

Scotland on Sunday 20 December 1998

The world's oldest debating society is embroiled in a war of words that threatens more than 200 years of its men-only existence.

The Speculative Society – once described by Robert Louis Stevenson as the “best thing in Edinburgh” – is a male-only talking shop whose members still meet by candlelight in a closed room within the cloisters of Edinburgh University.

Formed in 1764 during the Scottish Enlightenment, it also included Sir Walter Scott, amongst its most illustrious patrons. Present day membership ranges from the Duke of Edinburgh to the upper echelons of Scotland's legal, academic and literary fraternity.

But it is now being challenged by two female law lecturers who want its little-used suite of rooms at the university's Old College to be opened up to other users and for it to be forced to admit women members.

The university has so far responded by promising to investigate the 234-year-old society's right to occupy the rooms sited next to the law faculty, and whether it receives any free services from the institution.

The move was made following a request from the law faculty, which agreed to the proposal after it was tabled by two male lecturers at a meeting earlier this month.

Spearheading the campaign are Elspeth Reid and Sandra Eden, who believe the society's historic rooms, rarely seen by outsiders, could provide much-needed extra space for the cramped faculty. They also believe the male bastion sits uneasily with the universities equal opportunities policy.

“It's an old boys club and an anachronism,” Eden said. “We are doing this with a lot of support from other members of the faculty and others within the university who share our disquiet at the present arrangements.”

Reid said it was “regrettable” that the club still pursued a policy of not admitting women. “However we are not coming at this from a specific feminist perspective. This is a matter of concern not just for women, but for all university staff and students.”

They are being backed by Graeme Laurie, a fellow law lecturer, who said: “There is majority support from members of staff. We are drawing attention to the pressure on space and that the university may well be providing services to an organisation that conflicts with equal opportunities policy.”

The society was granted its rooms in Old College in perpetuity in return for agreeing to the demolition of its own hall which occupied part of the site.

The Spec's debating hall, still lit only- by candlelight and firelight, and its library and hall have remained largely unchanged since they were completed in the 1820s.

Members, many of whom are lawyers and judges, must be invited to join. There are 30 ordinary members who serve for three years before becoming extraordinary members.

Ordinary members must attend the society's weekly meetings, or face nominal fines which are levied in old money. Several infuriate their banks by paying with cheques written in pounds, shillings and pence

The society is seen as an excellent training for public speaking, with each Ordinary member required to read an essay he has written on a subject of general interest.

One member said: "Criticism of poor performance can be quite savage - members are merciless towards a sloppily researched or argued piece of work."

Stevenson's membership began when he was a student at the university in the 1870s. The British ensign draped over his body after he died in Western Samoa is hung above one of the society's fireplaces.

The club's history however does not impress Reid and Eden who are eagerly awaiting the result of the university investigation. But they do acknowledge that whatever the evidence against the club retaining the rights, they face formidable opposition.

Not only is Lord Mackay of Clashfern, the former Tory Chancellor and one of Britain's finest legal minds, a member, so too is the university's principal, Sir Stewart Sutherland.

Gavin MacColl, one of the society's five, revolving presidents, dismissed the law faculty's move as a "storm in a teacup"

He said: "People are raising this for their own political motives," he said. "We have not had anything put to us and we are just carrying on as we always have done."

MacColl argued that there were empty buildings across the road in Chambers Street if the law faculty needed more space and said the university provided accommodation of a women's club."

A university spokeswoman confirmed the society's status was being investigated, but stressed that it had no control over the society's affairs.