

Choose Leith? Trainspotting locations reveal the changing faces of Edinburgh

Irvine Welsh's debut novel depicted a hard-living, unforgiving Edinburgh district on the cusp of regeneration. Michelin-starred Leith is much changed now - but for better or worse?



Trainspotting author Irvine Welsh revisits Edinburgh's port area Leith, where he was born. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod

Irvine Welsh's phenomenally successful [Trainspotting](#), first published in 1993, charts the exploits of a group of friends, boozers and heroin users living in Leith, north of Edinburgh's historically and architecturally dazzling city centre. Set in the 1980s, on the fringes of poverty and degradation, the book also portrayed an area on the cusp of regeneration. Leith is now home to the highest concentration of [Michelin-starred restaurants](#) in Scotland, while according to the [last census](#) Leith Walk ward is the most diverse in the country, as well as one of the most populated.

But more broadly, says Ally Tibbitt of [Greener Leith](#), the area's recent history has been one of stalled regeneration as masterplan after masterplan has fallen by the wayside, most consistently around the dockside and most recently as a result of the financial crash.

“What people love about Leith is its diversity,” says Tibbitt, “which is a legacy from its days as a working port.” A concentration of private rental accommodation and relatively cheap property means the area has attracted the young professional market over the past decade, he explains. “The challenge now is how to keep young families here.”

Tibbitt points to a recent economic assessment of Leith by [Edinburgh](#) council, published last December, which revealed that 3,500 jobs had been lost from the area in the past five years. A new draft strategy pins hopes for growth in Leith on trams, creatives and tourism – while predicting that the docks will remain “an under-used, investment-starved asset right at the heart of Leith”.



Muirhouse shopping centre, location of the ‘Worst Toilet in the World’ in *Trainspotting*.
Photograph: Murdo MacLeod

The Worst Toilet in the World, Muirhouse shopping centre

After failing to score any heroin, *Trainspotting*’s anti-hero Renton obtains some opium suppositories which soon play havoc with his tender guts. He makes a dash for the gents at the back of the bookies in Muirhouse shopping centre, only to discover that the toilets are all blocked and the floor awash with piss.

“I enter the smoke-filled shop and head straight tae the bog. What a fuckin scene; two guys stand in the doorway ay the toilet, just pishing intae the place, which has a good inch ay stagnant, spunky urine covering the flair.” But needs must and, in one of the most scatological scenes from the novel – or indeed any novel – Renton is forced to fish for his lost suppositories in the over-flowing toilet pan.



Baba's Cave: one of the few businesses not boarded up in Muirhouse shopping centre.
Photograph: Murdo MacLeod

The bookies referred to in [Trainspotting](#) closed long ago, and Tahir Ali's fancy goods shop Baba's Cave is one of the few businesses not boarded up in the remaining avenue mall, which smells strongly of weed. "They put the roof on the so-called mall seven years ago," explains Ali, "but all it did was give shelter from the rain to the alcoholics, and now the elderly are afraid to walk through here."

A council regeneration programme has seen the demolition of much of the social housing in the area, in practice fragmenting the community as families are temporarily re-housed elsewhere and leaving local businesses without custom. "Since the council started demolishing the houses, it's been pretty dire," Ali says. "The butcher and two supermarkets have closed. I've managed to survive by the skin of my teeth."

It's a view echoed by Belinda Blythe, a volunteer at [Muirhouse Community Shop](#), which opened two years ago following the supermarket closures. As well as selling low-priced basics – customers can buy a single egg here if that is all they need – it serves as a hub for the local food bank, holds fortnightly cook-in days and organises second-hand goods swaps.

"The council is spending millions on regeneration," argues Blythe, "but it's not spending the money where it's needed, on upgrading the facilities we already have. They say they are giving 50% of the new housing to the private sector, so old families that have been here for generations are displaced, and if you want to buy here then you don't have the amenities."

A Muirhouse resident for the past decade, Blythe says she has witnessed the slow erosion of community spirit in the area. "There are problems with the local youth stealing cars, but there's nowhere for kids to go. People don't

look out for each others' children any more. Parents don't talk to each other."

The Volunteer Arms, Leith Walk

"The Volley", as everyday psychopath Begbie calls it, was a regular drinking haunt for Renton and his cronies – and supplied unwitting victims for the random acts of violence of which Begbie was so fond. In an early chapter, he describes a stand-off over the order of play at the pool table, noting that one of his companions was too drunk to hold a cue, despite it being before midday.

The [Volunteer Arms](#) retained its spit-and-sawdust reputation well into the Noughties, before a £70,000 refurbishment under new ownership saw it reinvented as a specialist whisky-and-craft-beer establishment called the Cask and Still. Launching the new pub last September with a tasting session of gin distilled on-site, owner Iain Pert noted: "One of the biggest differences is that, unlike the Volunteer Arms, we don't plan on opening from 7am. We'll be keeping more normal hours from now on."



The Volunteer Arms pub on Leith Walk has been reinvented as the Cask and Still. Photograph: Murdo MacLeod

Bartender Sam Hall insists the response from locals since the launch has been welcoming. "People are pleased to see that it's had such a massive facelift, though we do still get a few coming in expecting a pool table and a juke box." He adds delicately: "It used to attract all manner of folk you wouldn't want in your pub."

"It's never easy getting new clientele in the current economic climate," Hall suggests, "but the demographic is changing round here and there are a lot of younger people who like what we have to offer."

The appearance of the occasional hipster pub is part of a gentler and more coherent wave of change, argues Peter Matthews, a lecturer in social policy at the University of Stirling, who lives at the end of Leith Walk. “The economy in Leith is not strong enough to support the full-scale gentrification that you get in parts of London. The old pubs at the bottom of tenements have closed down as their older working-class clientele die out, and they are replaced by a younger clientele who want a different kind of place to drink. This is still the first wave of gentrification.”

Matthews adds that, in the case of Leith Walk, the received wisdom of developing mixed-background communities, because middle-class people complain more and so raise standards, seems to have been proven accurate. “In my own experience, community groups like Greener Leith have been hugely successful,” he says. “Leith Walk itself has been transformed from a pretty grim road to one that is liveable with wide footpaths and zebra crossings. That’s also driven by demographics: younger people have more time and energy to campaign.”



The Meadows in Edinburgh: ‘It feels like a park, but it’s also a commute.’ Photograph: Murdo MacLeod

The Meadows

With the pubs full of Edinburgh Festival types “having a wee snort before heading off tae the next show”, Renton, Spud and Sick Boy take some ecstasy and stroll across the city to the Meadows, a large public park to the south of the centre.

Out of their comfort zone and out of their heads, they chat up two girls who attend a nearby private school: “These lassies are playing at it ... gaun through an upset-yir-posh-Ma-n-Dad phase.” When Sick Boy and Renton menace a squirrel, they attract the ire of “two posh-lookin wifies”. As Spud reasons with his pals when he attempts to spare the rodent:

“They posh wifies think people like us ur vermin, likesay, does that make it right thit they should kill us?”

Public access to the tree-lined pathways and blossom trees of the Meadows was first granted in the middle of the 19th century. Now the park’s size and prominence makes it a magnet for sporting and community events, with a charity half-marathon every March and in June the annual Meadows Festival, which sees the park filled with locally organised stalls and performances over one weekend. The Meadows has also been the site of political protests and rallies, including a number of referendum-related events last summer and, famously, the 225,000-strong [Make Poverty History march](#) in July 2005.

The [Comment is Free](#) columnist [Morven Crumlish](#) lived by the Meadows as a student, and now makes her home to the south of the park. “It doesn’t feel like it has changed at all from when I was at university,” she says. “In the summer it’s still a sea of students and families. You still see the same faces, but the only difference now is that everyone has mobile phones.”

Describing the ambient nature of the Meadows, she adds: “It feels like a park, but it’s also a commute. People cross the Meadows to other parts of the city.” She notes that the perimeter of the park is far from uniform, contrasting the student-centric, more ethnically diverse area to the east with the more solidly middle-class streets to the south: “I have two artisanal chocolatiers on my street, but no supermarket.”



Leith Central Station building: a Tesco superstore sprawls where the platforms once stood.
Photograph: Murdo MacLeod

Leith Central Station

This location lends the novel its title. After a sojourn in London, Renton returns to Leith for Christmas. He visits the derelict [Leith Central Station](#) building with Begbie: “Now a barren, desolate hangar, which is soon tae be demolished and replaced by a supermarket and swimming centre. Somehow, that makes us sad ...” There, an elderly drunkard asks them jokingly if they have come to do some trainspotting. Renton notes that Begbie is strangely subdued following the encounter, and later attacks a passer-by on Leith Walk for even less reason than usual. Only then does Renton realise that the drunk man was Begbie’s father.

Leith Central Station was closed to passengers in the 50s and finally made redundant as a depot in 1972, after which the building fell into disrepair and became a haven for drug addicts. The large train shed was subsequently demolished and now a huge Tesco superstore sprawls across where the platforms once stood. On the site of the terminal building itself, Edinburgh council opened a leisure pool called Leith Waterworld in 1992.

But the popular facility was threatened with closure in 2010, prompting an [angry response from local residents](#). Johnny Gailey, who regularly used the pool with his young children, was a member of the Splashback campaign to save Leith Waterworld.

“What we found galling was the argument that the pool was running at a loss so it should close. But schools and hospitals run at a loss: that’s what we pay our taxes for.” The council also argued that it needed to prioritise funds to refurbish Edinburgh’s [Royal Commonwealth Pool](#) for the 2014 Games. “It feels like Edinburgh is a city for tourists,” says Gailey. “The council will put money into the Festival but not local arts – or in this case a valuable facility that was getting families to play together.”

Gailey says that the pool also fulfilled a very practical purpose, allowing families living in over-crowded accommodation space to play. “Leith was getting more and more overcrowded, and there was a log-jam of young families stuck in small flats who couldn’t afford to move because of the housing crash.”

Although the Splashback campaign initially succeeded in getting the sale halted, in 2013 the council sold the site for redevelopment as a soft-play area. “It wasn’t just a Leith facility,” Gailey adds. “It was bringing people into Leith to visit, and helping to counter some of those Trainspotting associations.”

