



the
WATER of LEITH
Conservation Trust

NEWSLETTER

Spring 2022



Focus on Leith - Special Edition

Welcome to our special edition where we will take a look at what's been happening at the mouth end of the river, or perhaps given this wonderful image by Ian Barnes, it should be 'reflections of Leith'.

Basin Issues and Operations

Long before any human activity the Water of Leith has flowed by the path of least resistance from the Pentland hills out into the Firth of Forth Estuary. Anything in the river has the potential to be carried downstream by the force of the water as it makes its inevitable journey out to the sea. What started as mostly woody debris was replaced over the years by sewage effluent and waste from water mills and industry along the river's banks.



Edinburgh is a very different place now with the heavy industry gone and disposable plastics commonplace in all our shopping. In 2022 a typical clean up reaps the reward of bags of wet wipes, dog balls, trolleys, drink cans, bottles and traffic cones. Unlike other local rivers like the Esk and Almond where the waste just goes out to sea, the Water of Leith is fairly unusual with having an operating port at the end and a boom stopping the waste getting into the port and estuary.

This boom under the Victoria Swing bridge gives us a last opportunity to retrieve the unwanted plastic litter before it does lasting harmful damage to the marine species. However, for this to happen it also means Leith must face an unsightly build up of litter especially after a storm.

In January 2020 during a particularly unsightly spell, a partnership agreement to tackle the litter problem was established between The City of Edinburgh Council, The Water of Leith Trust, Forth Ports and various landowners. Since then the WOLCT has carried out 25 monthly clean-ups of the Leith stretch of river on the first Wednesday of every month. It is our volunteers and staff that you can see in high visibility vests both on the streets and in the boat with their litter pickers and grappling hooks removing all they can reach from the river and local greenspaces. In a normal outing the boat team fill 2-4 ton bags with litter.

The plastic in the river is not just coming from Leith. It's coming from the whole river. A takeaway food container thrown in the river in Balerno could well end up under Victoria Swing bridge as could litter in an overflowing litter bin next to the walkway in Stockbridge. So feel free to come and get involved in helping clean up the river by meeting on the 1st Wednesday of the month.



Leith - A long and turbulent history

Sandie Boyle, our Visitor Centre Officer, writes of her Love for Leith ahead of her guided walk in April. There's nothing nicer than taking a stroll along the Water of Leith Walkway. Whether it be meandering through the ancient woodland of the Dells, or the Dean Village – the 'bread basket' of Edinburgh or my 'go to' favourite place – the Shore at Leith, I have always been fascinated by this area. Has this anything to do with being brought up in Leith for the first 4 years of my life, or maybe it's because it's in my blood, having discovered my ancestry had a strong presence and connection with both the 'Water of Leith' village (Dean to you and me) and Leith itself.

With its history beginning in pre Roman times, Leith has many a story to tell you about how it has survived over the centuries. With bloody battles to contend with and numerous outbreaks of the plague, Leithers remained strong and stoic in the face of all adversity. Under the control of the City of Edinburgh for many centuries it then became an independent port in its own right until it was (reluctantly) amalgamated with Edinburgh again in 1920 ending 87 years of independent existence. Is it any wonder its motto is 'Persevere'?

Its bustling trade made it the chief port of Scotland, and amongst many things, imported wine from France for royalty and esparto grasses from Spain and Africa for our papermaking industries. Exported goods were numerous and included coal, sugar, grain, iron and of course whiskey.

The waters at the Firth of Forth have witnessed many historical nautical events as ship building in Leith was once the finest in Scotland, a trade which lasted over 600 years, ending in 1983 with the closure of Henry Robb yard. Its most famous build was the 'Sirius', the first steamship to cross the Atlantic. Other ships that sailed are those connected to the failed Darien scheme, Scotland's attempt to compete with England's East India trading company, that sailed from Leith in 1698 on its journey to the Isthmus of Panama.

Why did it fail? What were the political implications? And what did this cost Scotland and its investors? Then we have the history of Salvesen's whaling company, a gruesome but necessary industry in the earlier years. It was not all about ships, in Leith other industries included a sugar refinery, biscuit making, rope and sail manufacturing to name a few.

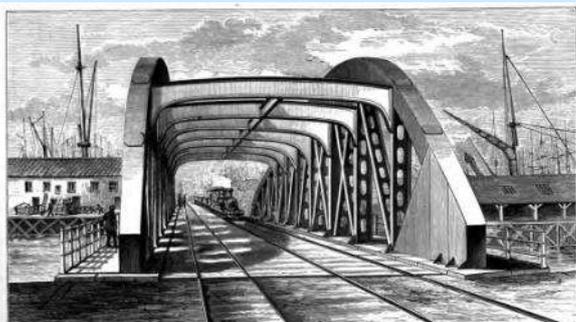
Ever wondered why some street names are so called – Burgess Street, Timber Bourse, Coalie Park and East Cromwell Street? There is so much more history in Leith that I'd like to mention, but I could not condense such fascinating history onto this one page. So please join me on my next jaunt to the Shore and we, together, can walk through some of the amazing history of Leith.



Victoria Swing Bridge gets a makeover

Victoria Bridge marks the end of the walkway and the beginning of the complex of docks managed today by Forth Ports. It is a scheduled ancient monument. The bridge was built between 1871 and 1874 to service the new docks. It was engineered by Rendel and Robertson, with J. H. Bostock as resident engineer. McDonald & Grant were contractors for the foundations, and the bridge was built by the Skerne Iron Works. Made of Wrought Iron, it is 65m wide and until the Kincardine Bridge was completed it had the longest clear swing bridge span in Britain. Renovations took place in 2000 but sadly its coastal location means it once again needs some care.

Forth Ports, the bridges owners, have begun a three phase renovation of this imposing feature. The current phase is underway and focuses on the north and south pedestrian walkways, with work on the northern pedestrian walkway being carried out first followed then by the southern walkway. The approximate time scale for this phase is 10 weeks. Pedestrian access over the bridge will be maintained at all times. Phase 2 of the works will cover the central deck and painting, which we anticipate being carried out over the summer months. The final phase, Phase 3, will be the turning circles which is planned for early 2023.



Engraving of the bridge carrying a train from around 1879—
source Wikipedia



A unique view of the river and Coalie Park from the newly converted cinema building on Gt Junction St – Sheila Masson

Coalie Park Plan is ready

Frequent readers will know that over the past year we have been working with the community in Leith to create an improvement plan for Coalie Park, a rather neglected and rundown part of the walkway. The finalised Coalie Park Improvement Plan will form the basis of next phases of the project and can be viewed on the Coalie Park page on our website.

In the coming month the Trust will be seeking permissions and planning consent from the Council and landowners, obtaining outline quotes for the overall work and individual project so funding applications can be submitted, conducting the necessary surveys of the site and detailed design development of some of the exciting technical projects in the site such as the Gathering Space and Community Garden / Skate hangout. This will hopefully lead to the implementation of a community led project to deliver improvements for citizens and nature in Leith. It includes 5 placemaking projects, 800m2 path upgrading, 4 arts / interpretation installation and restoration and management of nature habitats in the water and woodland areas.

As evidenced in the Coalie Conversations engagement process, and the range of interest this improvement plan development has attracted, there is a huge amount of will and support for this project but as yet no funding has been secured so a time frame cannot be included at this stage. However if you would like to support the project please contact helen.brown@waterofleith.org.uk

Focusing on Leith Schools

The Water of Leith walkway stretches through 13 miles of Edinburgh and, all along it, people enjoy the river by biking, jogging and walking along its banks. Yet with our Slateford-based Centre, we have always attracted more school visits from the west and the south of the city. Focus on Leith aims to change all that by engaging with schools with the mouth of the river on their doorstep in Leith.

Over this academic year, six classes from Leith schools will learn about the river near them, with a visit from Ruth, our outdoor learning officer. She will answer questions like, Is the river brown because it's dirty and polluted? What animals can we look out for? And, how can we keep our river clean? Later on in the year, the same classes will enjoy a visit to the Centre to learn more about the river and surrounding woodlands in its middle stage in Craiglockhart Dells.

Generous private funding means that we have been able to offer this programme to schools in the Leith area free of charge. Due to the restrictions on school visits for much of last year, the project was delayed. However, Victoria Primary School have just completed their visit to the river at Redbraes Weir, measuring velocity with dog biscuits and using an old repurposed bike wheel to recreate a water wheel. Some of the pupils from Victoria Primary weren't entirely sure what the Water of Leith was before we left the school. However, as we turned down the track to the river it was wonderful to hear them cry out "I know this place! I came here every day on my walk during lockdown." It's always great to help young people learn more about the treasures on their doorstep.

Members Events 2022

For details and information on how to book visit
www.waterofleith.org.uk/whats-on/

Members should use their special code when they book to get free or discounted entry – email admin@waterofleith.org.uk if you need your code

Monday 28th February – 7.30pm Members Evening and Talk at the Centre. Bridgescapes - a journey through history celebrating Scotland's bridge-building heritage. Bruce Keith presents an illustrated talk on some of Scotland's iconic bridges, including several on the Water of Leith. £5 Free to members.

Sunday 6th March – Guided Walk –Dean Village to Canonmills – Mills Spills and Thrills Part 2. Meeting at the bridge on Bells Brae in Dean Village 11.00am – Booking Essential £7 Free for members.

Sunday 10th April – Guided Walk – Focus on Leith. Meet Sandie outside the Malmaison Hotel on the Shore in Leith – 11.00am
Booking Essential £7 Free for members.

Saturday 7th May – Wildflowers of the Dells
On the same day as our plant sale join Helen as we discover the beautiful spring flowers of the riverside. Meet at the Visitor Centre 2.00pm £7 Free for members.

PLANT SALE – SATURDAY 7TH MAY – 10.00am onward. Our favourite Fundraising Event is back after a two year break, join us for bedding plants, perennials, veggies, trees and shrubs. £1 entry.

Children's Easter Events

Every Tuesday and Thursday of the holiday from 2pm to 4pm we run drop off activities for 7 to 11 year olds.

Booking essential - £7 per child

12th April – A Hunting we will go

14th April – River Dipping

19th April – River Dipping

21st April – Spring Survival Skills

Kingfisher Club is back this spring

Does your child ask for a bug box or a pair of binoculars every birthday? Can they spend hours building fairy houses or dens in the woods? If so, this might be the perfect Friday afternoon activity for them. This drop-off event will run from Friday March 4, 2-4 pm for five Fridays. The Kingfishers will learn about how animals and plants adapt to the colder and shorter days; they will explore what it would take for them to survive a night in the woods, including fire lighting; they'll learn how to look for signs of the elusive otter; and they'll get into the river to do some river dipping. And much more! Cost: £35 per child for five sessions. Places are limited so book your email: learning@waterofleith.org.uk

For more information or to subscribe to our blog visit
www.waterofleith.org.uk

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River News Round Up

Walkway Closures – Work is underway on the landslip above the Dean Village and its due to be completed and open by the end of March. Sadly a section of walkway immediately before that along side the Belford Britannia Hotel is now closed due to a damaged palisade fence. This section is owned by the hotel and pressure is being brought to bear on the Council and the Hotel to seek a resolution as the alternative routes are long and involve many flights of stairs. In Bonnington the section from Newhaven Road to Anderson Place is once again closed due to an unsafe wall right next to the walkway: again a resolution is being sought. Any queries on walkway closures please contact:

naturalheritageservice@edinburgh.gov.uk

Path work & Community Path Group of the Year – despite these closures our volunteers' work to keep the paths clear and accessible continues and so far we have completed around 100 path maintenance workdays – that is a lot of effort moving leaves and digging drains. This was recently recognised as we were awarded 'Community Path Group of the Year' by Paths for All and have a £250 grant to upgrade our tools. Thank you to all our volunteers, congratulations.

Otter and Kingfisher. Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are alive with many wonderful images of the wildlife of our wee river. This shot, however, is a first – the otter and the kingfisher in the same photo, thank you to Dave Stewart for sharing.

