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## The Genesis of an event

**Steve Hackett was playing at the Queen's Hall. James Bryce went along to see how he was getting on these days and to wonder at the merits of converting churches to leisure venues.**

### The Queen's Hall c1850

"Our church is relatively new, about 1822. We've just had the organ installed – only the second in Edinburgh I'll have you know – There's new tinted glass in the windows (about time too, I'd say, for a church of God), and the pulpit has been lowered somewhat. The south side of Edinburgh is new build, and Newington church is the place to be. The choice of worship for all the fashionable families of the area. There's the clock tower – few years old now – we paid for that, by subscription.

I'll show you round before the service starts. Up the steps here into the atrium. The stairs to the left lead to the upper gallery, and over on the right here is the entrance to the church proper. As you see, the wall behind the congregation is curved, as is the seating.

Wait a minute! There seems to have been a few changes. When I came in last, the pews were in boxes, some for the rich and true of the community, some for the less than rich and true. However, you can see that it is a large but intimate space. A touch of a down-market Albert Hall. The acoustics are excellent. Just the right amount of echo to allow the minister's words to reach each member of the audience.

Hold on! Where have they put the organ? No matter, we'll go upstairs and get our seats: the pulpit end of the balcony. It's always the best place to get a view of the minister, and, incidentally, the rest of the congregation.

Curious. It seems quite a different crowd this evening. It's usually quite an eclectic mix, old, young, rich, poor. The congregation tonight all seem of a 'certain age', 40-60 or more. I assume they've come for the guest preacher. I'm told he's quite an authority on the subject of Genesis."

### The Queen's Hall 2012

And there he is, Steve Hackett and entourage. The congregation rises and cheers.

As you will gather, several things have changed since the Queen dubbed the erstwhile Newington Church as the Queens Hall in 1967. Nowadays the stage end of the gallery is fine only if you want to hear the word of God, to investigate Hackett's guitar technique or ponder at how he has managed to keep his hair looking exactly the same for 35 years. For a good sound mix, move; from this position it is as palatable as Scotch broth mixed with grits. Take four paces sideways, however, and it is perfect. For more acoustic acts the side gallery is fine but for stadium rock central is best.

I'm curious about Hackett. Considering that he left Genesis after the Seconds Out album 35 years ago, and not having heard him since, I am looking forward to see what he is playing now. The answer seems to be, not surprisingly, a fair amount of material redolent of early Genesis (a sequence of chords over a repeated bass note being a common compositional trait). But he is, I think, more varied. There is a wonderful song about trains taking prisoners to the concentration camps, and some quieter moments on solo acoustic. The congregation, worshippers to a man (and they are largely men), greets each old favourite with a huzzah and sometimes a singalong, which is lovely for aficionados. My gripe is my usual one: I have to strain to make out the lyrics. Towards the end we get flashing lights, smoke-machines, two encores and

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for a moment we've been transported to the Scottish Exhibition Centre.

Which again is curious. It is basically a church. Ecclesiastical and secular sit together but do not quite meet. There are quite a few deconsecrated churches in Edinburgh and, I suspect, elsewhere. In Scotland there was a epidemic of church-building brought about by the disruption of 1843, when the radical United Free Church of Scotland broke free from the established church of Scotland in protest at what people saw as the interference of the state in ecclesiastical matters: rich landowners were allowed to appoint ministers, rather than, as is the case at present, the minister being appointed by the congregation (with a few nudges from the Presbytery). When state interference stopped in 1900 many of the Free congregations returned to the bosom of the Church of Scotland and, with congregations falling during the slump in the 1920s, many churches fell into disuse.

So what does one do with them? St Brides became a community centre, Greyfriars Mission Church became a dance base, the New North Free Church became the home of the university theatre group, Old Newhaven Free Church became Alien Rock, a rock-climbing area, and the Second Dean Free Church is now Belford Backpackers Hostel.

The Queen's Hall is a fine venue. It is intimate. It now has a table-seating arrangement at the front of the stage and, in spite of reservations stated above, is great for a wide range of acts: singer-songwriters, orchestral and chamber groups, jazz and rock, etc. The question I ask is this. When churches were first built in the 13th and 14th centuries they were the tallest buildings in the community. When wealth and finance became the gods of the age during the boom not so long ago, banks became the tallest buildings. Now that the evil recession is upon us, we see Wetherspoons and others converting these buildings to pubs.

Once consumerism, the current theology, has played itself out, will we see all those temples to the gods Tesco, Morrison, Lidl et al become stadia or sports arenas? I look forward with a sort of wry interest.

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