Inverleith Park: Background Notes

Inverleith

Like many places in the Lothians, the name may come from Scottish Gaelic – *Inbhir Llaith*, meaning "Mouth of Leith", as with Inverness, meaning mouth of the River Ness, or more simply “Inner Leith”. Leith comes from the Gaelic llaith, meaning "wet” or “liquid"—a reference to the main river that flows into a district. Characterised by a wealth of green space and parks, Inverleith is a mostly residential area. It is one of Edinburgh’s most exclusive areas with a number of detached Victorian and Edwardian houses.

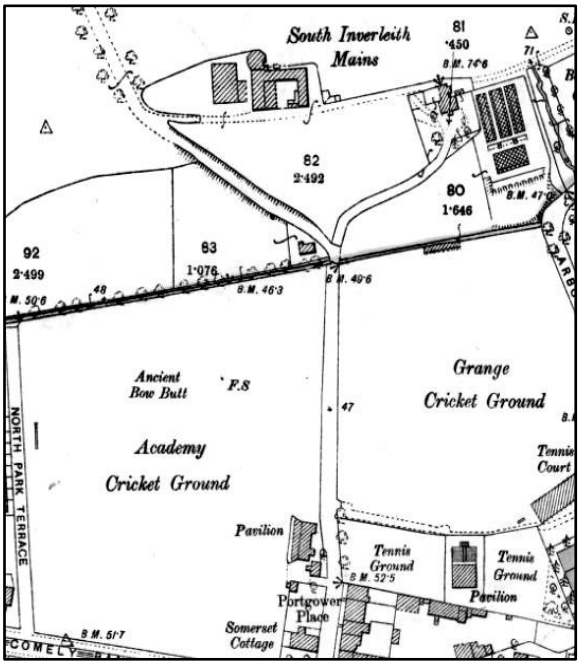
For over two centuries, since 1665, Inverleith was owned by the Rocheid family. It changed hands when a co-heiress, Mary, married Sir Francis Kinloch, 3rd Baronet of Gilmerton. Their son Alexander (d. 1755) inherited the entire Inverleith estates and changed his surname to become Alexander Rocheid of Inverleith. Inverleith House, designed in 1773 by David Henderson, became the family home and centre piece of the estate. However, Alexander and his descendants spent most of their time in Germany, and at the beginning of the C19th Alexander's son James Rocheid of Inverleith leased Inverleith Mains Farm (see map below) to George Lauder, Comptroller of the City of Edinburgh's Tolls, and the great-grandfather of Sir Harry Lauder.

Inverleith Park

At 54 acres, it is one of Scotland's largest urban parks. In 1889 the City fathers bought the land from Carl Rocheid. The farm came with the land. The ground was developed vigorously. Paths, roadways, and drainage were quickly underway, along with the construction of greenhouses, a pavilion, two bowling greens, four tennis courts, two golf courses and a ride for horses. Playing fields, tree-lined walkways and a sizeable pond followed. Part of the land was later given over to allotments.

Today, most of the park is open parkland, used as recreational space for rugby, football, cricket, baseball and other sports. The playing fields are owned and used by the independent schools of Edinburgh Academy, Fettes College, Stewart's Melville College, and George Heriot's. The Park also features a children's play park, four tennis courts, ball courts for basketball and football, a pétanque court, outdoor fitness equipment, outdoor table tennis and a running and fitness circuit. The boating pond was upgraded in 2007, with its western end turned into an attractive wetlands water garden. Most recently the newly refurbished Sundial Garden and a wildflower meadow have been established.
https://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/downloads/file/22591/inverleith-park-management-plan

The world's first rugby football international

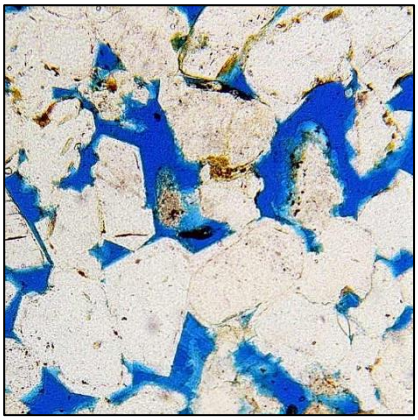


Inverleith brought to life one of the most important moments in sporting history, when an enthusiastic crowd of around 4,000 crammed into Raeburn Place to witness the inaugural rugby international. Scotland met England on 27 March 1871 on the cricket field of the Edinburgh Academy. In fact, the first nine international matches in Scotland were all played on established cricket fields.

The day ended in an unexpected – and much celebrated – victory for Scotland by a goal and a try to a try. Play was 20 a side, with two 50-minute halves, and scrums of 15 pushing against 15 in a tight maul that was often immovable for minutes. The goalposts were much shorter than today. The playing surface was laid out adjacent to the slope of the ancient archery mound, which used to be a feature at Inverleith. The English team complained that the pitch was too narrow, at just 55 yards wide. However, Inverleith continued to be used for Scottish Internationals until 1925.

One anecdote is "*J.F.Finlay had got away well with the ball and was sprinting towards the English line … when Osborne, folding his arms across his chest, ran full tilt at him, after the fashion of a bull charging at a gate. Both were very big, heavy men, and the crash of the collision was tremendous, each reeling some yards and finally falling backwards. For a few seconds, players and spectators alike held their breath, fearing terrible results, but the two giants promptly resumed their places, apparently none the worse.*"
https://www.scottishsporthistory.com/sports-history-news-and-blog/a-window-on-sporting-history-the-first-rugby-match-scotland-v-england-in-1871

Raeburn House Hotel and the 1912 Wall



Raeburn Place, which was first developed for housing around 1814, is named after the painter Sir Henry Raeburn. Born locally in 1756 he became a hugely successful artist, serving as Portrait Painter to King George IV. Raeburn House Hotel is the only survivor of a group of three villas at the west end of Raeburn Place. Built 1832 as Somerset Cottage it has a hipped slated platform roof and gable chimneys. Its facade is an excellent example of an Edinburgh suburban villa frontage, constructed in robust cream-coloured, fine-textured Craigleith stone. (A close-up image, BGS-P526995, reveals a clean, pure, uniform, well-sorted quartz-cemented sandstone with grains of ~0.1mm diameter; the blue staining demonstrates its interconnected porosity.)

Portgower Place was originally called Rocheid Street and was named after the Rocheid lairds of Inverlieith. When a row of terraced houses was built there in around 1880 the builders renamed the road, drawing inspiration from the village of Portgower near Helmsdale, which means 'goat harbour'.

The 1912 Wall has recently been the principal issue behind a fractious and expensive legal dispute between the Raeburn Cricket and Rugby Clubs (2016/21/22). The main issue revolved around the ownership of the solum (ground) beneath a 1912 boundary wall that had been associated with their sporting activities for over a century. To briefly paraphrase the litigation and the 95- and 28-page legal judgements: The Cricket Club claimed title to a narrow ‘ransom strip’ across which access would be required to enter the Rugby Club’s new commercial developments. They valued the ground (only a few feet wide) at around £875,000. The Rugby Club contended that the land had previously been granted to the City for the purposes of widening Comely Bank Rd. Hence it was part of a public right of way and consequently there was no ‘ransom strip’. The 1912 wall abutted Raeburn House, whose corner formed a key, fixed, point of reference in the evidence given. In the final analysis, it was the opinion of the Judge, Lady Wolffe, that the “*pursuer’s case fails*”.

Boating Pond

Inverleith Pond was constructed as a model boating pond in the 1890's. It has a puddle clay base and is 2ft. deep at its edges increasing to about 3ft. in the middle. In 2006 Edinburgh City Council asked the company Water Gems to come up with a solution to the problems being caused at Inverleith Pond by algae. The pond water was getting blue-green algal blooms that were a health hazard. These were principally caused by high nutrient levels in the pond (with inflows emanating from Ravelston, Davidson’s Mains and Blackhall).

Solution to the problem: The solution was to desilt the pond and use the silt to create planting beds for masses of aquatic plants. In addition, a curving boardwalk provided access over the water and through the plants. An initial draining of the pond allowed the silt to dry. This was then removed from the base of the pond and moved to the inflow. A gravel filter bed was also constructed to help improve water quality. The incoming water was rerouted so that all the water coming into the pond had to pass through the wetland. The beds were planted up with big blocks of flag iris, sweet grass, greater- and lesser-pond sedge, and purple loosestrife. Bog myrtle and marsh marigold were planted round the edges. There was lots of fun to begin with in trying to dissuade the 80 or so swans from eating the plants but this was solved when a dominant pair emerged, nested in the wetland, and drove all the other swans away.

Biodiversity gains: Since the wetland was constructed there have not been any further blue-green algal blooms. The plants absorb lots of the dissolved nutrients and the wetland traps particulates coming in with the incoming water. The biodiversity gains have been huge – heron and kingfisher are regular visitors, frogs spawn, and coot, moorhen and mallard regularly nest. Dragonflies and damselflies bask on the handrail of the boardwalk and sticklebacks swim through the starwort in the water. It is wonderful to see that Inverleith Pond is once again a popular visitor attraction. Water Gems were back recently to clean up the pond and to ensure that the water quality remains high. https://www.watergems.co.uk/portfolio_page/inverleith-park-pond/

Trees

The Tree Avenue Walk: 16 different common tree types (rowan, cherry, alder, sycamore, ash, lime, elm, holly, yew, birch, beech, elder and holm, turkey & sessile oaks) line the tree avenue above the Pond.

Planting the First of 75,000 Trees with Edinburgh Fringe Festival: Caledonian Horticulture partnered with Edinburgh Fringe Festival to help with a tree planting project pledged to establish 75,000 trees in recognition of 75 years of the Fringe. The first 75 trees were planted in the Park in 2022. All are native species; chosen because of the benefits they provide to insects and wildlife. They include a mix of birch, rowan, blackthorn, hawthorn, and hazel. All were doing well in spring 2024. But where, one wonders, where are the remaining 74,925 trees?
https://caledonianhorticulture.co.uk/planting-the-first-of-75000-trees-with-edinburgh-fringe-festival-in-inverleith-park/

Kinloch Anderson Sundial Restored at Inverleith Park

Photo from flickr.com/photos/patrickdown/

The Inverleith Park sundial was originally gifted by Edinburgh firm Kinloch Anderson in 1890. The dial has been standing as the centrepiece of the Sundial Garden since it opened in 1891. It was newly restored, by the same company, in 2018. This event marked 150 years since 1868 when the company was founded. The firm Kinloch Anderson is known for its high-quality clothing and textiles. A number of world class innovations by the family steered the business successfully throughout the 15 decades of its existence.

The sundial is unusual with dials facing the four points of the compass. The four faces now show all their proper details. The hour lines and numerals are exactly as they should be, all in their correct mathematical positions Each dial tells the time for part of the day—East for the morning, South for midday, West for the afternoon, and North in high summer for early morning and the evening. https://www.macmillanhunter.co.uk/kinloch-anderson-sundial-restored-at-inverleith-park/

Other Features of Merit

The former farmhouse of South Inverleith Mains still exists, near what was once the old castle or Fortalice of Inverleith, and where archery butts were located. At the rear of the farmhouse, now used as Council office accommodation, is the workshop area for Parks and Greenspace and the Fourwinds Inspiration Centre: a hub for environmental projects.

Of particular architectural merit are the impressive entrances. The northernmost is in the form of a pedimented red sandstone arch, topped by a unicorn with lion shield. At the east are rusticated gate piers with seated lions. Both entrances were designed by Sydney Mitchell. A drinking fountain, in a rough red granite obelisk and dated 1899, marks the crossroads of the main walkways that divide the Park.

Geological Timeline of Inverleith

- **340 million years ago - Carboniferous Period**

Inverleith is near the equator, in a hot, steamy, tropical environment slowly drifting northward. Arthur's Seat volcano erupts. Rising magma creates igneous intrusions of hard, resistant rocks that today form elevated hill and crags. Sediments, such as the famously durable Craigleith sandstone used to build many of Edinburgh's fine Georgian buildings), are found in nearby quarries. These are being lain down in wide, slow moving, sediment-laden rivers. A rift valley setting allows the sands and muds to be buried in a giant delta (in a not dissimilar situation to the present-day East African rift valley). Coal seams are created as plant material builds up in swamps (somewhat akin to the Everglades of Florida) turns into peat and later compressed by burial. The coal forests are dominated by huge (50m high) clubmosses and horsetails. Giant millipedes (2m long), amphibians and invertebrates roam the great equatorial forests; reptiles are evolving rapidly and beginning to inhabit the more fluvio-deltaic, lacustrine, and coastal environments.

https://www.deviantart.com/abelov2014/art/A-forest-of-the-Carboniferous-period-var-1-541173460

- **66 million years ago - Tertiary Era**

Scotland's drainage system initiates at the beginning of the Tertiary. Plate tectonic forces tilt Scotland to the east. The uplift and incline cause the major river systems (Spey, Tay, Forth, Esk, Tyne, Tweed) to form and drain to the east. Over time secondary streams (River Almond, Water of Leith) develop and flow into the primary river channels. The lowermost parts of the Park (Boating Pond, cricket pitches) lie on alluvium deposited by the evolving Water of Leith drainage system.

- **2 million years ago - Quaternary Period**

Dramatic global cooling → Ice ages. 3,000-feet-thick ice sheets cover Inverleith and erode the land as they ponderously flow east away from the Scottish Highlands, creating the classic 'crag-and-tail' landscape feature of the Castle Rock and High Street. Elevated sea levels fashion the extensive, flat raised-beach deposits of the sports pitches. Today, the highest of the beaches stretches as far inland as Comely Bank. Glacial Boulder Clay deposits form the hill on which Inverleith House stands, as well as covering the higher (northern) part of Inverleith Park, for instance the allotments. Many preglacial river courses are much altered and transformed by glacial erosion.

- **End of Ice Age (Roughly 10,500 years ago)**

Worldwide warming → Meltwater further erodes the Water of Leith. The higher raised beaches are inhabited by prehistoric hunter-gatherers, their encampments placed adjacent to the elevated shoreline. As Scotland recovered, little by little, from the immense load imposed by the weight of Glacial ice it slowly rises causing the sea to retreat locally.

Man-made climate change is happening at a much faster pace. Global temperatures, driven by mankind's burning of fossil-fuels (especially since WWII) are now climbing abruptly, plants and animals are moving poleward, the oceans are warming and causing sea-level to rise. The greater warmth also leads to the atmosphere holding more moisture and thus rivers (such as the Water of Leith) flood more frequently.

N.B. A magnificent vista of Edinburgh's skyline can be seen from the Panorama Board beside the Tree Av. Twenty-five spires, domes, towers and other recognisable features are on view. Also visible are an ancient volcano (Arthur's Seat), Carboniferous sandstone ridges (underlying the New Town), Crag-and-tail (Castle & High St.), Boulder clay (beneath), Raised beaches (behind) and River alluvium (below).