argument). That does not make the Tattoo fake, but it does mean that "ancient" is a claim to test. The show

combines real military music, long-standing pipe traditions and a modern, designed spectacle.

## Critics and Defenders

| View (check each) | Argument |
|---|---|
| Critics | Some say it glorifies the military and an imperial past, offers a narrow tartan picture of Scotland, and sits oddly in a city of arts festivals. |
| Defenders | Others say it is a skilled and popular piece of entertainment, supports charities, brings visitors and honours service people. |
| Middle ground | Some argue that it is both: a showpiece of musicianship and a version of national history, and that each deserves examination. |

**A British comparison**

Compare Trooping the Colour in London, or the military tattoos at Aldershot and elsewhere (check the examples). Each is a public display that links the armed forces to national identity, and each has admirers and critics, but the Edinburgh show is unusual in its international tourism audience.

**Check the details**

Dates of the first shows, audience numbers, charity figures and the history of tartan and Highland dress are all from general knowledge and often repeated with errors. Verify against the Tattoo's own records and independent histories, and treat strongly worded claims on both sides with care.

## Exercises

**EXERCISE 1**

Describe in a short paragraph what a tattoo is and how the Edinburgh Tattoo is organised, from the word's origin to the closing sequence.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 2**

Explain the idea that parts of "tartan Scotland" were shaped in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and say what this does and does not show about the Tattoo.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 3**

Write a fair two-sided assessment of the claim that the Tattoo "glorifies the military".

→ Solution

## Quick Reference

- **The word:** from a Dutch phrase meaning to turn off the taps (check)
- **Edinburgh:** first on the Esplanade in 1950; an earlier show in 1949 (check)
- **Format:** massed bands, international guests, lone piper, fireworks
- **The debate:** pageantry and charity against militarism and a narrow tartan image
- **The caution:** "ancient" is a claim to test

# The Edinburgh Festivals

Course 5 · Chapter 5 · Books, Film and Science

*The International Festival, the Fringe and the Tattoo get most of the attention, but the city's calendar is far fuller. There are festivals for books, film, science, jazz, art, children and storytelling, spread across the year. This chapter looks at four of them, asks how each began and what it adds, and considers what happens when a city becomes a collection of festivals. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".*

## The Book Festival

### Beginnings

The Edinburgh International Book Festival began in 1983, at first in alternate years and later every year (check the dates). It grew out of the book-trade and arts circles of the city.

### The tents

For many years the festival was held in a village of tents in Charlotte Square Gardens in the New Town, with a bookshop, a café and a large programme of author events (check the move to Charlotte Square and recent changes of site).

### What it offers

Talks, readings and debates with authors from many countries, with events for children and young people, and a mix of fiction, non-fiction, politics and poetry (check).

- **Edinburgh and books.** The city has a literary claim of its own: it was named the first UNESCO City of Literature in 2004 (check), and it has strong links with Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson and many later writers.
- **Debates.** The festival has had arguments over sponsorship, over author fees and over its changing site, which show that even a gentle-looking festival is also an economic arrangement (Chapter 8; check).

## The Film Festival

| Item (check each) | Detail |
|---|---|
| Beginnings | The Edinburgh International Film Festival began in 1947, alongside the first International Festival, and is often described as the world's oldest continuously running film festival (check the claim). |
| Early focus | Documentary film and the work of the British documentary movement, which had a strong Scottish link through John Grierson (check). |
| Changes of date | It moved from August to June in 2008 so as not to compete with the other festivals (check), and the organisation has gone through financial difficulties and changes of management. |
| Role | A showcase for British and international films and a place for premieres, though it competes for attention with larger film festivals (check). |

## The Science Festival

- **The idea.** The Edinburgh International Science Festival started in 1989 and is often credited as one of the first of its kind (check). It was set up to bring science to the public, and especially children.
- **The timing.** It runs in spring, not summer, which is part of the plan to spread the festival calendar through the year (check).
- **The format.** Hands-on events, lectures, shows and exhibitions at venues across the city, often in partnership with the universities.
- **Why Edinburgh.** The city has a scientific history, with figures such as James Hutton, James Clerk Maxwell and Alexander Graham Bell connected to it (check), and the Scottish Enlightenment is a point of civic pride.

## Jazz, Blues and the Rest

- **Jazz and Blues.** The Edinburgh Jazz and Blues Festival began in 1978 as a jazz festival, and runs in July before the August festivals (check the dates and the later name).
- **Art.** The Edinburgh Art Festival brings together the city's galleries in August (check).

- **Others.** Festivals of children's theatre, storytelling, comedy and the Gaelic and Celtic traditions fill other parts of the year (check which exist now).
- **The calendar.** Taken together, the festivals have extended the city's season, though August is still the peak.

**A festival city, or a festival machine?**

The festivals share audiences, venues, sponsors and public money, so the success of one affects the others. Supporters call the result a festival city that makes culture a year-round habit. Critics ask whether every theme now needs its own festival, and whether the city is more a place for visitors than for residents (Chapter 7). Both views rest on figures about audiences and spending, which should be checked in each case.

**A British comparison**

Compare the Hay Festival of Literature and Arts in Wales, the Cheltenham Literature Festival and the Cambridge Science Festival (check the examples). Each is smaller than Edinburgh's collection, but together they show how widely British towns use the festival format, and how often the same sponsors and authors appear.

**Check the details**

Founding dates, "first" and "oldest" claims, names and sites change often. Check against each festival's own history and independent reports before quoting, and treat claims of being the world's first or largest with particular care (Chapter 1).

## Exercises

**EXERCISE 1**

**Choose one of the four festivals in this chapter and write a short profile covering its start, its audience and one change since it began.**

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 2**

Test the claim that the Edinburgh Film Festival is "the oldest in the world", naming what you would need to check.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 3**

Give one argument for and one against the idea that a city benefits from having a festival for almost every subject.

→ Solution

## Quick Reference

- **Book Festival:** from 1983, Charlotte Square tents for many years (check)
- **Film Festival:** from 1947; moved to June in 2008 (check)
- **Science Festival:** from 1989, held in spring (check)
- **Jazz and Blues:** from 1978, held in July (check)
- **The caution:** "first" and "oldest" claims need a stated definition

# The Edinburgh Festivals

Course 5 · Chapter 6 · Hogmanay and the Winter Festivals

*The August festivals draw the headlines, but Edinburgh's other great public event comes in the dark of winter: Hogmanay, the Scottish New Year. It is one of the oldest customs in this course and also one of the newest organised events, since the huge street party of today dates only from the late twentieth century. Alongside it come the fire festivals, which claim ancient roots, and the winter markets, which cause arguments each year. This chapter separates the old customs from the modern events and asks which claims about them can be checked. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".*

## Hogmanay: the Custom

### The word

Hogmanay is the Scots name for New Year's Eve and the celebrations around it. Its origin is uncertain, with French, Norse and Gaelic explanations offered (check, and treat any single explanation with caution).

### First-footing

The custom that the first person to cross the threshold after midnight brings luck, often carrying coal, shortbread, whisky or black bun, with a tall dark-haired man traditionally preferred (check the details, which vary by region).

### Auld Lang Syne

The song associated with Robert Burns, who collected and revised an older Scots song in the 1790s (check). It is sung at New Year gatherings around the world.

- **Why Hogmanay mattered.** After the Reformation, the Church of Scotland discouraged Christmas celebrations, and in many places the New Year became the main midwinter holiday (check how strictly and how long). Christmas Day became a public holiday in Scotland only in 1958, and 26 December in 1974 (check the dates).
- **Older roots.** Some writers link the customs to pre-Christian midwinter rites, but evidence for a direct line is thin, and much of that story was shaped by later folklorists (check).

## Edinburgh's Hogmanay

| Item (check each) | Detail |
|---|---|
| Street party | The organised Edinburgh Hogmanay street party began in the early 1990s, with Princes Street closed to traffic, stages and fireworks (check the first year). |
| A lesson in crowds | The crowd grew until the event needed a ticketed, fenced area and licensing, as large gatherings in many cities do (check). |
| Torchlight procession | A procession with torches through the Old Town, often linked in popular accounts to Viking imagery, which is a modern theme and not a record of ancient practice (check). |
| Loony Dook | The New Year's Day swim in the Firth of Forth at South Queensferry, begun in the 1980s as a joke and now a popular event (check the origins). |
| Scale | Tens of thousands of ticket-holders, and television coverage in other countries (check the figures). |

## The Fire Festivals

- **Beltane Fire Festival.** A night-time event on Calton Hill on 30 April, begun in 1988, with a procession and performers in costume and body paint, drawing on older Gaelic May Day customs (check the date and the claims about ancestry).
- **Samhuinn.** A fire festival at the end of October that marks the start of winter in the old Celtic year, held in Edinburgh since the 1980s (check).
- **What they are.** Modern community events, run largely by volunteers, that borrow images from older customs. They are not simple survivals of ancient ritual, but neither are they invented from nothing, since Beltane and Samhain are old festival names (check).
- **The question to ask.** As in Chapter 4, "ancient" is a claim to test. The sensible questions are what the old custom was, what survives in record, and what has been added.

**Old customs, new events**

Hogmanay as a household custom is old, Hogmanay as a mass street party is modern, and the torchlight procession is a modern show dressed in older imagery. The fire festivals

work in the same way. A good account of any of them separates the three layers: the custom, the revival and the spectacle.

## Winter Markets and Arguments

- **Christmas in the city.** Since the late 1990s Edinburgh has hosted a winter market, a funfair and a big wheel in and around Princes Street Gardens and the Mound (check the dates).
- **The disputes.** Residents' groups and campaigners have complained about the use of public gardens by commercial operators, the closure of green space and the fencing-off of public land, while supporters point to the visitors and the revenue (check the cases and the outcomes).
- **The pattern.** It echoes the August arguments about crowds and ownership of the city (Chapter 7), with the difference that winter events keep shops and hotels busy in a quiet season.

**A British comparison**

Compare the Lord Mayor's Show or New Year's Eve in London, and Hogmanay in Aberdeen or Stonehaven, where the Fireballs ceremony swings burning balls through the streets (check the example). Local customs in smaller places often keep a rougher, more participatory character than the ticketed capital event.

**Check the details**

Folk customs attract confident claims about ancient origin. Treat any "this goes back thousands of years" statement as a claim, and check founding dates, crowd figures and the outcomes of disputes against organisers' records, newspaper coverage and council papers.

## Exercises

**EXERCISE 1**

Explain why Hogmanay was historically more important in Scotland than Christmas, and say what evidence supports the explanation.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 2**

Use the three-layer approach (custom, revival, spectacle) to analyse either the torchlight procession or one of the fire festivals.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 3**

Write a balanced paragraph on the argument over commercial winter markets in public gardens, giving the main points on each side.

→ Solution

## Quick Reference

- **Hogmanay:** the Scottish New Year; first-footing; Auld Lang Syne (check)
- **History:** Christmas discouraged after the Reformation; Christmas Day a public holiday in 1958 (check)
- **Edinburgh:** street party from the early 1990s, torchlight procession, Loony Dook (check)
- **Fire festivals:** Beltane from 1988, Samhuinn (check)
- **The method:** separate the custom, the revival and the spectacle

# The Edinburgh Festivals

Course 5 · Chapter 7 · The City and the Crowd

*So far the course has treated the festivals as things that happen in Edinburgh. For the people who live and work there, they are also things that happen to Edinburgh: the Royal Mile blocked with flyers, rents that jump in August, buses that cannot be boarded and a month of noise. This chapter turns from the programmes to the city itself. It looks at accommodation and short lets, crowding and the idea of overtourism, the people who work in the festival month, and the problem of working out who gains and who pays. Names, laws and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".*

## Where Everyone Sleeps

### The August squeeze

For a month the city has to house performers, crew, critics and many thousands of visitors, in a compact centre with a limited stock of hotels and flats (check the numbers). Prices in August are far above normal, which has long been a complaint.

### Short-term lets

Rented flats advertised on holiday platforms have grown in the city since the 2010s, and critics argue they take housing from residents and push up rents (check the scale). Supporters say they help visitors and give owners an income.

### The performers' problem

Accommodation is one of the largest costs for Fringe performers, and many report losing money after paying for housing, venue fees and publicity (check surveys on this, Chapter 3).

- **Rules.** The Scottish Government introduced a licensing scheme for short-term lets in 2022, and the City of Edinburgh Council was able to designate a "control area" in which planning permission is needed to turn a home into a short let (check the dates, the details and the legal challenges).

- **Student halls.** University accommodation is used as festival housing in the summer, a use that is helpful to visitors but that depends on the academic calendar (check).

## Crowds and "Overtourism"

| Issue (check each) | What residents and visitors report |
|---|---|
| The Old Town | Pavements and closes crowded with visitors, performers and flyer distributors, so that getting about on foot or by bus is slow. |
| Noise and waste | Late-night noise, litter and street cleaning needs rise in the festival weeks. |
| Services | Pressure on public transport, toilets and the emergency services, with temporary measures put in place by the council. |
| Everyday life | Some residents leave the city or rent out their homes during August, which is both a sign of the problem and part of the short-let market. |
| Tourism overall | The festival month sits on top of a large year-round tourist trade, so it is difficult to separate festival crowding from general visitor numbers (check). |

**Overtourism: a label, not a measurement**

"Overtourism" is used for places where visitor numbers are felt to exceed what residents or the place can bear. It is a judgement as much as a figure, since no agreed number defines it (check). A careful account asks what is being measured (visitors, nights, spending, complaints), whose view is being counted, and how the festival period compares with the rest of the year.

## Who Works and Who Pays

- **Seasonal workers.** Bar, hotel, venue and technical staff are needed in large numbers for a short period, often on temporary contracts and with long hours (check conditions and pay).
- **Volunteers and interns.** Some festival jobs are unpaid or low-paid, which raises questions about who can afford to work in the arts (check).

- **Venues and landlords.** The festival month is the main income of some venues and a source of rent for property owners, and the costs of hiring a room can be a barrier for performers (Chapter 3).
- **Small businesses.** Cafés, restaurants and shops gain from the extra custom, though some report that high rents and the shift of locals out of the centre offset the gain (check).

## Paying for the Pressure

- **A visitor levy.** Scotland passed legislation in 2025 allowing councils to charge a levy on overnight accommodation, and Edinburgh planned to introduce a charge on stays, with the revenue to be spent on tourism-related services (check the dates, the rate and whether it has started).
- **The argument.** Supporters say visitors should contribute to the cost of services they use. Critics, including some in the hotel trade and the festivals, fear higher prices will discourage visitors, and ask whether the money will reach the arts (check).
- **The wider debate.** The levy belongs with the questions in Chapter 8 about funding and who is responsible for the festival's costs.

**A British comparison**

Compare the pressure on Bath, York or the Lake District, and on Venice, Barcelona or Amsterdam abroad, where residents have campaigned against tourism and short lets (check the examples). Edinburgh is unusual in having an intense, dated peak, so its problems come in a concentrated month as well as year-round.

**Check the details**

Laws, council decisions and figures on lets, visitors and housing change quickly and are used by both sides of the argument. Check the current position against council papers, Scottish Government pages and independent studies, and notice who commissioned each study.

## Exercises

**EXERCISE 1**

Explain how short-term lets are said to affect Edinburgh, giving the argument of someone who sees them as a problem and of someone who sees them as an advantage.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 2**

Choose a claim that the festival month causes "overtourism" and list the evidence you would gather to test it, including what to compare it with.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 3**

Make a simple table of who gains and who pays from the festival month, with at least five groups, and mark which entries are well documented.

→ Solution

## Quick Reference

- **Housing:** August squeeze; short-term let licensing from 2022 (check)
- **Crowds:** Old Town congestion, noise, waste and services (check)
- **Workers:** seasonal staff, volunteers, venues and small businesses
- **Levy:** a visitor charge allowed by 2025 legislation (check the status)
- **The caution:** "overtourism" is a judgement, not a measurement

# The Edinburgh Festivals

Course 5 · Chapter 8 · Money, Politics and Reputation

*A festival that fills a city also has to pay for itself, and who pays shapes what is shown. This chapter looks at how the Edinburgh festivals are funded, at the disputes over sponsorship, at the practical effects of leaving the European Union on visiting artists, and at the boycotts and controversies that have followed the festivals. It also asks how a festival's reputation is made and lost. The subject is political and the sources are often partisan, so the chapter describes the arguments and the kinds of evidence, not a verdict. Names, laws and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".*

## Where the Money Comes From

### Public money

The Scottish Government, the City of Edinburgh Council and Creative Scotland have provided funding for the festivals, including a dedicated fund set up in the late 2000s (check the name, dates and amounts). The sums differ greatly between festivals.

### Tickets and sales

Ticket income, bookshop and café sales, and merchandise pay for much of what the larger festivals do, though the Fringe is mostly funded by performers and venues through ticket sales (check the shares).

### Sponsors and donors

Companies, trusts and individual donors support programmes and buildings, and naming rights are common. The same names appear again and again across the festivals (check).

- **The Fringe is different.** The Fringe Society provides services but does not pay performers, so the financial risk falls on the participants (Chapters 3 and 7).
- **Cost against benefit.** The festivals cite economic studies showing large returns on public money, and sceptics ask about methods and whether the money would have been spent elsewhere in the economy (Chapter 1; check).

## Sponsorship Disputes

| Issue (check each) | Detail |
|---|---|
| Who is acceptable? | Campaigners have argued that arts festivals should not take money from companies linked to fossil fuels, arms or other contested industries. |
| An example | In 2023 the Edinburgh International Book Festival and others faced protests over the sponsorship of an investment firm with fossil-fuel holdings, and some authors withdrew (check the details and the outcome). |
| The defence | Organisers say that sponsorship is needed to keep ticket prices and fees reasonable, and that public funding does not cover the gap. |
| The wider question | If public money falls, sponsorship rises, and with it the leverage of sponsors, which is a point made in debates about arts funding across Britain (check). |

## Brexit, Visas and Artists

- **The change.** After the UK left the European Union (check the dates), performers from the EU faced new rules on entry, work permits and the movement of equipment, and the cost and paperwork rose (check the details for each type of artist).
- **The International Festival.** A festival that brings companies from many countries felt the effects on cost and planning, and arts leaders raised the issue publicly (check the statements).
- **Visa refusals.** There have been cases in which artists from some countries were refused UK visas and could not appear, which led to complaints from festivals and authors (check the cases and the reasons given).
- **The balance.** The government's position is that immigration rules apply equally to all visitors, and festival leaders say the rules should be adapted for cultural events. Both are arguments, and the facts of each case should be checked.

## Boycotts and Controversies

> **A stage for the world's quarrels**

Because the festivals bring in artists from many countries and attract media, they have been used by campaigners as a platform and have been the subject of calls for boycotts over political issues (check the examples and the claims). Organisers have tried to protect artistic freedom while managing complaints and security, and critics on all sides have faulted them. The record is full of disputed accounts, so an account should say who made each claim and what documents support it.

- **Free speech.** Disagreements over who should be allowed to perform or speak, and what should be cancelled, have appeared at the Fringe and the Book Festival (check the cases).
- **Treatment of workers.** Debates about pay, unpaid labour and conditions have led to campaigns by performers' and workers' groups (check).
- **Reputation.** The festivals' reputation as open, adventurous and fun is itself an asset that sponsors and the city value. It is damaged by perceptions of unfairness or by controversy, and is protected by careful statements.

**A British comparison**

Compare the disputes over sponsorship at other British cultural institutions, such as museums and galleries that have faced protests over donors (check the examples), and the Edinburgh festivals' calls for visa reform with similar calls from British music festivals and touring musicians after Brexit. The pattern is general: culture, money and politics are entangled.

**Check the details**

This is a live political area, and many accounts are written by participants. Check each claim against primary documents (funding reports, public statements, court or regulatory decisions) and a range of news sources, and keep what is documented apart from what is argued.

## Exercises

**EXERCISE 1**

Describe the main sources of money for the Edinburgh festivals and explain why the Fringe is funded differently from the larger festivals.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 2**

Set out the arguments on both sides of a sponsorship dispute, and say what evidence would help to decide whether the sponsorship should continue.

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 3**

Write a short account of how a festival's reputation could be damaged by a controversy, and what a careful reader should check before accepting a story about it.

→ Solution

## Quick Reference

- **Money:** public funding, ticket income, sponsors and donors; the Fringe is performer-funded (check)
- **Sponsorship:** disputes over fossil fuel and other links, including 2023 protests (check)
- **Brexit and visas:** higher cost and paperwork for visiting artists; some visa refusals (check)
- **Boycotts:** festivals as a platform for political campaigns (check)
- **The method:** separate documented facts from argument, and name who is speaking

# The Edinburgh Festivals

Course 5 · Chapter 9 · Pandemic and Recovery

*For most of their history the Edinburgh festivals seemed to be a fixture, returning each August whatever the weather or the politics. In spring 2020 that assumption ended. This chapter follows the festivals through the pandemic: the cancellations, the experiments with online events and smaller live ones, the return in 2022 and the financial strain since. It also asks what the interruption showed about how the festivals are built and who carries the risk. The events are recent, so the sources are mostly news reports, the festivals' own statements and early studies. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".*

## 2020: The Cancellations

### The decision

In the spring of 2020 the large August festivals were cancelled or moved online as the COVID-19 pandemic closed theatres and banned gatherings (check the announcement dates). Reports described the Fringe as being cancelled for the first time since it began in 1947 (check, Chapter 2).

### The Tattoo

The Military Tattoo was also cancelled in 2020, again described as a first since it started in 1950 (check, Chapter 4). It, too, offered online material.

### The effect

Performers lost income and bookings, venues and seasonal staff lost their busiest month, and the city lost visitor spending (Chapter 7). The scale of the loss was estimated in several studies, with different methods (check).

- **Online experiments.** The festivals put some programmes and recordings online in 2020, and a few were widely praised, but audiences and income were far below a normal year (check).

- **Government support.** Schemes for the arts and for furloughed staff softened the loss for some, and emergency funds were set up for cultural organisations and freelancers (check the schemes and who was eligible).
- **Freelancers.** Many performers and technicians are self-employed, and support schemes reached some of them less easily than employees (check).

## 2021: A Partial Return

| Item (check each) | Detail |
|---|---|
| Live shows | A smaller Fringe and a scaled-down International Festival went ahead with distancing, reduced capacity and new outdoor and temporary venues. |
| Rules | Public health rules changed during the summer, which made planning hard and cancellation costs high. |
| Tattoo | A live show did not take place in 2021 in its usual form, with a film and other content instead (check). |
| Audiences | Many people stayed away, and visitor numbers were far lower than normal. |

## 2022 and After

- **The return.** In 2022 the festivals returned in full, with crowds back on the Royal Mile and a sense of relief among organisers (check the figures).
- **The numbers.** Ticket sales for the Fringe were reported to be below the last pre-pandemic year (2019), with reports of fewer shows and smaller audiences and then a gradual recovery (check the figures and how they were counted, Chapter 1).
- **Higher costs.** Rising prices for accommodation, energy and travel hit performers and venues, and the cost-of-living crisis cut audiences' spending (Chapter 7; check).
- **Calls for reform.** Performers, venues and the Fringe Society debated how to make taking part cheaper and fairer, including questions about fees, accommodation and the role of the biggest venue companies (check the proposals and the response).

**What the interruption showed**

The pause revealed how much of the festival's activity depends on a single month, on private risk-taking by performers and on a chain of businesses that earn most of their

income in August. It also showed that the festivals could survive a year off, since they returned, which is evidence about resilience. Whether the recovery is complete, or whether the festivals are permanently smaller or poorer, depends on figures that are still being gathered and argued over (check).

**A British comparison**

Compare other festivals and live arts across Britain, where the loss of 2020 and the high costs since have closed some events and venues, among them smaller music festivals and theatres (check the examples). Edinburgh's festivals, being large and well known, recovered more visibly than many, though the underlying strains were similar.

**Check the details**

The pandemic years are recent, and numbers vary by source and by method. Check dates, attendance and income figures against the festivals' annual reports, official statistics and independent studies, and note which figures include online audiences.

## Exercises

**EXERCISE 1**

**Explain who carried the main financial risk when the festivals were cancelled in 2020, comparing a large curated festival with the Fringe.**

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 2**

**Design a short plan for finding out whether the Fringe has fully recovered from the pandemic, naming the figures and the pitfalls.**

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 3**

**Choose one idea for making the Fringe fairer or cheaper for performers, and give one argument for it and one objection.**

→ Solution

## Quick Reference

- **2020:** August festivals cancelled or moved online; reported firsts for the Fringe and Tattoo (check)
- **2021:** smaller live programmes under restrictions (check)
- **2022 onward:** full return, but sales and costs under pressure (check)
- **Risk:** carried mostly by performers, freelancers and seasonal businesses
- **The caution:** recovery figures depend on what is counted

# The Edinburgh Festivals

Course 5 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: Reading a Festival

*The first chapter asked who is speaking, what they gain and what can be checked. Nine chapters later there is enough to answer, and to turn the answers into a method you can use on any festival: the Edinburgh ones, or the Eurovision Song Contest, or a beer festival in Munich. This final chapter gathers the myths and what the evidence says, sets out a timeline, then gives a practical method with a worked example. Names, dates and figures are from general knowledge and flagged "check".*

## Myths Versus Evidence

| Myth | What the course found (check each) | Chapter |
|---|---|---|
| The Fringe is the biggest arts festival in the world. | Depends on the measure; it is very large by number of shows. | 1, 3 |
| The festivals began to cheer up war-weary Britain. | Several motives and several people; accounts differ on who proposed it. | 2 |
| The Fringe was started by eight uninvited companies. | A tidy origin story with a more tangled record. | 2 |
| Open access means anyone can take part. | In principle yes; in practice cost decides. | 3, 7 |
| The Tattoo is ancient Scottish tradition. | Real military music in a designed, modern spectacle; the image of tartan Scotland is partly later. | 4 |
| Hogmanay and the fire festivals are ancient rites. | Old customs, modern revivals and modern spectacles are three layers. | 6 |
| The festivals make the city rich. | They bring spending; costs and benefits fall unevenly and the figures depend on method. | 1, 7, 8 |
| The festivals are apolitical. | Funding, sponsorship, visas and boycotts show a constant involvement with politics. | 8 |
| The pandemic ended the festivals. | They returned, but with financial strain and a debate over reform. | 9 |

## A Timeline

| Year (check each) | Event |
|---|---|
| 1947 | The first International Festival, the first uninvited companies, and the first Film Festival. |
| 1950 | The first Tattoo on the Castle Esplanade. |
| 1959 | The Festival Fringe Society is formed. |
| 1960 and 1963 | *Beyond the Fringe*; the Traverse Theatre. |
| 1978 and 1981 | The jazz festival; the first main comedy prize. |
| 1983 | The first Book Festival. |
| 1989 | The Science Festival; early Beltane and Hogmanay events around this period. |
| Early 1990s | The organised Hogmanay street party. |
| 2020 to 2022 | Cancellation, a partial return and a full return. |
| Recent years | Housing rules, a visitor levy and debates over sponsorship and funding. |

## A Method for Reading a Festival

Take any claim about a festival: its size, its age, its tradition, its wealth, its harm. Ask these questions in order, and mark each answer *documented*, *claimed* or *unknown*.

**1. Who is speaking?**

An organiser, a performer, a resident, a sponsor, a journalist or a campaigner? What do they gain from the story?

**2. What exactly is claimed?**

Which measure (shows, tickets, money, age) and which definition (first, biggest, oldest)? A claim without a stated measure cannot be checked.

**3. Which layer?**

Old custom, modern revival or modern spectacle? Separate the layers before accepting "ancient" or "traditional".

**4. What is the source?**

A record made at the time, a report written afterwards, a festival's own history, or an independent study? How were the numbers counted?

**5. Who pays, who gains?**

Which groups bear costs and which receive benefits, and is that on record or assumed (Chapter 7)?

**6. What would change my mind?**

What evidence would count against the claim, and has anyone looked for it?

## A Worked Example

| Question | "The festivals bring a huge amount of money to the city" (check each) |
|---|---|
| Who is speaking? | Usually the festivals or the council, with an interest in showing a return on public money (claimed source). |
| What exactly? | Unclear: visitor spending, extra income, jobs or profit, and which year (unknown until a study is named). |
| Which layer? | Not a custom claim; an economic claim that needs a method. |
| Source? | Economic impact studies, with different methods and funders (documented that studies exist; the figures differ). |
| Who pays, who gains? | Hotels, landlords and venues gain; many performers lose money; residents bear crowds and housing pressure (partly documented, Chapter 7). |
| What would change my mind? | An independent study showing lower net effects once displaced spending and public costs are counted. |

**The pattern**

Most claims come out part documented, part claimed and part unknown. That is not a reason to distrust everything said about the festivals, but a reason to ask which part is the record, which is the organisers' story, and which is an argument about values that evidence cannot settle alone.

**A British comparison**

Try the method on another British event, such as the Notting Hill Carnival or Glastonbury, or on a claim from a different country's festival, such as the claims about Oktoberfest in *German Beer, Oktoberfest & the Reinheitsgebot* or the contest in *The Eurovision Song*

*Contest* (check the examples). The same questions apply, and the answers often show the same mixture of record, legend and interest.

**Check the details**

Every name, date and figure in this course comes from general knowledge and is marked "check" where it is uncertain. The festivals change every year and the recent events are still being argued over, so verify against the festivals' own reports, council papers and independent studies before quoting anything.

## Exercises

**EXERCISE 1**

**Choose a claim about any festival and write answers to the six questions, marking each as documented, claimed or unknown.**

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 2**

**Pick three of the myths in the table and write one sentence each, in your own words, saying what the evidence supports.**

→ Solution

**EXERCISE 3**

**Write a short timeline of five events that, in your view, best show how the Edinburgh festivals changed, and say why you picked each.**

→ Solution

## Quick Reference

- **The festivals:** 1947 to today; the International Festival, Fringe, Tattoo, Book, Film, Science, Hogmanay (check)
- **The tensions:** open access and cost; tradition and spectacle; money, housing and politics
- **The method:** who is speaking, what exactly, which layer, source, who pays, what would change my mind
- **The habit:** label each claim documented, claimed or unknown
- **The caution:** "first", "biggest" and "ancient" need a stated definition

**Course complete**

You have finished *The Edinburgh Festivals*: the first festival of 1947 and the Fringe that grew beside it, the Tattoo, the book, film and science festivals, Hogmanay and the fire festivals, the pressures on the city, the questions of money and politics, the pandemic and a method for testing claims about any festival. Related courses include *The Eurovision Song Contest* and *German Beer, Oktoberfest & the Reinheitsgebot*.