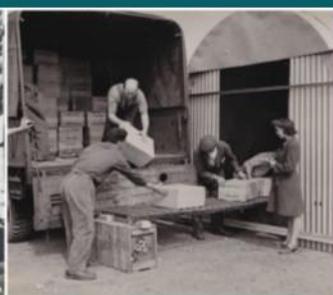
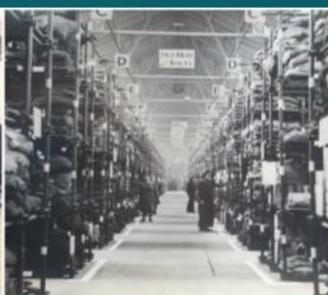


# The Solway Military Coast



## *A Story of Conflict, Courage and Community*



**Sarah Harper**



**THE DEVIL'S  
PORRIDGE  
MUSEUM**

# **The Solway Military Coast**

## ***A Story of Conflict, Courage and Community***

**Written by Sarah Harper**

**Edited by Richard Brodie**

**Research conducted by Sarah Harper and Edwin  
Rutherford**

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Special thanks are given to all those local people who participated in interviews which helped to gather invaluable personal insights and key local knowledge. A special mention is deserved for the staff, trustees and volunteers of the Devil's Porridge Museum, who had the vision and drive to pursue the Solway Military Coast Project to a successful conclusion. Many thanks also to the staff from local libraries and archives for their assistance and giving access to fascinating sources of information.

**Sarah Harper MA**

Research and Collections Manager

The Devil's Porridge Museum



**THE DEVIL'S  
PORRIDGE  
MUSEUM**



**Armed Forces  
Covenant**



# Foreword

When we began researching the amazing history of Eastriggs and Gretna twenty-two years ago, little did we know that we would end up where we are now. Our story is currently told in a new state of the art, five-star museum and, with this book, we have now succeeded in bringing our area's social journey up to date.

'The Solway Military Coast' acknowledges the contribution of our twin townships and the surrounding Borderland to the defence of the realm over the past century. This contribution is something that should both fill us with awe for the human effort involved and shock us that mankind has not learned how to make peace, rather than war.

When the project started, we only had a skeleton of ideas for our World War Two and Cold War book. Immense credit must go to our two researchers, Edwin Rutherford and Sarah Harper for gathering oral testimonies from our community and putting the flesh on the bones. Sarah has written this fine tome, which is a great feat, so early in her museum career.

**Richard Brodie**

Chairman,

Eastriggs and Gretna Heritage Group

The Devil's Porridge Museum

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# Introduction

The fast-running tides of the Solway Firth have ebbed and flowed for thousands and thousands of years, but, in the last one hundred years the role of the Solway hinterland has changed even more dramatically than those turning tides.

During wartime, this remote location at the mouth of the Solway Firth was afforded natural shielding from the Cheviots, Pennine and Cumbrian hills, water supply from the Solway and its rivers, and possessed excellent railway links in both north and southwards directions: all of which were advantageous for wartime activities.

This area first came to prominence during the First World War when 'the largest munitions factory in the World', HM Factory Gretna, straddling the Anglo-Scottish Border, was constructed over a length of nine miles. This factory brought thousands of workers into the locality, the majority of whom settled in the specially created townships of Eastriggs and Gretna.

When the Great War ended in 1918, fears were expressed in the local community that without assistance, Eastriggs and Gretna would become abandoned. The closure of the factory had left thousands without employment, and the vast majority of the workers had returned to their homes all over Britain to seek employment. Local shop keepers struggled to keep going without those flocks of customers and many local people faced bankruptcy, even though rents had been more than halved since 1916.

The hostels that were supposed to be turned into individual homes for families were lying empty, unconverted. Even once the decision was made to dispose of the factory, the Government continued to delay the conversion of the hostels, allowing them to fall into disrepair, after the 'Sale of the Century' in 1924, many houses remained unsold in the twin townships.

A reporter observed, 'Through the broken windows of these houses, the extent to which deterioration is taking place is very evident. Electric light connections are rotting, new stoves and kitchen ranges are being eaten away with rust, and everywhere are signs of the decay that is setting in for want of attention.'



'There is at present a feeling of doubt, uncertainty and incipient depression overhanging the district... Everything is apparently dismantled, possibly quite rightly but still depressing to observe. The impression is conveyed that the dominating wish is to convert anything and everything into cash and to get out quickly and at all costs.'

This said, Eastriggs and Gretna did not disappear with the Factory. Despite no new industry arriving to take the place of the huge works, the townships were not abandoned. There were those who believed that the positive lay-out of Gretna and Eastriggs would ensure their future. George MacNiven, an architect from Edinburgh, put the continued existence of the townships down to their manifold attractions and services:

'It may seem difficult to imagine a future development of these townships unless the factory area or portions of it are utilised for industrial purposes, but the fact remains that the townships are laid out in such a pleasing manner, in such a healthy situation, with well-designed and attractive houses...the additional advantages accruing from the various public buildings, recreation grounds, and amenities generally, cannot be disregarded. With these advantages and the apparent vitality of the present population and the small holders now settled in the area, it seems impossible to imagine the townships being allowed to become more or less derelict, and it appears eminently desirable to prevent such a contingency.'



By the late 1930s, Fascism had gripped Germany and was spreading across Europe. The British Government began to prepare the nation for battle, both for military purposes and to protect citizens from potential invasion. Once again, attention would be turned to the Solway Coast to mobilise for this time of need. This western portion of the Borderland would rise to the occasion just as it had in the First World War and play a mighty part in the defence of the United Kingdom.

When the Second World War broke out on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939, the Solway Coast area was seen as an ideal location to evacuate thousands of children away from the dangerous cities. Anticipating war, almost 5300 children were evacuated to Dumfriesshire on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September. Just over 1000 of these evacuees were relocated to Annan, Eastriggs and Gretna. Hundreds of children in the care of Dr Barnardo's Homes were also relocated to this area's stately homes for the duration of the war. Not only were there children far from home, but also Prisoners of War (POWs) of various nationalities who were based at camps in the local area or billeted to local farms.

The local community embraced their visitors and made every effort to make life easier in times of blackouts, rationing and the ever-present threat of invasion or attack. It would be this community spirit that held Gretna together on the night of the 7<sup>th</sup> April 1941 when a lone German bomber dropped 7 bombs on the township, killing 28 people.

Unlike most other parts of the country, this area had a high concentration of active military personnel and both munitions storage and production. The former HM Factory Gretna site, split between Eastriggs in Scotland and Longtown in England, was used to store bulk explosives, ammunition and inert materials for use by army personnel in all theatres of war. The depots at Eastriggs and Longtown were run by both soldiers and civilians throughout the Second World War and beyond.

Rather than building large scale munitions factories, the British Government, recognising the threat of aerial attacks from Germany, decided to construct several smaller munitions factories dispersed logically around the country. Many of these were built in Dumfriesshire, including Imperial Chemical

Industry (ICI) Powfoot which produced nitro-cellulose powders and cordite for shell filling factories.

The presence of the armed forces was very visible, not only around these munitions sites, but also at RAF Annan, a training airbase opened in 1942. The local community became accustomed to seeing planes flying over the area and above the Solway Firth: there were also several satellite airfields used by the RAF in this area.

When the Second World War ended, another unsettling war began- the Cold War. Rising tensions between the USA and the USSR made the British Government nervous nuclear war would break out. As a result, Britain began to construct nuclear power stations to produce Plutonium for the British nuclear weapons programme. In 1954, the vacant land of RAF Annan was deemed an ideal location to construct Chapelcross, Scotland's first Nuclear Power Station. Chapelcross would go on to produce electricity as a by-product of making Plutonium, and later in the 1980s produced Tritium for the British Hydrogen bombs.

Using first-hand accounts, primary and secondary sources from newspapers, film, local museums, libraries and archives, this book highlights the impact of these new industries on this previously quiet, rural intersection of the Solway Coast and demonstrates the courage of these communities in times of perilous conflict.