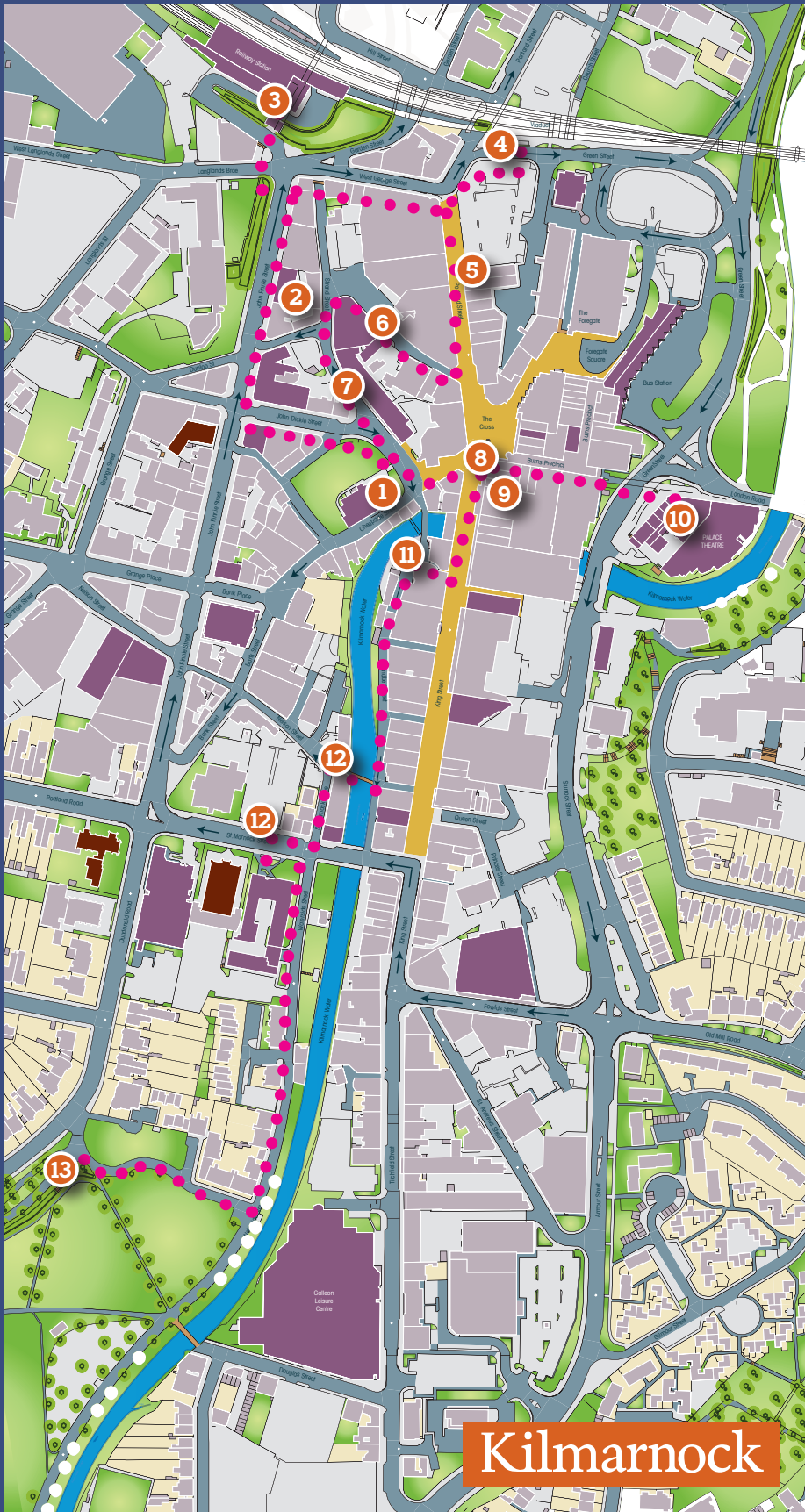




# Kilmarnock Town Trail

History of Kilmarnock

## Town Trail Map



### Location 1: New Laigh Kirk

From here, proceed along Strand St then into John Dickie St and along John Finnie St to

### Location 2: Opera House

Walk up to top of John Finnie St cross road at junction here with West George St using pedestrian crossing at this junction and into

### Location 3: Railway Station

Back track to top of John Finnie St junction with West George St, walk along West George St and into Green Street stopping halfway along the street where the first carpark is sited.

### Location 4: The Viaduct

Back track to where West George St meets Portland St and down Portland St a very short distance to

### Location 5: Former Bus Station

Continue down Portland St and turn right into Croft St and reach

### Location 6: Wheatsheaf Inn

Continue along Croft St and turn left into Strand St and walk down to entrance of Johnnie Walker Bond -

### Location 7: Johnnie Walker Bond

Continue short distance down Strand St until it meets Cheapside St turn left and short walk to

### Location 8: The Cross

After viewing the Cross, walk into the Burns Mall. Located at the entrance door is

### Location 9: Execution Stone

After this, walk through the Burns Mall and underpass. Continue to where the underpass meets London Road.

### Location 10: Grand Hall & Palace Theatre

Back track exactly the same way. Exit Burns Mall and enter into the Cross. Turn left and walk a short distance down King St. On right hand side (opposite BHS) walk through very narrow lane (No Name Lane) reaching

### Location 11: Sandbed Bridge

Follow the river walking along The Sandbed until you reach *Timmer Brig*. Cross and immediately to right is

### Location 12: Swine Raw

Walk along St Marnock Place and turn right into St Marnock St. At entrance to carpark is

### Location 12: Kilmarnock House

Walk back down St Marnock St for a few yards and cross at pedestrian crossing. Now walk along Waterside St until entering Howard Park.

### Location 13: The Lady's Walk

is adjacent to where Dundonald Rd is with the park - just inside it.

## 1 New Laigh Kirk

No one is sure of the exact origins of Kilmarnock but it is generally agreed that a settlement grew up around the site of the present New Laigh Kirk.

A previous church was demolished following the deaths of 29 people while attending a service on October 18, 1801. A loud cracking sound panicked the congregation and word flashed round the church that the building was collapsing. The fatalities occurred in a stampede to escape.

Understandably the parishioners did not want to return to this building. It was demolished apart from the steeple and the new church which we see today was built.



Outside the church building is an ancient graveyard. On this hallowed ground many graves and stones remain. One marks the burial site of the body of John Nisbet, a Covenanter who was publicly hanged at Kilmarnock Cross (1683). The graveyard also contains the heads of other Covenanters, John Ross and John Shields. They were executed in Edinburgh (1666) for spying on the king's troops in Kilmarnock. Their heads were displayed on posts in Kilmarnock to warn the local population. The church and graveyard are open Mon, Wed, Fri, noon til 2pm. Inside the church are several beautiful stained glass windows.

## 2 The Opera House

Kilmarnock Opera House was built in 1874, designed by James Ingram and cost £7,000. It was built at a time when local industry was booming and people had money to spend on a more extravagant lifestyle.

In 1875 The Operetta House (Opera House) was opened at the top of John Finnie Street as a theatre with 500 seats.



The rich merchants, industrialists and gentry of Kilmarnock enjoyed many shows. By 1925 its popularity had declined as more people travelled to Glasgow to the grander theatres. The 1920s was also the beginning of the era of silent movies. The King's Theatre (former cinema in Titchfield Street) became a rival attraction with its screenings.

John Finnie had made his fortune as a coal merchant. He decided to give something back to his home town; paying for the construction of a new street which was subsequently named after him. To crown it, this show-piece was built in red sandstone, in keeping with the other buildings on the street.

After it closed in 1925, the Opera House went on to be a church, an auction room, a hotel and a night club. It was during this last use in 1989 that a fire tore through the building.

In 2011, its historical value was recognised and it was restored to its former glory.

## 3 Kilmarnock Railway Station

Scotland's first railway from Kilmarnock to Troon was opened in 1812 to transport coal to the coast.

The first railway line from Glasgow was completed in 1843 and the original railway station opened (now demolished).

Later the station was enlarged to its present form. Look closely at the Victorian canopy to view the logo of the then railway owner, Glasgow & South Western Railway Company.

The area surrounding the station became a hub of locomotive building, in particular Andrew Barclay Sons & Co. Their original Caledonia workshop can be seen today.



## 4 The Viaduct

The railway from Glasgow terminated at Kilmarnock. Passengers would then have to use a horse-drawn coach from The Glasgow & South Western Railway Tavern situated across the road from the station (now Fanny by Gaslight) to reach destinations of Dumfries and beyond. Travelling by coach was slow and fraught with danger. En route many robberies took place at gunpoint.

It was decided to extend the line. In 1848 the viaduct of 23 stone arches, a magnificent feat of Victorian engineering, was built, giving passengers a fine view over Kilmarnock as they travelled south. The viaduct is built in arches to give it strength to support heavy locomotives passing above. For many years there were shops situated under the arches.



## 5 Kilmarnock Bus Station

In the early 20th century, Kilmarnock introduced a tram system. Unfortunately, it was never profitable and in 1926 it closed. A new bus service was founded to replace it- The General Transport Company. It operated from The Portland Street Bus Station, serving the town until it was moved to its present site in 1974.

It included one of the earliest purpose-built drive in/drive out bus station systems; this meant there were no reversing buses in this station.

After the demolition of the Portland Street site, an open-air market operated there briefly before more recently becoming a car park.



The bus station was situated on a very busy street. A Kilmarnock Burgh Policeman, William Fraser, used hand signals to stop traffic and let buses crawl out onto the road from the narrow exit. This was known as 'Points Duty'. In cold weather he would often stand on egg packaging sourced from a local grocer to stop the cold going through his big black boots.

To keep warm and dry he wore an oversized black oilskin coat bulked up with many layers of clothing underneath. People passing by would comment that he was so big he must be wearing fifty waistcoats!

Later a pub 'Fifty Waistcoats' was named after him ensuring he would become part of Kilmarnock folklore. The pub still exists today and is called Fanny by Gaslight.

## 6 The Wheatsheaf Inn

Robert Burns and Tam Samson were best friends through their farming backgrounds. Burns came to Kilmarnock from Mauchline for business and socialising, possibly at The Wheatsheaf Inn and also at The Commercial Inn which was directly across the road where the Johnnie Walker Bond is today. John Wilson often joined them, perhaps to discuss *The Kilmarnock Edition*.



The Wheatsheaf was built in the early 1700s as a coaching inn on the Stranraer to Glasgow route. Burns and Samson would perhaps meet here and stable their horses in the yard to enjoy "getting fu an'unca happy".

Sadly, the majority of The Wheatsheaf was demolished in the 1990s and the façade in Croft Street is the only remnant of the original inn.

## 7 The Johnnie Walker Bond

Johnnie Walker Whisky is a brand name which is known worldwide.

Johnnie Walker was born on a farm near Kilmarnock and he opened a grocer shop near the Cross in the town (now Goldsmiths building).



He blended his own whisky in the shop. It was so popular he had to expand his premises to the Johnnie Walker Bond on Strand Street. This closed at the end of World War II to move into more modern premises at Hill Street.



Whisky is one of Scotland's leading exports, bringing in large sums of money to the economy.

The Johnnie Walker premises in Hill Street finally closed in 2012 and moved to Fife.

## 8 The Cross

For centuries, Kilmarnock was a small village huddled around the Laigh Kirk and the Cross. It was hemmed in by small dwellings and was the scene of markets, executions, protests, entertainment and royal proclamations.



The main feature of the Cross today is a statue of Robert Burns and John Wilson. During Burns' visits to the town he became friendly with several influential men. John Wilson was one and he owned the only printing press in the area. In 1786 Wilson published 'The Kilmarnock Edition' of Burns Poems, the first book of Burns poetry. The print works were sited off Waterloo Street, which disappeared in the 1970s. Inside the Burns Mall a small plaque marks its site.

Today a working replica of the First Edition Printing Press can be viewed at the Dick Institute.



## 9 Execution Stone

King James VI (I) of Scotland also inherited the throne of England (Union of the Crowns) in 1603. He was Roman Catholic. The majority of Scots were Presbyterians and he wanted the

Scottish church to move towards Catholicism. The Covenanters resisted and were punished, even killed for their beliefs. They had signed the National Covenant in 1638 confirming their opposition to the king's ideas.

The stone marks the spot where the gallows stood at the Cross. In 1683 crowds gathered to watch the execution of John Nisbet, who is buried along with other Covenanters and their supporters in the New Laigh Kirk graveyard. This was the last execution in Kilmarnock.





## 10 Grand Hall and Palace Theatre

Kilmarnock's most prominent architect James Ingram, designed most of the imposing structure you see today, during the reign of Queen Victoria. The large ornate tower, known then as The Albert Tower (named after Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband) has the motto 'The Earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof' inscribed on it beside a wreath of fruit and flowers. This passage is found in the Bible in Psalm 24.

The sculpted wreath gives a clue to the original use of the building, a Corn Exchange. Farmers from outlying areas would bring their goods to be sold here on market day. A cheese market selling wares from Dunlop was very popular.

The building has been used as a library, a school and today it houses Ayrshire's top theatre – The Palace Theatre.



## 11 Sandbed Bridge/ No Name Lane

The Sandbed and Strand Street follow the exact line of Kilmarnock's first main street. This was part of the cart track from Ayr to Glasgow. The Kilmarnock Water was an obstacle that had to be crossed. In 1609 Timothy Pont, a famous map maker, visited the town and noted 'a fair

stone bridge over The River Marnock'. Pont later produced the first ever map of Kilmarnock, which clearly showed the cart track. The bridge, the oldest in the town has been rebuilt several times, the present bridge dates from 1762.



Walk the few yards from the New Laigh Kirk to the beginning of the Sandbed at The Loudoun Inn and you can see the road following a crooked path as it crosses the bridge!

Robert Burns was a frequent visitor to Kilmarnock. After attending service at the Laigh Kirk, Burns and his friends would cross the Sandbed Bridge on way to the pub. They would turn left and walk along the tiny lane you see (now called 'No Name Lane'). From there it was into Begbie's Pub for a few refreshments. Sadly Begbie's is long gone - BHS now stands there.

This route is immortalised in The Burns Poem 'The Ordination'

*"Swith, to the Laigh Kirk, ane and a',  
An there take up your stations,  
Then aff tae Begbie's in a raw,  
To pour divine libations, For joy this day"*

## 12 Swine Raw / Kilmarnock House

Kilmarnock House and Swine Raw were adjacent to each other; however life in both would have been completely different.



The Boyd Family came into possession of the grounds of Dean Castle in 1316, when Sir Robert Boyd (Earl of Kilmarnock) was rewarded the lands of Kilmarnock for supporting Robert the Bruce at The Battle of Bannockburn. Kilmarnock House, built in the 17th century, was their town house and became their main home after a fire at the Dean Castle. Kilmarnock House would have been very opulent given the family's connections. Kilmarnock House was demolished in 1935. St Marnock Street carpark is now sited in its place.

On the other hand Swine Raw was a group of houses which existed where Nelson Street meets the Timmer Brig. Swine Raw was where the working class lived. Life was harsh and full of drudgery. People would use the river at the back of the street to cook, to wash and for sanitation. Disease would have been rampant and not helped by the fact that people kept pigs here!

## 13 The Howard Park

The Lady's Walk was a favourite haunt of the Countess of Kilmarnock as she waited for news of her Jacobite husband captured at Culloden and imprisoned in the Tower of London awaiting trial and execution. She walked here from Kilmarnock House during this time. Unfortunately he was beheaded on 18th August, 1746. It is said she died of grief on 16th September, 1747. Adjacent to Dundonald Road, the park also has a mass grave to victims of a cholera outbreak early in the 19th century.

