

Heart(s) in Leith



It is often said that marriage is an institution. It is often said I should be in one but that's another story. Last year was a difficult one for me as my marriage of 30 years came to an end. Of course, I'm not the only person to go through a painful separation after a long marriage so I won't dwell on the gory details except to say my family and friends were shocked by the news. The consensus seemed to be that of all the people they knew who were married, my marriage was the one they didn't expect to fall apart. C'est la vie and all that. However, their shock at the demise of my marriage was replicated shortly afterwards when they discovered I was heading to Leith...

Since 1990, I had lived in Dalkeith, the heart of Midlothian. Yes, I must tell you, dear reader, I am a lifelong Hearts supporter as the numerous lines on my face and greying, if rapidly diminishing, hairline will tell you. So having digested the news that my marriage was over, those close to me thought it was a 'double whammy' when news broke that I was going to live in 'enemy territory'.

Hearts supporters of my acquaintance thought the break-up of my marriage had had an adverse effect on my mental health. 'You're moving to where?' they asked, with consistently high degrees of incredulity. 'Don't you know that's the dark side of town? You'll be perilously close to Hibernian FC, who hate Jam Tarts and hate Dundee (I don't think many Hibeers do hate Dundee, it's just that it conveniently rhymes with FC) Can't you move to Gorgie?

The truth is that, initially, I did move to Gorgie for six months. A stone's throw away from that well-known drinking establishment popular with people of the maroon persuasion,

The Athletic Arms, known locally as The Diggers. However, in July last year I moved in with the new love of my life – who lives just off Great Junction Street. And, I have to say to my family, friends and fellow Hearts supporters – I love living in Leith. As a ‘Leith Jambos’ banner at last year’s William Hill Scottish Cup Final declared, I suspect I’m not the only Hearts fan declaring those sentiments.

It’s only when you move to the city from the suburbs that you appreciate the advantages of living in town. I actually lived in Mayfield, a suburb of Dalkeith and a sad example of suburban decay. There is little of any interest in Mayfield aside from a couple of pubs and bookmakers. It’s a 15-minute bus journey from Dalkeith which itself has little to offer aside from more pubs and bookmakers – and cafes. You have another 30-45 minutes bus journey from Dalkeith before you sample the cultural delights of Auld Reekie (clearly, I’m excluding Gilmerton from this...)

Leith, however, is different. It’s an exciting, vibrant community rightly proud of its history and still hankering after the days when it was an independent borough and Edinburgh only began at Pilrig Street. There’s a character about Leith that shouts out from the pavements of Leith Walk as you head down from the city. Famous names adorn the streetlamps proclaiming (do you see what I did there?) their love for the place.

The Kirkgate Shopping Arcade may have been a consequence of an ill-thought 1960s architectural dream but there is a character about it that marks it out from other similar shopping arcades. Something, which the people of Leith might say, perhaps has its faults – but it’s theirs.

Constitution Street, The Shore and Commercial Street are laden with history and tales of a bygone age when Leith was a major port. A history should never be forgotten and will never be forgotten. Fine organisations such as the Leith Historical Society – to which I have attended several events – will

ensure this is the case.

The numerous Polish, Chinese and Mediterranean supermarkets along Leith Walk illustrate the diverse nature of the area. On my way to work every morning, I cross Great Junction Bridge and take inspiration from the Water of Leith below; the tranquillity of the cycle path and walkway running alongside is a haven from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. I close my eyes and imagine the great steam trains of yesteryear trundling under the bridge and the steam wafting to the street above.

I haven't forgotten Mayfield in Dalkeith as my daughter and my three wonderful grandchildren live there and I see them every weekend. And being a season ticket holder at Tynecastle, my trips to Gorgie are still as frequent (despite the traumas of the last few months) However, despite being here for little over a year, I now look forward to coming home to Leith. I never thought someone who has been a Hearts fan for 45 years would say that – but, believe me I mean it. My heart is now firmly resident here.

Even if this means I will still have to go to Gorgie to see a victorious football team in an open-top bus....