ONCE A WORKING RIVER, WITH POLLUTION TO MATCH, THE REJUVENATED WATER OF LEITH NOW PROVIDES A TRANQUIL RETREAT FOR CITY DWELLERS AND A VITAL WILDLIFE CORRIDOR.

RICHARD ROWE TRACES ITS JOURNEY FROM ITS SOURCE IN THE PENTLANDS TO THE SEA

WALKERS ON THE THIEVES ROAD – A NOTORIOUS OLD DROVE ROUTE THROUGH THE PENTLAND HILLS – MAY NOT ALWAYS NOTICE, BUT THE WOODEN BRIDGE THAT IS CROSSED BEFORE CLIMBING TO CAULDSKANE SLAP EN-ROUTE TO WEST LINTON IS MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN IT LOOKS. FOR MANY, IT OFFERS A FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE WATER OF LEITH – A HUMBLE,PEAT-STAINED BURN AT THIS POINT, BUT A WATERCOURSE THAT HAS SHAPED THE CHARACTER OF EDINBURGH FOR CENTURIES.

THE ACTUAL SOURCE IS FURTHER WEST AT COLZIUM SPRINGS, WHICH RISES NEAR MILLSTONE RIG; FROM THERE A NETWORK OF TINY BURNS FEED INTO HARPERRIG RESERVOIR BEFORE THE RIVER PROPER EXITS CLOSE TO TEMPLE HILL AND BEGINS ITS JOURNEY TOWARDS THE SEA.
Here, the embryonic river, so pure and life-giving in its upper reaches, passes through rolling farmland overlooked by the twin summits of West and East Cairn Hills. On the glorious summer day when I visit, the air is alive with the hum of insects. I watch as a dragonfly hawks along river banks tufted by swaying cotton grass, while on a prominent rock in the middle of the water is what looks like otter spraint.

It’s a bucolic scene, one far removed from where the river ends its journey in the busy shore district of Leith. But it’s what happens in the 24 miles between source and sea that makes the Water of Leith so special; although a tiddler compared to Scotland’s great rivers, it has a history, character and quality all its own.

Gorges

The Water of Leith flows gently in its upper reaches, but the pace soon quickens as the river begins to carve its way through a series of steep and heavily wooded gorges. In doing so, it has long connected communities and created opportunity; at the peak of activity in the 19th century, more than 70 mills harnessed its power to produce flour, fabric and paper. Add the busy docks and boat-building industry that grew up at its mouth, and this is a river that once formed the industrial heartland of Edinburgh.

Today, however, the mills are silent – the last closed in 1972 – and the river now serves as both a recreational retreat for runners, walkers and cyclists and a rich habitat for returning wildlife.

The Water of Leith may no longer provide livelihoods for those alongside it, but there remains a strong sense of ownership. “The river has a community of its own – a collection of people who cherish and look after it,” explains Charlotte Neary, the Water of Leith Conservation Trust’s Community and Volunteers Officer and my guide on a near 13-mile journey along the Water of Leith Walkway.

Formed in 1988 to conserve and promote the river’s heritage and wildlife, the Trust depends upon an army of volunteers from all walks of life who help with river clean-ups, path maintenance, ecological surveys, habitat creation projects, regular river patrols and more.

One such devotee is Mike Church, originally from the south of England but who has lived in the Balerno area for more than 30 years. “I didn’t know Edinburgh at all when I first came here, but was thunderstruck by the river and how it was accessible in this part of suburbia,” he reflects.
In what has been a long association with the Water of Leith – and an even longer love of rivers in general – Mike has served as an honorary water bailiff, Trust volunteer and eyes and ears for the council, reporting on everything from burst drains to broken handrails along his patch.

Now in his seventies, he retains a puckish spirit; keen-eyed walkers may notice some of his rock carvings along the walkway, while collaboration with a fellow “phantom” artist sees smiley faces drawn on the stumps of trees pruned during conservation work along the river. Others will have benefited from the many steps he has built to allow access to some of the steeper sections of river bank. All add to the character of the walkway, he says.

Powerful
The Water of Leith Walkway begins by Balerno High School. Here, almost halfway into its journey to the sea, the river is much deeper and more powerful, the volume of water boosted by the arrival of the Bavelaw Burn that exits from Threipmuir and Harlaw reservoirs to the south.

From Balerno to Slateford, a distance of five miles, the
walkway follows the route of the old branch rail line built in the 1870s to serve the mills along the river. Today, the walkway serves as a recreational route, a way of reaching the Pentlands and an attractive commuter path through the city.

Others once came here for more challenging pursuits, however. At Currie, we pass the first of ‘Dougie’s Walls’ – a section of railway siding used as a practice ground by the young Dougal Haston in the late 1950s. A local lad who became one of the leading alpinists of his generation, Haston devised a number of routes on the retaining walls of the old railway, naming them the Currie Wa’s. The routes are described in a guidebook published by Graham Tiso in 1967, with Haston jokingly according them numeric alpine grades to indicate their difficulty.

The routes and their place in Scottish climbing history were celebrated earlier this year in an exhibition at the Water of Leith Visitor Centre by climbing enthusiast and photographer David Buchanan. The exhibition combined photographs of pages from the Tiso guidebook with pictures of the Wa’s taken in 2012. "I first encountered

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the walls when climbing as a youngster in the late sixties," he explains. "I remember climbing them when I should have been revising for exams."

Although there are no tell-tale chalk marks to indicate that the routes are climbed today, those who fancy the challenge will find few of the hazards encountered by Haston. In the introduction to his guidebook, climbers are warned of the “accurate throwing arms” of stone-throwing urchins, the “risk of annihilation” by train
for anyone unfortunate enough to tire as one passes and the Water of Leith itself – a “fast-flowing sewer which runs under many of the hard routes”.

The Wa’s are just some of the unexpected delights found along the river; elsewhere we encounter giant weirs, the remains of sluice gates and lades – water channels that served the mills – Moorish grottos, natural springs, wildflower meadows and walled gardens. All have stories to tell. There is plenty of wildlife, too: peering through the wildflowers, we spot coots, herons, grey wagtails and dippers.

Some sections of the river are particularly attractive; emerging from Colinton Tunnel into the ancient woodland of Colinton and Craiglockhart Dells, it is hard to believe that a capital city is going about its business nearby. Later, it is the section from Roseburn through Dean Village and on to Stockbridge that most catches the eye; the feel of the river here different again, the city looming above it in layers, the sense of history profound.

Reborn

As we continue downstream, I’m struck by the cleanliness of the river. Apart from a huge recycling bin lying half-submerged close to the towering Dean Bridge, the water has been mostly free of clutter. But that’s not always been the case, says Charlotte. When the Trust was first established, the river suffered a lot of “old-school water pollution” – a legacy of the mill industry – while cracks in a Victorian sewer that ran beneath the river and litter that had built up over the decades added to the unsavoury mix.

Thankfully, it’s very different now. “In 2000, any volunteers doing practical work on the river always had to do some kind of clean-up,” she says. “Now, when we bring volunteers to many parts of the river there’s not enough litter to even do a clean-up.”

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As a result, more time is spent on actual conservation work – efforts that have helped increase the biodiversity of the river and improve the health of what is now a vital wildlife corridor through the city.

As we walk, Charlotte scans for signs of Giant hogweed, Japanese knotweed and Himalayan balsam, the three main invasive plant species that affect waterways in Scotland. Given a root-hold, all will readily out-compete native plants, lowering the diversity of plant life along the river banks. “We have surveyed the plant mix in and out of the river and know everything that grows here,” she says. “We try to keep on top of the invasives.”

Once established, Japanese knotweed and Giant hogweed – a plant that also exudes a phototoxic sap that can cause nasty blisters when touched – are notoriously difficult to remove, often requiring specific chemical treatment. For now though, the most widespread invasive species on the river is the slightly less troublesome Himalayan balsam, an attractive ornamental plant first introduced by the Victorians.
More information

The 12¾-mile Water of Leith Walkway runs from Balerno to Leith, its entire length well-served by buses. At the time of writing, some diversions were in place due to flood prevention works. Route maps are available from the Water of Leith Conservation Trust’s excellent visitor centre at Slateford, while a new audio trail guide is available to listen to online or download. For more on the Trust’s work, including volunteering, see www.waterofleith.org

David Buchanan’s celebration of the area’s climbing lore can be enjoyed at www.bit.ly/cuwas