

# *Rothesay Conservation Area*



## *Town Centre Character Area Appraisal*

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# STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Rothesay's Town Centre Character Area is significant for three reasons:

1. **Medieval Castle and Royal Burgh:** a unique 13th century castle, generator of the medieval Royal Burgh of Rothesay;
2. **Commercial Centre:** late 18th and early 19th century growth forming a compact and uniform town centre; later Victorian embellishments and early 20th century growth;
3. **Seaside Resort:** 19th century and early 20th century expansion creating one of Scotland's most important seaside resorts.

## Medieval Castle and Royal Burgh

Rothesay Castle (c1230) is associated with the royal family of Stewart (later Stuart), kings of Scotland (1371 to 1714), and hereditary keepers of the castle. Its circular form is unique in Scotland and was the focus of an early settlement, granted Royal Burgh status in 1401. The organic street pattern of the medieval burgh and the magnificent castle setting forms this historic town quarter. The former Stuarts' Townhouse on the High Street is a rare example of 17th century domestic architecture in Argyll.



## Commercial Centre

Social and economic growth encouraged the progressive reclamation of the shoreline north of Rothesay Castle during the later 18th century. The principle shopping street (Montague Street) and surrounding area demonstrates the prosperity of the late Georgian period, characterised by simple but robust buildings with Classical refinements such as splayed corners and articulated stonework. Their cohesive form gives a strength and sophistication to the town character, unusual for a small island. A significant number of historic shops remain in the commercial core representing periods of expansion in the late 19th century and the 1930s.

## Seaside Resort

Development of Rothesay as a holiday resort commenced in the early 19th century and rapidly expanded when Glasgow's growing working class were able to take trips "doon the watter". The seafront streets, the Esplanade gardens and its harbours provide an exemplar of the Victorian and Edwardian seaside resort. The Georgian classicism was embellished with more elaborate individual buildings such as the Duncan Halls and Winter Gardens, and Glasgow-style tenements were built cheek to jowl amongst earlier terraced cottages creating a vibrant townscape.



# SECTION 1

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to provide an illustrated appraisal of the *Town Centre Character Area* of the *Rothsay Conservation Area* following national legislation and governmental guidelines.

Conservation Areas were introduced in 1967 and are defined in Section 61(1) (a) of *The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997* as:

*“...areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.”*

Under Section 63 (1) of the 1997 Act, local authorities are required to *“formulate and publish from time to time proposals for the preservation and enhancement of any parts of their district which are conservation areas.”* Furthermore, Scottish Planning Policy 23 states that *“Designation provides the basis for the positive management...”* and encourages planning authorities to undertake conservation area appraisals to underline decision making.

Argyll and Bute Council is committed to preserving and enhancing the conservation areas in its care. In order to carry out this action it is necessary to first have a full and detailed understanding of all the factors which contribute to the special character and interest of the area, this is the role of the appraisal.

This Character Appraisal follows the recommendations provided by Planning Advice Note 71, setting the scene for active and effective conservation area management.

## 1.1 Method

This appraisal draws on a number of academic and practical guidelines, and relies upon both field and desk study. It should be recognised that the appraisal is not intended to be comprehensive, and the omission of any particular building, feature or space should not imply that it is of no interest or importance.

The draft Appraisal for Rothesay Town Centre Character Area was prepared by Argyll & Bute Council and was subject to public consultation for a 4-week period from 11<sup>th</sup> January 2010 to 8<sup>th</sup> February 2010. Consultation comments were reviewed and amendments made by Sonya Linskaill (RIAS) Conservation Consultant on behalf of Argyll & Bute Council and with support of the Rothesay Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI).

The Character Appraisal will be available on the Council's website in downloadable form. Copies will be placed in the local library and will be available on request from the THI Project Officer or Planning Department. An abridged Character Appraisal leaflet is also available.

## 1.2 Rothesay Conservation Area

Rothesay Conservation Area is one of Scotland's most extensive, stretching along the east coast of the Isle of Bute for some five miles from Port Bannatyne to Ascog (fig 1; Appendix A). It encompasses Rothesay town centre and esplanade, its early industrial area, extensive seafront residential suburbs and two villages. It was designated in 1971, extended in 1980 and 1984 and given outstanding status in 1985.

## 1.3 Rothesay Conservation Area: Character Areas

The Conservation Area has been divided into nine 'character areas' each with its own special architectural and historic interest (fig 1). This recognises the diversity within the Conservation Area and will allow each character area to be appraised and managed individually to improve decision-making and reinforce local identity.

## 1.4 Rothesay Town Centre Character Area

This Conservation Area Appraisal covers the Rothesay Town Centre Character Area, the historic burgh core and seafront reclamation (fig 2).



Figure 1: Rothesay Conservation Area indicating the 9 Character Areas © Crown

Figure 2:  
The Town Centre  
Character Area focuses  
on the castle, historic  
burgh core and  
commercial heart of the  
town.

It excludes the  
historic industrial part of  
the town (to the south)  
and the residential areas  
on the cliffs above the  
town centre (to the east  
and west)



**ROTHESAY TOWN CENTRE CHARACTER AREA**

## 1.5 Listed Buildings and Scheduled Monuments

Structures may have statutory protection as a Listed Building or Scheduled Monument. This is in addition to the protection afforded under Conservation Area designation. Listed buildings are designated under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) (Scotland) Act 1997 for their '*special architectural or historic interest*'. Appendix B provides details and images of Listed Buildings in the Character Area. The only Scheduled Monument in the Character Area is Rothesay Castle. Figure 3 records the listed buildings in the Character Area.

Other undesignated buildings make a positive contribution to the Character Area and a number of these are highlighted in the text. It should be noted that this report cannot assess nor describe every building in the Character Area and therefore exclusion of a building or structure does not mean a building is considered to have no value.

## 1.6 Archaeological significance and potential

A zone of potential archaeological sensitivity has been identified by the West of Scotland Archaeology Service (WoSAS). This zone acknowledges the historic significance of the Town Centre Character Area and is illustrated on the Archaeological Consultation Trigger (ACT) map which WoSAS supply to member local authorities. Any potential development or works within this area of sensitivity should be discussed with the Planning Department in the first instance who may consult WoSAS and Historic Scotland. Advice can be provided on the actions required in the case of potential development, for example mitigation fieldwork, archaeological evaluation, watching briefs. Figure 3 includes an extract from the WoSAS search page.

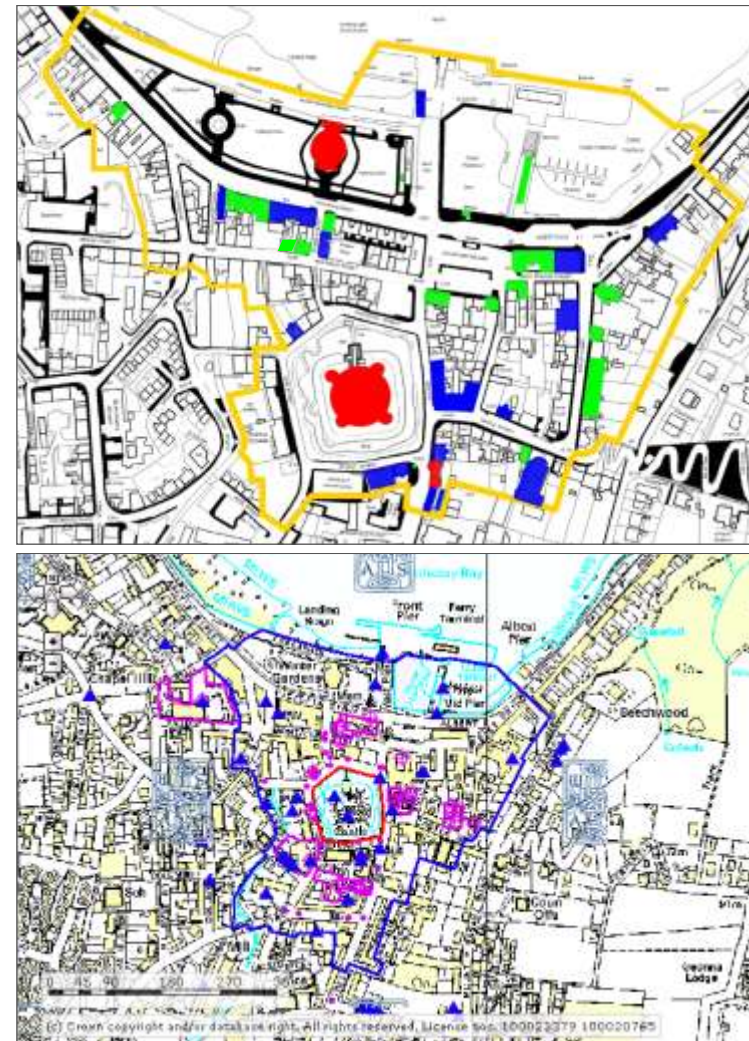


Figure 3: Top: Listed Buildings in the Character Area: Category A (red); Category B (blue); Category C(S) (green); refer Appendix B for further information. Below: Archaeological potential: extract from the WoSAS search page: the ACT boundary is outlined in blue and monuments (blue triangles) and previous investigations and reports (pink), the Scheduled Monument of the castle is outlined in red. © Crown

## 1.7 Location

The Isle of Bute is part of Argyll and Bute, a local authority which covers an expansive area on the west coast of Scotland and a number of inner islands (fig 4). Bute sits at the entrance to the Firth of Clyde, just off the Cowal Peninsula and some six miles to the north-east of the island of Arran. The shores of North Ayrshire and Inverclyde lie approximately eight miles to the west (fig 4).

Bute is divided into two parts by the Highland Boundary Fault, which crosses the island in a trench from Scalpsie Bay to Rothesay (NS 087 645). This forms a unique and distinctive landscape setting; Rothesay town lies on the head of the wide, sheltering Rothesay Bay on the island's east coast with typically highland uplands to the north and rolling fertile fields to the south. The Water of Fad flows to the sea on the western flank of the town centre and the Balskyte Burn (both largely culverted) runs a little to the east. Rothesay is the only town on the island and all principle roads converge on Rothesay including the A844 and A886. There are frequent car ferry services from Rothesay to Wemyss Bay (Inverclyde), and from Rhubodach to Colintraive on the Cowal Peninsula.

## 1.8 Population

The population of Bute rose from around 3,000 in 1755 to over 5,000 by the end of the 18th century, when the fishing and manufacturing industries were flourishing on the island. It continued to rise rapidly throughout the 19th century, to almost 12,000 by 1891 as Rothesay developed into a major holiday destination.

The population peaked in the 1930s (12,112 in 1931), and has subsequently experienced continued decline with a current population

of around 7000, (GROS, 2008).

Rothesay is the largest settlement on the island and accounts for 70% of the population and contributed significantly to the population growth throughout the 18th century; the town population rose from about 400 in 1756 to 2,607 in 1790. Rothesay's population now stands at just under 5,000 (4882 in 2008, GROS).

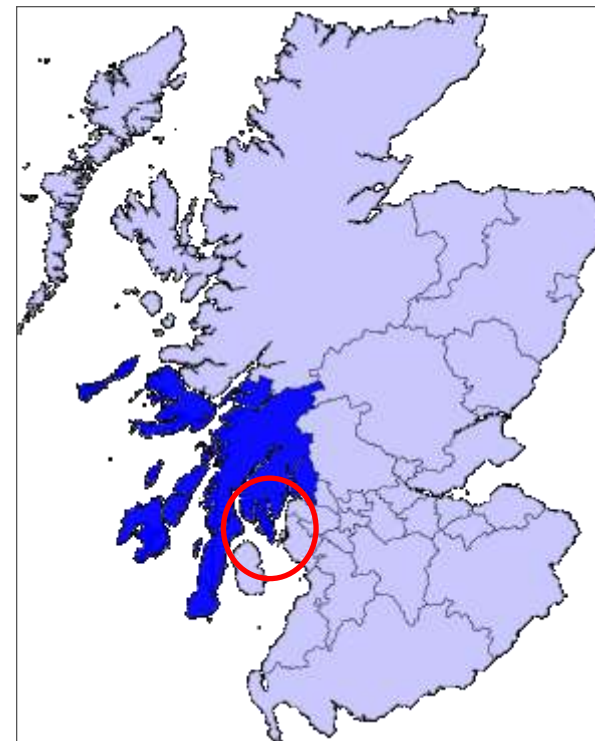


Figure 4: Argyll & Bute Council's location in Scotland (dark blue) with Bute circled.



## SECTION 2

# HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

*This section summarises the origin of the settlement and identifies the key periods of political or economic change and social development which shaped the physical form of the settlement.*

Bute's position, nestled between the central heartland of Scotland and the remote Western Isles, has influenced the island's historical development. The island, and Rothesay in particular, has played a part in Scottish history from the 13th century onwards, from the Norse invasions; the Wars of Independence; the Wars of the Three Kingdoms; and the 17th century Argyll Rebellion. From the 18th century fishing and manufacturing industries brought wealth and expansion and in the 19th century Rothesay became a Victorian resort and Glasgow's seaside playground, with steamers queuing up to bring the holidaymakers coming "*doon the watter*".

## 2.1 Origins: the Medieval Castle

The medieval castle was the focus for Rothesay's early development. Bute had been granted to Alan 2nd High Steward of Scotland (1177-1204) by William I (the Lion) around the turn of the 13th century. The castle is believed to have been built at this time to defend this new western frontier of Scotland. It stood very close to the shoreline, possibly only 100m away on relatively low-lying ground below the 10m contour, and this may account for the settlements early depiction as an island; an account of 1306 also records the castle being taken "by sea". The castle's circular curtain wall is unique in Scotland (fig 5).

The castle's association with the Scotland's monarchy was established on the coronation in 1371 of Robert II, the first king of the house of Stewart (later Stuart). The castle became a royal residence for both Robert II (1316-1390) and Robert III (c.1337-1406). Robert II built St. Michael's chapel in the castle courtyard. On the death of Robert III the Stewarts became keepers of the castle. The Rothesay Dukedom was created in 1398 for David, eldest son of Robert III; this title is still held by the monarch's eldest son, Prince Charles.

In the 15th and 16th centuries both James III (1452-1488) and James IV (1472-1513) used the castle's strategic location as a base for their campaigns to subdue the Lords of the Isles. At the accession of James IV the castle was refurbished, and the forward keep was built in 1512. James V (1513-1542) built the great tower of the castle in 1541. However, the castle was abandoned in the later 17th century having suffered significant damage during Cromwell's occupation (1650-59) and the Earl of Argyll's revolt against James VII (1685). Consolidation of the ruins was carried out in 1816 and 1872-79. In 1900 the Marquess of Bute reconstructed the Great Hall of the barbican.

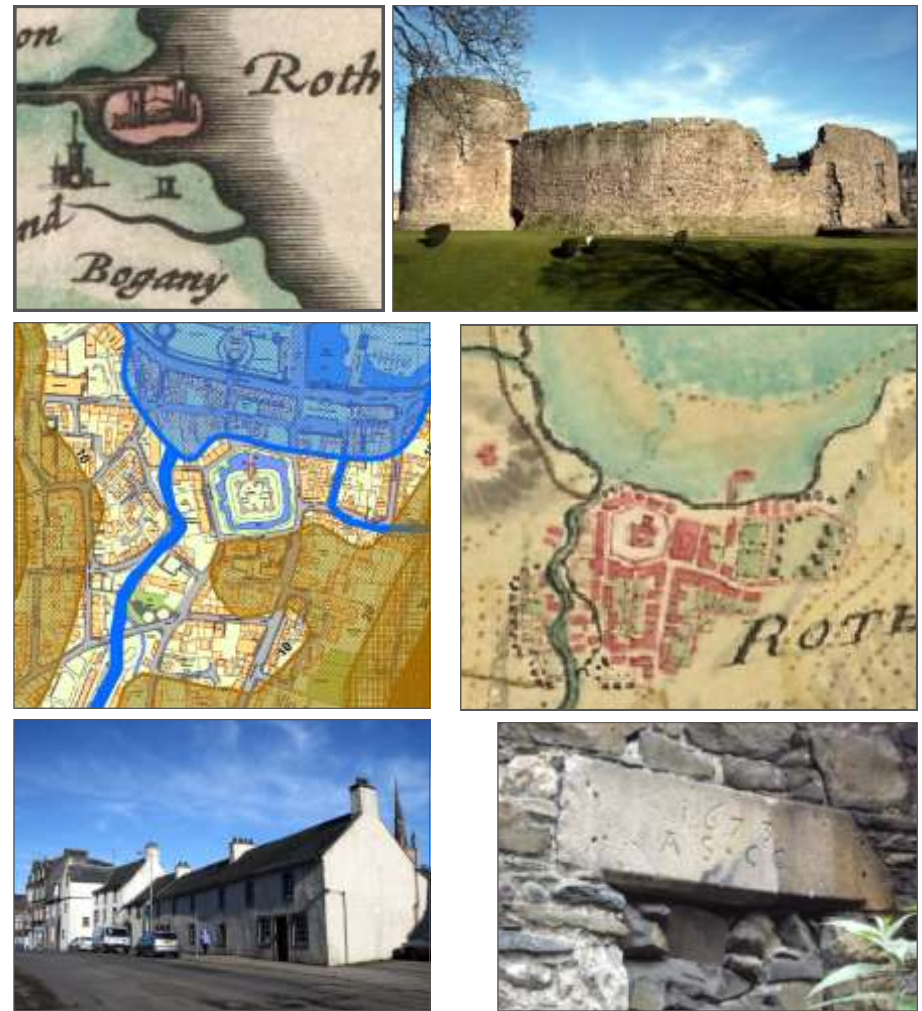


Figure 5: Top: (left) Blaeu's map (1654; © NLS) illustrates Rothesay as an island; the diagram below shows the castle's early position on the foreshore; (top right) the circular curtain wall of Rothesay Castle, unique in Scotland, only one of the four original drum towers remains constructed c.1263; (below) Roy's Military Survey (1747-55) provides clues as to the burgh's development; Bottom: early structures include the Stuarts' Townhouse (left) and fragments such a lintel to the rear of Nos 11-13 Montague Street.

## 2.2 Development: Royal Burgh 1400 to 1700

Rothesay was erected a Royal Burgh in 1400/1 by Robert III. Rothesay's charter marks a landmark in Scottish history being the first charter to use the term "*burgus regius*" or Royal Burgh (Gourlay, 1978).

The burgh charter suggests the existence of a settlement prior to this date; it is likely a cluster of buildings was associated with the castle, possibly running along the High Street south to the medieval parish church of St Mary (now the site of the High Kirk of Rothesay). The Royal Burgh status permitted free trade at home and abroad. Traditionally trade took place in the market place identified by a market cross; the first mention of a market cross was in 1490 when "*McGibbon's Cross*" is described as being in the 'middle' of High Street (Gourlay, 1978), but the precise location of the original market place is uncertain. It may have been located on Castle Street, or at the junction of High Street and Castle Street where a market cross stood until 1768 (Gourlay, 1978; McLagan, 2002).

Very little is known of the early burgh prior to the 17th century and historic redevelopment has removed or disguised the traditional burgage plots and early buildings. Archaeological and cartographic evidence, (Roy 1747-55; fig 5) can provide a basis to interpret the early burgh form. By the end of the medieval period development lay south of the castle on both sides of the High Street between the New Vennel (Stuart Street) and the Old Vennel (Russell Street), as well as to the west of the castle towards the Water of Fad. Castle Street stretched toward the Serpentine route and the area around Watergate and Store Lane was developed thereafter.

Of standing remains, other than the castle, the Stuarts' Townhouse (1681) is a rarity being the only remaining 17th century domestic

building in the region (fig 5; Walker, 2000). A number of small buildings standing in the block between Watergate and the High Street could contain remnants of former harbour buildings and merchants' premises. The stonework of one incorporates a marriage stone dated 1673 although this looks to have been inserted retrospectively (fig 5).

## 2.3 Growth: late 18th and early 19th centuries

Rothesay experienced a period of decay during the second half of the 17th century during which the Duke of Argyll developed Campbeltown, chartered as a Royal Burgh in 1700. Rothesay's fortunes were reversed in the 1760s: a Customs House was opened to maximise trade with Ireland (1765); a cotton industry was established (from 1779, with 5 mills in 1855) and the herring fishing became a highly successful industry. The population of the town grew rapidly from about 400 in 1756 to 2,607 in 1790.

Roy's map (1747-55; fig 5) illustrates the Royal Burgh shortly before this period of rapid growth. It shows development was still restricted by the sea, but the beginnings of the present harbour at the foot of Watergate (1752) are indicated with an area of undeveloped land behind the quay, where Albert Place and Guildford Square were later constructed. In contrast, Wood's survey of 1825 (fig 6; Appendix A) illustrates the growth of the town with the creation of new streets on the seaward side of the castle.

The success of the fishing industry and commercial trade saw a second quay being built from the foot of the High Street ('New Quay', 1785-90). The basic form of the current inner and outer harbours was established after 1822 when works were undertaken to reconstruct the two early quays to accommodate steamers, the New Quay being

extended eastwards (absorbing parts of the older pier) and creating a new entry into the inner basin (fig 7).

A comparison of these two early maps (fig 7) illustrates the significant changes that took place in the 70 years or so between the two surveys. The town's streets, only named by the town council in 1768, are illustrated including Water Gate, Shore Loan (now Store Lane) and East and West Princes Streets, and the beginnings of Guildford Square on reclaimed land at the pier-head. Significantly the development of Montague Street is complete; running below the castle on reclaimed land, it bridged the Water of Fad thereby linking the quays in the east to the developing west side of the town (now Bridge Street and Bridgend Street).

Bishop Street, which linked Castle Street with the growing harbour, was laid within the gardens of 'Bishops House' (demolished 1786). A stone plaque above the butcher's shop at the bottom of Bishop Street is said to come from the Bishops House. The town's public school (1798) is marked, having previously used rooms in the Bishop's House and remained in this building until a new school opened at the Mill Park in 1877. The building was later used as a reformatory and registry office until its conversion to housing.

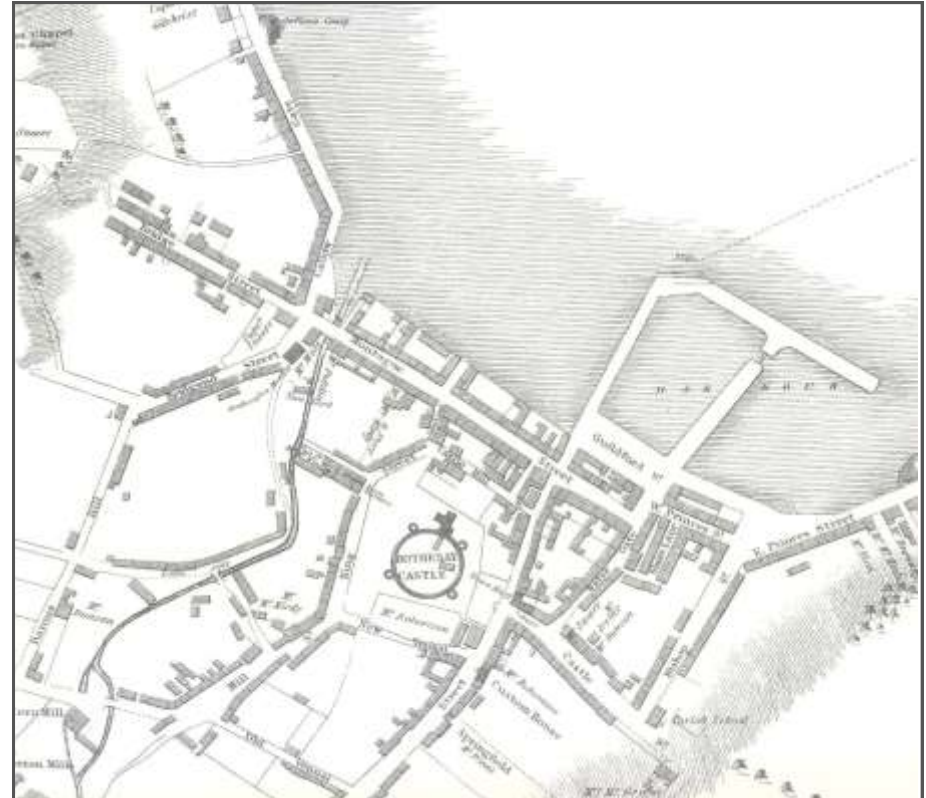


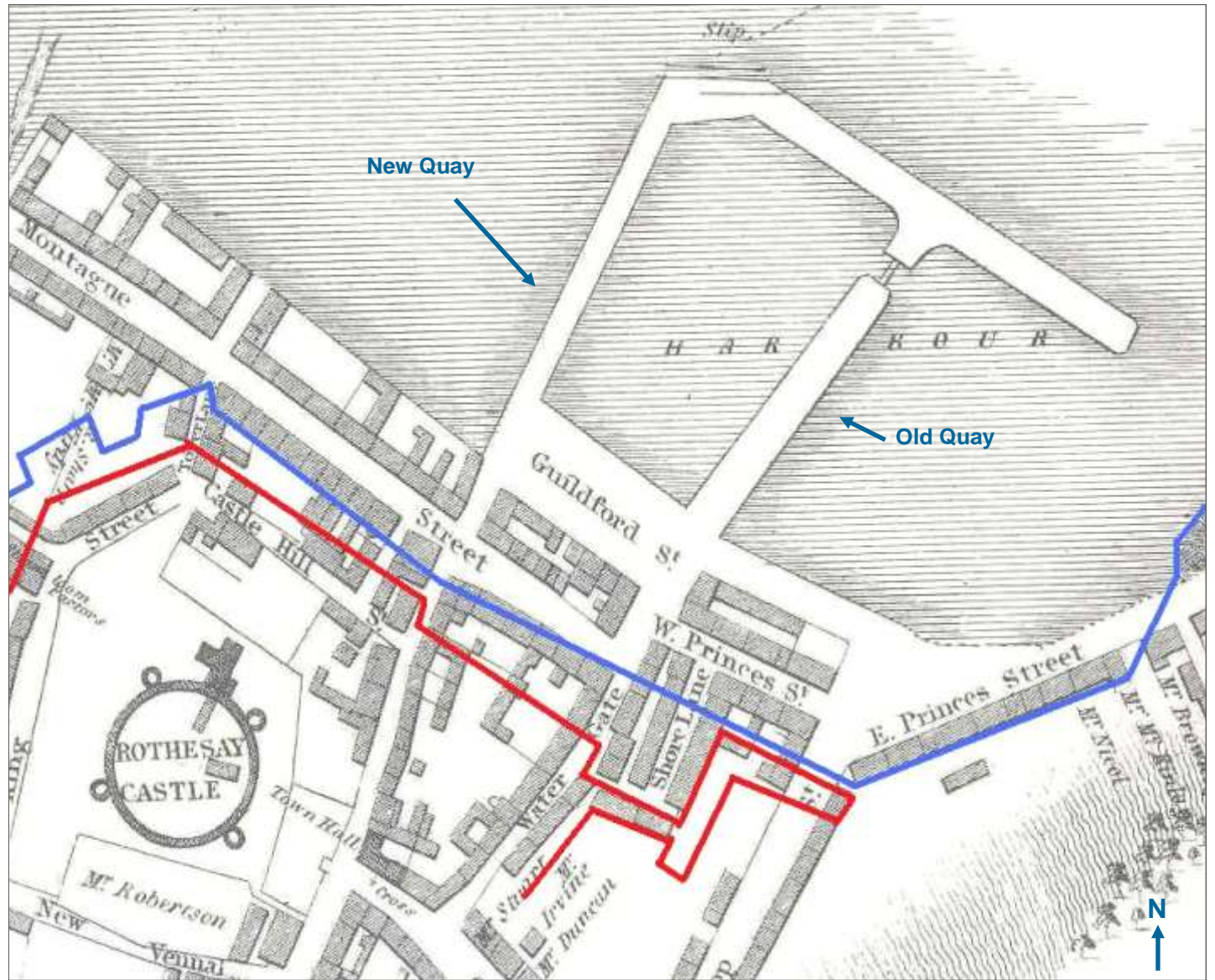
Figure 6: Growth of the burgh is illustrated in Wood's map (1825; Appendix A).

Figure 7: Seaward Development: The limit of development (red) & former shoreline (blue) as roughly indicated on Roy's map (1747-55) is super-imposed upon Wood's map (1825).

Reconstruction of the harbour commenced in 1822 when the Old Quay (1752) and New Quay (1785-90) were combined and extended to accommodate steamers.



Roy (1747-55) © NLS



Wood (1825)

SEAWARD DEVELOPMENT

## 2.4 Expansion: Victorian Era

The Victorians discovered the seaside in the early 19th century, first for medical reasons (healthy sea air and salt water) and then for pleasure. Rothesay rapidly became the perfect Victorian seaside resort, complete with medieval castle, and was soon transformed from a small fishing burgh into a thriving holiday destination.

The commercial harbour, was reconstructed in 1822 was extended in 1867 and 1899 to accommodate the increasing steamer traffic. In 1839 a new slip and a boat building yard had been constructed immediately to the west of the New Quay. Pier buildings were erected next to the drawbridge into the Inner Harbour in the early 1870s. Splendidly decorated public conveniences were built on the site of the cattle pens on the pier. East of Albert Place, the Albert Pier was constructed to accommodate cargo ships (1863 -1865; fig 8).

The first promenade was constructed in 1869, and a few years later the boat yard closed and was incorporated within the promenade to create the current Esplanade, a wide expanse of formal ornamental gardens and bracing seafront walks. Grand Victorian structures adorned the public realm including the former Russell Band Stand which closed the vista of Tower Street (1873; replaced by the Winter Garden) and the Thomson Memorial Fountain (1867; now in High Street) on a line aligning with Dean Hood Street. Further to the east the Ewing Fountain stood in Guildford Square and the Albert Memorial Fountain (1863) at the foot of Bishop Street.

Rothesay's heyday as a holiday resort culminated in the late 1800s as the working classes could now afford a trip to the seaside (Marshall, 2002). At its peak Rothesay was attracting as many as a dozen sailings a day from Glasgow's Broomielaw (July 1878). The steamers

were packed with holidaymakers intent on a good time; with the first sailing at 6.45am it was possible to spend a long, action-packed day in Rothesay all for a shilling. A horse-drawn tram service along the Esplanade was established in 1879 (by the Rothesay Tramway Co.) taking visitors to Port Bannatyne.

New buildings were constructed to serve the holidaymakers. Palaces of entertainment, such as the Duncan Halls (1876-9) and the Aquarium stood alongside grand seafront hotels, including the Glenburn (Scotland's first Hydropathic Hotel), the Victoria Hotel (mid 19C) and the Royal Hotel (c.1850; fig 14). Behind the seafront tenement blocks

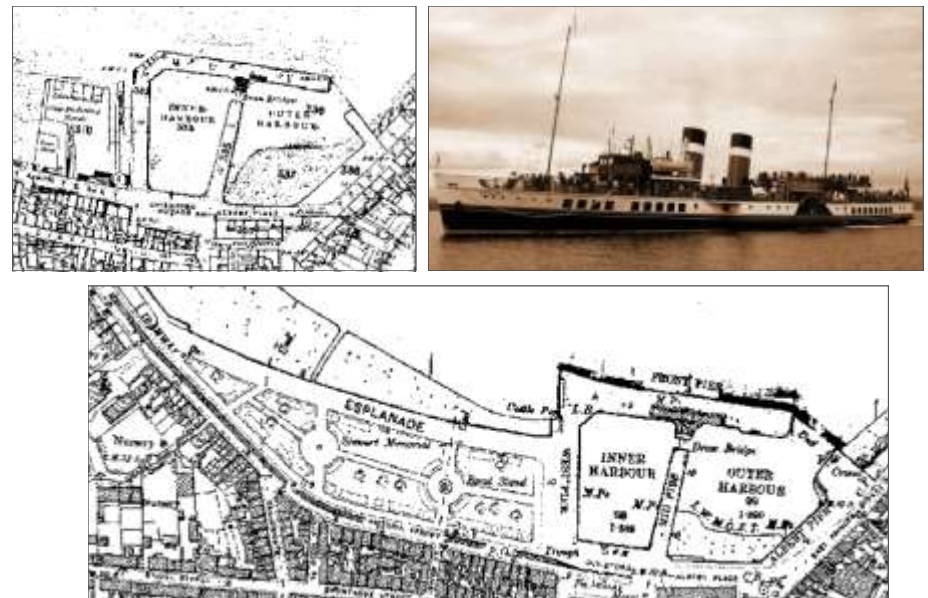


Figure 8: (left) 1st Ed Ordnance Survey (1862-3) showing slip and boat yard to west of the harbour and to its east a narrow Albert Pier; (right) "Waverley" last of the Clyde paddle steamers ; Below: 2nd Ed Ordnance Survey (1898-1904) showing new Esplanade to the west of the harbour replacing the slip and yard, as well as new buildings on the pier and a larger Albert Pier.

in the Glasgow style provided holiday flats for Glasgow families and homes for local workers alike. Mansions for mainland industrialists, fine villas for sea-captains, cosy family houses and welcoming seaside guest houses, often highly decorated with cast iron fretwork, were built all along the shores of Rothesay Bay (and on the hillside above), both to the west and to the east. Eventually Rothesay engulfed the fishing village of Port Bannatyne in one direction and the little rural village of Ascog in the other.

In the second half of the 19th century, religious dissent and the needs of a growing seasonal population led to a church-building programme. Many of these new churches occupied prominent sites on the seafront, such as St Paul's Episcopal Church and St John's (demolished 1970s). Other churches were situated behind the foreshore: Trinity Church in Castle Street, and West Church located behind Argyle Street. Their spires gave Rothesay a distinctive new skyline.

New civic buildings were also constructed. In 1832 the new County Buildings were built on the site of the earlier Town Hall. This battlemented grey building with its projecting square tower was a testament to civic dignity and pride and housed the Sheriff Court and gaol (conversion to residential, 2010). From 1825 the Stuarts' Townhouse was used as the Customs House. In 1897 a new purpose-built Post Office and sorting office was built in Bishop Street. New shops opened up, especially in Montague Street, and displayed their goods in decorative cast iron and timber shopfronts. A huge bakery was erected by the Co-operative Society in East Princes Street (fig 21); fully equipped with up-to-date machinery, it sent bread and confectionary daily to far flung coasts.



Figure 9: Postcards of the late 19th/early 20th century Seaside Resort

## 2.5 Consolidation and decline: 20th century

Rothesay's popularity as a holiday destination continued into the 20th century and further improvements were made to attract tourists. The Bute Museum was erected in 1926, and two of Rothesay's most iconic buildings were constructed: in 1924 the Winter Gardens, an Art Nouveau styled cast iron structure with a vast dome and pagodas, and in 1938 the Rothesay Pavilion in Moderne style, a building that marked out the resort as one of the very best in the British Isles.

Transport evolved to meet demands: an electric tramway opened in 1902 running from Rothesay to Port Bannatyne and extended to Ettrick Bay in 1905 (closed in 1949). A new taxi shelter (the Cabbies' Rest) was provided to serve ferry passengers in 1930. By this time Rothesay's population had already peaked but the town continued to be a very popular seaside resort into the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rothesay was also a naval anchorage from 1940 to 1957.

Similar to many other seaside resorts and small town centres throughout the UK, Rothesay experienced considerable social and economic change during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As an island location, Rothesay suffered particularly from its demise as a significant holiday destination as foreign travel expanded, and associated depopulation and a lack of investment have followed.



Figure 10: Rothesay 's 20th century iconic buildings: (top) the Art Nouveau style Winter Gardens (1924) and below the Pavilion in 1930s Moderne style.