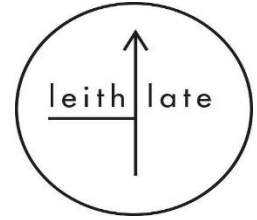


Speaker: Cameron Foster (Guide)

Mural: Leith History Mural

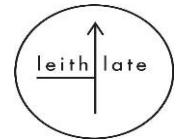
Audio 00:05:06



Hello everybody, we're down on the corner of Ferry Road and Great junction Street, right next to Leith Theatre in front of, what is quite frankly, a masterpiece in the world of murals. Originally titled, "Into the Future with a Strong Community" but now affectionally known as the Leith History Mural it was installed over three months in 1985 by Tim Chalk and Paul Grime. Tim and Paul were part of Artist's Collective, a group of three young artists which also included David Wilkinson, who completed 4 murals in the area as part of the Leith Initiative Project in the first half of the 80s. This was their second mural after the Gulls at Linksvie house and like the Gulls they put community engagement at the heart of the project. This time, however, rather than asking what people wanted to see which had resulted in a perfectly nice but stylistically kinda safe mural, they started speaking to residents about their memories. After spending months collecting tales and stories from the previous 70 years or so, Tim and Paul set about the task of trying to create a cohesive whole.

And this is the result. In terms of scale, composition, concept and, well, execution, its truly world class. Just to run through some of what we are seeing here- starting bottom left where it has started to fade quite badly we have kids playing in the street and a boxing match. Next to that we have Leith Gala which started in 1907 to raise money for Leith Hospital in the Days before the NHS. Moving up a little the coffins are the bodies of the soldiers who died in the Gretna Rail disaster in 1915. The disaster claimed over 200 lives and the bodies were brought back to the Drill Hall on Dalmeny Street. The panel to the right of that deals with ship building in Leith which had just come to an end after 600 years with the closure of the Henry Robb shipyards. The industrial action that preceded the closure is depicted in the lower section with a protest lead by a piper and a faded banner which reads "Henry Robb Leith" As side note, Tim pinched the composition for the section with the propeller from the painting The Deposition of Christ by Fra. Angelico from 1434 which, let me tell you, is triple classy.

Moving over again, the fella bracing himself on the table is from a memory one resident had of seeing their father come home from work taking burlap sacks off the boats all day the rough material would rub the dockers back raw and the child's mother would rub ligament into their father's back so they could go back out the next day. In fact, you can see the dockers just to the right and to the right again, a scene from the gates of the dock in the morning when men would crowd round to be picked for a



day's labour. Following that round some more leads us to marches and public speaking and the rise of socialism. The street scene to the left of the folk holding the red banner is the Old Kirkgate which was flattened to create the shopping precinct at the foot of the Walk. It's a pretty lively scene and if you look carefully you can see drunks being barrowed away and pigtails of Chinese Chefs and on the right, which I think is now a Greggs, the much-loved Gayety Theatre which is referenced again in the playbill above.

The final three sections are perhaps my favourite in some ways. It's very easy and all too common, for murals like these to simply focus on the past. What we see in these panels is and acknowledgment that things are changing. There's a removal van and the streets behind curve into a question mark. There seems to be a wall being built between the traditional Newhaven fishermen's houses and the sort of people who sit outside and drink wine in suits and, y'know, go on mural tours. But there's also derelict tenements and plans for improvements which, after all this mural was part of. The last panel, the piece that has yet to quite click into place is a hand - perhaps your hand - extended in welcome to the new members of the community.

The great thing about this mural is that it doesn't try to stamp a readymade identity on a place. It reflects on the past and is uncertain about the future but originally, below the chimneys, and before 30 odd years of storms and strain washed it away, was a bright horizon. As much as this mural shows the history of Leith as people remembered it, it's about the future. The other audio track has lead artist, and genuinely lovely man, Tim Chalk giving us some more insight into this fabulous mural but I'd just like to quickly finish by echoing something he says on the other track. A lot of people ask about restoring this mural and I really appreciate that instinct but there's a danger, in doing that that a work about living memory, uncertainty and hope would become a kind of pickled museum piece. But what if new artist came along and took the faded sections, the faded memories if you will, and added new work, new memories from the last 35 years? I don't know if there would be a mural like that anywhere else in the world.