

# HIDDEN HISTORY of THE RIVER GARNOCK

The Kilwinning Stretch  
from  
the Swallow Hole to the Lugton Mou'



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Kilwinning  
*Heritage*

## THE RIVER GARNOCK

The Garnock is a moody river. It rises in Clyde Muirshiel Country Park to the north and runs south through Kilbirnie, Glengarnock and Dalry, before flowing through Kilwinning. It continues its course alongside Garnock Floods to its confluence with the River Irvine, and beyond to the sea. It is only around 20 miles long, but it is rich in history, much loved by anglers, and it's perfect for a leisurely stroll along the paths of the riverbank, with plenty of wildlife.

It is likely that in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century, St Winnin himself sailed up the western seaboard from either Wales or Ireland and continued up the Garnock to Segdoune, where he settled and founded his Kil. John Strawhorn<sup>1</sup> estimates that 500 years ago, the sea would have reached the Dirrans, before completely silting up. Imagine mooring your boat at the foot of Dirrans Terrace!

The river has not always been in good condition. Lee Ker<sup>2</sup> writes that in 1692, William George was reported for Sabbath Desecration, after he threw a dead horse over the bridge into the Garnock on a Sunday! While in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, industry along the banks must have caused unimaginable pollution. Today the river is more healthy. Gordon Donaldson, President of Kilwinning Eglinton Angling Club, deserves credit for his work as a volunteer ranger. He has taken ongoing responsibility for planting young trees along the full length of the Garnock, to preserve the fragile ecosystem of the river. As he also holds a C&G qualification in Invasive Plants removal, you might see him on the banks tackling Giant Hogweed and other invasive species.

In conversations with neighbours, it's common to hear them say, for example, they saw a salmon leaping over the Barrel dam; or they were out walking the dog along the Bags; or they used to swim in the Salmon Hole. It became evident that there is a wealth of local knowledge about the Garnock and arcane terminology commonly in use among the general population.

This guide includes information from Kilwinning Eglinton Angling Club; old maps and textual sources; and Kilwinning residents' memories. It draws together, in numbered sections, the intriguing names of the six fishing sites and seven named dams (weirs); and explores the fascinating hidden history of the riverbanks, with their traces of long vanished features with some still to be seen.

A diagram of the river and the sites mentioned, is at the end, along with Acknowledgements and Bibliography.

A neighbour related this poem, from her father. It describes a moody river and could well be the Garnock!

### The Angler's Lament

"Sometimes ower early, Sometimes ower late  
Sometimes nae water, Sometimes a spate  
Sometimes ower glaury, Sometimes ower clear  
There's aye summat wrang, when I'm fishing here"  
*[source unknown]*

### A DAUNDER ALONG THE RIVERBANKS FROM NORTH TO SOUTH

On the **west bank**, a riverside track begins upstream from the **VIADUCT**, though it's now said to be dangerous through riverbank erosion. From the Woodwynd, the track becomes a pathway and it continues all the way to the underpass beneath the A78 and beyond to Nethermains Bridge on the B779, near the cowp. On the **east bank** a riverside path starts at a gap in the wall on Irvine Road, opposite Buckreddan. This path continues downstream as far as the **DIRRANS BRIDGE**, which can be crossed to continue the walk on the west bank.

The west bank path effectively unites **KILWINNING ABBEY** with **EGLINTON CASTLE**: join the riverbank path at Bridgend and walk south along to the **OLD RAILWAY BRIDGE**. Walk over the bridge and the path leads to the Irvine Road and pedestrian access to Eglinton Country Park.

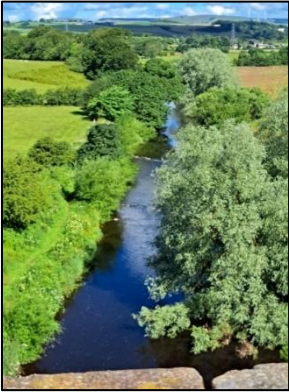
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<sup>1</sup> Strawhorn, pC4

<sup>2</sup> Lee Ker, p277

## FROM THE SWALLOW HOLE TO THE LUGTON MOU'

1. Starting at the **VIADUCT**, upstream to the north is the **SWALLOW HOLE** the first fishing site. It is in a bend north of Woodend, on the border with lands of Groatholm. It was a favoured place for youngsters to go wild swimming. A member of the angling club said that he swam in the Swallow Hole since he could walk 55 years ago. He added that the boys had constructed a diving board and cooked tatties out of the field beside the river!



(ii) *The River from the Viaduct*

Below the Swallow Hole are the **DRUID MOUNDS** on the west bank close to Wood Farm.

John Smith<sup>3</sup> in 1895 describes three distinct pyramid shaped hills beside the river. He paints a rather romantic view of their origins, believing them to have been man-made in pre-Christian times, and used in pagan ceremonies. Canmore<sup>4</sup> is more down-to-earth, reporting that "...there is no real evidence for antiquity about any of the mounds...These knolls are naturally formed and show no trace of adaptation".

It seems that a single escarpment beside the river has been divided into three by erosion from streams coming from the fields above. In this photo, taken over the wall of the viaduct, the Druid Mounds are within the group of trees top left. The Mounds are around thirty feet high with a flat area on top. They are now densely wooded and covered in shrubs and when I scrambled up them with a friend in 2015, at the top of each, was the boundary of a field belonging to Wood Farm. Over the fence were grazing cattle. That same field in 2023 has sheep, which are faintly visible in the image.

The Druid Mounds were a great playground for children and on my visit, I found evidence of a bonfire in a little stone pit, so there is still activity of some sort up there to this day. Whether Druid, or not is unknown. The Mounds are commemorated in Druid Drive in Woodwynd.

Upstream from the viaduct, two small dams are visible but the first significant dam is at the north foot of the viaduct. It is apparently not named, but it seems logical to call it the **VIADUCT DAM**. A member of Kilwinning Heritage, reported that as children they swam at **THE TURN**, south of the viaduct.

2. The next fishing site is the **WOODWYND STRETCH**, roughly beside the green between River Walk and Waterside Road in Woodwynd. There are three or four minor dams in this stretch. The **WORSTED MILL** was on the east bank below the Threadmill Burn. Further downstream, before the river curves to the next dam, are **THE STANEY BEDS** (Stony Beds). Younger children used to splash about in the west bank shallows, while the teenagers swam over to the deeper east bank, where they had a campfire and hung-out!



(iii) *Corn Mill Lade*

3. From the Woodwynd Stretch, the river curves, leading to the substantial diagonal **MILL DAM** just upstream from the **AULD BRIG** (Abbott Adam's Bridge).

This dam is interesting, as it also includes the **MILL LADE**, which fed the waterwheel for the **CORN MILL**. There is still evidence of the lade and masonry associated with it. The Mill was situated on the west bank at the start of modern day Garnock View. A member of Kilwinning Heritage remembers her grandfather taking her to meet the miller, Hughie Dick, who was always completely covered in white flour, aside from his bald pate, which, when he removed his bunnet, was pink!

On the east side of the Auld Brig was the **TANNERY**. An original building from the Threadmill complex is still visible in Bridgend Autoplex. The small islands in the river were known as the **BLEACHING GREENS**. The stretch below the Auld Brig is **THE BRIDGEND** fishing site.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, John (1895).

<sup>4</sup> Canmore



(iv). Barrel dam

4. Continuing downstream, just before the confluence of the Bannoch Burn and the River Garnock, is the **BARREL DAM**.

A member of the angling club told me it was originally constructed from 55-gallon drums, which were filled with concrete. It spanned the Garnock from bank to bank, with a space in the middle for the fish. A neighbour remembers it being constructed in the 1960s/70s. It was removed because it was said to have caused flooding at Bridgend when the river was in full spate. The drums have now been replaced by assorted rocks and masonry, but when the water-table was very low in mid-June 2023, one of the drums, which had not previously been removed, was clearly visible in the centre of the dam. Another minor unnamed dam is a few yards below it.

5. Beginning on the east bank at **DIRRANS COTTAGE** (now Pine Lodge), the fishing site on this stretch of the river is known as **CAPTAIN WRIGHT'S**, named after a previous owner of the cottage.



(v) Captain Wright's upstream from the Broken dam

The cottage was built in 1820 and the Census for 1911<sup>5</sup> shows **William H Wright** aged 48, living there with his wife Florence aged 30, and their daughter Winifred aged 2. They had been married six years. William died on 21 May 1917 at a Nursing Home in Glasgow. An obituary in the *Glasgow Herald*<sup>6</sup> reads: "William Henderson Wright Ret Commander, Lieutenant, RNR, Dirrans Cottage. Death on Service". By this stage, he was clearly more highly ranked than Captain.

The Census for 1921<sup>7</sup> records Florence (born in Mandalay, Burma) still living at Dirrans Cottage, with daughter Winifred.

In 1923 Dirrans Cottage was apparently bought by Archibald Seton Montgomerie, Earl of Eglinton, to provide a private school for the ladies of Eglinton Castle and the Estate<sup>8</sup>.

The 1911 map shows that the lands of Dirrans Cottage once bordered the river. It's probable that Wright had Riparian Rights and that this stretch has been known as Captain Wright's for over a century.

6. Captain Wright's continues to the **BROKEN DAM**. From here the river approaches the Dirrans.

In conversation with a neighbour, I learnt that the Dirrans was built in the 1920s/early 30s on a site known as 'landward' as it was outwith Kilwinning Borough Boundary. The closure of Fergushill and Benslie Collieries in 1921<sup>9</sup> caused a housing crisis, as miners and their families were displaced from the mining rows. Ayr County Council built the houses, and many miners subsequently found homes in the Dirrans. Locals talk of WW2 air-raid shelters in the gardens of the Dirrans houses.

Associated with the Dirrans are two significant features, which have now vanished.

The **FIRST** vanished feature is the monumental Eglinton Ironworks **SLAG HILL** (listed on Canmore<sup>10</sup> with a photograph). It stood on the west bank, continuing along close to the Auld Brig. It was covered in bits of shrubbery and grass, and a neighbour said it didn't look too much of an eyesore! It towered above Smith Crescent, so named after the Earl of Eglinton's Blacksmith's which was once in the field opposite, now Allotments. The slag hill was a playground for local children and many have their own stories. A neighbour in her 80s, born and bred in the Dirrans, reported that there was a tarry hole at the top. She jumped into it one day and the tar came up and over her wellies; she didn't tell me what her mother said when she got home! The hills were removed some time in the 1960s to build the deep water terminal at Hunterston, which was completed in 1979. The land where the slag hill stood, is now Almswall Park.

<sup>5</sup> Scotland's People

<sup>6</sup> Threetowners Forum

<sup>7</sup> Scotlands's People

<sup>8</sup> PressReader online, Scottish Daily Mail

<sup>9</sup> Hawksworth, p24

<sup>10</sup> Canmore

The **SECOND** vanished feature is **NINIAN'S ISLE** on the east bank, below Smith Crescent.



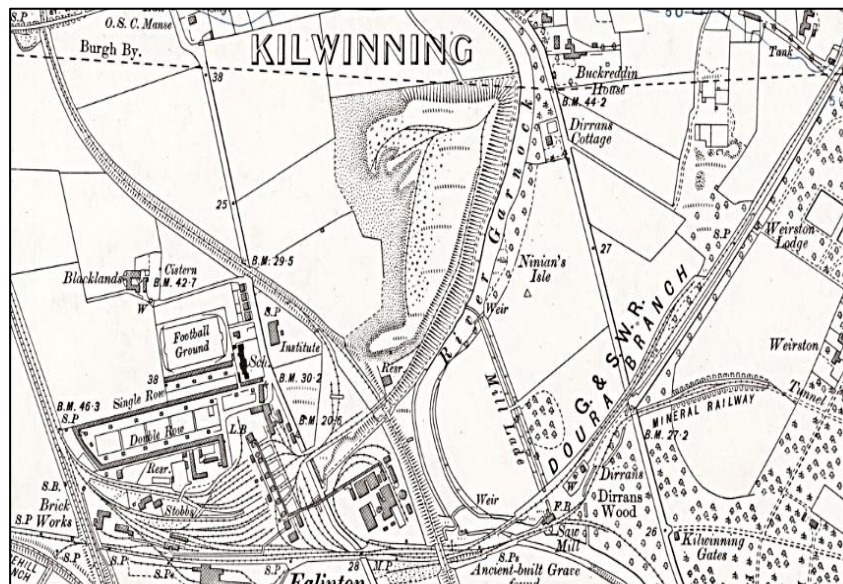
It has long been known that there was once an island in the River Garnock named Ninian's Isle.

The OS Map of 1855 shows it on the east side of the river, in a little inlet not far from the riverbank.

**Ninian's Isle** OS: Ayrshire XVI.4 Kilwinning. Survey Date 1855, CC-BY. <https://maps.nls.uk/view/74930575>  
Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland, <https://maps.nls.uk/index.html>

John Strawhorn<sup>11</sup> reports "... there is a *St Ninian's Isle* in the Garnock below Kilwinning". Earlier, in 1895, John Smith<sup>12</sup>, records a *Ringens Isle* in the Garnock. He claims that Ringen is a corruption of Winnin. However, the Whithorn Trust<sup>13</sup> has confirmed that St Ninian was also known as St Ringen.

There is, then, some doubt as to the original name of the Isle. Winnin or Ninian? Current knowledge is that the Saints Winnin, Inan, Finnan and Ninian hark back to the same saint Uinniau, with regional variations. So either Winnin or Ninian is possible. As Kilwinning was on the Pilgrim Way from Glasgow to St Ninian's shrine in Whithorn, it might have been named in the early period of pilgrimages. It is known that in 1507, King James IV stopped at Kilwinning on his pilgrimage to Whithorn. He might have spent time at the Isle too.



**Kilwinning OS Ayrshire Sheet XVI.NE. Published 1911. CC-BY, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/75494351>**  
Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland, <https://maps.nls.uk/index.html>

There is now no trace of Ninian's Isle anywhere in the river. The OS Map of 1911 clearly shows the Isle now within the riverbank in the vicinity of Seymour Avenue in the Dirrans. Adjacent Ninians Terrace commemorates the Isle.

It's possible that the construction of the Mill dam affected the water course and caused a build-up of sediment. Just to the left of the riverbank path, is a small green and densely wooded area at the back of Seymour Avenue. This holds the last traces of what was Ninian's Isle. It is still a wonderfully peaceful retreat.

Roger Griffith, Ayrshire Historian, suggests there might even have been a chapel or hermitage on the Isle<sup>14</sup>. This could originate from the time of St Winnin. I would like to think that in earlier days, St Winnin himself used the Isle as a retreat, when things became too busy in the Kill!

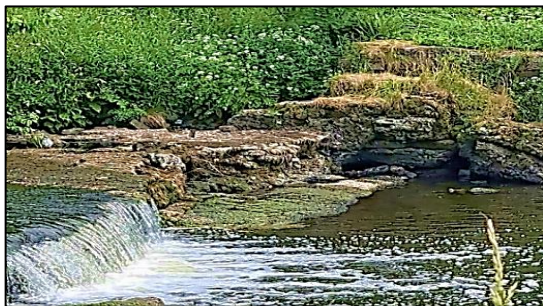
<sup>11</sup> Strawhorn, J (2006). p4

<sup>12</sup> Smith, John (1895), p61

<sup>13</sup> Whithorn Trust, electronic correspondence with author, 13 June 2023

<sup>14</sup> Roger Griffith, Ayrshire Historian, electronic correspondence with author, 15 June 2021

7. Returning to the riverbank, the next feature is **JEANIE'S DAM**, adjacent to the entrance of the Dirrans playing fields on the east bank. Local residents reported that the dam was named after Jeanie Kennedy, who had a wee wooden shop thereabouts.



(vi) Jeanie's dam & Mill Lade masonry

It is also the site of the **SAWMILL LADE**.

The map of 1911 shows a lade which ran from Jeanie's dam across the lower part of the adjacent playing fields, to the Sawmill downstream.

Remnants of the masonry from the lade were clearly visible at the dam on the east side, during the low water-table in mid-June 2023.

8. From Jeanie's dam, the river passes under the **DIRRANS BRIDGE**. Standing on the Dirrans Bridge a hundred years ago, the view on the west bank would have been dominated by the vast industrial complex of **EGLINTON IRONWORKS**, with its eight furnaces, railway network, and housing rows for the hundreds of employees. The map of 1911 shows the extent of the site. After closure of the works in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the land was cleared for the Blacklands housing development. The west bank riverside path was once an Ironworks railway track!



(vii). The Bags under ice, 2018

Within the bend downstream, is the next fishing site on the west bank, called **THE BAGS**.

It was once known as **CULLIM'S HOLE** and it apparently appeared as such on an 1850s map, according to the angling club.

This stretch of the river is liable to freeze over in harsh winters as my visit in February 2018 shows. Neighbours report having skated here as children!



(viii) Sawmill dam

9. Moving along from The Bags, the next dam is **THE SAWMILL DAM**, a substantial double weir.

Below the dam is the fishing site named **THE SALMON HOLE**. This was another favoured spot for youngsters to play.

10. Beyond the dam, the river passes under the **OLD RAIL BRIDGE**. Chris Hawksworth<sup>15</sup>, local historian, reports that the bridge was built around 1830 to carry the railway between the Ironworks and local collieries. After the line closed (c1940), the bridge was apparently used as an unofficial crossing. It is now part of the Sustrans network. Beside the bridge are piers carrying a large pipe, constructed around 1950.

A short distance downstream from the bridge, was the old **SAWMILL** on the east bank. The Mill closed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the land was cleared for housing at present-day Woodmill. A bridge, now vanished, carried a branch line to and from the Ironworks. Abutments of the bridge can still be seen on the riverbank, when vegetation has died back.

11. Below the site of the Sawmill, is the **LUGTON MOU' DAM** (Lugton Mouth Dam).

<sup>15</sup> Chris Hawksworth, Bridges, email with author 11 July 2023



(ix) *Mess John Steps*

Beyond the dam is a little-known feature called **MESS JOHN'S STEPS**. This is a row of stepping-stones from bank to bank, of uncertain age. They were clearly visible during the dry spell of mid-June 2023, but are otherwise usually partially covered by the river.

According to author Rosser54 Wikipedia, the term 'Mess' was used in the 17th century "as a jocular, but derogatory term for a minister, especially a Presbyterian one not appointed by the congregation. The term 'mess' derives from 'the mass'. The name is thus effectively Minister John's Steps". It has not been possible to discover which Minister this might refer to, nor how long the stepping-stones have been there.

The river on this stretch was another popular children's swimming hole. A neighbour reported that as boys, they had set up a rudimentary zipwire, using a rope across the river from bank to bank, and the handlebars from an old bike. The object was to launch yourself off the bank holding on to the handlebars, and when you reached mid-stream,

to let go and plunge into the river!

**12.** At the next bend in the river, **THE LUGTON MOU'** is revealed in the confluence of the Lugton and the Garnock, and this daunder along the riverbanks ends.

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#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Gordon Donaldson, President of Kilwinning Eglinton Angling Club, and other members of the club, who were so helpful in answering all my questions about the river. Their extensive knowledge of the Garnock is superb. The Club was founded in 1905 by the Earl of Eglinton, Honorary Patron. For more information: <https://keac.co.uk/>

Thanks to Ayrshire Historians for their invaluable input; and friends, neighbours, and members of Kilwinning Heritage who were happy to contribute and share their memories.

#### PHOTOGRAPHY

All photography by Heather Upfield, aside from *Mess John Steps* by Steven Campbell.

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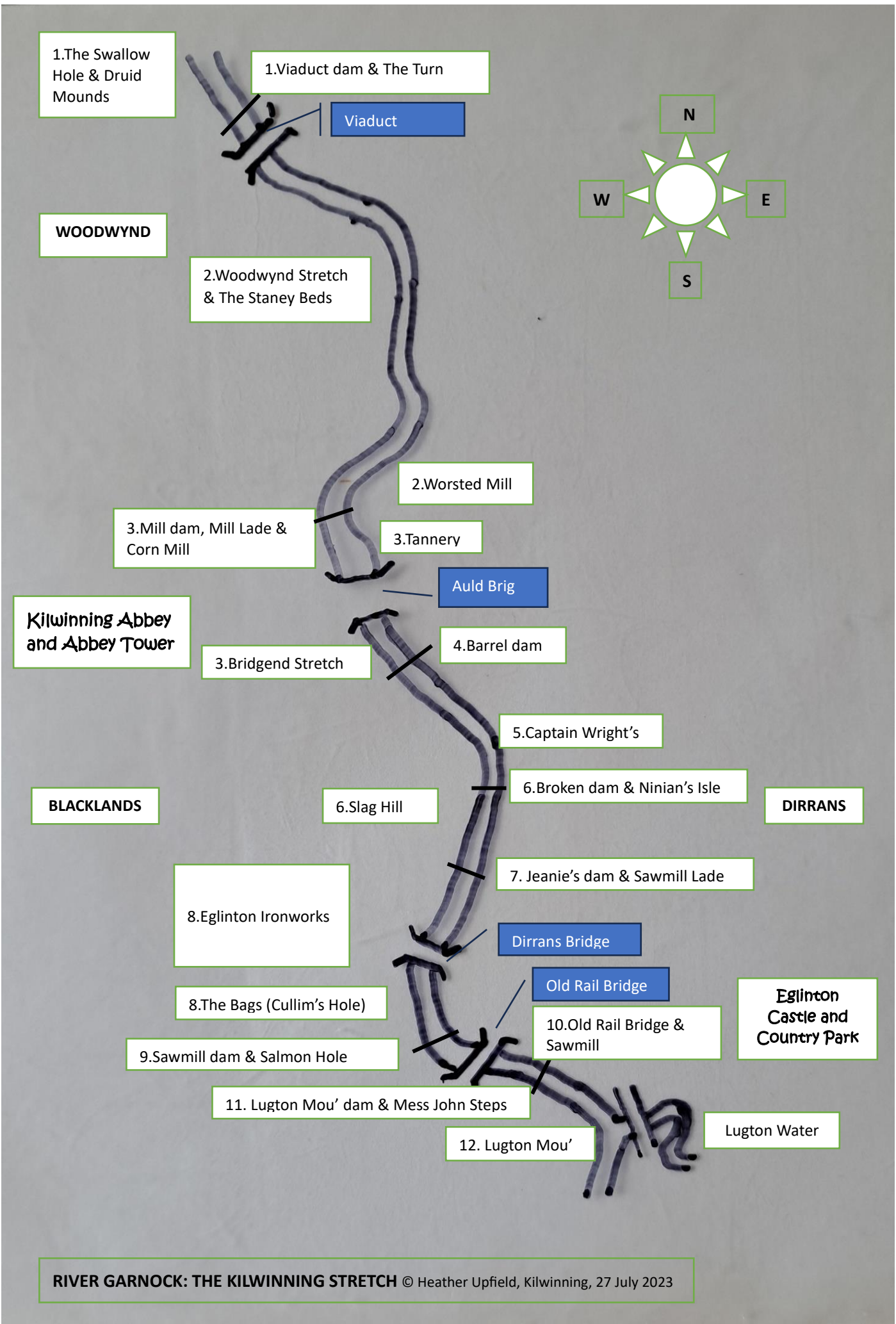
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