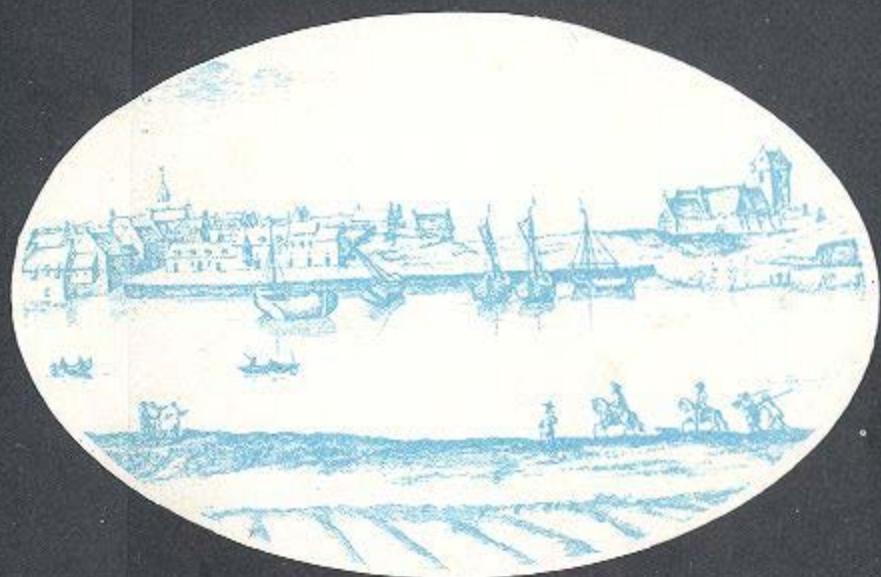


old ayrshire



HARBOURS

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Ayrshire Collections

Volume Fourteen

Number Three

old ayrshire harbours

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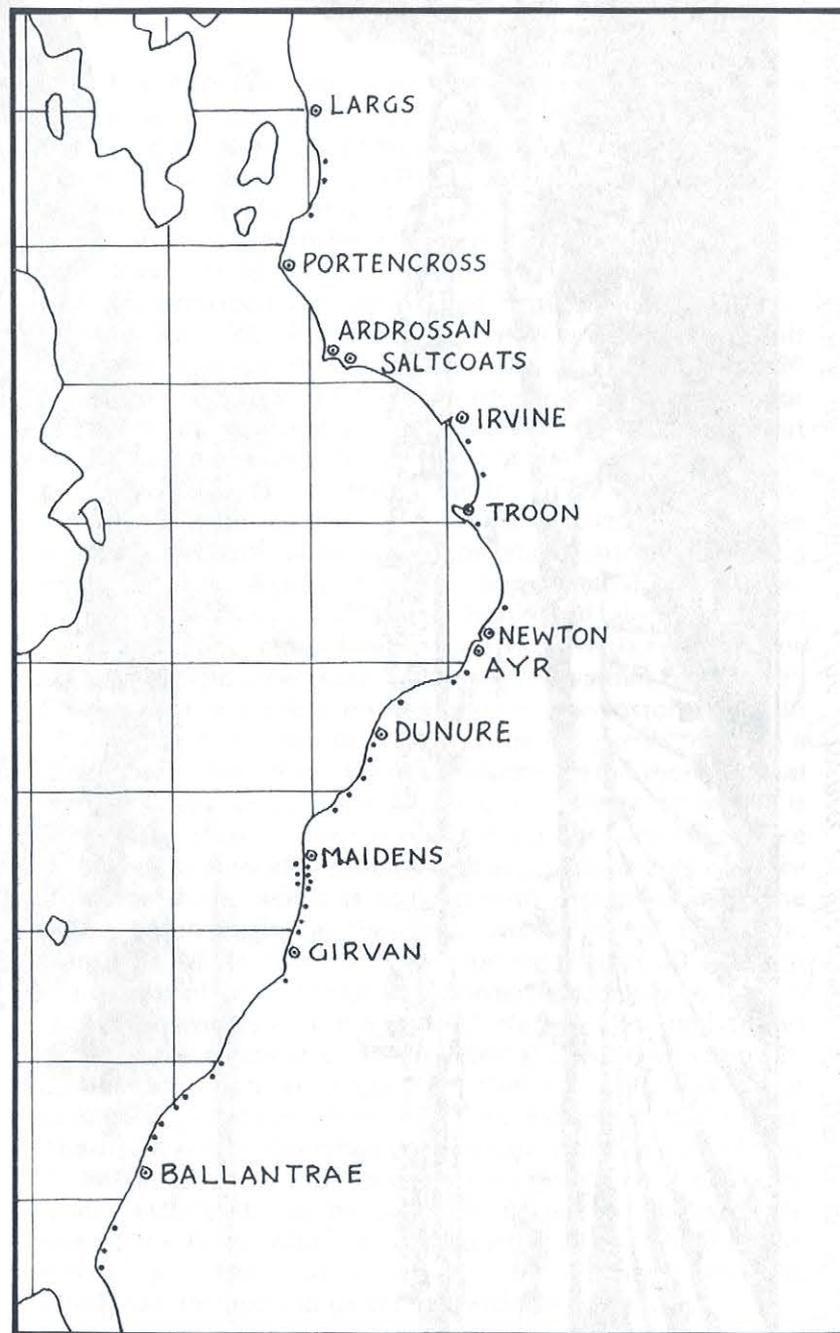
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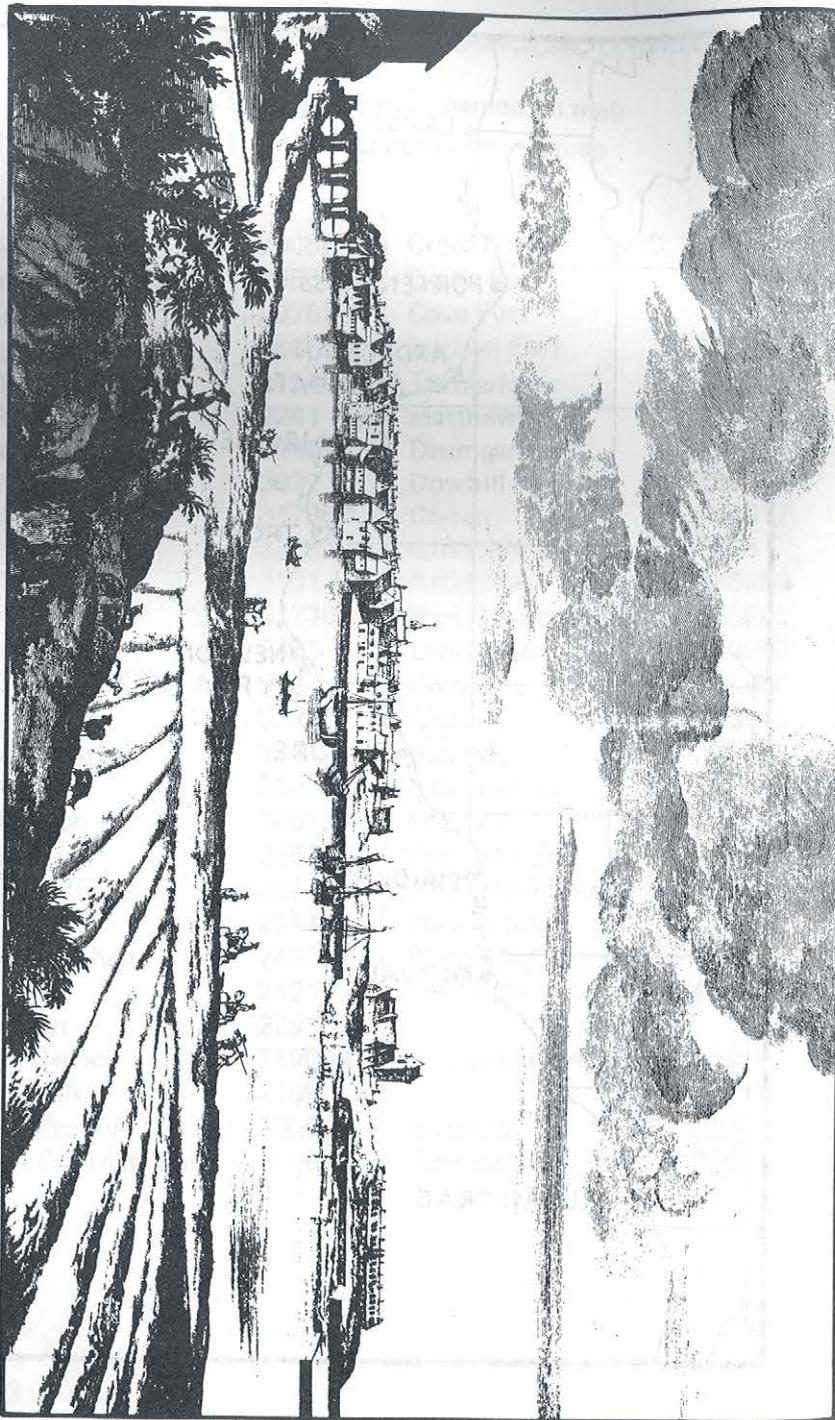
HARBOUR SITES IN TOPOGRAPHICAL ORDER

Class I Sites, in capitals, named on map

Class II Sites, locations only on map

LARGS	NS	200594	Cross Port	NS	200076
Kelburn		208563	Castle Port		196073
Fairlie		207559	Cove Port		195070
Stoney Port		180516	Lochan Port		194070
PORTENCROSS		175491	Turnberry		1906
ARDROSSAN		2241	Matthews Port		199036
SALTCOATS		2440	Drumgarloch		199036
IRVINE		3037	Dowhill		198031
Gailes		317360	Carran		197017
Barassie		326339	GIRVAN	NX	1898
TROON		3131	Ardmillan		166950
Port Ronnald		312308	Port Cardloch		166950
Prestwick		3425	Lendalfoot		130900
NEWTON UPON AYR		3322	Glenfoot		130900
AYR		3322	Carlton		125895
Doonmouth		324195	Burnfoot		108882
Greenan		312193	Balcrauchan		090878
Fisherton		266177	Port Vad		091870
Dunduff		266177	Port, old pier		090855
DUNURE		254161	BALLANTRAE		0882
Port Rorie		254161	Port Curcarie		054780
Port Shuchan		246151	Portandea		046754
Isle Port		242129	Port Sally		051724
Culzean		229100			
Port Carrick		219098	Not shown, in Renfrewshire.		
MAIDENS		2108			
Port Murray		205080	Inverkip	NS	2072
John O'Groats Port		202078	Wemyss Bay		1968





The Ayrshire coast may be thought of as falling, in a general way, into three sections — a rocky southern one, stretching for some thirty-seven miles from the Wigtownshire march to the mouth of the River Doon; a sandy central one, of seventeen miles, running on from the Doon to Saltcoats; and another rocky northern one, of about twenty-four miles, from Saltcoats to the Cloch Point.¹ The southernmost section was described in a work dated between 1683 and 1722, by the Rev. W. Abercromby,² who wrote 'though this Country (Carrick) be washed with the sea for a space of 24 myles and upwards yet there be no convenient harbours or bayes for the receiving of ships so that none resort to it but small boats and barks from Ireland or the highlands and ther best receptacle is the broad sands of Turnberry and the mouths of Doon, Girvan and Stinchar: and of all these three Girvan is the best'. After noting the labour entailed in pulling boats up these beaches to above high-water mark, he continued, 'The shoar is very well parted all alongst betwixt rocks and sand, some places a tract of open plain sand, some places high and steep rock which is ever washen by the sea'. Of the central section the minister of Stevenston wrote in 1793³ that five miles of the shore of his parish 'is quite a sandy beech on which the sea deepens in the most gradual manner imaginable. Hence, during a westerly storm, it is formidable to such ships as have the misfortune to be here embayed, as they strike the ground at a considerable distance from the shore, which is covered with dangerous surf. The sandy beach begins at Saltcoats, sweeps round by Irvine, along the whole coast of Kyle, for more than 20 miles to the mouth of the River Doon . . . interrupted only by a small rocky promontory at the Trune.' He strangely omitted to mention the estuaries of the Ayr and the Irvine, which offered the best natural refuges for shipping caught on what became a dangerous lee-shore in the prevailing westerly gales. The northern, or Cunninghame, section contains some larger or smaller bays but no navigable rivermouths. It is sheltered from westerly storms by Bute and Cowal, on the opposite side of the Firth, which is here greatly narrowed, and Fairlie Roads, an inner passage between the mainland and the Cumbraes, formed a large and dependable anchorage.

Major estuary sites are Ayr and Irvine, with Girvan of less importance, while Dunure and Portencross, though showing artificial improvement no doubt owe something to their position in rocky inlets. Wholly artificial major sites are Ardrossan, Saltcoats, Troon and Ballantrae, with Largs in a lower category. Estuarial conditions resulted, at both Irvine and Ayr, in alluvial silting or obstruction of the channel by banks of sand or gravel, and at Irvine in particular extensive and elaborate remedial work was done. Rather similar conditions, perhaps combined with changes in the line of the coast, may have led to the use by very small craft of the tidal lagoons and backwaters, as probably at Ballantrae or the mouth of the River Doon.

The harbours' development may be thought of as proceeding by phases, in accordance with the roles that they performed from period to period. It seems fair to put back their origins to prehistoric times, on the assumption that most of the harbours began as settlements of fishermen, and that fishing in one form or another has probably furnished a background, at all periods, to other sea-going activities. Passing references in the records to salmon-fisheries in the estuaries, and to boats working in the Firth and in the Sound of Kilbrennan, seem to exemplify a well-established pattern of ancient standing. At a less primitive stage came mediaeval overseas trade, and here Ayr and Irvine assumed special importance as serving Royal Burghs with overseas trading rights. In a later extension of this phase, there appeared three additional major harbours, namely Troon, Saltcoats and Ardrossan: devoted primarily to the shipping of coal from the neighbouring coal-fields, besides taking their share in general trade, particularly with the Irish and western British ports. This group of five major harbours provides an analogy with Galloway, for just as Port Logan and Portpatrick were designed to meet the demand for a North Channel crossing,⁴ and occupied the least unfavourable positions on a generally inhospitable coast, so the Ayrshire group, notwithstanding the drawbacks imposed on the sites by bars and silting and on the others by exposure and rocks, fulfilled an essential commercial need. With reference to the smaller harbours and customary landings in general, it may be well to observe here that the word 'creek', by which they are often described,

carries in official language the meaning of subordinate Customs-post, and does not necessarily imply the presence of a coastal inlet, nor, for that matter, a stream, as in current transatlantic usage.

Little can be learned about early structural work from the material at the Ayrshire sites. Works which existed before the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries were much altered by additions and improvements in the pioneer age of civil engineering, and the industrial developments of the 19th and 20th centuries carried the process further. It might have been hoped, for example, that the 'Old Quay' at Saltcoast, representing as it does a feature of the original plan, would exhibit some specimen of masonry plainly identifiable as dating from the 1680s, but no convincing traces have been found. In general the harbours exemplify the fashions and methods to be expected in work of the late 18th and early 19th centuries; and they no doubt reflect the ideas of the leading engineers of the time, whose advice was sought on one occasion or another, including Watt, Smeaton, Rennie, Jessop, Telford, Stevenson and Gibb. Ashlar or nearly squared and well-coursed rubble are everywhere the rule, quay-faces being sometimes reinforced with stout vertical timbers. An interesting structural sample can be seen at Ayr, where a pier, broken through transversely, shows ashlar faces and a core of random rubble. The stonework being in general so largely homogeneous, it is hard or impossible to distinguish the stages of the works' advance, nor can changes in the styles of bollards from wharf to wharf be trusted as dependable indicators. Such details apart, however, several of the harbours are noteworthy for their massive breakwater-piers, thrown out as defences against violent westerly storms, and rising on their seaward sides from widely flared and carefully pitched bases. Of these the North pier at Troon is a most impressive example. The sea-wall at Ballantrae likewise shows excellent masonry, on a work of smaller scale.

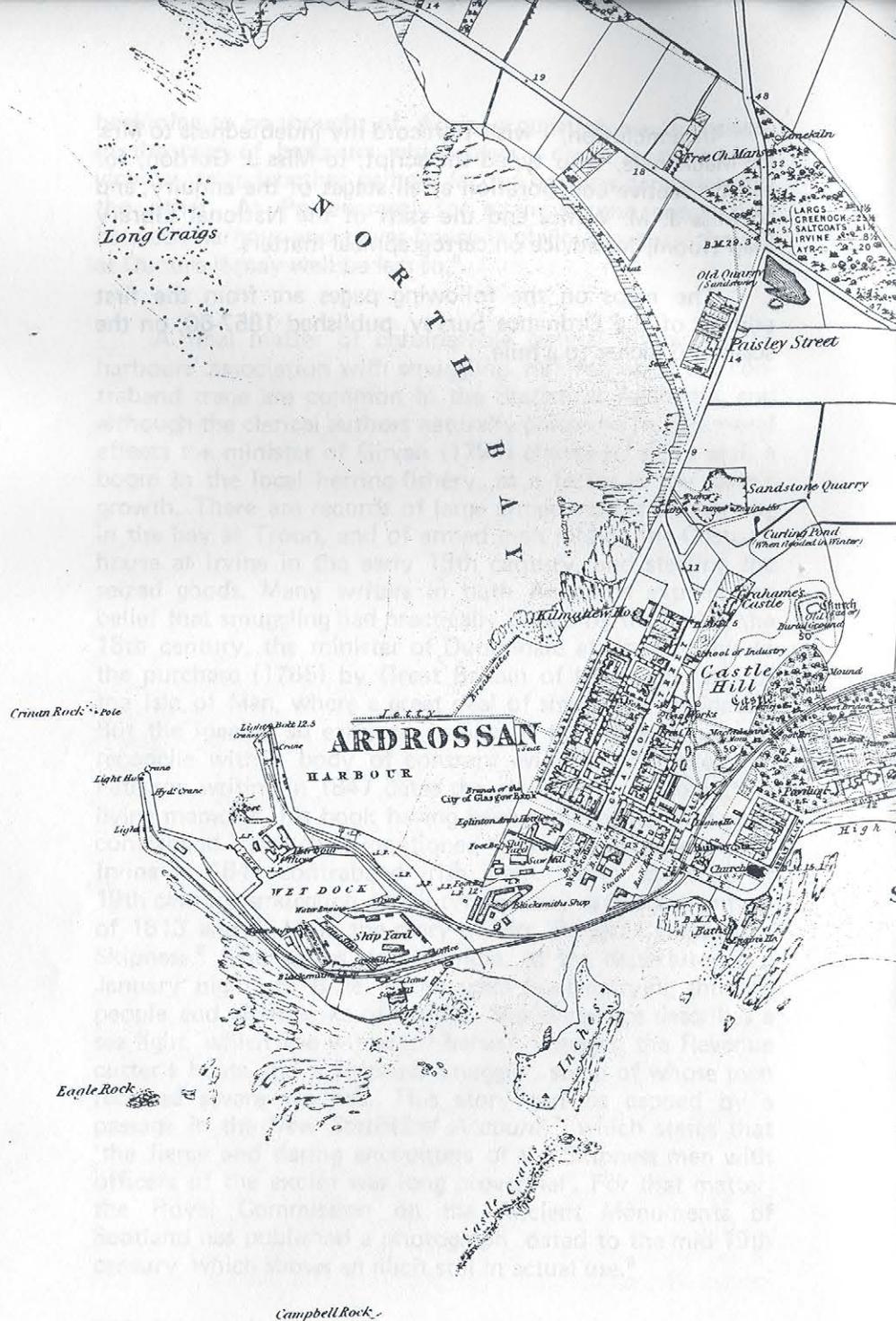
Mention may be made in passing of the comparatively small size of the ships for whose use the harbours were designed, and the bearing that this must have had on breadths of entrance and depths of water allowed for at bars and in docks. The accommodation of the earliest steamers was also

beginning to be thought of. Again, a question may be raised, in the case of harbours which have a castle in their close vicinity, as to whether or how far the one was dependent on the other. At Portencross, for example, the connection between harbour and tower-house is obviously close, though at Dunure it may well be less so.⁵

A final matter of considerable general interest is the harbours' association with smuggling. References to the contraband trade are common in the Statistical Accounts, and although the clerical authors naturally condemn its bad moral effects the minister of Girvan (1794) classes it, along with a boom in the local herring-fishery, as a factor in the town's growth. There are records of large armed vessels discharging in the bay at Troon, and of armed men raiding the Customs house at Irvine in the early 18th century, and stealing the seized goods. Many writers in both Accounts express the belief that smuggling had practically ceased by the end of the 18th century, the minister of Dundonald attributing this to the purchase (1765) by Great Britain of the sovereignty of the Isle of Man, where a great deal of smuggling originated. But the idea of so early an ending of the trade is hard to reconcile with a body of contrary evidence. For example, Paterson writing in 1847 dates the affair at Troon to 'within living memory', his book having been published in that year; contraband Irish salt is mentioned from time to time, and at Irvine in 1841 contraband Irish grain. Again, evidence of 19th-century smuggling of Kintyre whisky appears in entries of 1813 and 1814 in the diary of Mrs. Robert Campbell of Skipness,⁶ who writes for example, of the departure on a January night to Bute, of an open boat carrying thirteen people and eight casks of whisky. She elsewhere describes a sea-fight which she witnessed herself, between the Revenue cutter's boats and a Skipness smuggler, some of whose men received severe wounds. This story can be capped by a passage in the *New Statistical Account*,⁷ which states that 'the fierce and daring encounters of the Skipness men with officers of the excise was long proverbial'. For that matter, the Royal Commission on the Ancient Monuments of Scotland has published a photograph dated to the mid-19th century, which shows an illicit still in actual use.⁸

In conclusion, I wish to record my indebtedness to Mrs. G. Mackenzie, who typed the script; to Miss J. Gordon, for most effective collaboration at all stages of the enquiry; and to Miss J. M. Wilkes and the staff of the National Library Map Room, for advice on cartographical matters.

The maps on the following pages are from the first edition of the Ordnance Survey, published 1857-60, on the scale of 6 inches to a mile.



ARDROSSAN

CLASS I SITES

These are places (in alphabetical order) where harbour works exist; distinct from minor Class II Sites listed later.

Ardrossan. NS2241, 2242.

The history of Ardrossan harbour begins only in 1805, and there is a full description in the *New Statistical Account*.

Ardrossan stands on a promontory which projects about a mile into the Firth of Clyde, having on one side the somewhat bagshaped North Bay and being separated on the other by the open South Bay from the headland occupied by Saltcoats. With additional protection given by Horse Island and some rocks, the North Bay is more or less sheltered from all directions except the south west, and in its natural state served as a place of refuge in storms. The construction of a harbour was projected by the 12th Earl of Eglinton, with the idea that it should become the port of Glasgow by cutting out the navigation of the Clyde estuary, then still unimproved. He was also interested in the exploitation of the local coal and ironstone, in the improvement of his estates and in the development of Ardrossan town. The work was authorised by an Act of 1805, which covered in addition a canal to the port from Glasgow; but of this latter only the section from Glasgow (Port Eglinton) to Johnstone was built. Funds were obtained from shareholders, and the Earl himself spent £100,000 on the project.

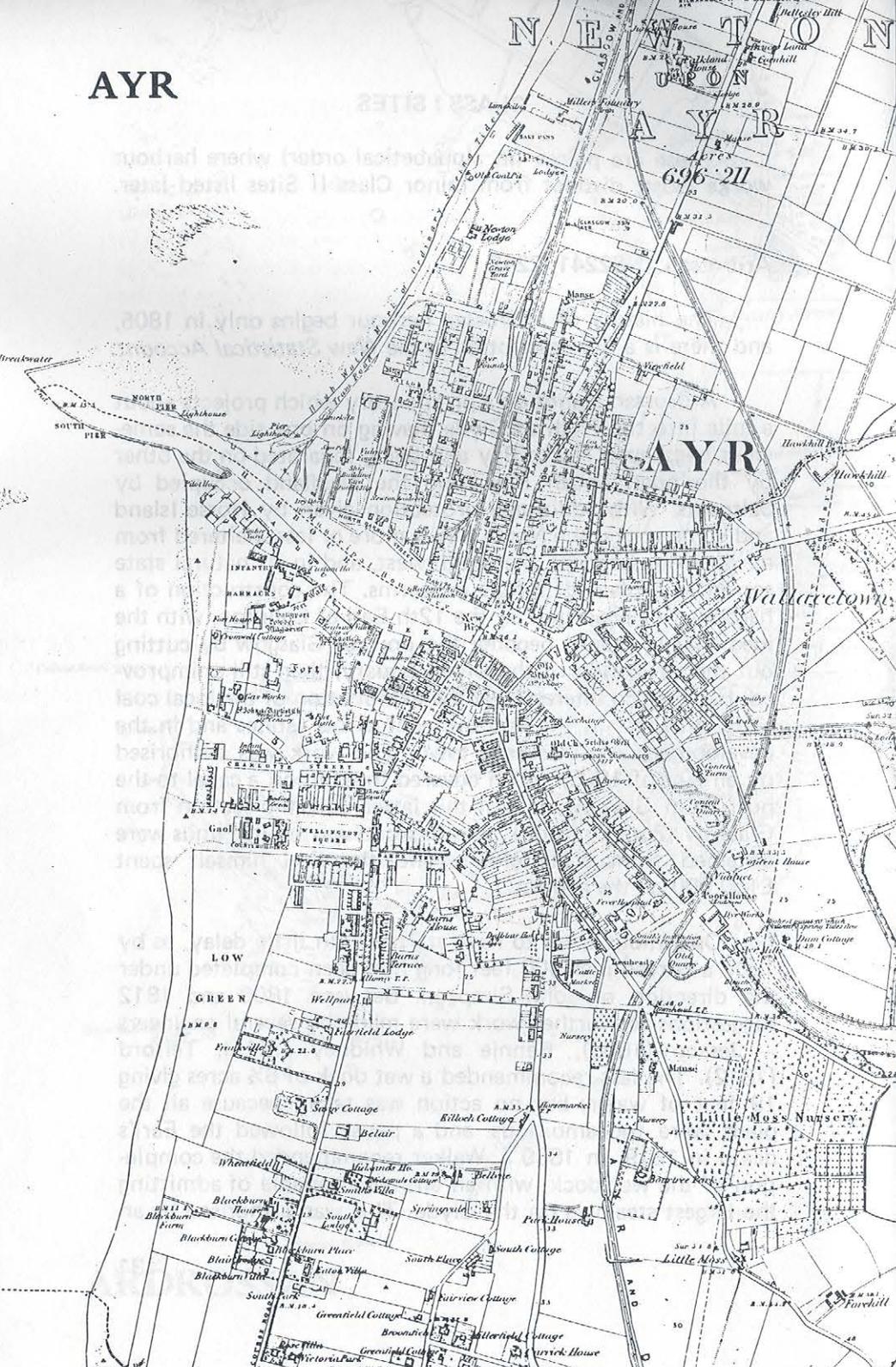
Operations seem to have started with little delay, as by 1807 a curved pier 900 feet long had been completed under the direction of John Simpson. Between 1808 and 1812 suggestions for further work were made by several engineers – Jessop (1808), Rennie and Whidbey (1811), Telford (1812). The last recommended a wet dock of 6½ acres giving 19 feet of water; but no action was taken because all the plans were too ambitious, and a pause followed the Earl's death in 1819. In 1839 J. Walker recommended the completion of the wet dock, with an entrance capable of admitting the largest steamers on the Clyde. This was authorised by an

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Act of 1841, and was completed by 1846. The resulting complex comprised two tidal basins, respectively 200 and 300 yards in length with quays which gave depths of from 10 to 21 feet at high springs; a dry dock of 3½ acres, with 500 yards of quay giving a depth of 20 feet; a graving dock giving 14 feet; with a patent slip, sheds, cranes, facilities for shipbuilding, and two leading lights. An unlighted beacon-tower was also built on Horse Island. Steamers are recorded as running to Arran, Ayr, Glasgow and Stranraer in 1837, and to Belfast in 1840.

In spite of far-reaching changes resulting from the industrial developments of the 19th and 20th centuries, the main features of the earlier plans persist. The chief of these is the long pier that covers the whole of the W. and SW. sector of the site. On its inner side this appears as a massive sea-wall, with a parapet standing up to 6 feet above a parapet-walk to which access is obtained by steps. Externally the foundations are seen to follow the dispositions of the underlying rock, with the outer wall-face sweeping up from a widely flared base. Within the pier there lies a large dock, presumably the 'wet' dock of 1846, which is now in process of being filled up with rubbish. Its entrance-passage and dock-gates have been overbuilt by the terminal works of the Arran and Belfast ferries, but the eastern jamb of the inner end of the passage is still free of the filling and the position of the western one can be inferred. North-east of this dock, and beyond the spur of railway leading to the ferry terminals, are two basins separated by a pier; the passage between them is spanned by a dock-gate. A difference in date between this pier and the dock now being filled up is suggested by a difference in the styles of their respective bollards.

Ayr. NS 3322, 3323.

The River Ayr falls into the sea within a few miles of the southern end of the predominantly sandy coast that begins at Saltcoats, and Ayr harbour occupies its lowermost reach, an estuary below the bridges. Its strategic potential was evidently appreciated by Cromwell, the impressive remains of whose Citadel stand on its south bank immediate-

ly downstream from the confines of the mediaeval burgh. His choice of the Ayr rather than of the Irvine estuary may well have been influenced by the serious navigational difficulties from which the Irvine was suffering at the time.

Ayr harbour is no doubt at least as old as the burgh, which received its charter in 1205.¹⁰ The earliest explicit evidence of a seaport's existence appears in a confirmation of Alexander II, which forbade the use of timber cut in Alloway for purposes other than the building of Ayr's own ships.¹¹ From a later date comes a favourable note by Bishop Leslie, who writes in 1578¹² of 'a prettie sey porte quhair strange nationis oft arrives and their landes, the porte is sa commodious'. Camden, again, calls Ayr a 'small seaport and well-known harbour'.¹³ Other records, however, tell of decay and ruin. Thus in 1587 commissioners were appointed to inspect the 'decayit' harbour and bridge, and arrangements were made for their repair if this should be found possible.¹⁴ In 1600 an impost was granted for harbour repairs, and in 1612 another was asked for but an answer was postponed.¹⁵ A similar application, made in 1622 for the repair of the 'herberie and bulwarkis', stated that the works had become ruinous and were likely to 'fall down and perish', to the 'overthrow' of the town, which depended largely on maritime trade.¹⁶ Tucker made the same point in 1655,¹⁷ reporting that the town was deteriorating as a result of the harbour becoming clogged with sand 'beaten up' into it by the 'Westerne Sea' and by winds from the islands. In 1695, an application, which was granted, described the harbour as ruined and lying 'in rubbish'.¹⁸ Outright monetary grants made for harbour repairs were of 4,000 marks between 1631 and 1649, and of £40 stg. in 1724;¹⁹ at the latter date the word 'ruinous' was again used.

The picture that emerges from records of the late 18th and early 19th centuries²⁰ is one of a tidal reach at the river's mouth with harbour-works on either bank. The channel was liable to silt up with sand brought down by the current, and this, with a bar formed outside by the same cause, obstructed navigation considerably. For that matter longitudinal banks

of shingle still appear at low tide in the centre of the channel well up the improved harbour. There was room for eighty vessels inside the bar.²¹ In 1771 Watt advised that the piers that flanked the waterway should be extended seawards, parallel with one another and of equal length. In 1772 Smeaton recommended that the north pier should be slightly curved and made 30 yards longer than the south one, and that both should be raised above the level of high water. This recommendation seems to have been carried out, for the south bank was, in 1837, over 300 yards long, 20 to 25 feet high, 8 to 9 feet thick at the top and three times as much at the bottom.²² In 1805 Rennie agreed with Smeaton's opinions, but favoured a further extension of the piers and the formation of a wet dock. In the event, the north pier was extended in 1800 and the south pier was rebuilt and extended in 1825, after which it projected 100 yards beyond the north one. In 1830 Stevenson advised that the north pier should be pushed out further beyond the south one and given a southerly cant, and that rocks and other obstructions should be cleared out of the channel. He disapproved of the idea of a breakwater, but one was built none the less, in 1836, on the advice of Gibb. It was 133 yards long and was placed 100 yards in advance of the north pier-head, but it was incomplete when the Parliamentary Report was prepared, being only at high-water level. Points made in the evidence produced to the Commissioners²³ included insufficient quayage; risks resulting from freshets in the river; exposure to swell in south-westerly gales, which made a tidal basin necessary; and the necessity of heightening the breakwater, of removing boulders from the harbour, of repairing piers and quays, and of restricting the dumping of sand and rubbish into the river above the bridge. It was also remarked that backwater was prevented from forming by a mill-dam. In 1846, the mouth of the harbour, which opened north-west by north, was 320 feet wide between the piers and was protected by a detached breakwater of rubble masonry. The bar gave a depth of 15 feet at high springs, but this harbour, like those of Irvine and Saltcoats, could not be entered by ships of over 220 tons. Both sides of the harbour were provided with quays from the bridge downwards, the total length of wharfage being 1200 yards. Fifty yards of the north quay were rebuilt in 1845. Equipment existed for shipbuilding and

repairs, including two iron foundries; a steam dredge was in use, which deepened the river by three feet and improved the bar. The system of lighting was regarded as satisfactory.

These records seem positive enough, but it is hard to establish correspondence between them and the existing works on any but the broadest lines. Discrepancies appear in respect both of dimensions and compass-directions, and little would be gained by elaborate attempts to resolve them. Generally speaking, however, both banks of the river, from the New Bridge downstream, have been improved as quays, the masonry of which seems fairly homogeneous throughout, though the bollards vary in style from section to section. At low tide, banks of shingle appear in the centre of the river, and in recesses in the built wharfage. The main features of the harbour of today can be summarised as follows. On the right bank, North Harbour Street runs, with wharfage its outer side, for some 770 yards to end on the entrance-channel of a large wet dock, part of its face being slightly set back for 100 yards to face a shallow recess. The entrance-channel of the dock narrows gradually from a width of some 77 yards at its opening and contains a pair of lateral projections adaptable for holding dockgates though no gates in fact exist. The frontage of this area is named the North Quay, and is revetted in masonry. From its west corner there projects the ruin of a wooden jetty, known locally as the Monkey Pier; this may or may not have been the structure recorded in 1827²⁴ as existing at Newton upon Ayr, the whole of this right bank being then outwith the Royal Burgh.

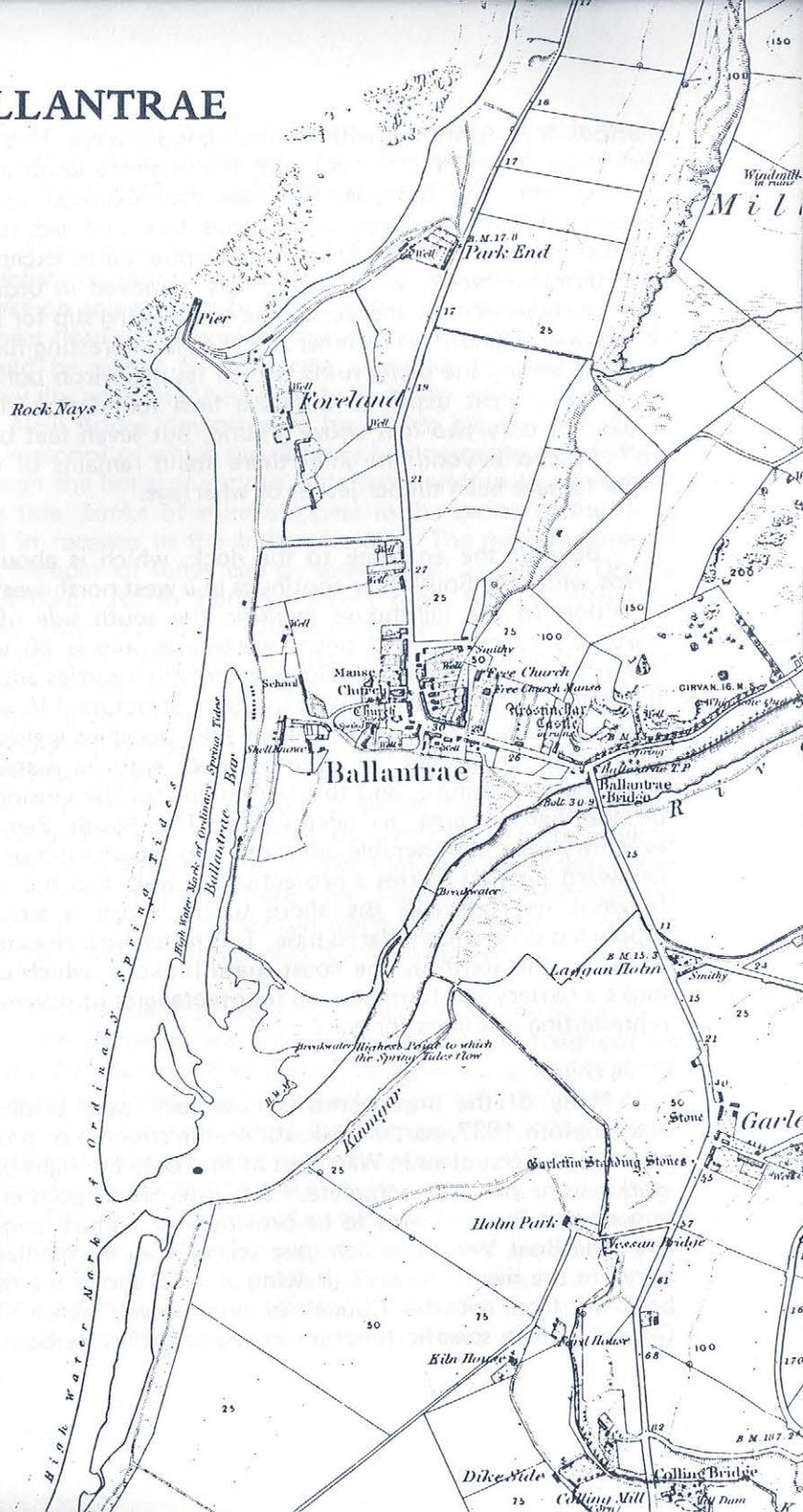
The left bank of the river, which carries the South Pier, has been similarly improved with wharfage throughout its length. Its upper section some 750 yards long, begins at the 'Ratton-key' mentioned in Burns' poem, 'The Brigs of Ayr'; and ends at the remains of the Compass Pier. This is now ruined but possesses some interest for the evidence regarding building methods that is given by its surviving terminal fragment. This shows the structure to have been a stout masonry jetty, with an ashlar skin on both faces and a core of large rubble. The north face, fronting on the harbour, is supported by pairs of heavy, vertical timbers. The south face gave on to an inlet about 60 yards wide, from which opened a long,

narrow dock furnished with shipbuilding slipways. This dock lies close to an in alignment with the seashore south of the river-mouth. The Compass Pier was thus exposed to tidal action on both its faces, and it was this that led to the weakening of the whole structure. Its upper parts, except for the terminal block, were accordingly removed in order to reduce its weight, at the same time the existing slip for small boats was arranged on its inner side.²⁵ It is interesting further to find among the pier's ruins two of its plain iron bollards, sunk to a great depth to obtain a firm foundation. These measured only two feet above ground, but seven feet below it.²⁶ In and beyond the inlet there stand remains of what seem to have been timber jetties or wharfage.

Beyond the entrance to the dock, which is about 60 yards wide, the South Pier continues in a west-north-westerly direction to the lighthouse marking the south side of the harbour's entrance. This opens westwards, and is 90 yards from the end of the North Breakwater which carries another lighthouse. That breakwater, a masonry structure 110 yards long which is nearly awash at high tide, occupies a ridge of tidal rocks connected, at its other end, with an eastward-going belt of shingle, and this last completes the closing-off of the harbour-area to northwards. The South Pier has evidently seen considerable additions and reconstruction. Its landward portion carries a protective sea-wall, and the angle between its root and the shore to the south is strongly supported on a widely flared base. This latter feature extends as far to the south as the coast-guard lookout, which over looks a battery-platform bearing four rectangles of pavement, representing positions for guns.

Many of the improvements now seen were evidently made before 1837, partly no doubt on the strength of profits made in the Napoleonic Wars, but at that date the right-bank works were not yet complete.²⁷ An interesting pointer to bygone conditions seems to be provided by a short, angular lane, the Boat Vennel, which gave access from the mediaeval burgh to the river.²⁸ Slezer's drawing of 1693 shows the river-bank in front of the Citadel as unimproved beach. The Citadel had no specific function in respect of the harbour.²⁹

BALLANTRAE



By 1837 the principal export was coal, of which 50,000 to 60,000 tons went out annually, much of it to Ireland. Nearly all of it was shipped from the right-bank installations in Newton upon Ayr. Other exports were cordage, leather, textiles, oatmeal, wheat and wheat flour, the main imports from foreign sources being hemp, tallow, iron, tar, pitch, and American tobacco. In the 1830s about 1,100 sail of coastal shipping left Ayr annually and about 300 arrived, while foreign trade accounted for some fourteen to seventeen departures and sixteen arrivals. Eighteen ships were owned in the town in 1837. Regular packets and trading craft ran to Liverpool, Dublin and Glasgow, and to Glasgow a daily steamer. Formerly Ayr had been the chief fishing-station for the whole Firth, but its share in this trade had lately decreased as different arrangements were made in other areas for the transport of fish to market.³⁰

Ballantrae. NX 0882, 0883.

Abercromby, writing in 1683, alluded to the mouth of the Stinchar, close to which Ballantrae stands, as a 'receptacle' for boats arriving from Ireland or the Highlands;³¹ but this allusion has little bearing on the history of the existing harbour at 'The Foreland', 650 yards to the north of the river mouth. The river mouth itself seems to have been accessible only to small boats,³² while the name Ballantrae suggests, in virtue of a Gaelic derivation, the association of the settlement with a tidal foreshore.

The harbour-works of today seem to have resulted from improvements begun in the 1840s. At that time a fishery existed, a steamer running from Stranraer to Glasgow made periodic calls, and cargoes of coal were sometimes brought from Girvan.³³ In 1846 there was constructed a fishing-harbour of about one acre, half of the cost being met by the Fishery Board.³⁴ The breakwater pier was to be 70 yards long by 6 yards wide, of ashlar-faced rubble, with a parapet-wall standing 7 feet high and rising 13 feet above the sea. The outer courses of the facing were to be set aslant³⁵ and dowelled, and the rock was to be excavated to give 3 feet of water at low springs. The harbour as it stands today agrees in general with the picture thus presented. It consists of a tidal

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