

# Old Leith Docks: Timeline

## Date Event

- 80 Agricola passes through Leith on his way from Inveresk to Cramond.
- C12<sup>th</sup> Medieval wharf edges in the Shore area.
- 1296 The capture and annexation of Berwick upon Tweed by the English cut off Southeast Scotland from what had been its main port for foreign trade, which allowed Leith to take its place.
- 1329 King Robert the Bruce gave to Edinburgh his harbour at Leith and access to it. This is the start of the process under which Edinburgh took control of Leith.
- 1380 Robert II granted the Incorporation of Master Mariners the right to levy duty on goods landed at Leith. This money was used to help the sick, poor, widows of mariners, and aged mariners.
- 1434 The King's Wark (or fortification) building was constructed on the orders of James I as a combined residence, storehouse and armoury (even a real tennis court).
- 1455 Vaulted cellars remain from Trinity House 'hospital'.
- 1483 St Mary's Church built. Leithers no longer needed to make the long walk to Restalrig on Sundays.
- 1486 The first bridge across the Water of Leith built at Coal Hill, previously called "the gate that leads to the ford"), thereby allowing development of the West bank (North Leith).
- 1493 St Ninian's Church built. Its manse and belfry are oldest buildings to survive in Leith.
- 1544 An English army under the Earl of Hertford sacked Leith. Part of King Henry VIII's 'Rough Wooing' an attempt to bring about the marriage of his son, later King Edward VI, and the infant Mary Queen of Scots.
- 1548 Leith fortifications begun by Mary of Guise. Over the next decade Leith became a walled town with fortifications based on the latest Italian designs (star shape / bastions, cf. Trace italienne).
- 1555 Trinity House built in Kirkgate.
- 1560 The Siege of Leith. Mary of Guise, acting as Regent for her daughter, Mary, Queen of Scots, and her French troops besieged by an English army fighting along with Scottish Reformation Lords.
- 1561 Mary, Queen of Scots landed at Leith on return from France. Lamb's House is not the building where she was entertained but is a fine example of an early 17th century merchant's house.
- 1610 Lamb's house: built in 1610 by Andrew Lamb. For many years the finest merchant's house. It has continental features such as crow stepped gables and a pantile roof. Its clay pantiles: large format, S-shaped, first appeared during the 17<sup>th</sup>C when imported from Holland, usually as ballast on trading ships.
- 1616 Whaling begins from Leith to Newfoundland.
- 1638 The National Covenant, opposing the proposed reforms of the Church of Scotland by King Charles I is signed in North and South Leith.
- 1645 The last and worst outbreak of the black death (bubonic plague – acquired from the bite of an infected flea) in Edinburgh and Leith. It ravished the port. Over 2,700 people in

South Leith died - about three quarters of the population. Immediately anyone fell ill, they were isolated in their house with their whole family. Wooden huts were built on the Links to isolate those infected. A 16th century dovecot at Lochend, is reputed to have been used as a kiln for disinfecting their clothes.

- 1649 After the defeat of the Scots at the Battle of Dunbar both Edinburgh and Leith surrendered to Cromwell. Around this time development out with the old walls began.
- 1655 General Monck built The Citadel in North Leith for Cromwell. One arched gateway, in Dock Street remains of this once impressive building. By this time Leith had become a very opulent and flourishing port and a substantial commercial town in its own right.
- 1686 A windmill built at The Shore by Robert Mylne, who also constructed a new harbour.
- c1690 King's Wark destroyed by fire. The present tenement (with characteristic Dutch gables and scrolled skewputts) replaced it and given the same name.
- 1693 Captain Collins, *Hydrographer to the King*, produced the earliest accurate map of Leith.
- 1698 The first four ships of the fated Darien Expedition sailed from Leith.
- 1709 A detailed street plan of Leith made by John Naish.
- 1744 The world's first 'Rules for Golf' were written for a tournament played on Leith Links.
- 1754 Leith gets a new water supply from Lochend. At this time the regular streets of Bernard, Constitution, Quality were set out, as Leith becomes a fashionable seaside resort.
- 1770/1 Permission was given for the construction of Leith's first dry dock, Sandport St.
- 1778 The old, arched stone bridge was demolished and replaced by a drawbridge, further downstream. This enabled ships to berth further upstream.
- 1779 Leith threatened by a fleet led by John Paul Jones, 'Father of the United States Navy'. A Fort, manned by the Royal Artillery, was then constructed in North Leith to defend against future attacks.
- 1792 Leith Banking Company was set up.
- 1799 Rennie's Plans were drawn up and approved for the construction of Leith's first wet docks. the first wet docks to be built in Scotland. The result was a modern, permanently accessible dockyard with accommodation for 150 vessels of typically 100 to 200 tons.
- 1800 Gt. Junct. St. formed as fast route from Leith Walk to new docks. Leith Bank. Bernard drawbridge. Leith expanded substantially during the 19th century, associated with railway building and the growth of the Port of Leith.
- 1805 The sails of the windmill were removed, and it was converted into a signal tower. Flag signals were used to tell incoming ships the depth of the water at the harbour bar.
- 1806 John Rennie's East Dock was opened - the advent of Leith's modern industrial period.
- 1809 Martello Tower built to defend Leith during the Napoleonic Wars. Exchange building.
- 1812 The new Custom House built in Commercial St., retaining its original use until 1980.
- 1813 North Leith Church moved from the old St Ninian's to a Greek Doric new parish church in Madeira Street with classic steeple. This was intended as the centrepiece for a Leith 'New Town'. The formality of the street layout (best demonstrated today by the Georgian architecture of Madeira St. and Prince Regent St., and the disposition of key buildings to create focal points and vistas) contribute to the impression of this area as Leith's own version of the New Town.
- 1816 The present Trinity House was erected to replace the earlier building.

- 1818 Junction Bridge was constructed. This was part of an ambitious plan linking the new docks to both Ferry Road and Leith Walk without having to go through the narrow streets of old Leith.
- 1822 George IV landed at The Shore. He was the first monarch since Charles II to visit Scotland.
- 1825 Junction Road Church (now St Thomas') was opened. This was one of the first buildings to be erected on Great Junction Street and originally stood isolated in the fields.
- 1827 Neo-Classical Town Hall in Charlotte St. (Pressure on space in Sheriff Court when L. becomes Burgh.)
- 1832 First railway - a horse-drawn operation, comes to Tower St. in the form of a single-track branch line - part of the coal carrying "the Innocent Railway". Closed in 1846 but repurposed for steam (1859) as South Leith station. Closed again to passengers and goods traffic in 1903.
- 1833 Parliamentary Burgh status acquired. Appropriately grand buildings of old Town Hall, L. Hospital. Edinburgh City having been made bankrupt by extension works to Leith piers.
- 1837 Shipbuilders, Robert Menzies & Sons, built 'Sirius'. The 1<sup>st</sup> steamship to cross the Atlantic.
- 1840 St Thomas church, manse, schoolhouse (a free school for boys, and also for girls) and hospital for ten female incurables in Mill Lane. Founded, as a memorial to his wife, by Sir John Gladstone (locally born Scottish merchant, slave owner, and Tory politician best known for being the father of British Prime Minister William Gladstone).
- 1842 Whaling ceased in Leith.
- 1846 Leith Citadel railway opened. It passed under Junction Bridge and through a tunnel under Coburg Street to its terminus on Commercial Street, having run via the Scotland Street Tunnel.
- 1847 South Leith Parish Church was substantially rebuilt with its hammerbeam roof.
- 1850 South Leith Poorhouse opened in Gt. Junction St. on the site now occupied by Taylor Gardens. Leith Hospital and Infirmary opened in Mill Lane c.1850. Additional upper storey and wings added 1920 onwards.
- 1852 Victoria Dock was opened to accommodate the larger steamships then in use.
- 1869 Albert Dock opened. The first dock in Scotland to be equipped with a hydraulic crane, which still survives today to the W.
- 1872 Horse tram services began in Leith.
- 1874 Victoria Swing Bridge completed. At the time it was the largest swing bridge in the United Kingdom. The wrought iron bridge carried two railway tracks, a road, with footpaths on either side.
- 1879 Leith North station, Lindsay Rd. (nr. Ocean Terminal), opened. Line ran via Newhaven and Craigleith. Demolished 2006.
- 1881 The Edinburgh Dock was opened.
- 1885 The Henderson Street Improvement Scheme was launched. It provided a new street running from Great Junction Street to the Shore and involved the demolition of many appalling slums.

- 1892 Renaissance style Ports Office at main entrance to docks in Tower Place.
- 1903 Central Station (most recently of Trainspotting fame) was opened at the foot of Leith Walk. Depot for diesel multiple units until 1972. Line ran via Abbeyhill. Never very successful. Trams proved to be better.
- 1904 The Imperial Dock opened.
- 1905 An electric tram system opened in Leith (continued operating until 1956). Through journeys to Edinburgh were not possible because Edinburgh had opted to install a cable tramway system. Passengers had to change at Pilrig.
- 1908 Christian Salvesen & Co of Leith began whaling operations in the Antarctic. By 1911 their fleet was the largest whaling fleet in the world.
- 1913 Leith Dockers strike for seven and a half weeks.
- 1916 Zeppelin raid. Night of 2-3 April. L14 dropped 23 bombs in Scotland's first ever air raid. *Two fatalities in Leith.*
- 1920 Leith was (reluctantly) amalgamated with Edinburgh - ending 87 years of independence.
- 1949 Abercrombie's plan for 'motorway' through the middle of Leith, with four giant roundabouts. Post-war industrial decline, population fell by half in some areas, Leith gained a bad reputation.
- 1962/5 construction of the Cables Wynd 'Banana' flats. These offered a welcome improvement over the still common problems of overcrowding and slum housing conditions. A new, higher quality, and more holistic approach to housing was pioneered - it aimed to create not just houses but communities. External access decks recreated the civic spirit of traditional tenement streets.
- 1963 Award winning twin towers of Leith Fort development built. (Popular at first, soon became notorious in the high unemployment era of the 1980s, demolished 1997). In 2018 replaced by popular colonies style housing – all with gardens and facing the sun.
- 1969 Outer lock constructed. Water is now permanently 1m higher than the old high tide level.
- 1983 Shipyard of Henry Robb Ltd closed. This brought an end to over 600 years of shipbuilding in Leith. It also saw the "Trainspotting era" and was a low point. Leith (EH6) was blacklisted for mortgages, partly on account of a huge Health and Safety exclusion zone centred on Leith Docks with a radius of 1 km, which prohibited new residential development due to the explosive value of fertilisers. The turn-around came in the mid-1980s when this restriction was abandoned in 1983, and when a few small property developers risked restoration schemes, such as at the Cooperage.
- 2001 Waterview and Waterside Houses built on Shore in Hanseatic style.
- 2018 Ocean Mist restored to her former glory as a boutique hotel. Originally built in 1919 as a minesweeper, has had an extraordinary history, having been owned by some amazing characters as a gentleman's pleasure yacht from racing drivers to cattle ranchers, whisky producers, and ship builders.
- 2024 Leith has always done its own thing. The area having shed its old industrial skin now embraces a trendy new guise – and has risen to sixteenth on the list of coolest neighbourhoods in the world, according to [Time Out](#).