

Dismissed Leith Police remembered 100 years on

The Leith Police Dismisseth Us, is one of the world's best known tongue-twisters and is said to have been a favourite of wily cops who wanted to test the sobriety or otherwise of the busy port's citizens.

It has certainly gained worldwide notoriety.

On 10 April, 1937, Australia's Morning Bulletin newspaper reported the tangled text as being used in "the new English traffic code" as a test for drunken motorists. Melbourne's city fathers debated the best method for catching drunk drivers, including the Chief Magistrate at the City Court, Mr Freeman, "who confessed that he had never been drunk, so it was difficult, he said, for him to say if he would succeed or fail with the "Leith police," and he was not going to try it."

One man who had plenty opportunity to practice this tricky teaser is third generation Leith policeman Gil Wallace, now aged 86, who retired on the rank of sergeant from the Lothian and Borders force in 1988. Gil, his father Peter Wallace and grandfather Gilbert Thomson, served a combined 90 years in [Leith Burgh Police](#) and its successor Leith or 'D' division of Edinburgh City Police.



PC601 Gilbert Thomson who joined Leith Burgh Police on 2 March 1891.

On Tuesday 2 November 1920, the fiercely independent police

force was confined to the history books when its 148 officers marched to Waverley Market where it paraded for the last time before amalgamating into the Edinburgh City Police force.

The merging of the Leith and Edinburgh forces came as a result of a hotly contested and passionately debated [plebiscite](#) held to decide if the two political and administrative functions should become one.

Despite an overwhelming 5-1 result declaring that Leithers valued continued independence from its larger neighbour, the deal was forced through, and to this day Leithers pride themselves in being different from those from “up the town”.



PC579 Peter Wallace who joined Leith Burgh Police on 9 October 1919, on points duty at the Fit o' The Walk circa 1940. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the day when Leith

Police was actually dismissed for the last time, sprightly octogenarian Gil is writing a short history of the Leith Burgh Police.

Gil said: "In the past I have published a small booklet on my family's police service history which stretches back to 1891 and with the 100th anniversary of Leith Burgh Police being disbanded I thought it would be interesting and fitting to do the same on the force's history."

Gil, of Portobello, joined [Edinburgh City Police](#) in November 1957 and spent his entire 30 year career on the beat and latterly as a uniformed sergeant in Leith, during which he received four commendations.

His father Peter, who served with the Royal Garrison Artillery in the First World War, joined Leith Burgh Police in 1919, and was pictured in the final Waverley Market parade. For a short while he served alongside Gil's grandfather, Orcadian born Gilbert Thomson, who became a police officer in 1891 and retired just over a year after the forces amalgamation in December 1921.



Leith Burgh Police 1906, PC Gilbert Thomson is back row

extreme right

He added: "It will be a mix of photographs of officers, police badges, artefacts and a recollection of one or two notable incidents which happened in years gone by. I have a collection of old pictures of my father and grandfather during their police days but it would be great to hear from any police families who have similar or who have any stories of the old force that could be added to the book."



Gil Wallace. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

Gil is pictured above with two medals awarded to his grandfather – the King Edward VII Coronation Medal (1903) awarded to Edinburgh City Police officers who were on duty for the Royal Visit to Scotland that year, and also the King George V Coronation Medal (1911) presented to all 598 Edinburgh officers by the Lord Provost, Sir Robert Kirk Inches, in two separate ceremonies at the City Chambers.



Leith Burgh Police are dismissed for the last time at Waverley Market on 2 November, 1920. PC Peter Wallace is pictured 4th from the right.

Tom Wood, the former Deputy Chief Constable of Lothian and Borders Police, started off his distinguished police career as a cadet in Leith division and recalls that the historic port had a distinctive feel compared to other city divisions.

Mr Wood said: "Leith always had a different feel about it – there was a sense of a unique identity. The history was all around – in the stonework – and Leith Police HQ in Queen Charlotte Street had been the old Burgh Police HQ as well as the Council Chambers.

"The old Burgh Chambers were and still are there, preserved as they were in 1920 – everyone knew 'The Leith Police' were special and in the heyday of the docks Leith was a busy and violent place. You just need to look at the size of the old Central Bar at the Foot of the Walk to get an impression of how busy the place was.



Sergeant Gil Wallace at Leith Police Station in 1976.

“Gil is rooted in Leith both in the police and from his earlier days in the Merchant Navy. His police connection goes back generations, over a hundred years, and I think his book will be a fascinating insight into a very special police force and a unique community – now hugely changed but still with its

own strong identity.”