



#1 SICK BOY

#2 RENTON

#3 TOMMY

#4 SPUD

PHOTO ALLSTAR

Trainspotting

TEXT MATT GLASBY

The Guide

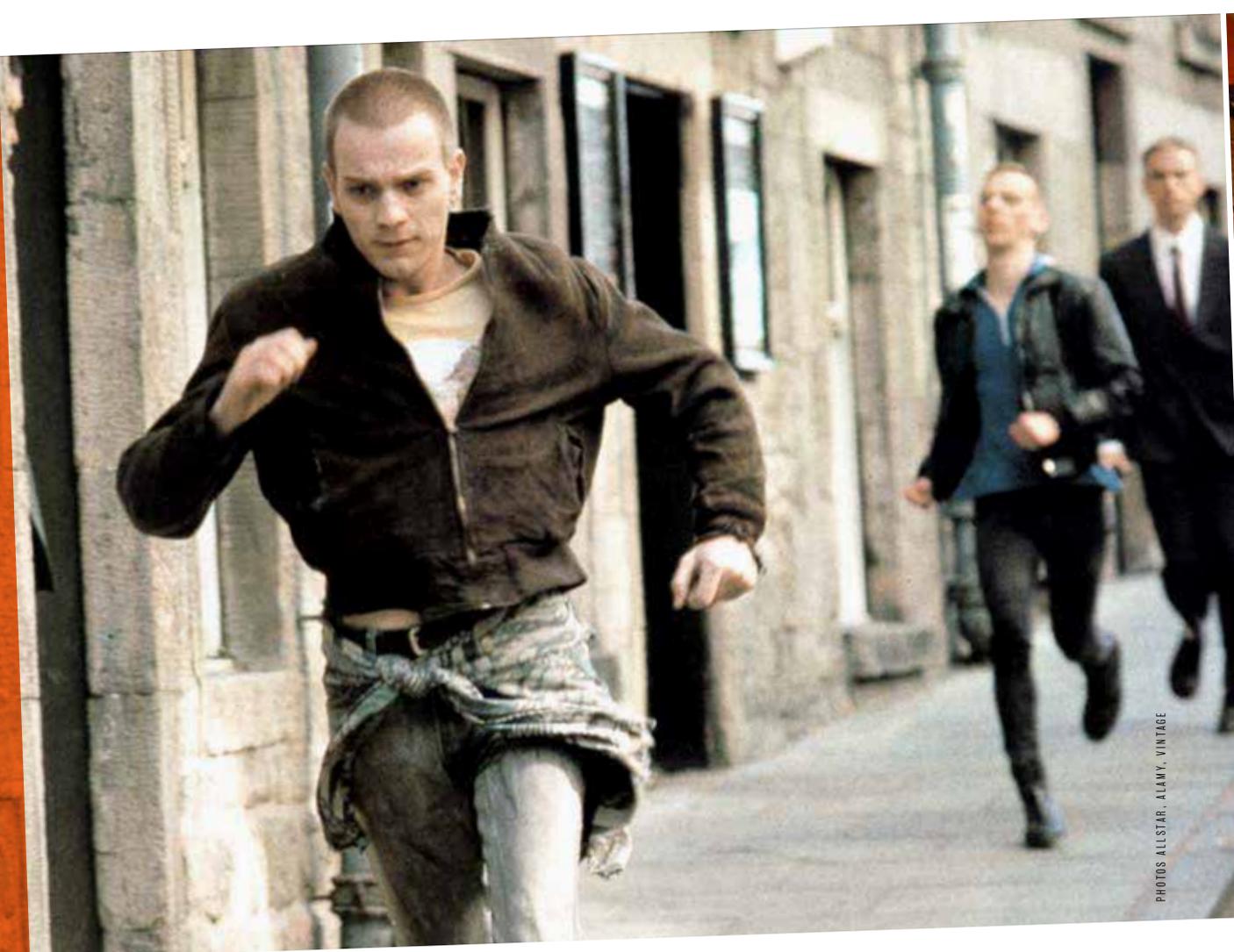
Exploring the mean streets of Leith for the real-life locations that inspired Irvine Welsh's masterpiece, *JetAway* takes a walk on the wild side

A way from the gothic gentility of tourist Edinburgh, where Constitution Street descends into the dark heart of the old port, a series of "I Love Leith" posters featuring local heroes such as inexplicably popular warblers The Proclaimers line the road. "I used to live downstairs from one of them," chirps the cabbie as he drops me outside the Port O' Leith pub. "But I was never sure if it was the ugly one, or the really ugly one."

No matter. It's not goggle-faced folkies we're here for, but Irvine Welsh, Edinburgh's unflinching gutter poet, whose novels *Trainspotting*, its sequel, *Porno*, and forthcoming prequel, *Skagboys*, track a generation lost

to drugs and disillusionment. Forget *Letters From America*, Renton and co's horizons stretch no further than local landmark the Fit Ay The Walk. "Leith is not Edinburgh," chides Tim Bell. "It's a working town in its own right, not a suburb and not a ghetto." How much of it was working 20 years ago, when Welsh debuted drafts of his breakthrough novel in this cosy boozier, is another story altogether.

More academic than tour guide, Bell, 65, cuts a donnish figure in the Port O' Leith's old-curiosity-shop-style interior, where much of *Porno* was set (it's Port Sunshine in the book). Though he admits to "helping keep the Irvine Welsh industry alive", Bell's ▶



PHOTOS ALLSTAR, ALAMY, VINTAGE



tours are not for film buffs – only 24 seconds of Danny Boyle’s iconic *Trainspotting* adaptation were shot in Edinburgh – or, for that matter, bairns. Reading Welsh’s spiky, frequently unspeakable prose aloud like a learned uncle, Bell shuts his eyes as if recalling bad memories. Leith locals may feel much the same about the blighted town brought to life in Welsh’s brutal cadences. “Welsh was a housing officer here,” explains Bell. “He’s in touch with the social history of the area. But *Trainspotting*’s about the effects rather than the causes. That’s why it’s literature.”

Like many a Welsh protagonist before us, the group – a rag-tag bunch of tourists, students and haughty Morningsiders seeing how the other half live – saunters from the pub to the Police Station, the subject of a fiendish local tongue twister (“The Leith police dismisses us, they thought we sought to stay...”) as well as Welsh’s playful slang. In the minds and mouths of Renton and friends, Lothian and Borders police (“LAB”) plus detectives (“private dicks”) becomes “Labdicks”. “It might have caught on,” muses Bell, “but it hasn’t.” Later, as we pass the Leith Academy, he tells us, “That’s where Renton and Sick Boy would have gone to school. It’s not explicit, but they would.” It’s over-analysis perhaps, but you don’t get anything like this depth of information from the out-of-work actors playing their trade uptown.

‘Leith is a working town in its own right,’ says Bell. ‘It’s not a suburb – or a ghetto’

Just round the corner, Welsh’s former flat at 2 Wellington Place looks out from a gravestone-grey block on to the scratchy grass of Leith Links. Back in his housing officer days, Welsh’s neighbours wondered at the strange click-clacking noises reverberating through the walls at night. Turns out it was *Trainspotting* taking its unruly shape, and the author wasn’t above seasoning the gritty realism with snatches of wish fulfilment. One chapter has Sick Boy, the amoral, Sean Connery-loving chancer that Bell seems to harbour a soft spot for, tormenting a skinhead with an air rifle from just such a vantage point. “It’s a great feeling, knowing you have the power to unleash such pain fae yir am front room!” he soliloquises Scottishly, before lapsing into a 007-esque: “Call me the unsheened ashashin, Miss Moneypenny.” It’s not hard to picture Welsh, frustrated, a blank sheet of paper staring at him accusingly from the typewriter, disrupted by hooligans below and letting his own dark thoughts take flight.

While we shelter from the drizzle at the Leith Dockers Social Club, where Renton begins his grubby re-entry into so-called “civilised” society, Bell’s thoughts flit from Kierkegaard to the infamous local family, mentioned by Renton in passing, who once pilfered his son’s skateboard. When he reads aloud from his well-thumbed volume – doing all the voices, from Sick Boy to Sean Connery – you remember how funny Welsh can be, despite the, shall we say, “authenticity” of the surroundings.

But it’s the next stop that’s most revealing – of Bell, of Leith and of Welsh’s feckless ne’er-do-wells. The largest of its kind built from scratch in 20th-century Britain, Leith Central Station linked this once-busy port to the outside world, but sat derelict through the 1970s and 1980s before being bulldozed to make room for a budget supermarket and even more budget leisure centre. “I’m glad they don’t call it a swimming pool,” says Bell ruefully. “You can’t get a straight swim, it’s all waves, chutes, and bubbles.”

While bemused locals skulk past, Bell reads from *Trainspotting*’s penultimate chapter, in which Renton and the psychotic Begbie pass through the station, now a “barren, desolate hanger”, and are accosted by a cackling tramp. “What yis up tae, lads?” he asks. “Trainspotting, eh?” The image of wastrels awaiting a gravy train that’s never going to come is a powerful ▶



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: RENTON ON THE RUN; PORT O’ LEITH PUB; PORT SUNSHINE ITSELF; TRAINSPOTTING’S SMUTTY SEQUEL; THE KITCHIN

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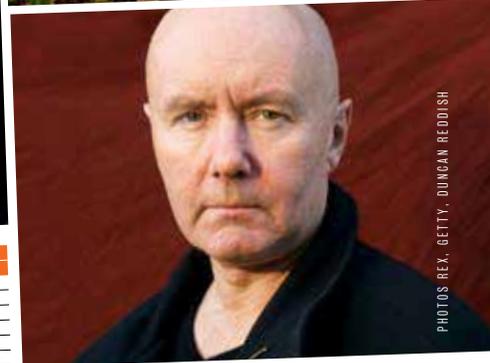
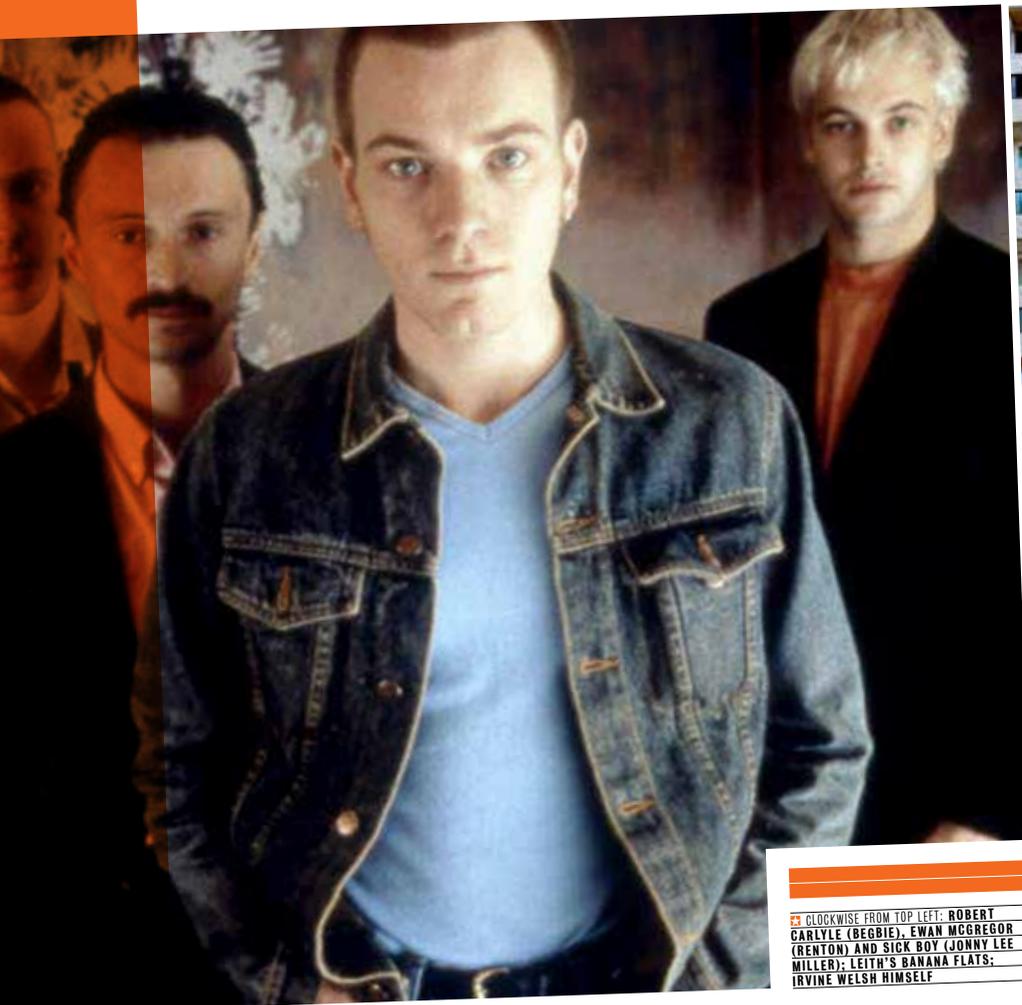
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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ROBERT CARLYLE (BEGBIE), EWAN MCGREGOR (RENTON) AND SICK BOY (JONNY LEE MILLER); LEITH'S BANANA FLATS; IRVINE WELSH HIMSELF

PHOTOS: REX, GETTY, DUNGAN REDDISH

one, compromised, according to Bell, by the tacked-on, happy(ish) heist ending that follows. But perhaps Welsh was right to leaven the misery with a few rays of hope, turning the Port O' Leith back, however briefly, into Port Sunshine.

If you step past Central Bar, where *Porno*, ahem, climaxes, and the depressing facade of the "banana flats" (Sick Boy's childhood home), down to the Shore, you can see Leith's past and possible futures starting to intersect, albeit uneasily. In 1561, Bell tells us, Mary Queen of Scots landed here and pronounced her pleasure at being in "sunny Leith", a sentiment echoed – not without irony – both by Sick Boy's cheekily retitled pub and The Proclaimers' debut, *Sunshine On Leith*. "The place is a potential gold mine," says Sick Boy. "You can feel the gentrification creeping up from the Shore. Leith is on the up." Besides an annual festival celebrating all things local from 11-20 June (www.leithfestival.com), posh nosheries such as the Michelin-starred Kitchin (www.thekitchin.com) are springing up along the old docks, while Leith devotees like Bell do their best to keep the flame of civic pride alive.

Back at the Fit Ay The Walk, a familiar face declares his allegiance to the "I Love Leith" campaign. On a poster overlooking "Queen Sticky Vicky", a statue of Queen Victoria renamed after a Benidorm burlesque, is Irvine Welsh himself. But just what is it about his work that continues to "appeal and appal" to Trainspotters

'You can feel the gentrification creeping up from the Shore,' says Sick Boy. 'Leith's on the up'

both old and young? "He tells people's stories in their own voices, without any concessions," says Bell, shutting his book for the last time today. He's not the only one. www.leithwalks.co.uk

