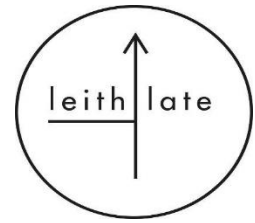


Speaker: Tim Chalk (Artist)

Mural: Leith History Mural

Audio 00:04:29



I painted this mural with Paul Grime in 1986. The Scottish Development Agency had set up a regeneration programme called the Leith Project and we secured funding as part of this to make a series of public artworks throughout Leith over a period of 3 years. This mural marked the culmination of our programme of artworks and was in a sense, the pulling together of all the threads of our involvement with the Leith community.

I'd had my eye on this gable as the ideal spot for a mural for a long time, but it wasn't until we'd been working in the area for a while that we felt it was appropriate to put an artwork like this in such a prominent place, and when we did we wanted to be sure that what we did was a proper reflection of the community. By this time, we had made lots of contacts with local groups and individuals and felt ready to make a large scale public statement about the local identity.

The '80's were an interesting and pivotal time in Leith. It was in the process of a real change in character. The old traditional Leith was still very much present, and there was a strong sense of local identity and pride, but the traditional trades and industries were on the decline; there was high unemployment and morale was quite low. The S.D.A. programme of economic regeneration was encouraging new businesses into the area and the process of "gentrification" was starting to get underway. It seemed an



important time to record and celebrate Leith's past and to assess the present and future.

Neither Paul or I were Leithers and we wanted this mural to represent the voices of the community, so our first task was to gather a group of local people representing a range of ages and views. We were very lucky that there was a programme running at the time called the Leith Local History Project. They had already made contact with lots of interested people from the area and through them we gathered a group of about eight people ranging from about 30 to 60 years old and through a series of workshops over a period of about 6 months we developed all the main themes and subject matter for the mural. It was a great process in itself and from it we got a fantastic wealth of material to work with, and again the Leith Local History Project was able to help us with a huge amount of old photos that they had gathered into an archive, and we also got lots more material from individuals that offered help.

The way we developed the actual design was that in our workshop sessions we'd discuss and remember what people felt was important to record and depict. Then I would pull together all this content into a rough layout, weaving together all the stories and subject matter, then bring this back to the group for discussion, and amendment. Then I'd work this up further, and again bring it back to the group. In this way through a process of editing and reworking, we gradually arrived at a design that everyone felt genuinely represented what they thought was "the real Leith". The next step in the consultation process was to put the finished design on public display for comment and feedback. It was on show in Leith Library for about a month and the general response was very favourable, so that gave us the confidence to go ahead.



That was all in the summer of 1985, and the plan was to have it finished by the late Autumn, but we ran into a problem with the render on the wall, and this had to be completely stripped off and redone, so the painting didn't start till the following August in 1986. The mural was finally finished in time for Christmas, and I can tell you, it got pretty cold on that scaffolding by the end! I can remember not being able to tell if there was a brush in my hand or not. We got pretty fit though - running up and down the scaffolding and crossing the road to see what we were doing from a distance.

But the finished result was worth it! I think it's the project I feel most proud of. The way it has been embraced and taken on a life of it's own over the years makes me feel we all got it right.

As anyone looking at it now can see, the mural is showing its age and could probably do with some attention. Various people have suggested some kind of renovation and I'm very touched by how much people care about the mural. I'm not sure what I feel about a straightforward restoration project, but I'd love to think it could spark off something else involving a new generation of Leithers and artists - a sort of continuation of the story.