

New public artwork on the canal

If you are walking along the canal at Fountainbridge you may see the new public art which has been unveiled at the student housing complex there. This is a sculpture of a wellington boot fallen on its side to reveal the footprint of a WW1 style hobnail boot.

The North British Rubber Company stood on the canal bank for decades and it is the work carried out there which saved thousands of soldiers in the first World War from the dreaded 'trench foot'..

✘ Artists Svetlana Kondakova and Maja Quille say the work in Fountainbridge, which is titled 'Imprint', also ties in with last year's centenary of the First World War by honouring the people who worked in the area and those who fell in the war.

The North British Rubber Company, founded in 1856, was one of the most important employers in Fountainbridge for generations of local people before closing its doors for good in the seventies.

During both world wars, the factory made millions of pairs of rubber boots for the British Army, helping to drastically reduce trench foot, a major concern during the First World War.

Svetlana and Maja, who are based in Edinburgh, were commissioned in 2013 by Edinburgh Napier University and Cityheart development to create a public artwork – Tree of Knowledge – to celebrate the new Bainfield halls of residence in Fountainbridge.

Imprint – a second sculpture commissioned by the university for the site – now sits in the colourful central courtyard

at Bainfield.

Svetlana (25) said: “The artwork is contemporary in its aesthetics and construction, but also addresses important historical events.

“The sculpture symbolically bridges the past and present, and mirrors the way the factory left its mark on the local and national landscape.

“In order to highlight the impact of the industrial boom of the 19th century in this area, the boot is based on First World War military aesthetics and finished with rivets. This also links the sculpture to local industrial structures like the Leamington Lift Bridge, which stands to this day on the Grand Union Canal.”

Maja (34) added: “The print revealed by the removal of the boot also brings to mind the progression of developments in the area, referencing how new things arise from the old.”

Patrick Hughes, Director of Property and Facilities at Edinburgh Napier University, said: “We believed the inner courtyard at Bainfield would also benefit from a public artwork and the Wellington boot proposal was perfect.

“It had been a close runner up to the Tree of Knowledge from four strong ideas presented by Svetlana and Maja.

“The boot sculpture is a strong reminder of the importance of the North British Rubber Company to the area and the industrial heritage of the site.”

This is what the North British Rubber Factory looked like in its heyday. (*Photo courtesy of RCAHMS Photographer Professor John R Hume*)

