



## Turning History into Art

Much of the physical evidence of Wig Bay's WW2 history has been dismantled and dispersed. The few publicly accessible sites that show structures from that period are the slip ways that led flying boats to the loch, the hard standing bays in the adjacent field and the brick and concrete slab lookout post at the end of the shore track.

As a sculptor with interests in historical construction materials and techniques I hope to draw a sense of the WW2 period at The Wig. Roughly shuttered concrete, weathered steel plate and the fuselage construction of aircraft are used to this effect.

Consultation workshops with local residents who had first hand knowledge of The Wig during WW2, coloured and illustrated the more ephemeral experiences of the bay. Aircraft constantly came and went from the loch with their unique smells and sounds. Children adventured among the dismantled aircraft at the end of the war.

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HERITAGE FUND

Solway Firth Partnership

### Finding out more

Archie Bell, 'Stranraer in World War Two'. Stranraer & District Local History Trust, 2005. Donnie Nelson, 'Wait till your Father comes home on leave - boyhood memories of wartime Stranraer'. Stranraer & District Local History Trust, 2012. 'Top Secret - the Second World War in Dumfries & Galloway'. Dumfries & Galloway Museums Service, 2014.

[www.dgtrails.org/rhins-of-galloway-path/](https://www.dgtrails.org/rhins-of-galloway-path/)

Front page pictures & credits - Canadian aircrew, Marine Gardens, Stranraer (Donnie Nelson), Test Flights at Wig Bay, 1945 Christmas card from Corsewall Camp with photo of Algernon, Jamaican serviceman (Stranraer Museum). Map image credits: 1,3,4&7 D Nelson, 2 Derek Fitzgerald, 5&8 Dumfries and Galloway Museums Service, Stranraer Museum, 6&10 J Pickin, 9 © Crown Copyright: Historic Environment Scotland. Licensor canmore.org.uk.

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TOP SECRET



# Loch Ryan

## The Secret WW2 Flying Boat Base



### 1 RAF Wig Bay - flying boat storage yards & observation post

In the fields on the north side of the track leading to The Scar are the remains of the concrete pads and hard standing areas where flying boats were stored. This area was also used after the war for breaking up redundant flying boats. One of the slipways can be seen close to the car park. The small brick building at the end of the track was an observation and mine watching post.

*Parking at Wig Bay car park. Track along shore leads to observation post.*

### 2 RAF Wig Bay - maintenance shed & slipway

The large concrete slipway by the Loch Ryan Sailing Club was used to haul flying boats ashore for maintenance. Across the roads is one of the large maintenance sheds (now a farm building). North of the slipway is a small concrete pier. This was used as a fuel jetty for the rescue boats working in the loch. The cutting in the hillside just north of the small pier was excavated to allow the wings of the Sunderland planes to get past.

*Parking near the sailing club.*

### 3 RAF Wig Bay - flying boat workshops

The site of two massive hangars built as flying boat workshops. Most of the buildings have been demolished but the surviving concrete floors show just how large the hangars were. Further south in the fields close to the road are a series of overgrown hollows that mark the position of flying boat pens. These were open sided sheds, just big enough to shelter the nose and engines. The square concrete blocks used to secure the flying boats in their pens can still be seen along the road.

*Roadside parking.*

### 4 Stranraer

RAF Stranraer was set up in 1940 as one of Britain's largest flying boat training bases. Hundreds of RAF personnel were stationed here during the war and many of the town's public buildings were taken over by the air force. On London Road, close to what today is Stranraer Academy, there was a huge transit camp built to house the thousands of troops coming into Stranraer on the ferry.

At the end of the war, as part of a project codenamed Operation Deadlight, over 70 German U-boats were assembled in Loch Ryan. They were then taken out to the North Channel and sunk. The German submarine crews were held in local prisoner of war camps.

Stranraer Museum has a display on wartime Wigtownshire.

### 5 Cairnryan Military Railway

The military railway, six miles (10 kilometres) long, opened in 1942. It ran along the east shore of the loch and connected the new military port at Cairnryan with the main line at Stranraer. There was a huge marshalling yard at Leffnoll which could hold up to 2,000 wagons. The railway also ran passenger services and was a lifeline for service personnel based in the isolated camps around Cairnryan.

The best preserved section of the railway is on the Loch Ryan Coastal Path between Innermessan and Leffnoll. The embankment here is in good condition and the remains can still be seen of a Pioneer Corps badge made from pebbles and set in concrete. The Pioneer Corps were one of the units that built the railway.

*The Loch Ryan Coastal Path follows the Innermessan to Leffnoll section of the railway.*

### 6 Braid Fell target wall

Braid Fell was used throughout the war as a bombing range by the Bombing Training Unit based at the West Freugh airfield near Sandhead. The surviving remains include a massive concrete target wall, its surface scarred by bomb and rocket hits. Set in the ground nearby is a huge concrete arrow which directed bomb crews towards the wall.

*The wall is three kilometres from Innermessan at the side of the moor road to New Luce.*

### 7 YMCA Canteen

The building that is now the Rhins of Galloway Hotel began life as a YMCA canteen. It served the large number of personnel working at the Leffnoll marshalling yard on the Cairnryan Military Railway. This purpose-built canteen was gifted by the Glasgow biscuit firm of McVitie and Price and opened in 1943. Nearby was a large accommodation camp, later used a prisoner of war camp.

*On the A77, 3 kilometres south of Cairnryan.*

### 8 Cairnryan Military Port

In 1942 the tiny fishing village of Cairnryan was transformed into what became known as Military Port No. 2. Should Glasgow or Liverpool be destroyed in enemy air raids then Cairnryan, along with Faslane, were to become emergency deep-water ports. The loch was dredged, three large piers were constructed and a purpose built railway connected the new port to the main line at Stranraer. The pier known as the Lighterage Wharf was at the site of the modern P&O ferry terminal and the second pier, the North Deep, was at the north end of the village by the lighthouse. The concrete remains of the third pier, the South Deep, can still be seen but all its cranes have long since been removed and scrapped. The modern Stena ferry terminal is on the site of a large concrete production yard and was also the terminus



of the military railway. Parts of the Mulberry Harbour, used in 1944 in the Normandy landings, were tested here.

*Parking at the car park at the north end of the village.*

### 9 Little Laight Anti-Aircraft Battery

A site of four concrete and brick heavy anti-aircraft gun emplacements with a command post and ammunition store nearby. Also nearby are the foundations of the accommodation huts for the gun crew. This was one of four heavy anti-aircraft gun batteries built to defend Loch Ryan. The others were at Kirkland Hill near Leswalt, Culreoch near Stranraer and Balyett near Innermessan. The Anti-Aircraft Control Centre for all these sites was in Stranraer, now the Airds Donald Caravan Site.

*On Loch Ryan Coastal Path. Follow track uphill for 1.5km from car park on A75 north of Cairnryan village.*

### 10 Glen App Coastal Battery

Close to the shore on the south side of Finnarts Bay was a coastal battery guarding the entrance to Loch Ryan. It comprised two six-inch naval guns and a series of searchlight sites. Most of the buildings have been destroyed but on the hill above the bay are the remains of a concrete observation post and signal station which controlled a string of mines stretched across the mouth of the loch.

*The command post is best seen from the A75.*





## Second World War sites around Loch Ryan...

RAF Wig Bay was established in 1942 to maintain, service and store flying boats. It specialised in converting American flying boats to RAF standards. The base occupied much of the western side of Loch Ryan between Soleburn and Kirkcolm and a number of wartime structures survive. It closed in the mid-1950s.

### 1. Storage & Observation



FLYING BOATS IN STORAGE, WIG BAY

### 2. Maintenance & Slipway



NAVIGATION INSTRUMENT CALIBRATION ON COMPASS BASE

### 3. Flying Boat Workshops



FLYING BOATS IN THEIR PENS

A local resident, Donnie Nelson, recalls the flying boats in 1938, "I can remember when I was a wee boy going down to the pier in Stranraer with some of my pals and watching the flying boats come in."

Another little boy, Bill Sandiford, arrived on the base in 1952 and spent five years there as boats were reconditioned, test flown and then delivered back to operational units. On one occasion, "I came back from school and stood at the end of the pier when two flying boats came overhead. The pilot of one obviously saw this little boy and dive bombed the slipway where I was standing, pretending to attack a submarine I think, and flew over my head at 300ft. I could smell the exhaust - nothing like it!"

OS WAR REVISION 1940. SHEET 90

### 10. Coastal Battery



OBSERVATION POST AND SIGNAL STATION, GLEN APP

### 9. Anti-Aircraft Battery



AERIAL VIEW OF LITTLE LIGHT ANTI-AIRCRAFT BATTERY

### 8. Military Port



SOUTH DEEP WHARF AND MILITARY RAILWAY, CAIRNRYAN

### 7. YMCA Canteen



WAAF PERSONNEL, YMCA CANTEEN

### 6. Target Wall



TARGET WALL, BRAID FELL BOMBING RANGE

### 4. Stranraer



RAF PERSONNEL, ROCK GARDENS, STRANRAER, MARCH 1943

### 5. Military Railway



ROYAL ENGINEERS SURVEYING ROUTE OF THE MILITARY RAILWAY