

# SEEAYR

A PAMPHLET

BY ROBERT BENNIE



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Bennie is a child of the fifties, a Glaswegian by birth and Honest Man by upbringing. Robert lived for many years almost within earshot of the Kelvingrove organ and enjoyed the many artistic treasures of City of Glasgow, the world class city archives of the Mitchell Library and the treasures of the Burrell collection. Robert is of course everyman.

Robert has seen a City recover from a devastating war, deal with its historically sub-standard housing and the loss of its heavy industry *raison d'être* and metamorphose into a forward looking city with a bright future, an exciting forward looking and inclusive city equally proud of its heritage and of its people. All of its people. From “Glasgow’s Smiles Better” to “People Make Glasgow” via the 1988 Garden Festival and many major sporting events such as the 2014 Commonwealth Games, Glasgow has created its own positive futures, and a city with a now vibrant tourism industry.

Robert has also seen post-industrial Bo’ness somewhat incredibly reinvent itself as a day tourism destination; seen the creative creation of Wigton the Book Town; and the inspired creation of West Kilbride as the Craft Town, Scotland and of Kirkintilloch as Scotland’s Canal Capital.

Robert believes that communities that make things happen have a future, and those who let things happen to them will simply continue their inexorable decline.

Robert sees unlimited potential in Ayr if a strategic approach is taken – a vision within which Auld Ayr can become new Ayr whilst still rejoicing in what makes Ayr different.

See Ayr!

# 1 PREFACE

It is the autumn of 2030 and Scotty Wilson Junior was making his pilgrimage to Auld Ayr from whence his maternal great-grandfather had come so many years ago. Awash with the sentiment of such a trip, Scotty was still quite uncertain of what to expect. Scotty was in for a pleasant surprise for sure.

Coming from the United States of America, Scotty had been unaware of the so called “Peasants’ Revolt” of 2020 that had brought big changes in local government, first in Ayr and then later elsewhere. The outcomes were perhaps not unlike that of the “Dream Big” movement back home in the US characterised by civic engagement, returning talent and downtown revitalisation, addressing post industrialisation in increasingly imaginative and flexible ways – succeeding where “big government” had hitherto failed. Some say it was in part maybe the new populism and the “death of democracy” that was in the air; some say it was a continuation of the disenchantment of all political parties because of so called populism and of course Brexit. Whatever the reason, the revolt had seen all local authority councillors replaced by independent representatives unaligned to any political party, people no longer willing to tolerate uninspiring politicians whose only talent appeared to be climbing their party greasy pole and supporting the latest ideology from an underworked Holyrood or a distant Westminster; politicians focussed on national politics over local issues and who over many years, no matter what the party colour, slavishly toed party lines rather than seek common cause for the common good; settling of old scores by petty voting down of sensible proposals that would benefit the community; councils overusing expensive consultants to cover a paucity of ambition, expertise and competency. The new Rotten Burghs.

The Local Government Act of 1973 had seen the break-up of Ayrshire as a historical and administrative county. Along with the increasingly centralised power of firstly Strathclyde Region and then the new Scottish Government, the subsequent Kyle and Carrick, then South Ayrshire Councils, had seen higher administration costs and an embedded culture of underperformance. Politically, South Ayrshire Council in 2019 had been a fragile “alliance” of Nationalists and the Labour party nominees, sworn enemies and minority parties both, leading to a council politically bigoted in fact and apparently “Marxism Lite” by nature, erroneously believing that it controlled all the resources and means of production. Something just had to change.

In 2018 the council had spread widespread concern with proposed spending cuts and spurious consultation, ruling as politicians always do by fear. When the cuts proved to be a fiction, trust in councillors and “the administration” became a scarce commodity. Astonishingly the council then pleaded for privacy. Increasingly the council had demonstrated itself incapable of even presenting the town in good fettle. The flowerbeds lay empty for the 2018 May bank holidays; volunteers were not allowed to clean the New Bridge over the neglected central and iconic River Ayr which itself lay littered with old bikes, rotting tree trunks and growing ugly sandbanks. The Sandgate, Ayr’s first and oldest thoroughfare was unworthily shabby, and incredibly year on year Ayr’s bathing waters were deemed to be poor. Yet finding time for sanctimonious virtue signalling whilst failing in their core responsibilities, South Ayrshire Council tried to stop people smoking outside restaurants. Another astonishingly misjudged venture which deservedly failed.

The politicians were not the solution, but the problem.

And so the revolution began in the spring of 2018. But then don't all revolutions start in the spring?

In 2018 over 300 people had taken time to object to a planning proposal of South Ayrshire Council to develop an important riverside gap site in the town - for itself! An ugly plan unencumbered by any business case. The resulting bill for over half a million pounds delivered nothing tangible and the details were mysteriously kept a secret from the local taxpayers, serving only to fuel further talk of shoddy governance. Some said that the critics came only from the better heeled south of the River Ayr. But geography was pretty much irrelevant as no one actually lived on the site nor stood to personally gain anything from objecting to the proposal. The natives started to become ever more restless. What the council was hearing at last, loud and proud, was the Voice of the People. Those who believed in Ayr the Brand. Those who would have bought "Make Ayr Great Again" baseball hats had they existed!

But 2018 was not the first failed property development venture by the city fathers. In the 1950s the then council bought a site at the corner of High Street and Bridge Street for development that never happened. In the 1970s it had demolished the Carrick Street Halls with no alternate use for the site. Following the failed 2018 riverside proposal, the coalition of 2018 proposed multiple un-costed non-strategic proposals, almost weekly. None addressed the fundamental difficulties of a town whose built heritage and vitality had been destroyed by five decades of egregious developments by multiple retailers. The resultant oversize retail estate, unwanted large units and unused housing above yielded a town centre desperately in need of re-population. The many fanciful proposals in 2019 usually only displaced problems and mostly would have destroyed further value. Or spend money the council simply did not have. No one ever addressed the likely scenarios of increased leisure, climate change, the demise of the car economy and return of home tourism.

And worse of all they never ever remembered "it's the economy, stupid."

What South Ayrshire Council had forgotten was that the collective electorate is usually a lot smarter than those it elects. In South Ayrshire the many and diverse activists had within their number competencies and skill sets much superior to that of South Ayrshire Council and with the local demographic trends there was more of this talent than ever before. These new revolutionaries had the resource and the time and could tell snook when they smelt it! The worm had started to turn. And life, local politics and Ayr could never be the same again. Socially the town, was divided by the River Ayr with a disproportionate focus on the High Street, with little reference to the north side of the river. A positive outcome of the revolt would finally see the end of pejorative terms such as "North Ayr" and the appalling "White City", which had stigmatised one side of the river and its residents for far too long. Henceforth there would be a holistic approach to future planning and new investment north of the river.

Through these dismal times and despairing of the many iterations of local government structure that had not served the town and people well, others would make sure that the Royal Burgh of Ayr was reinvented as a proud united town focussed on creating a strong and economically viable future for all. A future built on the strengths and assets of the area, adding not destroying value, wearing its soul on its sleeve, discounting any prescriptive vanilla view of Holyrood big government and the dead hand of public sector leadership. A future vision setting a flexible ambitious context which would have its own momentum, where the council was only one of the players and definitely not a necessary or controlling "partner" A world where faux self-serving "consultations" were no longer used to force through vanity projects of craven politicians. A world where the development of the local economy had primacy over everything.

A pragmatic solution of Ayr, by Ayr and for Ayr. A strategic vision making Ayr a great place in which to live, in which to invest, and which to visit.

## DAY ONE - MORNING

Scotty disembarked from his luxury SEEAIR coach at the new River Street coach park, very close to the Wallacetown area from whence his forbears had left for a new life in the New World. He could also have arrived by public transport at the modern transport hub at Newton on Ayr. Built on brownfield land, the Transport Hub served the whole of the Ayr and Prestwick urban conurbation, had park and ride facilities to both Ayr and Glasgow, and had been the single biggest investment north of the river in many years.

### AYR GATEWAY

Scotty was certainly not alone. The coach was full, many of whom coming from abroad possibly for similar reasons. Word had spread that the SEEAIR initiative set up by the new city fathers in 2020, sometimes contrived but never crass, an initiative which had become an exemplar and a rich experience not to be missed.

The establishment of SEEAIR had seen a long term commitment to revitalising Ayr, post-industrial, post jet travel, through short stay and day tourism and a superior leisure offer. SEEAIR envisaged a “must see” destination for short stay tourists, for “staycations” as foreign travel became more problematical. Foreign tourists already in the UK now had a persuasive reason to come to Ayr, and critically to stay overnight. SEEAIR was to become the context into which all development must fit. The days of piecemeal or cynical developers destroying the rich heritage of a fine Georgian and Victorian town were over.

An independent apolitical entity SEEAIR had been established as a company limited by guarantee with charitable status, to be the catalyst for change. And so it came to pass with the SEEAIR initiative in turn had led to the new well-earned and justified positioning of **AYR – SCOTLAND’S HISTORY TOWN.**



RIVER STREET COACH PARK



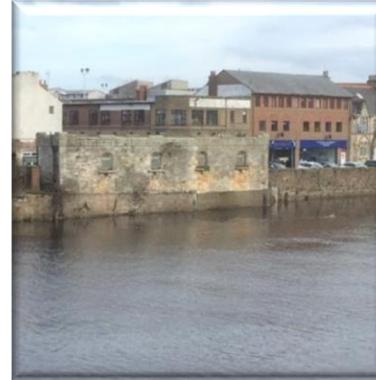
As ambitious as Wigtown’s “Scotland’s National Book Town” and West Kilbride’s “Craft Town Scotland” branding, **SCOTLAND’S HISTORY TOWN** had become the overarching strategy making Ayr a place to visit, live, and in which to invest.



## TOURIST INFORMATION

The SEEAYR coach prepared to leave the stance with its returning tourists to be replaced by a later shuttle to Edinburgh and then Glasgow.

Scotty walked to the old stone SEEAYR Information Centre which seemed to hang precariously like a piece of old Venice over the glistening River Ayr. The centre overlooked the “Twa Brigs” immortalised by the poet Robert Burns, - well at least one of them was!.



TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE

## URBAN RIVERSCAPE



The time was Scotty might have seen the old tidal river at low tide but the creation of a new weir west of the “New Brig” had created 1000 metres of permanently flat and safe water much improving the appearance of the town and making opportunities for small boats, canoeing, hospitality craft, and even a gondola! Here was a riverscape not out of place in any of Europe’s great cities. No more was this a town said to have turned its back on its river. The River Ayr was once more an asset at the very centre of the Historic Centre of **AYR - SCOTLAND’S HISTORY TOWN.**



## LOCAL HISTORY CAMPUS

The Tourist Information staff learning of Scotty's interest directed him to the Local History Campus in Main Street on the North Bank of the River Ayr centred on the ancient Newton Cross.



CARNEGIE LIBRARY



JOHN STRAWHORN MUSEUM



CULTURAL CENTRE

The Local History Campus, managed by and including the Carnegie Library, had been created by housing the new John Strawhorn Museum in the former Darlington Church and the new Cultural Centre in the former Orient Cinema (1932), leveraging significant value from the previously underinvested north bank of the river. This holistic approach was somewhat more enlightened than the piecemeal approach of previous councils and a town said to have “turned its back on its river”. Scotty spent his first few hours with the town archivists accessing the town's extensive records, the records of Scotland's finest medieval town and learning more of his family history. Collecting his free personalised tourism pack and itinerary Scotty set off with very positive first impressions.

## CROMWELL HOTEL AND CRUISE SHIP RECEPTION



That night Scotty stayed at the new Cromwell Hotel on South Harbour Street built on the site of old grain stores demolished and empty since 1976. The outside look and feel of the building, respecting the location and the previous use of the site being part of the planning and incentive conditions. The building included a reception centre for cruise ship passengers alighting from their tenders at the purpose built jetty in South Harbour Street, itself opposite Ayr's thriving marina.



As Scotty took one last look up the River from the New Bridge before retiring he could see five of the bridges and the river banks subtly floodlit and a dining barge disembarking the last evening guests at the River Street jetty. Here was a town which clearly cared and respected its heritage. Here was a modern town. As his head hit the pillow Scotty looked forward to his first full day in the land of his fathers.

## DAY TWO - MORNING

He visited the Cultural Centre in the former art deco Orient cinema whose frontage had been fully restored. The Cultural Centre itself was part of the de facto Ayr Gateway which started at the Newton Tower (1787) and the council offices in the former police station at the John Street roundabout, the point where most of Ayr's car or coach borne tourists entered the town. The central reservation and the verges leading up to the Newton Tower (1792-5) had been landscaped and incorporated welcoming messages, information and signage in several languages. Welcome to Ayr.

Scotty had walked across the new footbridge built on old railway pillars, a footbridge created for pedestrians, cyclists, runners, tourists, and for the pupils at the new Ayr Academy Junior School, but not before viewing the public arts currently on display in the Modern Arts Centre built on the Academy Junior School campus.



The Gateway had become the de facto boundary for SEEAYR within which design guidelines were set. For example, all street lights were to be carried in black ersatz Georgian standards, and all service boxes were concealed or painted black. With the Orient being the first impression many tourists would have of Auld Ayr, the SEEAYR group had made sure it was a good one – lustrous indeed being the meaning of Orient. The Orient's art deco palette of greens, blue and gold paintwork made the positive impression its founders wanted and was a promise of things to come in the revitalised town.

The Orient housed a new purpose built gallery with a permanent display of Alexander Goudie's Tam O' Shanter and of some of the important art and treasures owned by the town, hitherto hidden from the public eye.

At the Orient, Scotty learned of the area's rich and surprisingly intact cinema legacy from the 1930s boom time. With only the splendid Gaumont (1921) demolished for an egregious 1970s retail development, Ayr's largely intact cinema estate included the splendid Broadway (1935) in Prestwick - all but complete save for a squash court somewhat incongruously squatting in the stalls, the Green's (1931), the Gaiety itself (on the same site since 1902), and the jewel in the crown of the still operating Odeon (1938), the first and last Odeon in Scotland. With his itinerary already full he just did not have time to book a place on one of the cinema tours run by the Ayr Film Society but it went into his notebook for a later internet search.

In the Strawhorn Museum, named after Ayr's historian Dr John Strawhorn, Scotty saw the incredible depth of Ayr's history, the Ayrshire Yeomanry collection, and only a fraction of the town's artefacts that could be on display at any one time, but a lot more than he would have done before the campus opened! Scotty was encouraged to see the bus parties of schoolchildren being offloaded at the rear entrance safe from traffic. They were being mentored by students from the University of the West of Scotland, a partner of the campus. It was become abundantly clear to Scotty that Ayr was a town that respected its past as well as investing in its future. Scotty was beginning to like great grandfather's old home town. A lot.

## RIVER AYR COURTYARD

Lunch was in the High Street in the attractive River Courtyard development overlooking the river. The River Courtyard was the entire ground floor of the once notorious Riverside development that had indirectly led to the “Peasants’ Revolt”. Glass fronted on both the street and river elevations, the River Ayr Courtyard was an informal café and public area. Weather permitting, the glass to the river slid aside where a riverside terrace was much in demand, the terrace itself being a riverside path between the “Twa Brigs” and providing a view perhaps last seen in Burns’ time.



RIVER AYR COURTYARD

As a whole a building, sympathetic in both mass and design to its much earlier neighbours, from which stunning views could be had of both the River Ayr and of Thomas Hamilton’s splendid Georgian Town Hall, once the tallest building in the country.

The High street elevation had been created with glass reinforced concrete moulds replicating the red sandstone of adjoining Victorian buildings, creating a fine Victorian streetscape, albeit an ersatz one. The river elevation itself appropriately suggested wharf buildings, which was the first recorded development of the site in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The three upper floors, the award winning Wharf Apartments, were private apartments and serviced flats mostly with fine river views.

Atop of the Courtyard building was a stunning glass atrium and function suite covering the entire fourth floor. From its opening day this venue had been much in demand for private functions including of course receptions for those married in Ayr Town Hall. Illuminated at night the rooftop venue was the biggest ever statement that Ayr Town Centre was open for business, and of course generated many new overnight stays in the town.

As well as possibly being the biggest single development in the history of the town centre, the Courtyard and Wharf development had benefitted the town financially with the capital receipt from the developer and the significant on-going domestic and commercial local taxes. And as the landlord of the ground and top floors the Town Hall marketing people were able to market Ayr as a unique conference and exhibition centre. In a creative bit of accounting, all incremental revenue from the Riverside development had been ring fenced for reinvestment in other SEEAYR developments.

## DAY TWO - AFTERNOON

### ALLOWAY

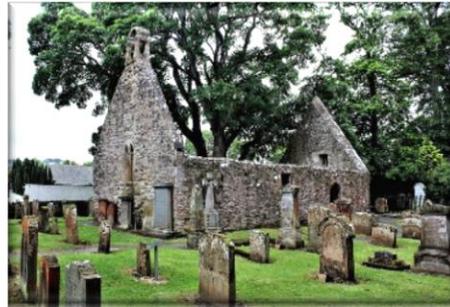
In the afternoon Scotty took the electric Hop on Hop off bus from the foot of the town all the way to Alloway where he greatly enjoyed Burns' Cottage and Burns' Heritage Centre now almost on a par with the offer in Shakespeare's Stratford after many years of investment by the Scottish National Trust.



**BURNS MONUMENT**



**BURNS COTTAGE**



**AULD KIRK**



**BRIGADOON HOTEL**

Scotty decided to stop for an early dinner at the Brigadoon Hotel so that he could see the nightly arrival of the Grey Mare Meg around 7 o'clock, where she was met in the spooky Auld Kirk by a full recital of Tam O' Shanter.

This new "tradition", maintained by local riding and Burns enthusiasts had served to extend the tourist day and expenditure in the High Street as they awaited her departure from the Tam O'Shanter Inn in the High Street at 6:00 every day. Contrived maybe, but universally enjoyed by all, bringing Burns to life in a way only Ayr could – and another great picture opportunity to send around the world to the relatives! Which of course Scotty duly did!

The late hour had increased the number of overnight beds required by tour bus companies who now overnighed in Ayr simply to catch Meg. As a result more hotel beds were being created in the area and the night-time economy had grown apace.



## THE ESPLANADE

Returning to his hotel by the Hop on Hop off bus, Scotty saw for the first time Ayr's stunning beach landscape witnessing a spectacular sunset over Arran as the bus travelled the full length of Scotland's fine Victorian esplanade (1880), beside which Ayr's own ancient "Central Park", the Low Green, a flat and well drained area for informal events and sports and designated for public use since s in fact it had been since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.



AYR ESPLANADE



SUNSET OVER ARRAN

The SEEAYR initiative had released immense new value from Ayr's sleeping asset of the beach and Esplanade. Reduced to a one way carriageway the Esplanade had been completely resurfaced and repurposed for modern times, a very attractive safe area for walkers, families, runners and cyclists. Creating new performance spaces, new light architectural roofs, robust enough to withstand the worst of Scotland's winds, had been put over the underutilised open air band stand and the amphitheatre on the site of the old barracks to encourage use by amateur and professionals alike. These were part of a commitment to the arts, which also encouraged informally licenced buskers in other stages built in open spaces. With no through traffic on the esplanade, and the coach park moved to River Street, parking had been augmented at the north end.

Blackburn also served as the finish line for the many road races that were now held in the flat and stunning landscape of Ayr, the new footbridge on the River Ayr and crossings on the Dunure Road and Monument Road creating routes that runners and cyclists could use secure from the worst of traffic. At the north entrance to the Seafield car park Scotty saw the permanent finishing line created to accommodate the many running events, fun and competitive, races established celebrating a wonderful flat landscape, not least the Ayr marathon and the Robert Burns fun run, now some of the biggest events in the calendar. The economic impact of the runners, supporters and spectators had become significant to the town.

Although it was evening Scotty could still see people using the Blackburn outdoor sports centre. A competition to find a use for the long disused Blackburn Boating Pond had not surprisingly come up with recreating a Boating pond! Many of the new free to access sports and bike hire were based at Blackburn. In the sand Scotty was amused by the optimism of posts for beach volleyball and tightropes. Whilst Costa Clyde was maybe not as warm as Santa Monica beach, the bathing waters with their always "excellent" SEPA rating stood testament to the commitment to a quality leisure and activity theme promoted by SEEAYR.

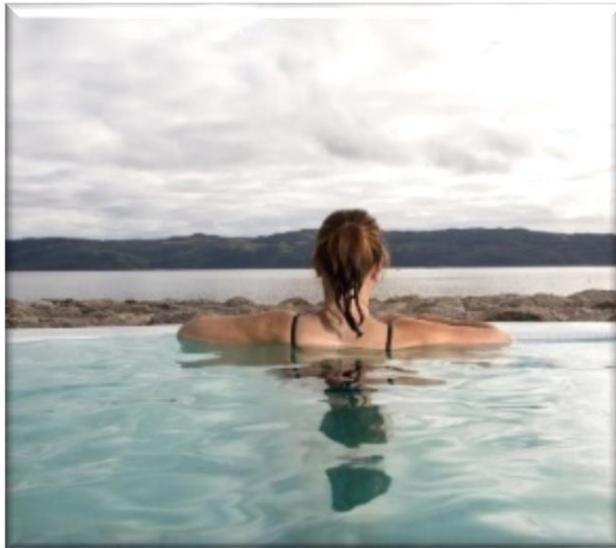
## A MODERN SEAFRONT

Reflecting the randomness of the New York's hugely successful High Line - if not stealing ideas wholesale - the award winning public space was subtly interspersed with seating, grassed areas and modern sculpture.



NEW YORK'S HIGH LINE

## AYR SWIM CENTRE



Scotty was particularly impressed by the imaginative Ayr Swim Centre with its stunning infinity pool feature, which itself had become a leading year-long attraction in Scotland. Here was another reason to visit Ayr whatever the weather, an innovative venture capitalising on the stunning landscape of Ayr, Ayr as a seaside resort, a novel and worthy successor to the open air pools of recent history, built acknowledging the seaside heritage of Ayr.



SWIM CENTRE (GREEN)

CITADEL (RED)

The nearby Citadel sports centre, part of a joint world class leisure campus with the Swim Centre included many sports halls and several 5 a side 4g football pitches built in the hall of a previous swimming pool. A popular and very busy venue for residents and visitors alike.

The Hop on Hop off bus stopped and turned at the end of the promenade on the harbour itself, beside the preserved shipbuilding and repair yard opposite the old pilot station which itself now a thriving restaurant on South Beach Road, enjoying exceptional views over the Firth of Clyde and Arran, just one of the many new restaurants and coffee shops capitalising on the growth of the local economy.



RESTAURANT

## WELLINGTON SQUARE

Returning up the north side of Wellington Square Scotty had a flash of déjà vu. This was maybe not so surprising since this, possibly the finest Georgian square outside of Edinburgh. Restored to its cobbles and with its replica railings and gates and devoid of modern street furniture, it had become a much desired location for countless films and TV dramas.

The use of Wellington Square for filming had brought welcome income to the town, and countless opportunities for the local University's media students.

The associated "venue tourism" a significant contributor to the success of the SEEAYR initiative.



"A" LISTED AYR SHERIFF COURT



WELLINGTON SQUARE GATES AND RAILINGS.

## SPORTS HERITAGE

If he had had more time Scotty could have booked a tour on Ayr's Sports Heritage Tour to enjoy a rich sporting history which had enjoyed the patronage of both Lord Eglinton and a local publisher for many years. His lordship is possibly responsible for the bowling and horse racing that continues to this day.

### SPORT HERITAGE - LAWN BOWLS



The modern game of lawn bowls owes its existence to the Scots and the Scottish National Bowling centre is in Northfield, Ayr. Amongst many greens in the district is Ayr Bowling Club established before the "uniform code of Laws" in 1848.



### SPORT HERITAGE - HORSE RACING



Horse racing in Ayr can be traced back to 1576. The first organised meeting, held in 1771 with the first Ayr Gold Cup run in 1804. The sport owes a lot to its sponsor the Archibald Montgomerie the 13<sup>th</sup> Earl of Eglinton.



Ayr Racecourse, established in 1907, is Scotland's only Grade 1 track with over 30 meetings per year including the Coral Scottish Grand National Festival in April and the William Hill Ayr Gold Cup Festival held every September.

OLD RACECOURSE PAVILION

AYR RACECOURSE

### SPORT HERITAGE - FOOTBALL



SOMERSET PARK

Scotland was one of the earliest modern footballing nations, some say the home of the modern game. Somerset Park is home to Ayr United, formed in 1910 by the merger of Ayr Parkhouse (1886 – 1910) and Ayr F.C. (1879 – 1910). Ayr FC itself was a successor to two other clubs Ayr Thistle and Ayr Academicals. Somerset Park is possibly the oldest intact senior football stadium in the UK. Now a listed building, it is used only as a training ground for the senior team, and tours are available of the old stand, open terracing, boardroom and extensive club archive.

## SPORT HERITAGE - QUOITING

Quoiting was once bigger than soccer for the working man, with “courts” in even the smallest village. A quoiting rink thought to be Scotland’s last working rink can still be seen at a Miners Welfare Club near Prestwick Airport. Quoiting rinks were often flooded in winter for curling, a sport that thrives to this day in Ayr, in sight of the home of curling stone granite – Ailsa Craig, and near the only curling stone manufacturer in nearby Mauchline. The National Curling Museum is in Rozelle House, Ayr. (see below)



The story of the other ice sport of hockey has been problematical, since the loss of Ayr’s first rink in the late 1960s.

## SPORT HERITAGE - RACQUETS



Lord Eglinton’s other sport of racquets, a precursor to the modern game of squash, was played in a large court. His Lordship’s court, almost certainly the last in Scotland, is restored as a multi-purpose venue and can be seen in Eglinton Park just a short distance from Ayr. The late John Dunlop of Doonside, had his own squash court in his house in Racecourse Road, and was responsible for amongst other things the Ayr Advertiser walk, an annual competitive 13 mile walk for primarily young children. Whilst no longer part of the calendar as so much of school sport, it has in spirit at least been resurrected in an annual night time charity walk.

## SPORT HERITAGE - GOLF



Other personalised tours available are a golf package to play on Ayrshire’s many golf courses. Ayrshire hosts four James Braid designed courses plus Prestwick (1851) designed by Old Tom Morris, which held the first Open Championship in 1860, Old Troon (1878) which has hosted the Open championship nine times, and Turnberry (1873) host of the Open championship four times and now possibly one of the finest courses in the world.

And for visitors seeking that elusive perfect golf swing fashioned in Scotland the home of golf, there was a Golf Academy at the Ayr Dalmilling Golf Course.

## DAY THREE - MORNING

Scotty arrived at the Fish Cross at 10:00 the next day on for his guided tour of Auld Ayr by local experts. If he had been so minded Scotty could have taken the self-guided **AYR – THE HISTORY TOWN** trail, developed and managed by the Civic Society and the Rotary Club of Ayr building on their successful Ayrshire Coastal Path. The trail was based on the concept of the Boston Freedom Trail, with the route mapped by markings on the pavements. Some cynics had said that this one initiative had created the biggest ever improvement in Ayr’s pavements!

There was a choice of guided tours. One of the medieval town and harbour and one of the later High Street itself. Scotty decide to do both, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. He was surprised at just how many people of note had lived in Ayr – marked by an **AHT** plaque.

On the High Street Tour Scotty learned of recent initiatives to bring housing back into the Town Centre. Just as at home, the retail estate had to be deliberately shrunk quicker than it had ever grown. Ayr had grasped the nettle by relaxing planning regulations to encourage demolition of redundant large retail and creation of new housing but always within the **SEEAIR** design constraints. The council itself had divested itself of much of its High Street property at a discount to stimulate the creation of this new town centre housing. For obvious reasons there had been a focus on structures on the “Building at Risk” register.

The success of the initiative was clear with a wide choice of cafes and restaurants for the new townies, especially evident in Newmarket Street as planners had long hoped. Many of the new townies were young professionals and pensioners alike who had moved to Ayr because of its affordability but also because this New Ayr was now a very cool place in which to live.

Scotty, a city planner back home, also noted the many public spaces, creating a very relaxed public realm. The tour had turned back on just such an example - at the tranquil Queen Elizabeth Memorial Garden built on the site of a derelict office block in Beresford Terrace. Scotty was very taken by the original “square” - Burns Statue Square. It was still the first impression of Ayr for those coming by train, not least those going and arriving by the enthusiast Steam Train which was based in old railway sidings at Newton but ran steam excursions all over Scotland to and from Ayr. The interest in this enthusiast steam train based in a significant town centre had been significant, replicating the significant economic impact the Irwell Valley railway group had had on the vitality of Bury town centre and other towns on the line in Lancashire.

### AYR STATION HOTEL



Marvelling at the quasi Versailles grandeur of the 1886 Grade B listed Station Hotel designed by Andrew Galloway, Scotty learned that it had survived many philistine attempts to remove it. By **SEEAIR** focussing on tourism, enough new demand had been created to reopen it as a hotel, much used by the steam train enthusiasts and coach trip tourists.



## ODEON CINEMA



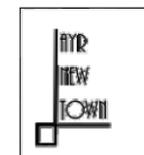
Scotty crossed to the Odeon - the first and last art deco styled Odeon (1938) in Scotland. The refurbished building frontage looked as grand as first intended whilst much of the rear of the building had been remodelled to deliver the modern cinema offer. The Ayr Odeon had become a reason for film lovers to come to enjoy Ayr. Scotty enjoyed this, a rare modern building of importance.



With a little poetic licence, Grey Mare Meg paid a nightly visit to the remodelled Burns Statue Square to stand beside her creator's statue much to the amusement of visitors and the enrichment of the restaurants that thrived on the north side of the square. Meg and rider more often than not delayed here by the demand for selfies! But then Tam was never known for his punctuality!

At the foot of the square the shell of the Bobby Jones, dance hall, drill hall and erstwhile cinema, empty since 2005, rebuilt as flatted accommodation and a family restaurant being testament to the new inward investment in the area.

In Alloway Street, Scotty saw the biggest yet development of new apartments being built on the sites of redundant retail and retaining the stone façade of the old Hourston's department store (1896) and the fine art deco frontages of Dalblair Road. This was the much regarded Ayr's New Town – a planned new suburb the result of a design competition to find a modern layout for modern town living - an exemplar for others to follow. A town where the people were put before cars.



As the tour ended Scotty was pleased to discover the **AYR - THE HISTORY TOWN** Centre in the Wallace Tower. Hitherto unaware of William Wallace, (1270 – 1305) the Scottish patriot, and of his connection with Ayr, Scotty found the offer here was less parochial than that of the Local History Campus but demonstrated well Ayr's and its peoples' significant contribution to the history of Scotland and the world beyond, putting his emigration into a fresh context.

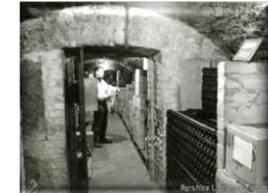
# DAY THREE - AFTERNOON

## AULD AYR TOUR

In the afternoon Scotty enjoyed the Auld Ayr Tour of the oldest part of the town and the harbour, during which he heard of the richness of Ayr's history from Cromwell's Fort (1652-1653) and his Auld Kirk (1654), from the Covenanters being martyred at the town gibbet in 1666 to Billy Connolly and Gerry Rafferty playing the "A" listed Loudon Hall (1513) in 1970: from the 13<sup>th</sup> century Dominicans or Blackfriars to the later Franciscans or Whitefriars of Mill Street.



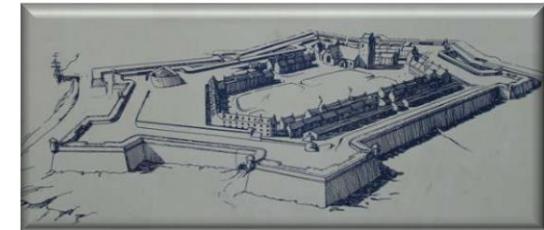
COVENATERS!



SMUGGLERS!



ST JOHN'S TOWER – SCOTLANDS PARLIAMENT OF 1515



CROMWELL'S FORT

Scotty experienced its extensive built legacy, including the lesser known smugglers tunnels, Town Hall cells and the oldest seat of continuous learning in the UK, if not the world. The remodelled 1799 Ayr Academy building, now styled as the new Ayr Academy Junior School, in recognition of the site's exceptional heritage stands on a place of learning established in 1233.



OLD TOWN JAIL



AND TORTURE CHAMBER!!

## SELF GUIDED TOURS

Self-guided walking tours of Ayr and its impressive built heritage, from medieval structures to the mansions of sugar and tobacco barons and the Arts and Crafts masterpieces around and including the Savoy Park Hotel, were popular, utilising the simple methodology of Boston's Freedom Trail, itself a unique collection of museums, churches, meeting houses, burying grounds, parks, and historic markers.

Industrial Heritage tours with as diverse content as fishing, coal mining, iron foundries, shipbuilding, textile manufacturing, salt manufacture and of course agriculture, many all but gone from Ayrshire now, were also available.

## THE CULZEAN PATH

Given more time Scotty would have enjoyed a walk on the stunning Culzean Path, a 12 mile path built on the line of the Maidens and Dunure Light Railway (1906 – 1968).

The restored track bed runs all the way from the Burns Centre in Alloway to Scotland's jewel in the crown – Culzean Castle.

Maybe in years to come Scotty's grandson will have the opportunity to ride on a steam train along this amazing line with its breath-taking scenic views, an experience recreated by the forward thinking people of Ayr.



**MAIDENS AND DUNURE LIGHT RAILWAY**



**CULZEAN CASTLE**



**CARRICK HILLS VIEWPOINT**



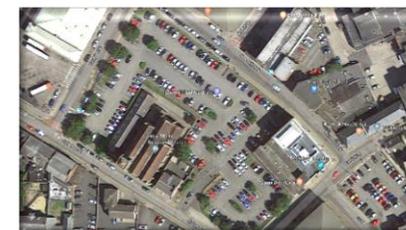
## NIGHT LIFE

But a town needs a night life for young and young at heart.

Scotty was impressed by the “theatre land” footprint created around Ayr’s fine Gaiety Theatre, with a changing offer and personality throughout the day until the wee small hours of the morning.

Theatre Square had been a creative use of underutilised public realm, a pedestrianised area linked to the High Street and Arthur Street nightclubs.

The Gaiety Theatre itself a busy category B listed performing arts venue, noted for its interior rococo features, its atmosphere and its acoustics. The Ayr Gaiety was built in 1902, reconstructed 1904. Its façade remodelled in 1935, and further reinstated after a fire in 1955. Successfully run by a trust and many volunteers since 2013.



As he walked along the High Street back to his hotel on his last day in Ayr, Scotty spotted the SEEAYR office, a repurposing of a redundant Masonic Hall (1896), a “B” listed building rescued from the Building at Risk Register appropriately as part of the SEEAYR initiative.



## DAY THREE - FINAL EVENING

For his final night in Ayr Scotty joined an evening tour to the twin estates of Rozelle (1760) and Belleisle (1787), both sold in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to raise town funds and now back in the ownership of the people of Ayr. Both estates are a haven of peacefulness in a rural setting with fine remodelled Georgian mansions.

### ROZELLE ESTATE

Curling, a Scottish invention, dates back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Burns is known to have curled in 1789. Rozelle was home to Ayr and Alloway Curling Club, (est. 1854). The archive of the Scottish Curling was mostly collected by Sherriff David Smith (1936-2015), a member of Portland and Symington (Codham) Curling Clubs and honorary member and president of Ayr CC, and the world's leading authority on curling and its history. It was given its home at Rozelle as the National Museum of Curling by the SEEAYR initiative.



DAVID SMITH CURLING MEMORABILIA



EGLINTON TROPHY



ROZELLE MEMORIAL SCULPTURE PARK

The 37 acres of wooded and parkland offers outdoor entertainment including the Sculpture Park of wood carved memories of WW1.



THE MACLAURIN ART GALLERY

The Maclaurin Art Gallery funded and organised by the volunteer Friends of the Maclaurin, who ensure a continuous series of local, national and international exhibitions

### BELLEISLE PARK ESTATE

At the adjacent and even bigger Belleisle Park, Scotty saw its fine 5 star hotel, two golf courses, a stunning conservatory funded and operated by volunteers, a magnificent restored walled garden, a children's play park, deer park and visitor centre.



## HASTE YE BACK

As his SEEAYR shuttle left Ayr for Edinburgh, Scotty reflected on what he had seen.

Scotty believed there was a lot of towns back home in the US that might learn from the SEEAYR initiative.

Here was new “must visit” destination shaped by a coordinated strategy, by sense of place, and by love.

Here was a town where inward investment hitherto patchy, now had developers competing to build the new urban realm of housing, modest retail and local services whose core revenue came from the much greater number of people living and visiting the town.

This was not Auld Ayr, but thoroughly modern Ayr, more than the sum of its parts, creating value not destroying it.

Here was a town creating long term sustainable yearlong jobs on its rich day heritage and leisure offer and a world class setting.

Here was a town fully justifying of its positioning as **AYR – SCOTLAND’S HISTORY TOWN**.

As his coach drove past Scotland’s Spaceport based at Prestwick, Scotland’s first international airport, Scotty reckoned here was just another reason why so many companies were locating in Ayrshire and why young people were so keen once again to live in Ayrshire.

Scotty made a mental note to tell everyone he knew that they should certainly see Ayr for themselves.

If Scotty had looked into the history of the Peasants’ Revolt he would have discovered that one of the catalysts for change had been a pamphlet, a vision of what could be, the end of which of dear reader you have just reached.

*Robert Bennie*

June 2019



