

The Dark Streets of Leith – a new book of old stories

The Dark Streets of Leith by Margaret Hubble is published and available now on Amazon.

This new book is based on stories of 19th century criminals in Leith and based on Margaret Hubble's research into old court papers at the National Records of Scotland. The book is made up of short stories about the various characters she has encountered there, two of whom were hanged for their crimes.

The author explained her reasons for writing about her chosen subject. She said: "People keep asking me why I like "dark" stories so much, that is stories about villains.

"For those who are not researchers, it might be difficult to understand. But for researchers, the High Court case papers at the National Records of Scotland are like gold dust. It isn't so much the criminal who interests me, but the amount of social history contained in the witness statements that I find so intriguing. You can find out how long a working day was in those times and the working conditions, how many small shops opened until about 11 in the evening, the names of old public houses, and just how few possessions working people owned."

SAILOR JIM

In the story about James Scott, a young sailor who stole sovereigns from a ship, the descriptions by his friends about James' spending sprees and what he treated them to in terms of food and drink, eating for instance "cow heel and baps", were to the author, quite hilarious. His travels to places outside

of Leith when ferries were more common, and how much he paid for his overnight accommodation were interesting.

In the story about “concealment of pregnancy”, when an infant was left on someone’s doorstep, it led to an investigation of the relevant Kirk Session Records for South Leith, which, although providing confirmation about the subject, also gave an incredible amount of information about the family who had informally adopted the abandoned baby.

The story of William Bennison, the poisoner, details of the amount of travelling he did back and forwards to his birthplace in Ireland, as well as his bigamous marriages, made it a very complicated tale. He was a religious zealot on the outside, but this was a cover for his “dark side”. One of the witnesses, a man with no legs who lived in the same tenement, was in the habit of begging from a small cart in Leith Walk which was pulled by his faithful dog. The dog was found poisoned, which raised suspicions in the neighbourhood when Bennison’s wife died a sudden death. There was even a piece of fabric from a dress included in the High Court papers.

Ms Hubble continued: “Researchers do tend to deviate from the main subject of their research. When investigating a story about theft, a pawnbroker was mentioned and on researching **her**, I found a “story within a story”, in that she seemed to be somewhat of a slum landlord (owner of many properties in a shady area of Leith) who had a henchman in her gentleman son – a “surgeon”, who regularly appeared at the courts. He seemed to be quite a despicable character by all accounts. I did investigate his credentials, as far as being a “surgeon” was concerned, but although he had matriculated at Edinburgh University, neither the Royal College of Physicians nor the Royal College of Surgeons had any note of him.

“One of the Provosts of Leith, a fine old upstanding man who had served as a Bailie, a Magistrate, on the Police Commission and on the Parochial Board was sentenced to transportation

across the seas for his indecent practices against two young girls. Due to public opinion, and an appeal signed by most of the jury, remission of sentence was subsequently granted, however, and he only served a few years in Calton Jail.

“Edinburgh City Archives was where I found a photograph of one of my criminals – Henry Spinks. They have the wonderful “**Rogues Gallery**”, which is an old album of mugshots of criminals. It’s not in any particular order and has very little information for most of the criminals, other than when and where they were tried.

“But if you find your man there, then once again it’s a Eureka moment.”

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Margaret Hubble



The Dark Streets of Leith

A fascinating history of crimes committed
during the 19th Century, either in Leith or by
people originating from Leith

Margaret Hubble