

Exploring Edinburgh's undervalued summit

Craiglockhart is probably the least known and least visited of Edinburgh's seven major hills.

It's rarely recommended as a destination for newcomers and tourists, and is notably absent in many of the walking guides to the city and Lothian. Despite sitting high above the city, it might even be described as a hidden gem. This is particularly true of the Wester of the two distinct sections of the hill.



Looking over Napier University's Craiglockhart Campus (Photo by Eva Vaporidi).

An exploration of this spot is best started from at Edinburgh Napier University's Craiglockhart campus. After taking in the remnants of a 14th-century tower (Craiglockhart Castle) and the space-age Lindsay Stewart Lecture Theatre, your thoughts might drift towards the famous poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. By extraordinary coincidence, the two spent

time here when the Italianate building was (under the auspices of the Red Cross) a military psychiatric hospital during World War 1. Originally built as Craiglockhart Hydropathic (a private health hotel), it treated shell-shocked officers during the war. Sassoon later described the place as an 'underworld of dreams haunted by submerged memories of warfare and its intolerable shocks and self-lacerating failures to achieve the impossible'.

Owen's dates on the plaque at the entrance (18 March 1893 – 4 November 1918) are deeply poignant – he died a week before the armistice was signed. They bring to mind the excellent, if overlooked, 1997 film adaptation of Pat Barker's *Regeneration* (directed by Gillies MacKinnon), which focused on Owen and Sassoon's time at Craiglockhart and their interactions with the multifaceted Freudian psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers (superbly played by Jonathan Pryce). It's not a particularly accessible film but worth seeking out.

Excellent, overlooked, and not immediately accessible also describes Craiglockhart Hill. That it is not located in the centre of a wide public space is perhaps one reason it is less visited than, say, Blackford Hill. Instead, running over and between Easter and Wester sections of Craiglockhart Hill is the course of the private Merchants of Edinburgh Golf Club. The course provides stunning views and some challenging, somewhat eccentric holes. The publication *Capital Golf* from 1985 relates that this 'short but intriguing course' was founded in 1907 and was substantially redesigned in 1931 by the 'ubiquitous' James Braid. It's notable that a number of other hillside golf courses in and around Edinburgh (including Torphin, Lothianburn and the Old Braids No. 2) have closed since the book was published. Hillside golf isn't for everyone. The path up the side of the university campus is also used by golfers (it takes them to the 8th tee). You are immediately reminded ('WARNING- golf course ahead') that you need to be on the lookout for a white missile coming out of

nowhere or urgent cries of 'Fore!'.



Merchants of Edinburgh Golf Club

The most direct route up to the Wester summit (575 ft/ 173 metres) takes you on a narrow path which starts behind the green of the 7th hole. There are several other ways up, but impatience took hold. The steepness here is significant. In his 2013 biography of Owen, Jon Stallworthy talks of the 'dark flank of Wester Craiglockhart Hill...upreared like a breaking wave' giving this area a 'forbidding aspect.' In the narrower sections, the gorse tugs at your clothes, though it is regularly burnt back. The view from here, over the roof of the Napier buildings, towards Corstorphine Hill and the Forth Bridges beyond, is superb. From that point, the city looks to be at peace.

Around the summit marker, are embedded masses of sandstone. You have a truly fantastic view from this point; one well worth savouring. From this angle, the series of Hills

(Pentlands, Braids, Blackford, Arthur Seat, Calton, Castle Hill) seem evenly spaced, as if laid down like that in prehistory. It's an epic view of the city, with these volcanic edifices dominating the man-made. A view unchanged over millennia.



Photo by Eva Vaporidi

On the other side of the hill is a much gentler path which takes you past robust Scotch pines and densely packed birches into The Steils. The 23 bus terminates here, taking passengers 'into town'. This residential area nestles around the buildings which were once the City Poor House, with up to 1,100 'inmates', including some who were considered 'lunatic paupers'. On the opposite side of the road the old Edinburgh City Hospital has similarly, since closing in 1999, become a desirable area of housing, Greenbank Village. An example of pushing 'undesirables' to its periphery of the city? In fairness, the site of the hospital (mainly focussed on the treatment of infectious diseases, such as scarlet fever- its original name was Edinburgh City Fever Hospital) was selected because of the 'fresh air and sunlight' afforded by its near rural setting. The site covered 130 acres, including sheltering woodland. Similarly, the Craighouse Mental Hospital was perched on Easter Craiglockhart Hill, in picturesque grounds.



Photo by Eva Vaporidi

As the late local historian Charles Smith relates (in *Historic South Edinburgh*), public transport tended to fizzle out at the foot of Morningside Road – the rest of the journey along so-called ‘Poorhouse Drive’ was on foot. This served to manifest the marginalisation of those who stayed and worked there. An aerial photo of the area taken in 1931 shows these institutions surrounded by fields, as if a separate village untouched by urban life. In time, these once ‘marginal’ areas have been swallowed up and the city now extends well beyond Craiglockhart Hill to the bypass in the south.

The Craiglockhart Hills provide one of the best angles to see Edinburgh’s topography. Craiglockhart Hill(s) perhaps looking across, green with envy at its more illustrious, more visited sisters.

This overlooked pair of hills offers much in terms of scenic beauty, as well as access to intriguing (and uncomfortable) aspects of the city’s history.