

Historic Wigtown

Wigtown was the county town of a moderately sized county, in what now seems a quiet corner of Scotland. This makes its survival and its individual character all the more interesting. It was not always so quiet or so remote, and many traces of a rather more important past remain to help explain the form the burgh takes today.



The origins of the settlement at Wigtown are uncertain. There is little evidence for prehistoric or early-historic occupation on the site. Yet the logic of its location at the western end of the lowest, fording east-west route through Galloway, suggests that there is likely to have been earlier settlement here. The first tangible evidence of occupation, however, is a tenth-century cross-shaft unearthed in the graveyard of the medieval parish church.



Front Cover: Wigtown by J. Clerk 1827 (Courtesy of Stranraer Museum)

Top 9: The ruins of the medieval and post-Reformation church (Martin Barron)

Above: Wigtown from the south-east: the view dominated by County Buildings. To the left can be seen the back of Old Bank House, the former customs house (Cain Murray)

Wigtown

The Scottish Burgh Survey broadsheet



The Scottish Burgh Survey



Top: The top of Agnew Crescent. The building on the right has an angled corner typical of new-town developments of the early nineteenth century (Cain Murray)
 Middle (right): the earlier building on the site, dating from the mid-eighteenth century, which once served as the Customs House, as well as the former offices of the county officer. In 1796 the Customs of Carlisle was paying window tax on the building, which may well support the site of the county officer's offices in the high quarter of the burgh.
 Bottom: 11 North Main Street, an eighteenth-century building. The side elevation was exposed when New Road was laid out in the 1840s and the fine doorpiece (inset) may have been moved from the front when the house was converted for use as a shop. This building was given a facelift during the recent Townscape Heritage Initiative (Richard Oram)

Created a royal burgh in the later thirteenth century, Wigtown was downgraded in 1341 to a burgh of regality belonging to the newly created Earl of Wigtown, then passed in 1372 to the Douglas family. The town regained royal burgh status following the forfeiture of the earldom of Douglas in 1455. The burgh prospered in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, despite a long-running series of feuds between noble families fighting for influence over the region. The income of the burgh was clearly a worthwhile prize.

The town's economy relied heavily on the trade in cattle from its hinterland, either walked across the ford or shipped out from its simple river-mouth harbour, mainly to north-west England. The burgh seal, a three-masted ship, indicates the importance of seaborne trade to the burgh. Medieval and early modern Wigtown benefited from the traffic of pilgrims to the shrine of St Ninian at Whitthorn. King James IV was an annual pilgrim and stopped regularly in Wigtown on his journeys to and from the shrine.

The town was in decline by the second half of the seventeenth century, and its harbour became inadequate as vessels became larger. From the eighteenth century new roads and bridges, and the growing importance of new harbours in the west of the shire, such as Portpatrick and Stranraer, meant Wigtown was less of a communications hub. However, the needs of the county for banking and administration meant that Wigtown had a continuing purpose which is evident in much of the townscape.



Top left: The burgh arms, depicting a three-masted ship

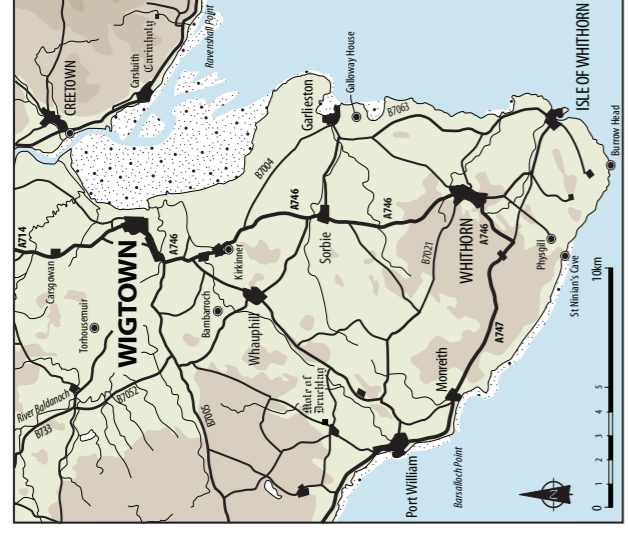
Above: View of the old harbour at Wigtown, just before it stopped functioning. Aquatint by William Daniell, 1815. The spire up the hill belongs to the tobacco bank in 1776

The Scottish Burgh Survey



Wigtown as depicted on Boyd's Military Survey of Scotland, c.1750. The town is shown as being the largest it has today, with its large central market place. A large building or group of buildings stands on the site of County Buildings. The church and churchyard can be seen just to the east of the town, and further east is the harbour (simply a quay and storehouse), from which lead dotted lines marking the 'ford at low water' across the Cree to just south of Creetown (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Library)

The Scottish Burgh Survey



This summary is based upon research by the Universities of Stirling and Dundee as part of the Scottish Burgh Survey project. This has, since the 1970s, surveyed over 70 of Scotland's historic towns and cities. The primary aim is to identify areas of archaeological potential to help assess the implications for development. The survey assimilates and explains historical records and archaeological work, suggests questions and locations for further investigation, and seeks to characterise places.

The broadsheet was designed for Historic Scotland by CFA Archaeology Ltd. www.cfa-archaeology.co.uk

This broadsheet accompanies the book *Historic Wigtown: Archaeology and Development* by RD Oram, PF Martin, CA McKean and S Anderson, published for Historic Scotland by the Council for British Archaeology. The book may be bought from Oxbow Books (01865 241249) or www.archaeologyuk.org/books or from any good bookshop.

Where development is being considered, advice on any statutory or planning requirements should first be sought from Dumfries and Galloway Council, Planning and Environment Services (tel: 030 33 33 3000 or via the Council's website: www.dumgal.gov.uk).

Further information on specific sites can be found in the PASTMAP website www.pastmap.org.uk

Places to visit: **Wigtown Booktown (tel) 01988 402036**
Museum in Wigtown County Buildings (tel) 01776 705088
Bladnoch Distillery (tel) 01988 402605

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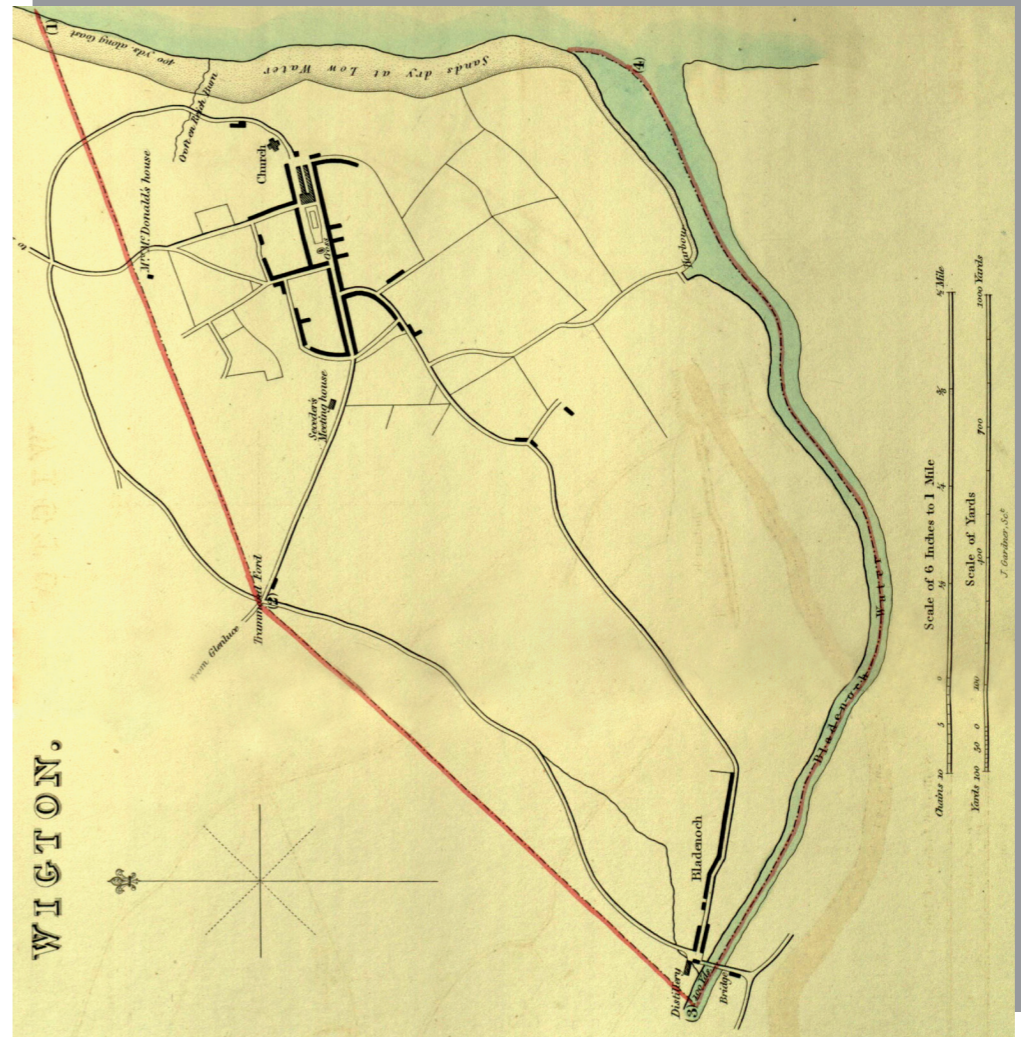


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1822 map, down to show the Parliamentary boundary of the town after the 1832 Reform Act. The main change from the Bay map is development down one side of Agnew Crescent towards the new harbour. It also shows the growing village of Bladnoch, with its distillery, foundry and bridge. At this time, the town is still called 'Wigton'. As the volume of postal communication increased during the nineteenth century, a problem arose as to how to distinguish between Wigtown and Wigton in Cumberland. It is clear that this alone did not prevent confusion, and during the second half of the century the following notes appear in Trades Directories: 'Attention is directed to the necessity of addressing letters "Wigton, North Britain" or "Wigton, Wigtonshire", not Wigton (only), as in the latter case letters will be forwarded to Wigton, in Cumberland, instead of their proper destination. (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland)