

The Union Canal: “Edinburgh’s best kept secret”

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FIG 1: Construction on the canalside
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The Union Canal runs from Fountainbridge to Falkirk, where it joins the Forth & Clyde Canal, and continues on to Glasgow. The mile-long stretch between the Lochrin Basin and Harrison Park is only a fraction of the canal but constitutes the sections in the heart of the capital.

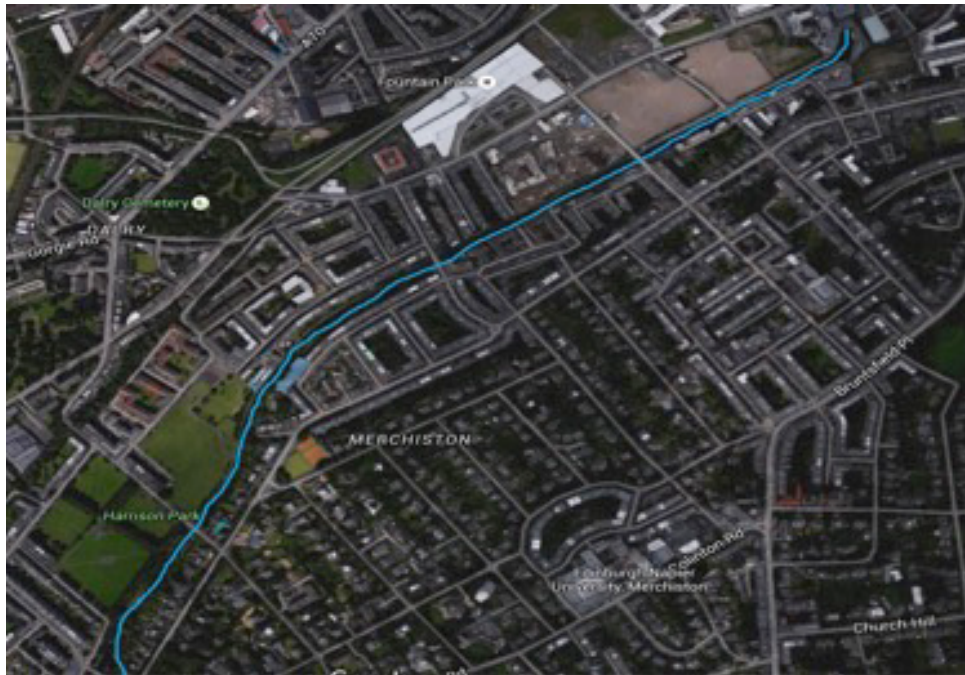


FIG 2: Union canal section from Lochrin Basin (top right) to Harrison Park (bottom left).
Source Google Maps

Historically, the canal’s role in Edinburgh has constantly shifted according to its uses. It was built as a route for the people of Edinburgh to access cheap coal from the west, but was subsequently neglected and partially filled in for much of the 20th century. It wasn’t until the Millennium that the canal was reopened as part of the £83.5m Millennium link project. Since then, the canal has been used by a variety of actors, involving towpath users and boat residents. Furthermore, the Lochrin Basin is at the heart of Fountainbridge; a prime site for development, where rapid construction is taking place everyday. Yet, despite its multi-functional properties, the canal is still a space of little recognition amongst the majority of the people living in Edinburgh.

Our decision to work with this particular space was inspired by our initial interest in the people that live on the canal, and the choice to live on water within a city. The notion of mixing two lifestyles together seemed very intriguing. We found that there is an unequivocal love and appreciation for the canal, despite the contrastive groups that interact with it. However, it soon became apparent that this love came in many forms. We attempted to examine it from the different perspectives of the varying social and economic actors and explore the various users of the canal as a space. These range from the people who live on canal boats, to a social enterprise that resides on a canal boat, whilst also looking at Scottish Canals and the Fountainbridge Canalside Initiative (FCI), who represent its developmental and management aspects. By examining the way in which these varying groups value the canal we could discuss the disparate intentions that could possibly cause contention in the future.

Setting

The Lochrin Basin is surrounded on all sides by a complex of new restaurants and offices. Almost like a towering fish bowl, the basin looks like an extension of the complex, and not the beginning of a 31-mile long canal. Around 200m down from this terminus, the canal narrows to be at a constant 3.5m wide (Scottish Canals 2015). The small building of the Union Canal offices is situated close to the water and run by two Scottish Canals employees. Nearby, the other canal boats designed for business purposes are moored. The sleek blue of the architecture firm's narrowboat is in stark contrast to the chintzy pastel green of the next-door "boatel", which charges £200 per overnight stay. Past the hydraulically-powered Leamington Lift Bridge, which was built in 1896, and restored in 2002, the disparity between residential and developmental sides of the canal becomes more evident:

There is also a contrast between the delicate homes and the wasteland construction site on the other side of the canal, behind an eight-foot high metal fence. The decor of the boats varies; some are ornate and feminine, some functional and minimalist. (Fieldnotes, 28/01/2016)

As said by Lewery, the canal is occupied mainly by 'pleasure boatmen' (1995:43). There are nine boats permanently moored opposite the towpath. They face the construction site, and are situated beneath a block of holiday-let apartments. Adjacent to the towpath, sits the Re-Union boat, the "Lochrin Belle"; a 40-foot, wide beam floating village hall. This area is referred to by Scottish Canals as Leamington Wharf, and is separated from the Lochrin Basin area, which links the canal to Fountainbridge, by the Leamington Lift Bridge.



FIG 3: Residential moorings at Leamington Wharf

These moorings are distinguished from the main canal by a low footbridge; beyond this there is no space for a canal boat to turn until you reach Harrison Park. Two miles further along, the canal transitions into the more residential and wooded setting more associated with canal life. There are additional residential moorings, a city park, and a derelict boat house. The rowing and canoe clubs still operate in this area.

Methods

Our first impromptu meetings with residents, Pierre and Christine, proved invaluable to our research. They took place on houseboats, and our interview with Pierre, an unassuming leader of the Scottish Canals Boater's Group (SCBG), was even in the Ratho Basin, eight miles outside of Edinburgh. These meetings were more formal, but they allowed us to see a variety of different houseboats and areas. Residents were more than happy to give tours of their boats, and talk about their lifestyle and relationship with other boaters. Our relationship with Re-Union, a reputable community along the canal, also provided links to other boaters such

as Jen, a female resident, exceptional in a male-dominated space.

We first got involved with the social enterprise Re-Union, when two members of the group were invited to join their training programme, by “cold-calling” on some volunteers having their morning cigarette outside the Lochrin Belle. This programme involved a weekly six-hour workshop for non-residents, designed to make boating skills more accessible to the wider community with skills training workshops geared towards getting our Helmsman qualifications. We ‘participated in order to observe’ (1983:45) and spent extended periods of time with informants leading to high levels of rapport, and many hours of ‘deep hanging out’ (Geertz 1998:69). Many of our interviews were unstructured, random, and from ‘spontaneous informants’ resulting in rich, qualitative data, from an intimate group.

We also conducted a number of formal interviews with Re-Union crewmembers, councilors, and residents to gather information on the space from non-boaters. This gave us contrasting perspectives. However, given our research focus on the space of the canal, our data is proportionately weighted towards canal users, both residential and commercial. We are aware that such extensive participant-observation with canal users might have resulted in a bias towards them in our research. Still, becoming volunteers with Re-Union incorporated us into a very welcoming, and close-knit group. This provided links to the wider canal community. Our participant-observation culminated with a night spent on a houseboat at Harrison Park. Fully engaging in the residential lifestyle, even for such a brief period of time, demonstrated to us the romantic, idealistic rationale for living on the canal.

Gender and Security on the Union Canal

There is a gender disparity on the canal. Pierre, a single father, had joked about this in our first meeting:

When we stepped off his boat, I asked if he knew any of the other boaters down the dock, ‘yeah, of course. We all know each other. This life attracts similar characters. People want to have their spot, their space, and a cocoon. Its funny over there (pointing to a boat down the dock) there is a man on his own, and behind him another man (he laughs). Sort of a bachelor’s club. (Fieldnotes, 02/04/16)

Contrary to Pierre’s statements about women on the canal many women use the space in a myriad of ways, with at least half the regular Re-Union volunteers identifying as female. Yet there does appear to be a difference between occasional and permanent use of the canal for women. Elaine, a Re-Union volunteer, told us that she appreciates the “slower pace of life”, and the ability to be “uncontactable” in contrast with her hectic work schedule. This sentiment was echoed by male volunteers, contrary to Bender’s idea of spaces having ‘differential uses’ in regards to gender (1993:170). But for those living on the canal, the space is still firmly gendered. Jen, a resident, agreed that she felt patronized, when we asked her about applying for residency:

“It’s quite a male dominated world and there’s not many young females. So it was a little challenging, but they were generally pretty encouraging, which was cool. They were like ‘well this is a novelty! There’s a little girl trying to get a boat, good for her.”

The canal has been a gendered space since it’s inception in the 19th century as a means of ‘cargo-carrying’ (Lewery 1995:43) across central Scotland. An element of this masculine skills-based domination persists. Still, Jen acknowledged that the men were actually “really encouraging” of her desire to engage with the space more permanently.

Many informants felt anxious about the lack of security along the canal; understandably considering it’s open and public nature. Anna, the volunteer coordinator at Re-Union, acknowledged that crime had reduced since she began interacting with the canal in the 1970s, when, “you could get mugged, or worse”. Nevertheless, the canal space is still felt to be unsafe by boaters:

“I’m on this little boat, I’m feeling vulnerable...this is not necessarily the best area.”



FIG 4: Hospitality training with Re-Union aboard the Lochrin Belle (top);
FIG 5: We participated in crew member training every Monday for eight weeks (bottom).



FIG 6: The narrowboat that we stayed on during our fieldwork.

Jen described an incident where she was awoken during the night, by strangers running up and down the roof of her boat. The ‘fragile shells’ of canal boats do little to protect residents from external harm. In being ‘closer to nature’, boaters are more vulnerable (Bowles 2015:116). This vulnerability has been exacerbated by the increasing drug use on the canalside, which Jen also mentioned. The fear of being vulnerable is legitimate. Celine, who resides at Harrison Park, was a victim of arson, and her boat was burnt down two years ago. The canal might not be as ‘Eden-like’ as boaters would like to believe (2015:122), but those like Jen are realistic about the difficulties of the romanticized lifestyle associated with the canal

Residence and Management

The canal space has been dramatically transformed since the Millennium Link project (Scottish Canals 2015), and is now a ‘remarkable asset for the community’ (Re-Union 2015). What was once a neglected backwater has been rejuvenated, becoming a cosmopolitan space for commercial and residential purposes. Yet, despite large investments from Scottish Canals, and the passion and care of boaters, the canal is still subject to misuse and degradation. The difficulty arises when a variety of uses intersect over the same resource (Church et al. 2007:213).

In the opinion of the boaters, there is an element of misuse or mismanagement of the canal by the council. Jen reported that they were “obsessed with property development along the sides of the canal”. This alludes to the general attitude towards the residents by, not only Scottish Canals, but the sedentary population. When looking at ‘boat dwellers’ in Southern England, Bowles suggested that sedentary people view the boaters as nomadic and ‘closer to nature’, and therefore separated from the surrounding societies (2015:116). Residents feel underappreciated by the Union Council; they don’t see them as residents in the same way that we are residents. As Lewery said ‘boat people should be regarded as a tough but respectable segment of society’ (1995:51) - they ‘are not a single political entity, but are self-consciously political’ (Bowles 2015:282). In other words, ‘social values and moral standpoints structure the debates over conflict’ and can therefore not be ignored (Church et al 2007:219).

Through talking briefly to the canal office at Lochrin Basin, and subsequently with Jen and Pierre, we found inconsistencies with the information given to us by them. One of the main issues appeared to revolve around its maintenance:

“Scottish Canals are failing miserably on their task of maintaining the canal.”(Pierre)

“There are so many issues with not dredging the canal... It’s really scary when you’re on your boat and you hear things scraping along the hull... and we’re paying! You have to pay a navigational license as well as your mooring fee.” (Jen)

Dredging involves clearing out the canal of all of the various rubbish and weeds in order for boats to travel through more easily. There is a machine designed to do this, that has sat unused next to the resident’s moorings since our fieldwork began. Anna, the volunteer coordinator of Re-union reported that Scottish Canals were supposed to use this every month but fail to do so as a result of the costs involved in using it. When we asked the canal office employees, both middle age men, whether the workings in and around the canal run smoothly, they responded with nods and positivity and said that providing diesel and water was their main responsibility. Dredging and proper waste disposal were not mentioned although they spoke about the canal festival in June which involved community groups surrounding the canal putting on performances and activities. This felt like evidence of a separation between the canal itself and what surrounds it; as if they see themselves as managing the canal for the people around it as opposed to managing it for the people on it.

The illegal disposal of bulky waste has become a serious problem, exacerbated by this inconsistent dredging. Special council collections cost a minimum of £21 (Edinburgh Council 2016), and our informants told us that many Edinburgh residents “fly-tip” waste into the canal instead. During one session aboard the Re-Union boat, we grounded to a halt to discover that a suitcase was entangled in the propeller. Attempting to wrestle the suitcase free was an arduous, forty-five minute process. Dealing with fly-tipping should be a



FIG 7: The Union Canal

shared issue, for boaters and management alike.

Pierre thought these were issues that must be addressed by Scottish Canals. As the unofficial repairman for the entire fleet of houseboats in this area, he is regarded as somewhat of a “celebrity on the canal” and a community leader. As a canal resident for over 13 years, Pierre had a long-standing relationship with the council and the local community, and said that, ‘the community was built around messy management’. At this time, prices were a big issue. With an influx of spending, the rent was rising as, “there was an incentive for the council to make money”. Pierre had been wary of the canal’s leadership, saying that no one at that time even knew who ran Scottish Canals. In recent years, Pierre has moved his boat to the Ratho area (3 miles west of the Lochrin Basin), where he doesn’t feel pushed out by Scottish Canals. But, like many boaters, he remains heavily engaged in community affairs in Edinburgh. Along with other residents, Pierre set up Scottish Canals Boaters Group (SCBG) in an effort to provide a collective voice for the resident boaters. With over fifty members stretching across the canal, the group tackles a variety of issues; at the moment, the rising mooring prices in Edinburgh have seen many residents trying to sell their boats, “it’s political, people are being kicked out of their homes”, reiterating Bowles’ aforementioned standpoint. 13 boats are now for sale in this area of the canal.

Another opinion on the issues facing boaters was needed. One group member spoke with Richard Allen, a board member of the Fountainbridge Canalside Initiative (FCI) – a group of activists trying to ensure a ‘viable and sustainable community’ around the Lochrin Basin in Fountainbridge. Richard was extremely informed on the canal’s history, and described it as a, “place of constant change”, which has had so many uses since its inception. With the increased development of the canalside, his group is, “working with developers and the council to create a unique waterside neighborhood”. So, when we asked about him about the issues some of the boaters had expressed, he was well informed:

Richard expressed concern over the dredging issues, but he remained adamant that Scottish Canals was trying to cut mooring prices. When I asked him about the boaters’ community though, he thought they considered themselves a separate entity. ‘They’re not Gypsies, but they are travelers though, so there is a hint of that, you know?’ Richard, who knew by name many of the boaters we had met, said that maybe their static boats, basically a ‘linear park’, was bad for the canal. ‘You know, they [SCBG] can have a good whinge, but they are going to get caught out. A lot more people are going to want to start to live here.’(Fieldnotes, 24/02/16)

Like many of the people we had met, Richard shared a love for the place that came out when we spoke about its historicity and unique ecosystem. “The pace of life on the canal calms you down. You notice things, the birds, the flowers”. Richard had stated that the FCI stance was that the more people who use the canal, the better. It was difficult for him to specify how, and who could use the canal, but without more money, through more boats, and “a new breed of boater” (i.e. second home owners) Scottish Canals would lose money for issues like dredging. “The world is coming in”, he said. Like other informants, Richard seemed to think this came with change, both good and bad, but inevitable nonetheless.

Conclusion

It would be easy to conclude that there are diverging viewpoints concerning the canal’s current and future usage. As Church says, ‘sharing leads to conflict’ and if people are to continue to discover the canal, then this might proliferate (Church et al 2007:225). However, we do not believe this to be a black and white issue; all groups acting on the canal are interlinked and integrated within the surrounding society in some way or another, and it cannot be a case of one against the other. Action is already being taken to alleviate future problems. As recently as the 18th March, Scottish Canals released an article announcing that, they will “work with boaters to tackle areas causing navigational issues” by investing £250,000 towards dredging. Here, the issues which Jen and Pierre had both mentioned are beginning to be addressed.

This does not necessarily mean that the viewpoints of the council and the residents are in alignment

just yet. In the same article, Transport Minister, Derek Mackay, said that, “this work will help ensure the safe navigation of the Lowland canals by leisure craft, while enabling progress towards the Scottish Government’s aspiration of growth in the numbers of boats navigating these vital tourism assets” (Scottish Canals 2016). Whilst complying with the desires of the residents and improving navigational systems, are these amendments driven by ulterior motives? In this case, different motives can be harnessed effectively, as long as the best interests of the canal are at heart. It’s not necessarily whether one opinion takes precedent over another, but rather how the space is improved. Whether the canal is a home, an escape, a nature reserve, or a commercial entity, conflicts of interest should take the backseat to an appreciation of this overlooked space.

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