

HANNAH ROBINSON



SECRET EDINBURGH

AN UNUSUAL GUIDE



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

BLAIR STREET VAULTS

14

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• Access only with Mercat Tours: www.mercattours.com

• Prices vary by tour, approx £15 per adult

• Buses: 3, 5, 7, 8, 14, 29, 30, 31, 33, 35, 37, 45, 49



*Safe from
the Securitate*

Now that Mary King's Close has become an international tourist attraction, those of us who like to burrow have to delve further down to explore Edinburgh's secret underworld. Just below the Tron bar on Blair Street is an inauspicious opening into an underground world of cavernous vaults between the supporting structures of the South Bridge – the long, hidden bridge which carries the A7 from the High Street, over the valley that is the Cowgate, onto Chambers Street. Built in 1788, it was to link the centre to the Southside and the university area.

To support the bridge, layers of archways were constructed – nineteen arches spanning some 300 metres. The gaps between the arches looked rather useful, so floors were built to create rooms that were used as storage or rented out as artisans' workshops. Soon there was a thriving underground craftsworld of cobblers, milliners, smelters and the like. There were even oyster bars with an edgy atmosphere that made them terribly fashionable for well-heeled folk who wanted to kick off said footwear.

But being a dark and hidden space, it also attracted people who didn't want to be seen. Meetings of the Hellfire Club were held here for "persons of quality" who wished to take part in immoral acts. Soon Burke and Hare were hiding their bodies down there, and there was even a convenient body-sized passageway leading up to the university medical department (see p. 175). The place became so dangerous that only thirty years after opening, the council decided to brick it up, using rubble gathered from the city's many fires.

Over a hundred and fifty years later, in the early 1980s, ex-rugby international Norrie Rowan, who owned the Tron bar, discovered a passageway leading into the vaults from his pub and started, rather unofficially, to clear the space. Soon Edinburgh bands were renting the rooms for rehearsals. Fringe performances and night clubs were held there. At one point it even served as a hiding place for the Romanian rugby player Cristian Raducanu, aided by Rowan in his escape from the Romanian secret police just before the 1989 uprising. Recently things got a bit more official and archaeologists and historians became involved. Now you can only visit the vaults with Mercat Tours, either as part of their "Historic Underground" tour or, if you'd prefer a more gothic experience, through one of their ghost tours.

Photograph courtesy of Mercat Tours



Photograph by Keith Hunter @ the artist

Antony Gormley, *6 TIMES*, 2010

Six cast iron figures, each 191 x 50 x 36 cm

Commissioned by the National Galleries of Scotland, with support from the Art Fund, The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, The Patrons of the National Galleries of Scotland, Claire Enders and The Henry Moore Foundation
Permanent installation, Water of Leith, Edinburgh, Scotland

“6 TIMES” SCULPTURES

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Various spots along the Water of Leith

- www.nationalgalleries.org/visit/scottish-national-gallery-modern-art
- enquiries@nationalgalleries.org



Six times a-Gormley

In 2010 six life-size iron casts of Antony Gormley’s body were placed along a trail leading from the National Gallery of Modern Art down the Water of Leith and out to the Firth of Forth. Mechanical problems meant that four of them had a spell of absence but by the end of 2019, all six pieces were back in situ. Almost identical save the angle of the head ... and yet constantly changing depending on their location and the elements. They are a human gauge of the water level and can provoke unexpectedly strong emotions. Sometimes paddling, sometimes drowning; sometimes hopeful, sometimes despairing. Sometimes dressed in a bikini or boxers (temporarily added by an interactive artist). Sometimes lying face down under water as they are hinged to lie flat in stormy weather.

Since they can be a little shy and elusive, here is a location guide for the Gormless sculpture spotter:

6 TIMES HORIZON: sunk into the tarmac on Belford Road in front of Modern One, as if the figure had waded in when it was still liquid and got stuck. Staring out at his foot-level view of the zebra crossing, the entire sculpture is in there, buried up to his metal disc nipples.

6 TIMES SKY: in the Water of Leith, near the steps leading down from the back of the gallery in a tree-lined pool above the Cauldron Weir, a perfect spot for ¾ tonne of metal to go paddling. This area is called Bell’s Mills after the mill that stood here until 1972, when it exploded while grinding wood flour to make linoleum.

6 TIMES GROUND: on the upstream side of the Stockbridge. If you’ve walked here from the gallery, you’ll have passed St Bernard’s Well (see previous page) and a stretch that was once the industrial slum area of Edinburgh, with eight grain mills, a brewery and a tannery. It is now the most landscaped area of the river, a manmade 18th-century pastoral idyll.

6 TIMES RIGHT: close to the footbridge in St Marks Park, where Warriston Road crosses the river. This is the Powderhall area, reputedly named after a gunpowder factory. This Gormley might be looking for frogs – the old name for this spot was “puddocky” as it was a good spot to catch toads, or puddocks.

6 TIMES LEFT: just below the Anderson Place bridge next to Scott Coppola Electricals. This one is wading in Bonnington, where the river still retains its industrial feel. But it was once called Bonny Toon, a pretty milling village between Edinburgh and Leith.

6 TIMES HORIZON: behind Ocean Terminal, on the end of the carcass of a pier, staring out to sea. You can probably view him best from a floor or two up in the car park. Is this his final destination or is there more beyond?

WALL OF ADVANCED ROOFING

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Corner of Newhaven and Stanley Roads, Edinburgh EH6 4SJ

- Viewable 24 hours
- Free
- Buses: 7, 11



King's conundrum

A friend's daughter was walking back from Victoria Primary School, up the Newhaven Road, when she spotted a tiny king's head poking out from the side wall of Advanced Roofing: it was high up above her own head, about level with the Newhaven Road street sign, intricately detailed and wearing a medieval, perhaps Arthurian-style hooded crown. She was thrilled to find it. It really is tiny, maybe the size of a carved chess piece, made of a sort of tarnished pewter. What was it and why is it there?

Closer inspection reveals the wall to be full of treasures – a stone thistle, a lump of marble embossed with the letters ZZA, a rose-topped triangle inscribed with the date 1593. The edges of two of the little windows are lined with pebbles. The cement around the larger window is pargeted with a tile-like pattern and a handwritten date (1970) below a hammer and chisel, with a large snaking S on either side. What could they all mean?



The secretary at Advanced Roofing didn't know anything about it. But a neighbour across the road remembered Stanley Sutherland, who set up his building company there. He was quite a character and built the wall himself, filling it with bits of interesting masonry he'd picked up over the years, like a magpie feathering its nest with trinkets, or a Leith-based Gaudi decorating his walls with random broken objects. Where he found them nobody knows ...

NEARBY

GREEN LANTERN

Three streets away, outside No. 17 York Road, is a strangely elaborate lamp post. Unlike the rest of the familiar olivey-brown tubular posts, this one is painted bright forest green with gold edging and a large hanging glass lantern. It is called a Bailie's lamp as one was installed outside the house of any Bailie (senior councillor) so that he could be quickly found in an emergency. A Provost (the Scots equivalent of a Mayor) had two of them, one for life and one removed on leaving office. This one is outside the house of Kenneth W. Borthwick, Lord Provost of Edinburgh from 1977 to 1980.



TILED CORRIDOR

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- Royal Edinburgh Building
Royal Edinburgh Hospital, Morningside Terrace, Edinburgh EH10 5HL
- 0131 537 6000
 - www.francespriest.co.uk
 - mail@francespriest.co.uk
 - Open 24 hours
 - Buses: 5, 11, 16, 23, 36, 38



Decorum est

Hospitals, particularly modern ones, can be clinical, labyrinthine places, focused on the practicalities of layout and budget. Design doesn't tend to be at the forefront. But even as far back as the 1880s, when the pioneering psychiatrist Thomas Clouston was developing nearby Craig House in Craiglockhart for use as a psychiatric hospital, he recognised that a beautifully designed environment was important for mental wellbeing. It was at his hospital that war poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon were rehabilitated. So when Edinburgh & Lothians Health Foundation commissioned the ceramic artist Frances Priest to create a piece for the Royal Edinburgh psychiatric hospital, it was from the tiled stairwell of Craig House that she drew her inspiration.

Frances took the Victorian teal and ochre patterns she found on archive images and played with them – enlarging and rearranging, adding bolder oranges and turquoises. Shropshire tile specialists Craven Dunnill Jackfield slip cast 2,500 tiles from moulds of her originals. The result transforms a modern white-windowed corridor into a lively human space, the natural light dancing off the shiny lacquer of the tin glaze. And if you look carefully, in amongst the luscious reproductions, you can see Frances' 300 slightly less than perfect but just as beautiful handmade tiles.

NEARBY

LEAF LITTER SCULPTURES

- www.cyrenians.scot/community-and-food/community-gardens
- Tues, Wed & Fri 10am–4pm

In the grounds of the Royal Edinburgh you'll find a community garden, a productive allotment populated with vegetables, bees, wild flowers and several human figures made of chicken wire and leaf litter – each captured in such lifelike poses that you quite expect them to make a grab for an escaping chicken, or trip as they run with the wheelbarrow.

The garden is run by staff and volunteers, and managed by the Cyrenians, a charity set up to prevent homelessness, focusing on mental health and wellbeing. The space is open to all – the public are positively encouraged to come. The Cyrenians work with patients, NHS occupational therapists, doctors, students and the local community, providing horticultural therapy, beekeeping courses, outdoor cook-ups, and ingredients for herbal remedies. Look out for their Big Lunch in the summer and their Doors Open day – otherwise just drop in and buy some of their amazing produce.

photograph by Hannah Robinson

PHYLLIS BONE ZOOLOGICAL SCULPTURES 14

Ashworth Laboratories, King's Buildings, West Mains Road, Edinburgh EH9 3JT

- www.nhc.ed.ac.uk
- Exterior viewable 24 hrs
- Free
- Buses: 24, 38, 41, 42, 67



A stone menagerie

All around the outside of the Ashworth Laboratories are small but beautifully carved animal sculptures. They were commissioned for the new zoology department, which in the 1920s was based at Old College and fast running out of space now that normal life was resuming post-war. James Ashworth, Professor of Natural History and specialist in the nerve fibres of polychaete worms, managed to persuade both the Carnegie Trust and J.D. Rockefeller to help fund the building of this state-of-the-art facility.

The resulting designs by Sir Robert Lorimer and John F. Matthews, based on Ashworth's sketches, were perfectly practical, spacious, evenly lit, but a little ... dull. Enter Phyllis Bone, a graduate of Edinburgh College of Art who had been chosen by Lorimer to carve the animal sculptures for the Scottish National War Memorial. Bone had studied *animalier* under Édouard Navellier in Paris. Her work was both scientific in its detail and strikingly modern in style.

Bone modelled the animals in clay and worked with the Holyrood Pottery to have them cast in an artificial stone (a bit like Coade stone: see p. 284). Her creatures represent different zoogeographical regions: the reindeer, golden eagle and polar bear are from the Palaearctic region. A beaver and a bison come from the Nearctic. An aardvark, a chimpanzee and a lion signify the Ethiopian (now Afrotropical) region. The Oriental region, aka the Indomalaya ecozone, enlists a rhinoceros, a tiger and an elephant, with ropes entwining its great feet. From Australia we have a kangaroo, from South America a nine-banded armadillo, and from New Zealand a pair of sphenodon lizards. Invertebrates have a group of their own: a dung beetle, a crab and a swirling octopus.

On the main staircase inside the building are more of Bone's sculptures – tiny bronze owls, cats and monkeys perch on top of the finials of the metal balustrade. There is also a copy of Hugo Rheinhold's famous *Darwin's monkey* sculpture: a chimpanzee sitting atop a pile of books and contemplating a skull, probably wondering why he's been called a monkey, not an ape.

In 1944 Bone went on to become the first woman elected to the Royal Scottish Academy. Asked why it was always animals she sculpted, she replied: "All these creatures that fly from us shyly or threaten us fiercely interest me. I am enthralled by their shapes, their rhythmic movements, which, separately and combined, are so decorative and sculptural."

MERCHISTON TOWER CEILING

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10 Colinton Road, Edinburgh EH10 5DT

• Visits by appointment only. Contact: conferences@napier.ac.uk

• Buses: 11, 15, 16, 23, 36, 45

“**Rabelaisian
rafters**”

There is something rather extraordinary hidden in the Merchiston Tower. The building itself is worthy of an entry: a medieval red stone tower house hidden in the middle of a modern university campus. It was the seat of Clan Napier and the birthplace of John Napier, the eighth Laird of Merchiston, mathematician, philosopher, inventor of logarithms, and after whom the university was named.

Climb the winding stone steps and you will find a large boardroom with an impressive long asymmetric table sitting on a split-pea green carpet; below is a minstrels' gallery. You are getting warmer. But it's not until you lean your head back that you really hit the hot stuff.

Look closely at the ceiling above you. Running along the rough pine boards are some rather unusual hand-painted tempera illustrations. They appear, at first sight, to be ornamental vases, flowers, angels. The explanatory notes on the wall tell you that this is the finest and earliest dated Scottish Renaissance ceiling from 1581, which was transferred here after being discovered at Prestongrange in 1962.

But then you start to notice the details: a winged lizard with a human head, a weird-looking angel emerging from a contorted shell, a bare-breasted Viking lass with a lion's-head door knocker hanging from her nether regions. It's all starting to get a bit Hieronymus Bosch.

And that's when you spot the pornographic elves. Truth be told, you shouldn't have climbed up to the minstrels' gallery and stood on a chair to see them. You got too close. And now it's too late. You'll never be able to think of Santa's little helpers in the same way again.

The bawdy images are copies of a 1565 French collection of woodcuts called “The Droll Dreams of Pantagruel”, the work of François Desprez. He himself was inspired by a series of five books collectively entitled *The*

Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel by the satirist François Rabelais, which charts the epic and somewhat scatological adventures of two giants, father and son. The text is full of lively escapades. An entire civilisation is discovered living behind Pantagruel's teeth. He drowns an army in urine. He meets the Chitterlings: a race of half-men, half-sausages. Salvador Dalí published his depictions of the same characters in 1974. How they ended up on an East Lothian nobleman's ceiling is certainly worthy of more study.



COLINTON TUNNEL MURAL

Water of Leith Walkway, just off the bridge on Gillespie Road

Nearest postcode: EH13 0JX

- colintontunnel.org.uk
- Access: free, 24 hrs
- Buses: 45, 400

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Tunnel vision

Colinton Tunnel used to be a bit of a scary place. It's one of the longest railway tunnels in Edinburgh and it's on a curve, so there's a point in the middle where you can't see either end. It was built in 1874 as part of the Balerno line, a short loop off the Edinburgh to Carstairs main line, stopping at Hailes Halt, Colinton, Juniper Green, Currie and Balerno. The tight curves and steep inclines of the route meant that it needed special strong engines with a short wheelbase, which became known as Balerno Pugs. You can see a sister pug restored and running on the line at the wonderful Bo'ness & Kinneil Railway.



The last train to run on the line was in December 1967, and the tunnel was then bricked up until the seventies. In the eighties it became part of the Water of Leith Walkway and a silhouette of the Balerno Pug was painted on its walls. But in the words of the Colinton Tunnel Preservation Society, it became “increasingly dark and forbidding”, not a route where walkers and joggers felt safe.

So the Colinton Tunnel charity decided to do something about it. And that something was Robert Louis Stevenson's poem “From a Railway Carriage” turned into a giant walk-through illustrated poem. Artist Chris Rutterford, who came to street art through his background in comic and graphic novel illustration, worked with local schoolchildren, graffiti artists and community groups to create Scotland's biggest mural: 140 metres long, and 5.4 metres in height.

Down one side of the tunnel are the words of the poem, painted by street writers Craig Robertson and Duncan Peace. Down the other side are illustrations inspired by it. The schoolkids painted the crowds watching the passing train – look out for their zombies, pirates, leprechauns and “Legalise it” T-shirts. At the end is Rutterford's portrait of RLS himself. Stevenson, who was born in Canonmills, spent many of his holidays at his grandfather's house in Colinton. (Read more about him on pages 97 & 209.) RLS suffered from a lifelong disease of the lungs, and in periods of illness would write children's verses – like the one Rutterford chose for the mural, with its steam train rhythm, whizzing along the line:

“From a Railway Carriage” by Robert Louis Stevenson, from *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885):



photo by Paiko Mera

Faster than fairies, faster than
witches,
Bridges and houses, hedges and
ditches;
And charging along like troops in
a battle,
All through the meadows the horses
and cattle:
All of the sights of the hill and the
plain
Fly as thick as driving rain;
And ever again, in the wink of an eye,
Painted stations whistle by.
Here is a child who clammers and
scrambles,
All by himself and gathering
brambles;
Here is a tramp who stands and
gazes;
And there is the green for stringing
the daisies!
Here is a cart run away in the road
Lumping along with man and load;
And here is a mill and there is a river:
Each a glimpse and gone forever!