

COLONIES TO WATERFRONT

Housing alternatives around Leith



 2.5 Miles

 1.5-2.5 Hours

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GUIDED WALK, 2-4PM SUNDAY 08 MAY

A walking tour of innovative housing on Edinburgh's northside, looking at differing models over the last 180 years, that give people choices of how they live. The walk passes through several low-rise housing projects that are densely built but provide attractive combinations of shared and private external spaces, and good quality, affordable homes in the city. You will be able to look at fascinating examples of philanthropic workers housing, self built, council and association built homes in the area from Leith Walk to the docks, and see continuity of design from these into current developments.



The walk is about 2.5 miles, and will take between 1.5 and 2.5 hours.

START MCDONALD ROAD LIBRARY

Leith Walk EH7 4LU

Leith Walk has been the main route from the Capital to its port for centuries, but most of the open fields and estates off along it were undeveloped until the 19th century. The classical New Town extends to this point, and starts to mix with the later dense tenements on and to the east of Leith Walk. While these are now dominant, they were one of a number of housing types that tried to provide housing for the growing population of the city, both workers in the new industries growing up round the ports and new railways, and the middle classes. Later the city added modern housing types in between, like tower and slab blocks, but a smaller scale survives and we will follow these through the area, revealing how people have lived in the area in the past and today.



Walk down Macdonald Road past 19C tenements, behind which on the right lies the railway line that serviced the industries in the area. The privately developed Hopetoun Gate area on the left largely replaced old factories in early 20C. Turn left into McDonald Street and stop on the corner with McDonald Place.

1 BELLEVUE NEW COLONY HOUSING

EMA Architects: 1 McDonald Place EH7 4NH

Completed in 2015, this privately developed housing scheme follows and updates the 'Colonies' housing model developed by the Edinburgh Co-operative Housing Company in the 19th century. Rows of two and half storey terraces, with two flats one over another, made up of a 'double upper' accessed by an external stair over a ground floor unit, accessed from different sides of the building. They sit behind a deck access tenement block onto McDonald Road, and negotiate the change in scale that typically happens in this area between the main and rear streets. The modern variation gives all residents their own semi-private terrace of garden off the central shared open 'pedestrian street', with cars parked on street at the ends of the rows. The popularity of the scheme demonstrates how well the model has lasted and serves small families in the city.



Walk upto Bellevue Road and cross it, and up the path on the left of the new housing block into the back of Claremont Court

2 CLAREMONT COURT MODERNIST GARDEN FLATS

1962. EH7 4LA

Like the Bellevue Colonies, this scheme commissioned, by Edinburgh Corporation in 1952 replaced a bakery building. It was one of a number for post war housing using new forms of construction and layout. Designed by Basil Spence, who went on to produce major projects like Coventry Cathedral, it is a classic arrangement of concrete framed deck access blocks around a pair of courtyards. It provides homes for 243 people in 63 units, in flats and maisonettes with balconies, raised off the ground over open passages and parking, with bungalows on one side, allowing sun into the shared garden. Designed with a mix of rough concrete and painted brick, it demonstrates the benefits and difficulties of such projects, that the larger common area let in light and greenery but the garden is underused as not tended or owned by the occupants. While such schemes are now fashionable, here it still provides good Council housing, if in need of some renovation.



Walk back to Macdonald Road from Bellevue Place, past the old power station that served Edinburgh's cable tram way (the duct for the cable is still below the street). Turn left after the Fire Station on to Dryden Terrace, cross the still operating railway on the pedestrian bridge onto Dryden Street, past the back of the Shrub Place development, and then right up Spey Terrace.

3 SHAW'S PILRIG MODEL BUILDINGS

1850. EH7 4PH EH7 4PH

This area is on the land of the former Balfour Estate from Pilrig House, with this top end developed in small plots. The Pilrig Model Dwellings are the predecessors of the Colonies, and were developed on a philanthropic model by a company set up Reverend William Blaikie, to provide better standards of workers housing, when most had been housed in then squalid tenements on the Old Town. Designed by Patrick Wilson, these early versions are plain stone buildings with internal stairs, accessed off paths running past the front doors on each side, with gardens set away from them. Very compact inside, with some ground floor flats being essentially two rooms (with outside toilets originally), they still provide an attractive and quiet environment, sheltered behind the gable wall of the now demolished Shrub Place Tramworks, and is big contrast to the looming council built Inchkeith Tower nearby.



Walk up Spey Terrace past Inchkeith Tower, turn left down Spey Street through a mix of workshops, services and housing. Turn left onto Pilrig Street and right up the similar Arthur Street, then first left down Arthur Street Lane.

4 PILRIG COTTAGES WORKERS HOUSING

Arthur Street Lane. 1862. EH6 5DR

Built a decade after the Model Buildings, these single storey 'cottages' are almost rural in character, were developed privately by Robert Simpson, and show how the area only was built up slowly during a slump in the building industry. Essentially a terrace behind a wall, 'three streets' off the nearby main street of Leith Walk, these follow the early colonies model with private gardens off a shared path. All look onto a plot of separate, particularly sheltered, allotments created at the time on their north side. Further up Albert Street, you will find a surviving pre-industrial cottage, and a 2-storey tenement block, off a shared stair of a similar age, which were fitted piecemeal into the area as plots were feued by the Balfour Estate.



At the end of Albert Street, turn left down Balfour Street, developed with larger scale tenements, beyond which on the right lay the 19th century Shotts Steel Foundry. Turn left onto Cambridge Avenue.

5 CAMBRIDGE AVENUE CAMBRIDGE GARDENS

1886-1890. EH6 5AW

By the 1880's, development of the area was taking place on a large scale, but the Balfours of Pilrig House who steadily sold off their land towards Leith Walk, were careful to try and preserve of the character around their historic house. They varied the feuing plan for these two streets of compact 'rustic' terraced housing developed by James Shaw, aimed at more middle class occupants, who could use the nearby train station. While these appear to be only one and a half storeys from the front, if you walk up to the end and turn down Cambridge Gardens, you will see they are essentially three storeys to the rear, with the gardens a further storey down, similar to the New Town. Both the tightly planned streets and rear gardens make attractive small scale shared spaces, if more subdivided than the Colonies or the 60's housing.



Walk back down to Balfour Street, and turn left into Pilrig Park, and follow the path to the right towards the developing private developer housing off Tennant Street



2.5 Miles



1.5-2.5 Hours

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6 PILRIG HOUSE

1638. EH6 5RF

The original country house of the area, Pilrig House was bought by the Balfour family partly by money in compensation for his fathers role in the collapsed Darien Company attempted colony (of another kind) in Central America. They occupied the house until they gifted it and its park to the city in 1941. It was burnt out in 1971, and after a decade as a ruin, was restored as flats in 1982, with a surrounding development of sheltered housing. Several trees in the park contain suspended metal nametags by sculptor Andrea Geile.



Walk down the path at the right end of the park alongside the back of Bonnington Primary School to Bonnington Road. Cross this and head down Bangor Road just ahead to the left, by the converted Sugar Bond warehouse and the office blocks adjacent. Follow the road right, and then turn left onto The Quilts, upto the Water of Leith.

7 THE QUILTS / BOWLING GREEN HOUSING

1981-85. EH6 5RZ

Moving out of Pilrig and into Leith, the Bowling Green Street estate was designed and built in the early 1980's by the Scottish Special Housing Association, which came into being in 1937 and alongside different councils, developed thousands of homes for rent around Scotland. By this time, the thinking on the best scale for housing had moved from high back to low rise, and this is an interesting estate of mixed housing types, borrowing qualities of Colonies in some area (pedestrian access, close house spacing, maisonettes) with other traditional types (perimeter tenements with shared gardens). Like the Colonies, it is built well in the most available plain materials of the day (concrete block) with all the flats laid out well, and have access to a garden, many also have balconies oriented to the sun and views. A quiet but well occupied corner of Edinburgh in a bend of the river.



After exploring the Estate, cross the bridge and walk down West Bowling Green Street, up South Fort Street, and over the old railway line. Cross Ferry Road and walk up North Fort Street, tuning into Industry Lane.

8 INDUSTRY LANE EARLY COLONIES

1860's. EH6 4EZ

A little known example of workers housing, again on a lane two moves off the main street. Essentially the same model as the early Pilrig Model buildings with internal stairs, this is just a single row of upper and lower levels flats behind grander houses, but set in their own well tended gardens. Behind them another commercial block of flats has been built, but unlike them, is only surrounded by car parking.



Go back to North Fort Street, turn left past the school and the wall of the Fort, and left into Hawthornbank Place

9 HAWTHORNBANK COLONIES

1863-64. EH6 4HQ

A small group of Colonies using their most well known design, with external stairs to upper flats, off a narrow central street, and with an outer side facing the 'public' street. These were the second development of the Edinburgh Co-operative Building Company, set up by skilled artisans to provide a better quality of housing for themselves, and in a large part built by them. Still compact and cheap (the external stair made them cheaper and made more space inside) these are found in a number of locations near industrial sites around the city. The forestairs in particular add an attractive and sociable element to the shared spaces. (These can be seen in some newer housing, such as Richard Murphy's Dublin Street Lane.) The design does have reduced privacy, in that lower flats look into the upper flat's garden on one side, but this has not stopped their continued popularity: no ECBC Colony has yet been demolished.



Leave the terraces and turn left up North Fort Street, and either cut through the 80's developer flats on North Hillhousefield, or down to Lindsay Road, and then back up the slope to Bathfield. Behind the large block with the surgery, go up the right side of white painted, low walled housing, and turn in to the courtyard with the trees.

10 HAMILTON WYND, FORT COURTYARD LOW-RISE HOUSING

EH6 4EH.

This is the last remaining part of 1960's Fort Estate, which was designed and built 1957-63 for the Edinburgh City Corporation. While all the high rise elements to the north and south were demolished, the residents of this interesting set of low rise 'courtyard blocks' voted to keep them. In echoes of the bigger Fort, each house hides behind brick and rough concrete outer walls, with only small windows and occasional upper rooms peeping over. Within, each has its own private entrance courtyard, best seen from an aerial view. While in some ways this makes the houses 'anti-social', all are accessed from small scaled pedestrian routes which feel both informal and oppressive, and the central courtyard is partly turned into a community garden. While some are well loved, at this time some were abandoned, and it is hoped the adjacent redevelopment will bring them all back into use.



After exploring the Estate, walk back north down the side of large block to Lindsay Road, opposite two commercial developer blocks of flats typical of the Waterfront (high stacked flats with little used balconies, sat over a sea of car parking and largely unused windswept lawns). Turn up Portland Street, until you come back to the walls of the Fort. You should be able to see into the site from the side gates, watch out for construction traffic

11 FUTURE COLONY HOUSING

Completion from 2017. EH6 4HP

The building site sits within the historic walls of the military fort originally built from 1780. The walls tended to isolate the estate from the surroundings, and probably hastened its decline, with deck access Fort House being demolished in 2013. The proposal now on site returns to a low rise Colony model of tight streets and closely spaced blocks, from the former windswept and floodlit open space round the old blocks. Originally commissioned by Edinburgh Council and designed by Malcolm Fraser Architects, it is now being delivered by the Port of Leith Housing Association. The design is more 'single sided' with access and gardens all facing south-west, and attractive shared spaces round the retained Georgian gatehouses. Nothing is less sustainable than blocks that have to be demolished because of social or design failures, projects like this look to learn from and emulate the best past housing, with good homes that encourage social interaction and enjoyment of the spaces round them.



Walk back down North Fort Street to Ferry Road, or round the corner to Great Junction Street, to catch a bus back into town or to the walk's start point



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