



*From the Neolithic Age until today people have enjoyed, admired and harnessed the power of the river Ayr.*

*The River Ayr Way means that even more people can experience this walk through our heritage, along the river Ayr from source to sea.*



# History of The River Ayr Way



*east ayrshire  
just waiting to be enjoyed*

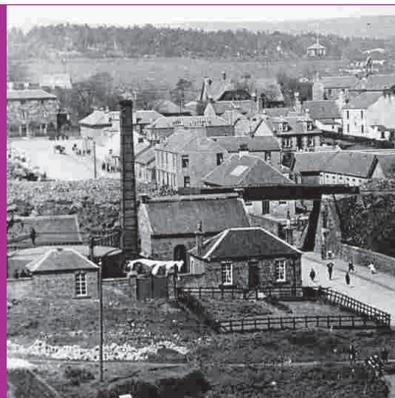
# River Ayr - from Source to Sea

**A path from source to sea;** this 66km path network follows the river Ayr from its source at Glenbuck Loch to the Atlantic Ocean at Ayr. The river twists its way east to west across Ayrshire, travelling through moorland, cutting sandstone gorges, and meandering over rich farmland.

*On its journey it also travels through history.*

The river Ayr has inspired Robert Burns and helped hide William Wallace from English troops. It has created a village and powered the industrial revolution. The river Ayr begins by tumbling from the western shore of Glenbuck Loch and joining the Ponesk burn in East Ayrshire near the border with South Lanarkshire. In the mid-19th century, the river Ayr provided power for at least 15 mills with almost the same again disused at that time. The first works in line to make use of the waterpower was Muirkirk Ironworks founded in 1787. Wrought iron was processed here. Below Muirkirk the river skirts Aird's Moss. These 180 square kilometres of RSPB reserve is a haven to many birds and animals.

Much of this area has ingrained memories of the Covenanters. In 1637, the Scottish clergy was obliged to recognise the King as head of the Church. They refused to do this which led to almost 50 years of strife. In 1680, the battle of Aird's Moss was fought between Covenanters and King's men. 112 troops, many mounted, attacked less than 70 Covenanters, killing 9 and taking 5 prisoners. The rest escaped. One of the men, Reverend Richard Cameron, prophesied his own death. As he washed his hands and face that morning he said, 'This is their last washing; I have need to make them clean, for there are many to see them.' The government leader had Cameron's head and hands severed from his body and taken to Edinburgh to claim a £500 reward.



*Further down river, Burns' associate, 'Bauld Lapraik, the king o' hearts...' rented Muir Mill, near Dalfram, in the 1790's.*

At the village of Sorn there have been at least 4 water-powered mills. The current church halls were converted from Dalgain Mill after the mill closed around 1913.

Sorn Castle, dating from the 14th century, is poised dramatically on a sandstone cliff high above the river.

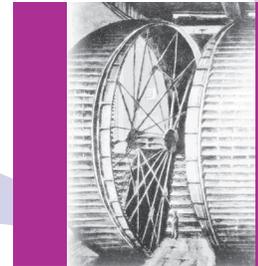


*A lade was built to provide the castle with power. By the time the river reaches Catrine it is much more powerful.*

Claud Alexander made his fortune as Paymaster General of the East India Company's troops in Bengal. He returned to Scotland and bought Ballochmyle Estate.

In 1787 he went into partnership with David Dale who had recently built his famous mill at New Lanark. Together, they built a cotton twist mill by the river Ayr, a stone's throw away from Ballochmyle House. A system of sluices and lades led water from the voes, or small bays, half a mile down river to the wheelhouse at the mill.

Robert Burns spotted Claud's younger sister, Wilhelmina, walking by the banks of the river Ayr and immortalised her in the poem, 'The Bonny Lass O' Ballochmyle'. Burns sent a copy of this poem and a letter asking permission to publish it to Miss Alexander. She did not consider it appropriate to reply but treasured the letter and poem all her days. Dale and Alexander also built houses around the mill to accommodate the new workforce.



Before the mill was built in 1787, Catrine consisted of only 2 or 3 thatched cottages. By the time the mill was up and running, Catrine was a thriving village of over 1000 inhabitants. Glenbuck Loch, the source of the river Ayr, is actually manmade. The owners of Catrine Mill created it in 1802 to store water. Sluices were opened at night and the water would reach Catrine by the following morning when it was time to start work. A bleaching works was added, also water-powered, in 1824 and in 1827, 2 'big' wheels were added. These water wheels had a diameter of 50 feet, were 10 feet 6 inches wide and had 120 buckets each. When built, they were the largest and most powerful wheels in Scotland.

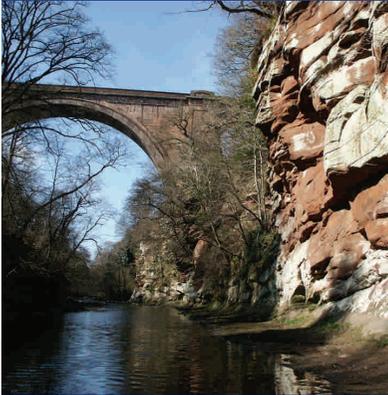
*They powered the looms for 120 years. The original mill stood until gutted by fire in 1963.*

Beyond Catrine, the river has cut a deep gorge through the sandstone. Ballochmyle viaduct was built to carry the railway across this gorge. Six small arches and 1 large central arch span the gorge. The main arch span is 55.6 metres and it is 51.5 metres high. When it was finished in 1848, it was the world's largest masonry span arch and one of the greatest engineering achievements of its time.

Near the bridge, carved into an unusual face of hard sandstone are Cup and Ring Markings. The carvings have been dated between the Neolithic and early Bronze Age.

It is believed that they have been carved over a period of 1000 years. They were only discovered when a local man walking by the river in 1986 spotted them and realised their significance.

*The site is now among the top 10 most important 'Cup and Ring' sites in Britain.*



The river flows on past the Haugh, where Cistercian monks had a corn mill in 1527. Many of the earliest corn mills on the River Ayr were owned by religious groups. Dominican Monks owned the Over and Nether mills in the town of Ayr in the 14th century. They occupied them for around 300 years. Yorkshire nuns and canons of the Gilbertine order owned Dalmilling Mill near Ayr in the 13th century.

As arable farming increased with the help of communities such as the Monks of Melrose based at Mauchline, local landowners built more small mills to grind the local corn. Tenants would be 'thirled' to a mill. This meant that they were bound to mill all their corn at this mill. The fee for grinding corn was the 'multure' and it was paid in meal, not money. The meal was measured by the 'goupin'. This was as much as two hands put together could hold.

The abolition of multures and better roads meant smaller local mills were no longer practical. Milling was concentrated in the larger mills such as Barskimming and Privick. As the corn mills fell into disuse, lint mills and waulk mills, used for the preparation of flax for spinning and the fulling of woollen cloth appeared. The industrial revolution brought the Muirkirk Ironworks and Catrine Cotton Mills. Over the centuries, the River Ayr has powered at least 26 mills.

However, with even more improvements in transport and the introduction of steam then electric power, the power of water was not enough to keep the mills in production.

*Traces of the lades that once carried the water are the only signs of many of these mills today.*

The Haugh is also the site of the curling stone manufacturer T. and A. Kay's first factory. For centuries, curlers have skimmed smooth stones across frozen lochs and rivers. The rumbling sound of the stone speeding over the ice led to the nickname 'the roaring game'.

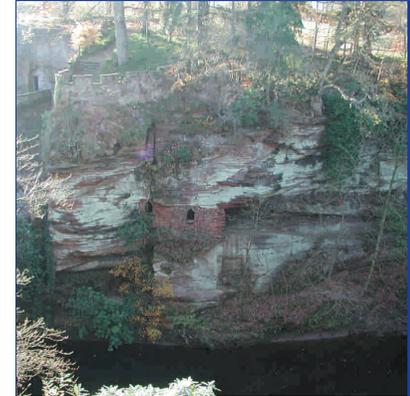
By the 18th century the stones were being shaped and smoothed. Handles were fitted and the stones were ground to create a bias. This meant more skill was required to throw the stones since they would now travel in a curve to reach the rink. Andrew Kay began producing stones at the Haugh in the 1860's. The business stayed in this small factory for over 40 years before moving to Barskimming Road in Mauchline in 1911. The company is still in existence today, supplying curling stones to places as diverse as Bulgaria, Israel and Japan.

*The Lugar joins the River Ayr here.*

The river then flows through Barskimming Estate, home of the present Lord Strathclyde.

At Barskimming, caves have been cut out of the sandstone. The 'Coach Caves' are nearly 7 feet high and wide enough to hold a coach.

At Failford, where the Water of Fail joins the river Ayr, is a memorial to the final parting of Robert Burns and his sweetheart 'Highland' Mary in 1786.



The Failford gorge has an interesting feature. Steps have been cut into the sandstone leading to a spot known as Peden's Cove. Here, the covenanter, Alexander Peden, preached to his congregation on the other side of the river.



The Water of Ayr and Tam O' Shanter Hone Works can be found at Stair. Hone stones were originally found in the bed of the river. Later they were quarried and then mined nearby.

Hone is a smooth, fine stone used to give a very fine edge or polish.

Now, they can be artificially produced but, for the finest sharpening of surgical instruments or jewellery making, the natural stone is still the best.

*Since the 18th century, stones from these works have been exported all over the world. The company is still in existence at the same site today.*



Stair Bridge was built in 1745. A few years later it was reported that the bridge had 'failed in its foundations.' In order to strengthen the foundations, old milestones that had recently been replaced with new stones were used to give protection to the central piers.

*When the water is very low, the place names can still be read on these old milestones.*

The river passes through Enterkine Estate near Annbank and Mossblown, past the site of Privick Mill, then on to Auchincruive. (A cruive is an apparatus and method of catching salmon in a river or sea beach.)

As a young man in the late 12th century, William Wallace had a violent encounter with English forces near Riccarton by Kilmarnock. Wallace was forced to flee to Auchincruive near Ayr, which was owned by a relative. Here he spent a great deal of his time hiding in Leglen wood and by the banks of the river Ayr. Five hundred years later, a young hero worshipper called Robert Burns walked from Mount Oliphant near Alloway to Leglen wood. He wanted to tread in the footsteps of the great William Wallace.

*Today, there is a cairn on the south bank of the river beside Oswald Bridge to commemorate both of these great Scotsmen.*

Robert Oswald made his fortune in sugar plantations in Jamaica and the slave trade. He was proud of his role as chief negotiator during the War of American Independence. He bought Auchincruive Estate in 1764. Oswald Hall was designed by Robert Adam in 1767.

Auchincruive's hanging gardens on the riverbank were built in the 1830's by unemployed miners. A dam and waterfall were created and Oswald Bridge was built in 1862.



Further down river, stepping-stones can be seen at the site of an old mill. As the river enters the town of Ayr it makes its way through Craigie Estate with its more formal walks.

*The river now makes its way through Ayr to the sea.*

William the Lion, King of Scots, built a castle between the mouths of the rivers Ayr and Doon in 1197 and called it Newcastle-upon-Ayr. The river Ayr was first bridged here around 1250. This timber bridge was rebuilt in stone in 1470 and the Auld Brig is still standing today. A new bridge was built in 1788. Robert Burns imagined a conversation between the two brigs.

*The Auld Brig says,*

*'This monie a year I've stood the flood and tide;*

*And tho' wi' crazy eild I'm sair forfairn  
I'll be a brig when ye're a shapeless cairn.'*

This came true when the new bridge was washed away in floods in the 1870's. The Auld Brig again became the main crossing until a second new bridge was built in 1878.



Looking upstream from the Auld Brig, we see Turner's Footbridge. This was built for Turner's Breweries to allow their workers a quicker route to and from work.

From the new brig, the piers of another bridge can be seen. This is the remains of a railway bridge allowing coal wagons direct access to the harbour to load coal for export.

*Ayr became the main port on the west coast in 1300 and remained so for several centuries.*

