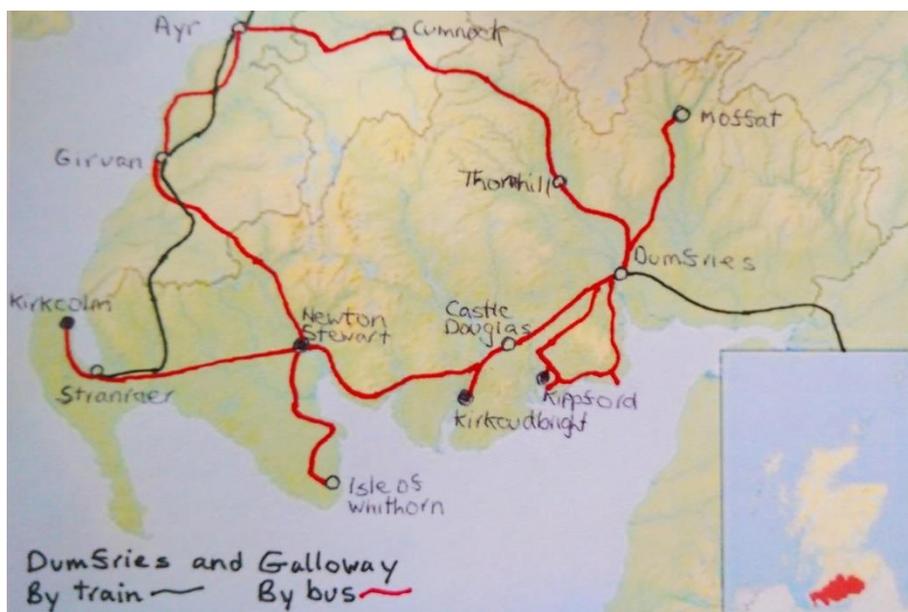


Southwest Scotland

Southwest Scotland is an area I know very little about, despite being fairly close to home. In my younger days in Scotland you either headed north to the Highlands or straight down the West Coast Main Line or the A74 to England. In 1975 a friend and I had a few days hitching around the area and that is about it. I have a vague memory of a drunken visit to relatives of Colin in Stranraer (but I may be imagining that one – I've certainly heard Colin's tales of Stranraer). To rectify this I've paid three short visits in the last few years, marked on the map below.



The 2015 trip

Dumfries and Wigtownshire

The journey from Durham to Carlisle I know well, so instead of describing it I will start with a rant. Planning the day's travel is a pain - the whole day is affected by the way in which cross country journeys from East to West never connect with one another. The earliest I can reach Dumfries from Durham is 1152, because the train service from Durham does not start early enough, the connections from south to west at Newcastle are poor, as are those at Carlisle from east to west. The core Galloway 500 bus route from Dumfries to Stranraer departs from Dumfries station, but there is no bus until 1315. OK so I'm not in a hurry and go for a couple of pints instead – see below – but the earliest I can reach Newton Stewart is 1505. The journey from Durham is 158 miles. Journey times are not helped by the poor service on the Carlisle-Dumfries-Kilmarnock-Glasgow line, where there is a three-hour gap in each direction in the middle of the day - there are extra trains from Carlisle to Dumfries on Saturday but the 0955 from Carlisle departs 2 minutes before the train from Newcastle arrives, so it makes no difference to my journey.¹

From Carlisle to Dumfries this rural train ride passes by or close to Kingmoor freight yard, the Longtown Military Railway heading off to Longtown Munitions Depot, Eastriggs Munitions Depot, the redundant Chapelcross nuclear power station decommissioned in 2004, a boiler factory outside Annan and the site of Powfoot ordnance factory. It was the militarisation of this area during the first

¹ The train times are still as poor in summer 2016, though the bus from Dumfries now leaves 25 mins earlier so Newton Stewart can be reached by 1440. Phew.

world war that led to licensing laws, the weakening of beer and the nationalised Carlisle State Brewery to keep the workers (relatively) sober.

Just before Dumfries the train horn sounds, to warn some track workers of our approach, but then it keeps on blaring. Two Scotrail drivers sitting near me jump up and head for the cab, presumably worried that the driver has collapsed at the controls, but it turns out the horn has simply stuck.



The River Nith at Dumfries

Out of the station at Dumfries and into the centre of town. There are handsome red sandstone buildings such as the Dumfries and Galloway Council headquarters. Across the main shopping street and down a lane past Friars Tuck Chippee (sic) and a souvenir shop advertising C U Jimmy hats to the riverside, which would be a nice spot if it wasn't mainly a car park. A pint in the Coach and Horses, which is up for sale...hopefully it will go to someone who looks after it - the beer is good, and from the posters it looks like an excellent music venue. Then into the New Bazaar, obviously a Doonhamers pub with a football signed by the Queen of the South football team in prime position above the gantry, and a bottle of specially bottled Doonhamers whisky to celebrate the team becoming Scottish Second Division Champions Division 2001-2. Wow.

The bus is a Stagecoach coach and we roll along the A75 through the countryside, a pleasant mixture of farms, woods, cottages and cows, calling into prosperous little towns such as Castle Douglas and Gatehouse of Fleet, and after 90 minutes we are at Newton Stewart. I check into the hotel then back to the bus stance for a trip to Isle of Whithorn on the 415 minibus.

The one-hour journey is via Wigtown (Scotland's National Book Town), Bladnoch, with its distillery (about to begin production once more after a period in administration) and good looking pub in the Good Beer Guide, Kirkinner, Garlieston ('home of the Mulberry Harbour') and Whithorn. No time to stop off en route due to the cross-country timings. I remember Isle of Whithorn vaguely from my last visit when I was twenty years old. I do the same thing as we did then and go for a pint in the Steam Packet Inn. It has an excellent location on the harbourside (though it's a bit cold today to sit outside), and a good selection of beers (and a brewery on the way according to the local CAMRA magazine). Only time for the one pint before I catch the last bus back, and the driver is expecting me. Whithorn is a pretty little place but it looks a bit run down (closed shops and pub). We call in at the Stagecoach depot (a farm shed with room for 2 buses or 4 minibuses) then back to Newton Stewart.



Isle of Whithorn

I'm staying in Newton Stewart because it's the best centre for bus connections and there is a range of accommodation. The towns and villages of the Machars look like good alternatives - the pubs in Isle of Whithorn, Bladnoch and Wigtown all have accommodation. The area seems fairly prosperous, though there are a few closed pubs around. They seem to be those which depended on the wet trade - recent changes in drink-drive legislation in Scotland are affecting such pubs in rural areas. I have a wander round Newton Stewart. As expected is not a lot happening on a Tuesday night, though the bus shelter has its complement of disaffected youth sharing a packet of tabs. A couple of pints and a fish supper and then I have an early night.

South Ayrshire

The first bus of the day is the 359 minibus to Girvan. Through the woods, calling at Glentroll, a Forestry Commission village. We cross from Dumfries and Galloway into South Ayrshire and immediately the road surface becomes appalling. The quiet A road has not been modernised in umpteen years and it is like driving in the 1960s. After the railway line from Stranraer comes in from the Southwest near Barrhill we cross over or under the line six times, twice in the length of the same railway viaduct.

At Girvan I'm sensible for once. At 1020 the Harbour Bar is already open with a couple of punters having a smoke outside. Instead of going in I wander around and take a few photos. It's a dreich day, there's not a soul on the beach, the amusement arcade or the Italian café. It looks as though there are no holidaymakers on the Costa del Clyde this year, though the caravan parks we pass during the morning seem busy enough.

On the busy bus to Ayr the two gentlemen in front are talking about Big Stewart. 'The one with the bad legs?' asks one. 'No, the one in a wheelchair' replies the other. By the time they get off they haven't agreed (and I'm none the wiser) whether there are two Big Stewarts or only one, albeit at differing stages of dilapidation.

Turnberry golf course and resort (a different world from Girvan though only 4 miles away) is getting ready for the British Women's Open. The bus travels on via Maidens, past Souter Johnnies Cottage at Kirkoswald (read your Burns) and the entrance to Culzean Castle, then via a short detour to a housing scheme on what feels like a mountainside outside Maybole, and finally along the main road through the smug suburbs of Ayr.

I have 40 minutes to wait and there's a Wetherspoon's pub, the West Kirk, along the road from the bus station so I pop in for a pint. It must be a listed building - it is every bit a kirk inside and out, with an uncanny resemblance to others I was in in my childhood. At least it's been put to a good use.

The next stretch is through the South Ayrshire coalfield. I chose the route because I've never been before, despite having a family connection with Cumnock (though the details are limited). It is much like the parts of County Durham which haven't recovered from pit closures. Through Coylton and on to Drongan, which is basically a housing scheme (the original pit village was demolished in the 1930s), and we zigzag through every street. Though it looks depressed, and the Welcome Inn doesn't look at all welcoming, there are no empty houses that I could see. There are some new bought houses built at a suitable distance from the scheme, to avoid the inhabitants having to mingle with the village neds. Onward past the site of Killoch Colliery, through Ochiltree, a large village where the



Killoch Colliery winding towers 1960-1990

only pub is open only three days a week, and past the site of Barony Colliery, where the A frame winding gear is now a heritage attraction. I remember from geography lessons at school that these were two large pits, but both closed in the late 1980s and there are few signs left of the coal industry. Auchinleck is a bit more lively than Drongan or Ochiltree, though there are plenty of closed shops (and a recently opened Tesco – there may be a connection). Finally we arrive at Cumnock where the bus terminates.

The weather has improved but it decides to shower so I take shelter in the Craighead Inn. There's keg McEwans 60/- on draught and the maximum they feel able to charge for a pint is £2.40. Cumnock looks, feels, and is poor, and I suspect I'm actually older than most of the men in the bar, all of them in poor health.

The Dumfries bus is a full size coach, though I'm the only person on board as it leaves Cumnock, and the maximum number of passengers is six. There is a coal conveyor on the outskirts of New Cumnock – the opencast workings around the town, which replaced earlier pits, finally closed in 2013. The original village of New Cumnock is derelict with no sign of life – everyone lives in the housing scheme up the road. There are quite a few Union flags about which, round here, I suspect (It is July) is more to do with sectarianism than a comment on the 2014 referendum.

Then we cross over the border back into Dumfries and Galloway and, to be trite, I could say that both the landscape and the social cachet of the area changes immediately, but it doesn't. Kirkconnel is an outlier of the Ayrshire Coalfield, and most people live in Kelloholm, the neighbouring housing scheme across the river Nith, built to house miners. The bus seems to visit every street. There are well kept houses and gardens, and no empty houses, but it seems that every community facility is closed and boarded up. Past an old coal bing, the final sign of the industry, we arrive in Sanquhar, which marks the real transition into Dumfriesshire, and it looks prosperous. We carry on down Nithsdale, with a glimpse of Drumlanrig Castle (home of the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch and Queensberry) on the right, and into Thornhill.

I'm in need of a comfort break so it is time to get off the bus. Thornhill is very pleasant planned village on the Buccleuch and Queensberry estate. I plump for an hour in the Farmers Arms (always a good idea if you can find an accommodating farmer), mainly because it's the only pub open at three o'clock in the afternoon. Definitely a more upmarket village - £3 a pint here. Then on to the next bus which takes a back road through Dalswinton, another planned village, Kirton and back into Dumfries.



A pint in the Tam O Shanter Inn where the banter is lively:

Bloke number one 'If ah could pish petrol ah'd pish oan him and set a match to it'.

Barmaid 'youre being a right wee bitch the day'
Bloke number two 'live and let live'.

And that's basically the end of the trip apart from returning to Durham by train, and the connections work in this direction. The real end of the trip is, as usual, the Colpitts.

Tam O Shanter Inn, Dumfries.

The 2016 trip

Kippford

A further exploration of the area in 2016, starting again with the train to Dumfries, and its hopeless connections. I just miss a bus to Dalbeattie so I have almost an hour to pass, this time in the Caven Arms, which has won local CAMRA awards every year for the last ten years. At this time of day it is busy mainly with diners but the selection of beer is good, the staff are friendly and it looks like it will be a good evening pub also.



View from Rockcliffe over the Urr estuary towards the Solway Firth

In Dalbeattie I have seven minutes to wait for the connecting bus – so time for an essential quick visit to the loo in the Maxwell Arms (and a quick half pint of fizzy Belhaven). On the road out of town we pass a pub called the Cum Ye Inn, which sounds as though there will be interesting goings on in the back room later at night, but then again maybe not. My destination is Kippford but it is still early and it's dry so I stay on the bus to the next village Rockcliffe and walk back along the coast path. The half-hour walk is on a quiet footpath with good views over the estuary, where the Urr Water flows into the Solway Firth.



I'm staying in Kippford (pictured) because it looks like a nice spot and in the Anchor Hotel because the pub is in the Good Beef Guide. After a walk around and a pint I decide I like Kippford - it is a mixture of upmarket sailing types and families from the caravan sites nearby. It is a small village and quiet – the road in is a dead end so there is no through traffic. The main street has the hotel and cottages on one side and the river on the other. There is a small lifeboat station and Kippford is also the home of the Solway Yacht Club. Like much of the Solway Firth the tidal range is large and the yachts are only able to get out at high tide. From my bedroom window in the Anchor I watch the tide come in and some of the strange currents that form as the mudflats are submerged. The Anchor Hotel is a fine pub with rooms. The public bar area is cosy with a wood-fire burning and the beer is good - I'm drinking Sulwath Criffel, a fairly strong bitter brewed up the road at Castle Douglas. The food is also good and the staff and punters are friendly.

I have a good night's sleep and a (very) full breakfast. The morning is miserable with poor visibility and smirr soaking you without you seeing it. I'm taking the bus back to Dumfries, the long way round via the coast. It is just over 20 miles by the main (!) road but takes about 80 minutes with diversions into villages at the end of cul-de-sacs – Kippford itself, Rockcliffe, Southernness and Carsethorn. At Sandyhills we change buses - the minibus heads back to Dalbeattie and a regular bus arrives, turns round and heads back to Dumfries. The tourist literature refers to this as 'the secret coast' and it is quiet. There are quite a few caravan sites dotted around, but it is difficult to see where people will come from – it is quite a drive from any major city for a weekend break. It is difficult to see much of the scenery through the gloom and the condensation but it looks like pleasant countryside, with long beaches by the sea. Southernness is a large holiday park in the middle of nowhere and there are a few damp refugees from the camp heading into the toon (Dumfries) for the day. Kirkbean is the birthplace of John Paul Jones, founder of the US Navy, and has an odd-looking church. Carsethorn these days is only a row of cottages with an attractive pub, the Steamboat Inn, and in the past was well known as a port from which many emigrated (voluntarily or otherwise) to Australia and America. On the left is the prominent hill of Criffel, named after the beer, and at New Abbey the remains of Sweetheart Abbey can be seen through the gloom. It is the day of the Scottish Parliament

elections and there are plenty of Tory posters in the middle of the fields, presumably to remind the sheep how to vote. In the towns the posters are for the SNP plus a smattering for the Greens - Labour and the Lib Dems scored zero.²

Moffat



Another hour at Dumfries to wait for a connection to Moffat so time for a pint in the Wetherspoon's pub Robert the Bruce. In the bar there is a Robert the Bruce Community Board, advertising meditation classes, though I reckon that pillaging classes might be more appropriate to Robert the Bruce. The bus to Moffat is a very flash coach – though it is the local bus as far as Moffat it then heads up the motorway to Glasgow. I still can't see much. The road out of Dumfries is littered with the usual car showrooms but once in the country most of the land is forested and most of it seems to be owned by the Annandale Estates. We pass fairly close to the village of Ae (I only mention it because I like the name), cross the railway line and motorway at Beattock then up the hill to Moffat.

The location of Moffat away from the motorway and railway line means that I'd never been there before. It is pleasant enough in a small town Scottish sort of way – there's a huge Walkers shortbread lorry delivering supplies to the natives to keep them going, and plenty of woollen, tartan and tweed shops. It is the home of Moffat toffee and there is a statue of a ram with no ears in the middle of the High Street. The street would be impressive if it hadn't been turned into a giant car park and getting around town means dodging traffic. Another of Moffat's no doubt many claims to fame is the Star Hotel (pictured), in the Guinness Book of Records © as the narrowest hotel in the world. Not only that but it still has a

plain public bar round the side, like most Scottish hotels used to have but very few do now. So I pay it a visit and I also have a half hour in the bar of Stag Hotel along the road, before it is time for the bus back to Dumfries.

By Dumfries the rain has stopped, but it is still very grey. Forty minutes later at Carlisle it is sunny and warm and, judging by how people are dressed, it has been all day. I'm more used to an east-west change in the weather than a Scottish-English one – the first blue sky appeared as the train pulled into Gretna.

² The two constituencies in Dumfries and Galloway both elected Tory MSPs, with Dumfriesshire being a gain from Labour.

The 2011 trip

Kirkcudbright and Kirkcolm



Tsunami warning, Kirkcolm

I particularly liked the punter who estimated my age as 38. The decking and beer garden attracts wildlife including red squirrels.

On the final day I caught the morning train from Stranraer to Glasgow. Stranraer station is at the end of a pier at the harbour – it seemed like a long walk from town on a wet morning (the town station closed in 1966). Since late 2011 the trains wait for ferries from Larne that never come. The journey to Girvan is through wild country – there is a signalbox at remote Glenwhilly where tokens for the single line are exchanged. It looks as though the railway line has never been touched since the 1950s – though the trains are marginally newer. The trip ended with a late lunch at Mother Indias Café in Glasgow then on to Durham.

Photos: All photos by Steve Gillon except for the following: Killoch Colliery by www.scotbrut.co.uk; Tam O'Shanter by www.dumfriescamra.org.uk. The introductory base map is a Wikipedia template.

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I've left this trip till last, though it was my first of my recent visits. 2011 was before I started taking notes and writing up my journeys for the website, so I don't have any details just a recollection of the highlights.

The first day took me to Dumfries for a couple of lunchtime pints (the usual hopeless connections) and then on to Kirkcudbright where I stayed in the Gordon Arms Hotel, which was cheap and cheerful and had decent beer. I remember a pleasant wander round the town and an excellent haggis supper from the chippy by the harbour.

The second day took me onward to Stranraer, with a lunchtime stop in Newton Stewart. Stranraer is a scruffy little town largely dependent for work and passing trade on the ferries to Ireland (now all departing from Cairnryan further up the coast). However the Grapes is a smashing pub – unspoilt and full of characters. I stayed at the Blue Peter Hotel in Kirkcolm, a no-horse village about seven miles from Stranraer on the Rhinns of Galloway. I chose it because it had won CAMRA awards, and both the beer and the food were excellent. The pub has changed hands since then but still gets excellent reviews.