

The Lost Stream.

Ask anyone which river Glasgow was built on and nine times out of ten you will be told “the Clyde”. However the answer, at least in technical terms is in fact, the Molendinar. It was on these banks that St. Ninian (AD 397) and later St. Mungo (a.k.a. S. Kentigern AD 603) settled. They did so because of it was a beautiful place. These days are long gone, and as the countryside has slowly been consumed by ‘the octopus of industry’ finding any trace of the river now, is almost impossible.

So where did the Molendinar go, and why? These were my first questions. I had heard by way of mouth that the Tennents brewery on Duke St. sits directly on top of the river and that the water had simply been consumed in its beer production. As with many things heard second-hand, this story turned out to be a simplification of the truth. True, the brewery was on top of the river, but Tennents beer was not made up of its water.

Through further investigation at the Mitchell Library I was able to get hold of many parts of a more complex jigsaw that I began to assemble. The most interesting of these was Theodore Brotchie’s ‘Glasgow Rivers and Streams, Their Legend and Lore’. This small publication of 1914 dedicates a whole chapter to Glasgows buried streams, and there I found reference to the Molendinar.

Brotchie describes the passing of a ‘limpid stream into a foul sewer’ with great panache for romanticised description, but his overall thesis is engaging: Does this progression mean real progress, he asks. We have not just lost a stretch of water but ‘that subtle breath which the woodland path and the wimpling burn give forth to all who care to woo them’. In short, we have lost touch with part of nature, and in so doing, part of our understanding of ourselves: our identity.

These questions became crucial in my research. What did the disappearance of the Molendinar mean to Glasgow, and would it ever be possible to bring the river back?

I was surprised throughout, by the lack of information surrounding issues as basic as where the river actually was. I began researching during a period when The British Geological Survey were undertaking their own research on behalf of the City Council and Scottish Water to ascertain precisely this, and I accompanied them on a number of fieldtrips where manholes were lifted and samples taken. Recent European legislation meant that the river would need to undergo a rapid clean-up to reach minimum standards, and because the Molendinar has effectively acted as an overflow for the sewerage system for the past two hundred years, major work would be required on the basic infra structure. This pressure was exacerbated by the gradual gentrification of the East End, (namely Dennistoun) where flats were being constructed at a rate of knots – all of which would need to be plumbed in to the ailing sewage system.

Through continued dialogue with representatives of GCC, SW and the BGS, I learned that there was an even more poignant subtext to all of this activity: In response to the flood event of July 2002 Scottish Water were in a rush to avoid further embarrassment. A number of areas in the East End had suffered from severe flooding brought about by the culverting of the Molendinar, and its subsequent neglect. Worse still, the tragic death of a young boy in a graveyard in the East End of the city was being attributed by some, to landslips which were themselves the result of inadequate drainage brought about by the network of narrow culverts. GCC and SW were in quiet legal negotiations to determine which parts of the river they would be accountable for. Suddenly everyone was interested in the Molendinar.

In another development I contacted Amey Highways to see if they had any knowledge of the river. “We don’t have any historical knowledge whatsoever” they replied. “five to six years max” they continued. In fact the river runs directly beneath the M8, Europes busiest motorway, near to the Blochairn exit. It has often been suggested that Glasgow fails to recognise its past. Could this be a result of the fact that the oldest parts of the city surrounding the Cathedral, are so difficult to evidence. Who for example would have imagined that the area of land on the junction of High St. and Duke St. which stood for so long as a wasteland, and has now been converted into a car park, was once a formal garden for the Citys proud University, before its relocation to the West End. I have seen paintings of well dressed couples arm in arm taking the air on leisurely

walks, no doubt discussing the latest academic developments.

Residents of Blackhill on the north side of the M8 are perhaps better informed. I interviewed one elderly resident, Agnes, now in her 80s who described Blackhill as a desirable address before the bulldozers moved in to create the Motorway. She used to walk a mile or so along the Molendinar to school, across fields and small bridges. Now the area is run-down and dislocated from the city centre by an eight lane superhighway. I interviewed other individuals, all experts in their own way, all eager to reclaim this forgotten landmark. Some remembered fishing in the river and netting a good catch. Little chance of that now. George Rattray of the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency declared that there was next to no chance of Salmon returning to the river as long as sewage continues to flow directly into the burn during heavy rainfall events. Of all those I approached only the City Council and Scottish Water were too embarrassed to appear before camera. Perhaps their decision to re-route the Molendinar into the Camlachie burn – (another culverted stream beneath Glasgow Gree) is another 1960's fiasco they would rather forget about. The fact that part of my research was being funded by the City Council (the other half being supported by Glasgow School of Art SoFA Research Fund) failed to convince them that they should share their future vision for the City.

An unedited paper relating to this research was given to delegates at Watershed: 'Environmental Art – Engendering a Community of Change', held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery on Saturday 11th October, 2003. The Conference coincided with the exhibition Crossovers 2003 at the Pavillion in Mile End Park, London.