

The background image shows a dramatic coastal scene. In the foreground, dark, jagged rock formations meet the sea. A steep, grassy cliff rises from the water's edge. At the top of the cliff, a multi-story stone ruin, possibly a castle or tower, stands prominently. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds. The overall tone is historical and atmospheric.

CAVES & GRAVES

# Scotland's Southern Coast

Where every  
name tells a story

Solway Firth  
  
Partnership



This guide is an introduction to some of the stories that have inspired place names on the long and varied coast of Dumfries and Galloway. The rugged shoreline is perforated with caves that have often been associated with illegal or clandestine activities.

All names begin by describing a place to another person or group of people, as a way of helping us find our way in the world. Some place names have existed for hundreds of years, while others are a modern phenomenon, but they all tell a story. Place names can provide clues about the history of our coast and reveal what people considered noteworthy. Place names can help to identify places of archaeological importance or identify landmarks that are the setting for folk tales or works of fiction.

The spooky looking Brandy Cove, near Portling, is reputed to have been a smugglers hideaway.



For thousands of years, caves have provided shelter from the elements and have been regarded as spiritual places for pilgrimage, healing or burials. The caves at Port Mora, north of Portpatrick, are believed to have had religious uses as well as a waterfall with health benefits. There is some evidence that there are links between ancient sacred sites and later Christian establishments. Memorials in coastal kirkyards reveal much about the social and maritime history of a parish and include monuments to victims of shipwrecks.

Explore the seashore and imagine what it would have been like to live in a cave or visit one of the coastal kirkyards to discover more about the history of the Solway coast.

Ask people who know the area where the good places are to visit or get a detailed Ordnance Survey map and plan your own adventure.

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**Find out more about the connections between place names and social history, local customs and beliefs by visiting:**  
**[www.solwayfirthpartnership.co.uk/solway-coastwise](http://www.solwayfirthpartnership.co.uk/solway-coastwise)**



**EVERY NAME TELLS A STORY**





Enjoy your visit to the coast, but always remember to be careful especially if you are visiting caves.



Scottish weather can be unpredictable. Check weather forecasts and take appropriate clothing and footwear.



The coast can be rugged and remote, so tell a family member or friend where you are going and when you expect to be back.



The Solway coast has one of the largest tidal ranges in the world. Remember to check the tide times to avoid becoming stranded on the vast sand-flats or in tidal bays.



The coast is bursting with life so try to avoid disturbing wildlife, particularly shore-nesting birds in spring.



The coast is beautiful and to keep it that way please take your litter home with you.

At the head of the bay next to the Southern Upland Way, there are two small caves named on old Ordnance Survey maps. Dropping Cave was named after the water falling over the mouth of the cave. It was a healing cave where bathing in the water was reputed to have “kill or cure” properties. It was particularly popular for children suffering from whooping cough.

The adjacent cave was called Ouchtrimackain Cave which was believed to have provided shelter for a hermit. In more recent times the cave has become known locally as Monks Cave.

**NAME MEANING:**

A cave with running  
or dripping water



Port Mora (also known as  
Sandeel Bay) NW992551

**DROPPING CAVE**

**1**





The cliffs north of Ardwell Bay on the western shore of the Rhins have a number of caves where people lived as recently as 100 years ago. One of the smallest caves is Sheeps' Rink Co', a niche in the rocks where in the late 1800s William Purves took up residence.

A former clown and strongman he retired to his seaside home where he undertook odd jobs and sold picture postcards of himself. He had many visitors during the summer season and kept a record of their names. The cave is no longer shown on maps.

**NAME MEANING:**

Unknown, Co' is abbreviated cove, a local word for cave

2

**SHEEPS' RINK CO'**

Ardwell Bay near Black Cave  
NX070461



Lying below the cliff top Mull of Galloway Trail this cave has long been a place of pilgrimage. Although it is unclear who St Medan was, local legend portrays her as an Irish princess who converted to Christianity. At one time, a chapel was built out from the cave entrance but now it is in ruins.

To the south-east of the cave are three circular rock pools which were regarded as healing wells. These were believed to be most effective on the first Sunday in May, known locally as Co' Sunday (Cave Sunday). Access to this cave is difficult and should only be attempted with local guidance.

**NAME MEANING:**

.....

A holy cave / chapel  
dedicated to a saint



**St Medan's Cave and Chapel**  
NX143315

**ST MEDAN'S CAVE AND CHAPEL**

**3**





The grave of Commodore François Thurot is shown on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map, although there was no headstone. As a French privateer he was authorised by his government to attack enemy ships and he terrorised merchant shipping on the Scottish coast. In February 1760 his luck ran out when he was surprised by three British warships off the Galloway coast.

After a short ferocious battle his ship, the *Bellisle*, was destroyed with 160 men dead, including Thurot. His body was washed up on the shore and was buried in the graveyard at the expense of Maxwell of Monreith.

**NAME MEANING:**

.....  
The burial place of  
Commodore Thurot

4

## THUROT'S GRAVE

Kirkmaiden (Monreith) NX365399





Tradition tells us that St Ninian, Scotland's first saint, used this cave as his personal sanctuary. While this cannot be verified rock carvings testify to the importance of this remote location as a place of pilgrimage. Crosses have been cut into the cave wall and Christian carved stones dating back to the 10th and 11th centuries have been found in the cave. These can now be seen at the Whithorn Priory and Museum. There are other caves on the Wigtownshire coast with early Christian connections but St Ninian's Cave remains the prime site for modern pilgrimage.

**NAME MEANING:**

.....  
A holy cave dedicated  
to a saint



St Ninian's Cave NX422359



**ST NINIAN'S CAVE**

**5**



Named on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey map, Whigs' Hole was traditionally believed to be a hideout for Covenanters (sometimes known as Whigs) who opposed the role of the King in the affairs of the Presbyterian Church. During the religious persecutions in the 1600s, which at their peak were known as the 'killing times', the Covenanters sought refuge in secret caves. Close to the high water mark this cave quickly reduces to a small entrance hole large enough to crawl through, but small enough to easily close up using a boulder. Local tales are told of soldiers repeatedly searching for the hiding place on the coast but failing to capture the Covenanters who used the cave.

**NAME MEANING:**

.....  
Hiding place of a covenanter

6

**WHIGS' HOLE**

**Heughs of Barholm near Meg  
Merrilees Cave NX518526**





Occasionally maritime accidents resulted in drowned bodies being washed up on the shore. This must have led to the evocative place name Dead Man's Bay which appears on old maps. In October 1826 a local vessel called the Ranger was returning to Kirkcudbright from Whitehaven, with a general cargo and 9 passengers. In heavy seas, Captain McLean missed the entrance to Kirkcudbright Bay and sailed into the rocky shore at Kirkandrews. In the scramble to abandon ship the mate and two passengers were washed away and drowned. The churchyard includes many fascinating headstones, including a memorial to the unfortunate 21-year-old ship's mate, William Carson.

**NAME MEANING:**

A bay where a body has  
been washed ashore



Kirkandrews churchyard NX600481

**DEAD MAN'S BAY**

**7**



Below the clifftop footpath to Borneess Batteries is an inaccessible cave named after the bones found within it. During excavations in the 1870s numerous artefacts were found including children's skulls. The remains were initially thought to have dated from the Iron Age. However, recent radio carbon dating of a skull has revealed that it was deposited 1,000 years earlier in the Bronze Age.

Parallels have been drawn with a site in the north of Scotland where children's skulls appear to have been exhibited on posts at a cave entrance. The reasons for this grisly display are still open to speculation.

**NAME MEANING:**

.....  
A cave where bones  
have been found

8

**BONE CAVE**

Bone Cave NX620446





In the early 1800s, the novelist Sir Walter Scott wrote 'Guy Mannering' set on the Solway coast. In this tale, of ruthless smugglers in a lawless Galloway, isolated caves became ideal hiding places. The popularity of his book led to local people identifying landmarks with fictitious events. Torrs Cave was rechristened Dirk Hatteraick's Cove to link it with the smuggler in the novel. Now reverted back to the earlier name, it has been excavated and archaeological finds, including rock carvings, suggesting that the cave was inhabited from the Iron Age to the 18th century. Access to the cave is not possible when the training range is in use.

**NAME MEANING:**

.....  
A fictitious smugglers cave



Torrs Cave, Dundrennan  
Training Range NX676445

**DIRK HATTERAIK COVE**

**9**



It was the custom of local people to bury bodies close to the place that they washed ashore and mark the place with a crude headstone. The stone marking the burial place of Joseph Nelson, is so weathered the words are almost illegible. Set amongst the rocks, it was laid by his widow Ann Nelson from Whitehaven.

It commemorates the drowning of her husband in 1791 after the sinking of 'The Ann'. Many tales have grown up around Nelson's grave but nobody has been able to discover if he was a smuggler, a merchant or an unlucky passenger.

**NAME MEANING:**

.....  
The burial place of Joseph Nelson

10

**NELSON'S GRAVE**

Nelson's Grave NX852526





It is only possible to explore the sea arches and caves in the cliffs west of Sandyhills Bay at low tide. Adjacent to the tall rock arch, known as Needles Eye, is the entrance to Piper's Cave.

This natural cave quickly narrows and appears to come to an abrupt end but miners in the search of copper have hewn a tunnel to extend the cave for a considerable distance. The cave is reputed to be haunted by a ghostly piper who entered playing his bagpipes and was never seen again. Can you hear the drone of pipes in the mouth of the cave?

**NAME MEANING:**

A cave haunted by a piper



Needles Eye NX889545



**PIPER'S CAVE**

**11**



Erosion of the softer parts of the Dumfries and Galloway coast occasionally exposes graves. These gravelly mounds are the largest 'hills' on the flat inner Solway shore. When they were eroded in the mid 1800s several ancient burials were washed away. Within the stone slabs of the coffins or cists, human bone fragments were found along with pottery decorated with a herring bone pattern, probably from the Bronze Age. The coast continues to be eroded and is exposing layers of sand, clay, peat and tree stumps. Some tree stumps exposed lower down on the beach have been carbon dated and are 8,000 years old!

**NAME MEANING:**

.....  
Mounds on Newbie farm





The study of place names can tell us about wildlife distribution in the past. Dove Cave is the most common cave name found on the Dumfries and Galloway coast. Today the cave-dwelling rock doves have interbred with their domestic cousins resulting in pigeons with a variety of colours and patterns. Caves used by jackdaws are sometimes called by the Scots name Kaa or Keaw, although this may have referred to the 'red legged jackdaw' or chough that previously bred on our cliffs.

Keep an eye out for cave spiders and hibernating moths but try not to disturb them.



**CAVE WILDLIFE**





- |                                     |                           |                              |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>1</b> DROPPING CAVE              | <b>5</b> ST NINIAN'S CAVE | <b>9</b> DIRK HATTERAIK COVE |
| <b>2</b> SHEEP'S RINK CO'           | <b>6</b> WHIGS' HOLE      | <b>10</b> NELSON'S GRAVE     |
| <b>3</b> ST MEDAN'S CAVE AND CHAPEL | <b>7</b> DEAD MAN'S BAY   | <b>11</b> PIPER'S CAVE       |
| <b>4</b> THUROT'S GRAVE             | <b>8</b> BONE CAVE        | <b>12</b> NEWBIE HILLS       |

## Solway Firth Partnership

**Cover:** Dunskey Castle, near Portpatrick. Tradition tells us an underground passage links the castle dungeons with the cave below.

**All photographs:**  
Solway Firth Partnership