

THE GARNOCK DOWNSTREAM

HIDDEN INDUSTRY AND FORGOTTEN PLACES FROM LONGFORD TO THE SEA



*Longford Viaduct
Photography © Vivienne Johnstone,
with permission*



*Confluence of Irvine & Garnock Rivers
Photography Heather Upfield*

A SEQUEL TO:
*HIDDEN HISTORY OF THE RIVER GARNOCK
FROM THE SWALLOW HOLE TO THE LUGTON MOU'*
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Kilwinning
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FOREWORD

We are all familiar with the vanished industry on the Garnock banks, from Glengarnock Steelworks, through every town in the Garnock Valley, to Woodmill in Kilwinning. However, less is known about the Garnock and industry beyond the Lugton Mou'. Today, the river disappears under the A78, is fleetingly seen beneath Nethermains Bridge (known locally as Paddy's Brig) and again as it passes beneath Longford Viaduct. From there it is obscured till it reaches Irvine Harbour. How different it must have been before the bypass was built, and the river from Nethermains onwards was easily accessible and highly visible. But for those who venture on to those forgotten lands from Todhill and other routes, there is much to explore.

Kilwinning Eglinton Angling Club hold angling rights as far as Longford Viaduct and slightly beyond and during the season are often to be seen along that stretch of river. Driving along the bypass shows trees, vegetation and mounds and it's difficult to get a clear idea of what is down there...if anything. Surprisingly, there is so much more beyond the Longford Viaduct than can be seen from the road: active industry adjacent to deserted industrial units; the Longford Misk and Snodgrass settlement on a peninsula (names now largely forgotten); and massive mudflats and sandbanks through which the Garnock weaves as it heads to its confluence with the River Irvine and they jointly flow into the sea.

The inspiration for this article began with two simple questions: "Have you ever been having a quiet coffee at 10.00am on the first Wednesday of the month, and jumped out of your chair when warning sirens go off, and you start thinking the end of the world is nigh?. Or have you been surprised by an occasional loud explosion that echoes across town?" Well, you wouldn't be the first! The answer lies in local industry and all will be revealed.

From the Longford Viaduct (the rail track labelled G&SWR on the 1897 map below), the Garnock is flanked on one side by Stevenston and Ardeer, known as **GARNOCK WEST** and the other side by Irvine, known as **GARNOCK EAST**.



Ayrshire Sheet XVI.NE 1897 CCBY (National Library of Scotland) with permission

The above map shows the now lost Chlorine Works at the west of the Garnock, and Eglinton Ironworks top right. The landscape is criss-crossed by mineral railways. There were important industrial sites on both sides of the river going back to at least the late 18th century and likely before. This article takes a look at some of the principal industries and places in the area.

On the map to the east, the Garnock borders the peninsula of Longford Misk, which stretches to the Glasgow/Ayr railway line. On its bank sits the settlement of Snodgrass to the left of Bartonholm, and below them Deepdraught. Bottom left is the text 'Ardeer Sandhills', a massive tract of land unfit for building, but useful in the industry that later developed. Although industry has long since ceased at Garnock East, it is still active and prosperous at Stevenston and Ardeer in Garnock West, to this day.

GARNOCK WEST

Nobel and ICI

Alfred Bernhard Nobel set up the Dynamite Factory at Ardeer in 1871, having purchased 100 acres of land from the Earl of Eglinton¹. Many local residents worked there from across North Ayrshire and beyond. Marjorie Hannah, an elderly friend of mine in her 90s, was one of the many women employed there, among a work force of around 19,000 people. She worked on Detonator manufacture and was responsible for Crimping [*processing*] Detonators by hand, before Testing them and Packing. She left after a year, in 1959, but told me she was terrified of explosions the whole time she was there. And with good reason. Despite Safety measures of their day (wholly inadequate by today's standards), there had been three notable explosions in 1884, 1913 and 1938, causing mass fatalities and injuries. In 1926 Nobel merged with ICI, with production ceasing in 1990. Some buildings were demolished, but others still survive as ruins.

Africa House



In the middle of the ICI works, was the famous Africa House, from the Great Empire Exhibition at Bellahouston. In 1938, after the exhibition closed, it was purchased by ICI, dismantled and rebuilt on site, where it was used as a cafeteria for staff. Sadly, Africa House fell into a ruinous state, and became unsafe. It was demolished in February 2025, despite efforts of a conservation group to save it.

Wikipedia Rosser1954, 27 Nov 2019²

Nobel went on to use his fortune to create the prestigious Nobel Prizes, first awarded in 1901.

Chemring



The site has now been taken over and developed by Chemring³, a munitions plant on Central Avenue, Stevenston, at the very bottom of the peninsula. Among other things they make shells for Challenger 3 tanks. On a modern map, the site sits below the Chlorine factory of the 1897 map.

And herein lies the answer to the sirens and explosions! I am informed by Graeme Smets, Saltcoats historian⁴, that the company tests all its fire alarms at 10am, on the first Wednesday of every month. And if you hear an explosion from time

to time, it's not local fireworks, but they are testing their shells. Glad that's sorted!

¹ Ardrossan & Saltcoats Herald 29 November 2025 <https://www.ardrossanherald.com/news/25657981.lost-ayrshire-rise-fall-nobel-explosives-ici/> Accessed 22 April 2026

² Wikipedia en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:1938_old_Africa_House,_Ardeer,_ICI_Nobel,_Ayrshire.jpg Accessed 12 April 2026

³ Chemring site at Ardeer, www.chemring.com Accessed 12 April 2026

⁴ Messenger correspondence with author 7 April 2026

The Steam Power Plant

Interestingly, the white buildings of Chemring (right), are adjacent to the remnants of the historical Steam Power Plant (left). The chimneys from this building can be seen all around the area.



Drone photography © Graeme Smets, with permission



Land adjacent to the Plant is covered in a series of high sand dunes, where they are recorded as 'Ardeer Sand Hills' at the foot of the map on page 1.

This commodity is fundamental to the safety of the site, as explosives can be safely stored and testing shells takes place within their confines

Drone photography © Graeme Smets, with permission

I quote Graeme Smets, Saltcoats historian, who posted on Facebook in March 2026⁵:

"The Ardeer power station was a 20th-century industrial power plant built to supply steam and electricity to the enormous Nobel/ICI explosives and chemical works. It featured twin chimneys, large boiler houses, and extensive pipework feeding steam across the site. It is consistently described as one of the largest buildings on the old Nobel estate, dominating the skyline of Stevenston's industrial shore... The plant's importance was such that, in 1912, a dedicated Territorial Force company was raised from the workforce to defend the site in wartime due to its strategic value".

"The plant supported:

- Steam for chemical processes (nitroglycerine, gelignite, propellants, nitrocellulose).
- Electricity for workshops, laboratories, and the internal rail network.
- Heating and power for the self-contained "factory village" that once included shops, dentists, and transport systems."

About the value of preservation of the ruins, Smets continues that they constitute: "Scotland's industrial heritage: representing a period when Ardeer was a global centre of explosives and chemical innovation. Local identity: especially for families whose histories are tied to the works. Engineering history: showing how a remote peninsula was transformed into a self-contained industrial city." Can't argue with that.

Ardeer Ironworks

Also in the same vicinity, built 1849 by Merry & Cunningham Ltd, the Ironworks was a huge site with 5 blast furnaces on the Ardeer shore. There are now no remains. See North Ayrshire Heritage on Facebook, 20/3/2025.

⁵ Saltcoats PhotoHub on Facebook February 2025. Accessed 12 April 2026

GARNOCK EAST

From the buildings and industry of Ardeer in Garnock West, I return to Longford and the River Garnock at the A78. Along the bypass there are visible industrial ruins before and to the south of Todhill Country Centre (The Richmond Fellowship Scotland⁶). I have been unable to discover what these buildings were at this stage. From a map of 1906 these buildings were across the Garnock from Longford Chemical Works, recorded as 'Chlorine Works' on the 1879 map. On the same stretch, the Penny Burn meanders from the back of Whitehurst, beneath the A78, and emerges in the Todhill fields, before joining the River Garnock to the west of the Longford Viaduct. The burn was reputedly an original parish boundary between Stevenston and Kilwinning.

The Longford Misk

Now to venture onto the Longford Misk, a promontory in the river, where the ancient settlements of Snodgrass, Bartonholm and Deepdraught were located. It can be accessed from the east riverbank from the path accessible from Paddy's Brig [*Nethermains Bridge*] heading towards the Longford Viaduct. Another route is via Garnock Floods Nature Reserve.



It is also accessible from Todhill on the west of the river, via a concrete bridge, known locally as The Sodgers Brig. Gordon Donaldson of Kilwinning Eglinton Angling Club informed me that his grandfather, who lived at Nethermains Farm back in the day, reported that the bridge was manned by armed soldiers during WWII, to guard whatever the War Office was doing locally.

Longford Viaduct. Drone photography © Graeme Smets, with permission

Longford itself is known by Kilwinning residents, as Lumford. That is also how it is rendered by Robert Morrison writing in the 1940s about his memories of his 19thC childhood in Kilwinning⁷. He tells the story of the Cobbler's Hole, where cobbler Johnstone fell into the Garnock while angling at Woodwynd, and his body was carried downstream "as far as the Lumford Bridge".



Drone photography of Longford Misk © Graeme Smets, with permission

⁶ Country Centre www.trfs.org.uk/in_your_area/1084_todhill_country_centre Accessed 18 April 2026

⁷ The Biography of Roberts Morrison, Scottish Corpus of Texts and Speech, Document 1017 <https://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/document/?documentid=1017> Accessed 12 April 2026

What is a Misk? It means a damp low-lying stretch of coarse grassland and is frequently associated with Ayrshire. The Dictionary of Scots Language⁸ has a report of the District of Cunninghame, Ayrshire 1820 which describes a misk as “water-worn gravel, moss and blown sand concocted into one mass”. The name is also associated with Bog Myrtle (*Myrica gale*) which must have grown profusely in these damp conditions. Being non-arable the land was an ideal location for industry.

The above photo page 5, shows the Misk today, taken from Garnock West, with the river heading south to the sea on the right hand side. There is a bridge in the foreground linking Garnock West with the Misk. I am grateful to John Dunlop, Irvine Camera Club⁹, for his photograph of the bridge.



Photography © John Dunlop, with permission

Dane Love, Ayrshire author and historian, notes that mining on the Misk started early on. He reports: “as far back as 1798 one [of the mines] had ...a steam-powered engine to pump water from the shafts”¹⁰. According to *Scottish Places*, the Misk was mined in the 19thC by the landowner Colonel Fullarton of Fullarton, but on 20 June 1833, the whole area flooded spectacularly¹¹. John Strawhorn¹² records that as a result, the mining villages of Bartonholm, Longford, Snodgrass and Nethermains “were laid under water” and presumably abandoned. The land remained flooded and out of use for the next 20 years.

The main cause of flooding, in this boggy environment, was the original flow of the Garnock through the Misk. At this point it was tidal and high tides could wreak havoc in the mine shafts. The problem was resolved by Archibald Montgomerie, 13th Earl of Eglinton. He authorised the construction of a canal, thereby altering the flow of the river to allow drainage, and although it took a year for the land and works to dry out, there was a successful outcome. See map on page 8 for the original flow of the Garnock and how the canal solved the problem.

Bartonholm Colliery was established to the east of the Viaduct, supplying coal to Eglinton Iron Works. According to Dane Love, Ayrshire author and historian, a village grew around the mine, with single storey workers rows, comprising 2 rooms each. To the left were three cottages of Deepdraught, so named for a deep drainage channel, or its ability to support boats in the Garnock at that point. Despite the proximity to Irvine, the inhabitants of Bartonholm appeared to have had more affinity with Kilwinning, and it should be noted that they had some quality football players among their number!¹³ Bartonholm Colliery closed in 1928 and the mining village has since been demolished. [**see Postscript page 10*].

With all mining on The Misk ceased, eventually Nobel/ICI took over the land, extending their site from Garnock West to Garnock East.

⁸ DSL <https://dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/misk>, accessed 14 April 2026

⁹ Messenger correspondence with author 10 April 2026

¹⁰ *Ayrshire's Lost Villages*, Carn Publishing, 2016, p33

¹¹ <https://www.scottish-places.info/features/featurefirst94212.html>, accessed 13 April 2026

¹² *The History of Irvine* (1986), John Donald Publishers Ltd, Edinburgh. Page 142

¹³ *Ayrshire's Lost Villages* (2016). Carn Publishing, Auchinleck.p36

Chris Hawksworth, Kilwinning Historian¹⁴, made an earlier visit to the Misk and kindly shared his findings. He wrote:

“There was a network of narrow gauge railways which served the buildings, carrying explosives from one site to the other. A branch line linked the site to the main line between Irvine and Ayr, and until around 1987, there was a daily service of a few gunpowder wagons, which were taken to Falkland Yard in Ayr, for onward distribution”.

“Many of the buildings are in a poor state and slowly starting to crumble. There were corrugated iron blast walls which contain sand in front of most of the buildings which in turn were buried in sand, so if they did blow up, the blast would be contained. These sand covered structures were known as *Chilworth Mounds* after the site in southern England where they were first built.”



Photography © Chris Hawksworth, with permission

Further down the Misk, it is possible to see a series of ruined buildings from the train heading to Ayr from Kilwinning, shortly after crossing the Viaduct. Hawksworth has identified these as part of the Nobel/ICI works. They were built around 1934, seemingly to make cordite.

Today, the Misk looks a wild and forbidding wilderness, but Hawksworth informed me that there is an abundance of birds there from Mute Swans in the pools and even Crossbills, so it has become something of a nature reserve of itself.

Snodgrass

And finally, on to the settlement of Snodgrass. It is situated on the left of the peninsula and the key to the settlement is in its name. Although there are a number of possible meanings floating around, according to Dictionary of Scots Language¹⁵, ‘snod’ means ‘smooth’ (from Old Scots c1475). So in contrast to the coarse grass of the rest of the Misk, here is an area where there is smooth grass. After the flooding, a map of 1906 records a sheepfold at Snodgrass and I infer from this, that it was suitable for grazing. I can imagine the original medieval settlement growing up around a small meadow, with a horse, cow and a couple of sheep.

There are references to Snodgrass dating back to the 14thC, but it was likely to have been occupied well before that. John Strawhorn, Irvine author and historian, suggests that the whole area would have been under the sea 2000+ years ago¹⁶ but in the intervening years, there have been archaeological finds on Ardeer and Longford Misk from Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age 9600-4000BC) and Bronze Age (2500-700BC), likely to have been washed downstream.

¹⁴ Email correspondence with author 7 April 2026

¹⁵ DSL <https://www.scottishcorpus.ac.uk/document/?documentid=1017>. Accessed 14 April 2026

¹⁶ The History of Irvine, (as Ref 8) Maps C3 and C2

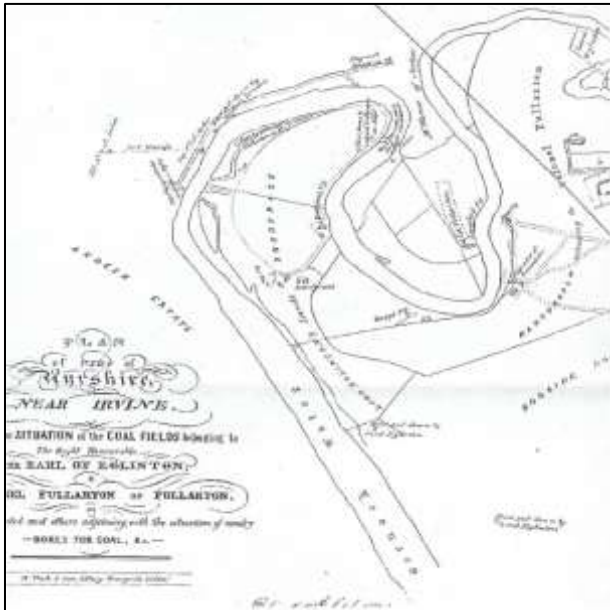
Snodgrass Surname

From the ancient occupants of the settlement, Snodgrass became adopted as a surname. Over the centuries, the surname proceeded to spread worldwide and it now has its own clan pages on the Internet. The *Snodgrass Clan Society of America* online, reports that the earliest mentions of a Snodgrass surname are:

“Adam Snorgyrs, Bailie of Are [Ayr] in 1372...”

“...modern form of name began to appear in 16thC Patrick Snodgrass admitted Burgess and Freeman of Glasgow in 1578”¹⁷.

Another source says that there was a strong link between the Snodgrass families and the Cunninghames. To follow that up, read *Early Snodgrass*, a family history by Norman Snodgrass Jnr¹⁸ at: www.electricscotland.com/webclans/stoz/snodgra2.html



The *Snodgrass Clan Society of America* website includes an interesting map of the Longford Misk¹⁹, which shows the original path of the River Garnock, curving through the Misk.

Today, that U-bend has vanished. There is no date visible on the map, but it would seem to be 1850s or thereabouts, as the Earl of Eglinton is shown as landowner along with Colonel Fullarton of Fullarton.

It appears that the canal the Earl constructed for drainage, linked the two top parts of the 'U' giving us the river flow we know today.

The 1897 map (page 2) renders this original river flow in dotted lines.

There are now Snodgrass family members across the world, and they all owe their surname to this little settlement on the banks of the River Garnock. While they cannot be considered a clan in the

traditional sense, they have their own family crest and coat of arms.

The name Snodgrass is immortalised in the song “Oom Pah-Pah”²⁰, from Lionel Bart’s musical *Oliver!* (1960): “Mister Percy Snodgrass, would often have the odd glass...” and Hugh Wilson, member of Irvine Golf Club, informed me that Snodgrass is the name of the 13th Tee:

7	5	The Cup	318	318	309	4
8	4	Saddle Back	177	177	160	3
9	5	Racecourse	459	459	442	4
	43	OUT	3274	3212	3052	36
PLEASE PLAY READY GOLF						
10	3	Brant	373	373	364	4
11	4	Grandstand	464	464	454	4
12	4	Arran	385	367	347	4
13	6	Snodgrass	431	431	431	4
14	4	The Specs	378	378	350	4
15	5	Barterholm	338	338	328	4
16	3	Redburn	157	157	155	3
17	4	The Warren	438	396	387	4
18	6	Flagstaff	356	326	312	4
		IN	3320	3230	3128	35
		OUT	3274	3212	3052	36
		TOTAL	6594	6442	6180	71
		PAR				
		COURSE HANDI				

¹⁷ Snodgrass Clan Society of America <https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~clansnodgrass/genealogy/history.html>.

Accessed 14 April 2026

¹⁸ ElectricScotland Family History Accessed 14 April 2026

¹⁹ Snodgrass Clan Society of America, as above

²⁰ Oom Pah-Pah Lyrics <https://forgetmenots.ie/files/Oom-Pah-Pah-Lyrics.pdf> Accessed 16 April 2026

River's End

From the Misk, the Garnock winds through sandbanks and mud flats. On the east bank sits the old Bogside Racecourse, seen in this view from the 7th Tee, Irvine Golf Course, looking across the racecourse towards ICI.



Photography © Hugh Wilson, with permission

Further downstream sit the wooden remains of Nobel wharf on the west bank. It was used till the 1990s, with railways linking to different parts of their site. The moveable crane is clearly visible and behind the wharf, are the piers of a Nobel industrial bridge, linking Ardeer to the Misk, no longer passable.



Photography © John Dunlop, with permission

Further down from the wharf, is the story's end, with the confluence of the River Garnock (flowing down from the left), and the River Irvine (in the foreground). As one, they flow under *The Big Idea* bridge and out to sea.



Looking across to the Bogside flats. Photography © John Dunlop, with permission

POSTSCRIPT

* From Page 6. Shortly before publication, I was advised that Kilwinning Heritage had been contacted by an individual from Northern Ireland, researching an ancestor, Alexander Cupples, aged 16 or 17. He had sadly died in a roof collapse at Bartonholme Colliery in December 1874. Probably one of many who died in the mines, which wasn't deemed particularly newsworthy at the time.

While working on this article in April, many of us were appalled by a report in *Ardrossan & Saltcoats Herald*, 16 April 2026. It featured the extent of dredging at Ardeer, resulting in the wholesale destruction of trees and natural habitats across a vast swathe of land. This fragile landscape deserves to be protected.

https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1562547505432512&set=a.804986131188657&locale=en_GB,
Accessed 16 April 2026

NATURAL HISTORY OF THE RIVER GARNOCK

'*Tight Lines: the fish, wildlife and conservation of the River Garnock*' a pdf of slides from a Kilwinning Heritage talk given November 2024, by Gordon Donaldson and Rickie Gilmour from Kilwinning Eglinton Angling Club. Available as a free download from:

www.kilwinningheritage.org.uk/downloads/

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Thanks to Vivienne Thompson, Kilwinning photographer, for permission to use her beautiful photograph of the Longford Viaduct on the front cover

Thanks to Hugh Wilson, for golfing contributions including photograph of the Bogside Race Course

Also by Heather Upfield:

Timepiece, a history of James Blair and the clocks, clock & watchmakers of Kilwinning, 2019
Available £2+p&p from www.kilwinningheritage.org.uk/shop

Second Time: A Companion to Time Piece III, 2026
Available as a free pdf from www.kilwinningheritage.org.uk/downloads/

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The Clock & Watchmakers of Kilwinning, 2021, Antiquarian Horological Society
www.ahsoc.org/blog/the-clock-and-watchmakers-of-kilwinning/

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