

Ayrshire – 50 Interesting ‘Facts’

1. The name Ayrshire (North, South and East) derives from the River Ayr and the word ‘ayr’ goes back into the mists of time, but may mean, ‘smooth running’.
2. The Ayrshire coast cycleway (National Cycle Network No 7) is well worth the effort. This route takes in long stretches of the Ayrshire coastline between Irvine, Troon, Prestwick and Ayr and has spectacular views across to the Isle of Arran. www.sustrans.com
3. Europe’s smallest cathedral is to be found on Millport with seating for barely 100 worshippers – roughly the equivalent number of inhabitants per square kilometre within Ayrshire.
4. Sir Thomas Brisbane (1773-1860) was born in Largs, became Governor of New South Wales in Australia and gave his name not only to Brisbane in Australia, but also to Brisbane Street, Brisbane Road, Brisbane Glen Road, the Brisbane Queen Festival, Brisbane House Hotel and Brisbane Taxis in Largs itself.
5. The Pencil Monument in Largs commemorates the Battle of Largs in 1263 when King Haakon of Norway’s fleet of 200 ships was defeated not so much by Scottish forces as by the storm which gave them a helping hand. It is often forgotten that less than 750 years ago the Western Isles belonged to Norway, but were ceded to Scotland after this battle. Each year in September this ‘victory’ is celebrated in a Viking Festival in Largs.
6. Nardini’s celebrated restaurant in Largs with its iconic art deco exterior may yet reopen following the decision in December 2005 to allow the redevelopment of a building behind the café. Let’s hope those famous ciabattis will be on sale again once more!
7. Bobby Lennox, a fine footballer and one of the celebrated Lisbon Lions who won the European Cup for Celtic in 1967 when they beat Inter Milan 2–1 in the Lisbon National Stadium, was born in Saltcoats and until recently ran Bobby’s Bar in the town.
8. James H Moffat who built A T Mays into a very successful nationwide travel company was born in Saltcoats.
9. David Dale, creator of New Lanark, a model industrial town for the cotton mill industry, was born in Stewarton in 1739.
10. The world’s first short wave radio transmission across the Atlantic was made from Ardrossan. The plaque on the sea facing wall of Abbotsford Nursing Home reads: ‘Near this site in December 1921 radio signals transmitted by radio amateurs were first heard across the Atlantic.’
11. Scotland’s newest distillery is the Isle of Arran Distillery at Lochranza. Production began in 1995. Its oldest malt would have been just a little older had building work not stopped to allow two golden eagles to hatch their chicks.
12. Jack McConnell, Scotland’s First Minister, was born in Irvine in 1960. He grew up on a sheep farm on Arran and was educated at Arran High School.
13. The geological division which crosses Scotland from Stonehaven to Loch Lomond and makes the clearly seen division between the Lowlands and the Highlands also crosses Arran and is the reason for the island being called ‘Scotland in miniature’ – rugged to the north and low lying to the south.

14. It is said that near the beach at Blackwaterfoot on Arran, Robert the Bruce found inspiration to try again, from a spider's determined efforts to create its web in a cave known appropriately as 'The King's Cave'.
15. Royal Troon plays host to the Open Championship every seven years. Famous players such as Bobby Locke (1950), Arnold Palmer (1962) and Tom Weiskopf (1973) have won the celebrated claret jug here.
16. The first Open Championship was held at Prestwick in 1860. It was organised by the members who subscribed £25 to purchase a red morocco belt with silver clasps. It was won by Willie Park of Musselburgh with a score of 174 over 36 holes. A replica belt was presented to Sandy Lyle when he won the 125th Open at Royal St Georges Golf Club.
17. In 2002 SeaCat moved the Scottish terminal for its fast ferries to Ireland from Stranraer to Troon. The SeaCat 'Isle of Man' can carry 500 passengers and 88 cars at a speed of 36 knots across the North Channel to Belfast.
18. On 3rd March 1960 the 'King' himself, Elvis Presley flew into Prestwick. He was finishing his American army national service and stopped over in Prestwick for two hours.
19. James Keir Hardie (1856 – 1915), the early socialist leader and one of those who helped to found the Scottish Labour Party, lived for most of his life in Cumnock in a house called 'Lochnorris' which still stands today.
20. In 1784 Robert Burns came to live on the outskirts of Mauchline at Mossgiel Farm and it was here that he wrote 'Holy Wullie's Prayer', 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' and 'The Twa Dugs'.
21. It was in Mauchline that Robert Burns was married to Jean Armour in 1788.

I see her in the dewy flowers -
I see her sweet and fair.
I hear her in the tuneful birds -
I hear her charm the air.
There's not a bonie flower that springs
By fountain, shaw, or green,
There's not a bonie bird that sings,
But minds me o' my Jean.

22. The production of box-work or Mauchline ware has made Mauchline a by-word for a most collectible set of items – small boxes, sewing accessories, letter openers and match holders. Most have pictures of tourist attractions, resorts etc. A glance at items on e-bay gives an interesting insight into just what is available to collectors.
23. The making of curling stones began in Mauchline in the 1800s. Andrew Kay and Company are almost literally unrivalled in the world and, thanks to that wonderful stone by Rhona Martin and the subsequent gold medal at Salt lake City in 2002, business has boomed.
24. Auchinleck was the home of James Boswell, biographer of Dr Johnson with whom he made a celebrated tour of the Highlands in 1773.
25. William Murdoch (1754 – 1839) who invented gas lighting was born in Old Cumnock. His house in Redruth (Cornwall) became the first in the world to be lit by this method.
26. The Afton is a small river that flows into the Nith near New Cumnock. It was there that Robert Burns was inspired to write:

Flow gently, sweet Afton, among thy green braes!
Flow gently, I'll sing thee a song in thy praise!
My Mary's asleep by thy murmuring stream ---
Flow gently, sweet Afton, disturb not her dream!

27. Ayr Flower Show is Scotland's answer to the Chelsea Flower Show.
28. In 1297 William Wallace set fire to the English garrison at Ayr in one of his first confrontations with the occupying forces.
29. The first Burns Supper was founded in Greenock in 1801. Irvine Burns Club claims the longest record of consecutive Burns Suppers, holding more than 180!
30. The Robert Burns National Heritage Park in Alloway is a must for anyone with even a passing interest in Burns. Once you have peered into the Auld Kirk of Alloway, the famous poem Tam o' Shanter takes on new meaning:

Tam tint his reason a' thegither,
And roars out – "Weel done, Cutty-sark!"
31. Kilmarnock was famed throughout the world for the quality of its carpets. The Titanic used carpets produced by Stoddards. Sadly carpet production ceased in 2005.
32. The celebrated First Edition of Burns' poems was printed in Kilmarnock in July 1786. The news that the 612 copies of his book, *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, were selling like hot cakes - thanks in no small measure to a glittering review in the Edinburgh press - delighted him. The *Kilmarnock Edition*, as the book became known, had elevated him to celebrity status. Had it not been for this, he might well have emigrated to Jamaica. This must rate as one of history's closest shaves!
33. William Wallace may well have been born at Elderslie near Kilmarnock.
34. David Daiches in his book, 'Scotch Whisky' writes: The brand name 'Johnny Walker' was invented to accompany a poster by Tom Browne. His poster and the accompanying slogan soon made Walker's Kilmarnock Whisky universally known.
35. The 'kil' in Kilmarnock means church and relates to the spread of christianity associated with St Columba and early missionaries. The 'marnock' refers to a St Ernan who may even have been St Columba's uncle. Within Ayrshire we also have Kilbirnie (St Brendan) , Kilmaurs (St Maurice) , and Kilwinning (St Finnian)
36. If ever a discovery changed the world it was that made by Alexander Fleming. He was born in 1881 at Lochfield, a farm outside Darvel in East Ayrshire. Penicillin, which he discovered by accident, as it were, led to him being awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1945.
37. Bill Shankley (1913 - 1981), Liverpool's greatest ever manager, was born in the village of Glenbuck, South of Muirkirk on the A70. He was the man who famously said that football was not a matter of life or death - it was far more important than that!
38. It was in the in the High Street of Maybole where William Burness, Robert Burns' father, met and fell for Agnes Broun and they married in Maybole on 15th December 1757. Robert was their first born just over a year later.
39. Sir David Kennedy (10th Earl of Cassillis) commissioned Robert Adam to transform Culzean from a run of the mill fortress into a grand romantic and fashionable palace. Adam worked on Culzean over a period of 15 years (1777 to 1792) and it has to be one of his greatest achievements.
40. When the Kennedy family donated Culzean Castle to the National Trust for Scotland in 1945 they asked that the top floor be given to General Eisenhower as a thank-you from the people of Scotland. He first came to Culzean in 1946 and was clearly touched to accept this gift.

41. Eisenhower's longest stay was during his retirement when he enjoyed painting and walking in the peace and quiet of Culzean's beautiful gardens, woodland and shore, as well as playing golf nearby. He wrote of Culzean "this is a place I can relax".
42. Crossraguel Abbey is one of the best preserved, most varied and most interesting of the many abbey ruins that are dotted across Scotland. It can be found just to the south of the A77, about two miles south west of Maybole.
43. In 1570 Dunure Castle was owned by Gilbert, 4th Earl of Cassillis. He was a greedy man with a fiery temper. His uncle was the last Abbot of Crossraguel. Upon his death the land and Abbey passed to Gilbert in 1564. In 1565 the King appointed Alan Stewart the lay commendator to the Abbey. He now controlled the land, buildings and duties paid to them. The Earl had Stewart kidnapped and thrown into the black vault of Dunure. It was here that Stewart was roasted over a well stoked fire until finally agreeing to sign over the lands to the Earl.
44. Girvan's beaches remain a draw for visitors, even in an age when lots of people fly south for the summer. Not many Mediterranean resorts can match Girvan's views north west to the craggy skyline of Arran, or west to the remarkable dome of Ailsa Craig, rising 1114ft out of the Firth of Clyde ten miles away. Girvan is the starting point for trips around or to Ailsa Craig: the only operator licensed at www.ailsacraig.org.uk
45. Knockcushan Hill, Girvan. This area on the town-side of the river above the harbour was originally known as The Moot Hill of the Bailiary of Carrick. King Robert I (the Bruce) held court here in 1328 and there is a memorial commemorating this event.
46. Known as Paddy's Milestone because of its position midway between Glasgow and Ireland, Ailsa Craig, sticking above the sea, is all that is presently visible of this ancient volcano. The granite is distinctive and easily recognisable; it contains a blue mineral, riebeckite. Despite its remote location, the quality of the rock was so outstanding, particularly for making curling stones, that the island's shape has been altered by quarrying.
47. It was from Ailsa Craig granite that the curling stones used by the Scottish Women's Curling Team, Winter 2002 Olympic Gold medal winners, were made.
48. Until wireless telephone communications were established on Ailsa Craig in 1935, the lightkeepers and employees of Ailsa Craig Granites Ltd used to depend on pigeons for the conveyance of messages. When a doctor or supplies were required urgently in stormy weather when it was impossible to have messages taken by carrier pigeon, a system of signals by fire was used.
49. Ailsa Craig's importance as a seabird colony is owed to the *Gannet*. Since the 1950s when an estimated 5000 pairs bred on the island, the population has steadily risen to around 35,000 pairs by 2000. Seabirds have flourished here since the removal of brown rats.
50. Alexander "Sawney" Bean was Scotland's Hannibal Lecter. Moving to Ayrshire to escape a hard life he fell in with a woman Black Agnes Douglas, who was denounced as a witch. They had a murderous career throughout the coast area, which involved ambushing travellers on the road, robbing them of their possessions, murdering them and eating their remains.