



HISTORIC SCOTLAND  
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[places]

# GRETNA



# GRETNA – A MUNITIONS TOWN

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## How do you build a town for around 20,000 people in only two years?

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This was the issue facing David Lloyd George when he was appointed Minister for Munitions in May 1915. A shortage of artillery shells on the front line in the First World War caused a political crisis and Lloyd George was put in charge of solving the emergency. The solution was to build a huge munitions factory along the shores of the Solway Firth to produce Cordite, which had replaced gunpowder as the propellant used to fire bullets and shells.

Gretna was the result of this frantic building boom and it now has a unique place in Scotland's story. The streets and buildings have come to form an important and lasting architectural legacy. Construction started in November 1915 to house workers at the munitions factory and the design was overseen by one of the most influential town planners in early 20th-century Britain. This booklet celebrates Gretna's architecture and looks at the planning which went into creating the town. A number of the buildings have been given listed status. A map highlights some of the buildings in the town that are worth a closer look and an accompanying webpage with a video can be found at [www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/gretna](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/gretna).



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1. Women at work in the munitions factory (Science Museum/Science and Society Picture Library)
  2. Early view of the village and St Ninian's church (© Courtesy of RCAHMS. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk))
  3. Sir Raymond Unwin, 1932 (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

## BEGINNINGS

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Gretna owes its existence to the Government's decision during the First World War to place a munitions factory along the shores of the Solway Firth. Troops at the front line were lacking sufficient ammunition, so David Lloyd George, then Minister for Munitions, set about dealing with the problem. Sufficiently remote to be at low risk of attack, and yet close to the main railway lines for ease of transport, the Solway shore was an ideal site for a munitions factory. Stretching 9 miles from Dornock to Longtown on the other side of the Border, the factory consisted of a vast and complex array of buildings, plant, and communication systems specially built to produce the high explosive propellant, Cordite. The Scottish half of the factory manufactured nitroglycerine, whilst the English half in the south produced nitrocellulose, the two principal ingredients of Cordite.

The quiet surrounding area, previously populated by isolated farms, suddenly needed to provide accommodation, first for a large number of construction workers (many from Ireland) and then for 20,000 factory workers and their families. The workforce (mostly female) was drawn from all over Britain and was joined by scientists and specialists from all over the world. Two new townships were created to house them, one at the smaller settlement of Eastriggs and one at Gretna – only a short distance away from its famous neighbour, Gretna Green.

Gretna was designed under the direction of the architect Raymond Unwin (1863–1940), with Courtenay M Crickmer (1879–1971) as the resident architect. It was to be a self-contained community, with housing in timber huts and brick-built houses. Shops, recreation facilities, churches and a hospital were all included. The town was carefully laid out in a regular street pattern with a central avenue and a number of crescents. Green space and gardens were integral parts of the vision. Although the timber huts have not survived, what remains is a fascinating mix of private housing and public amenities.

Unwin was one of the most important figures in early 20th-century British town planning. He worked predominantly in England and is perhaps best known for his planning of Letchworth Garden City and Hampstead Garden Suburb. Crickmer was a London-based architect.

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- 4. Former cinema in Central Avenue
  - 5. Aerial view of Gretna, circa 1929 (© RCAHMS [Aerofilms Collection]. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk))
  - 6. Central Avenue
  - 7. Junction of Central Avenue and Annan Road (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk))



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## A PLANNED TOWN

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Planned towns have been part of Scotland's history since the 18th century. One of the most important examples is the cotton mill town of New Lanark, which was founded in 1786. Here good housing was integrated with social and educational facilities for the workers, and green space was considered an important aspect of the whole design. In a way Gretna was a continuation of this early type of planning, but with a major influence from the Garden City movement. This movement began in England at the beginning of the 20th century to counter the overcrowding of the working classes in cities. Offering a new approach to urban planning with self-contained communities, it focused on providing good housing and more individual space, as well as forming a deeper relationship between the town and the country. The pattern seen at Gretna was to continue in the building of the New Towns, in Scotland as elsewhere, in the years after the Second World War.

Unusually for Scottish towns, red brick is the predominant building material in Gretna, visually strengthening the English influence. To the south of Annan Street on either side of Central Avenue, the town has a noticeable grid pattern and in this area timber huts were erected in large numbers. Some of these were hostels, with long dormitories and a large living room, and some were for married workers.

Central Avenue contained the majority of the community facilities and was a hub for life in the town. Originally a railway ran down the middle of the street which linked the factory to the main line. Shops with flats above line one side of the street, and the group retains its Arts and Crafts character with the overhanging canopies, small, flat-roofed dormer windows and distinctive chimney stacks. The former cinema was specifically designed to complement the terrace of shops and is set slightly back from the road in the centre of one of the groups. It is amongst the earliest purpose-built cinemas in Scotland and a rare survival in its own right, evidence of the importance of providing newsreels and films for the hard-working population. The northern section of Central Avenue has a number of former dormitories which were designed in such a way that they could be transformed into private homes, if necessary. These were converted into housing after the War and now form an attractive boundary for the main street.

When the War was over, the need for the munitions factory ended and the workers left as quickly as they had arrived. The redundant factory and its machinery were sold and broken up, and the housing and other buildings were auctioned in 1924. Little survives of the factory, but fortunately many of the buildings within Gretna remain. Their unique design and layout makes Gretna an environment where communities can continue to thrive and yet the town can still pay tribute to the vital role it played during the First World War.

# CENTRAL MAP OF GREтна



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Anvil Hall, former St Ninian's Roman Catholic Church. C Evelyn Simmons, 1917



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Central Avenue



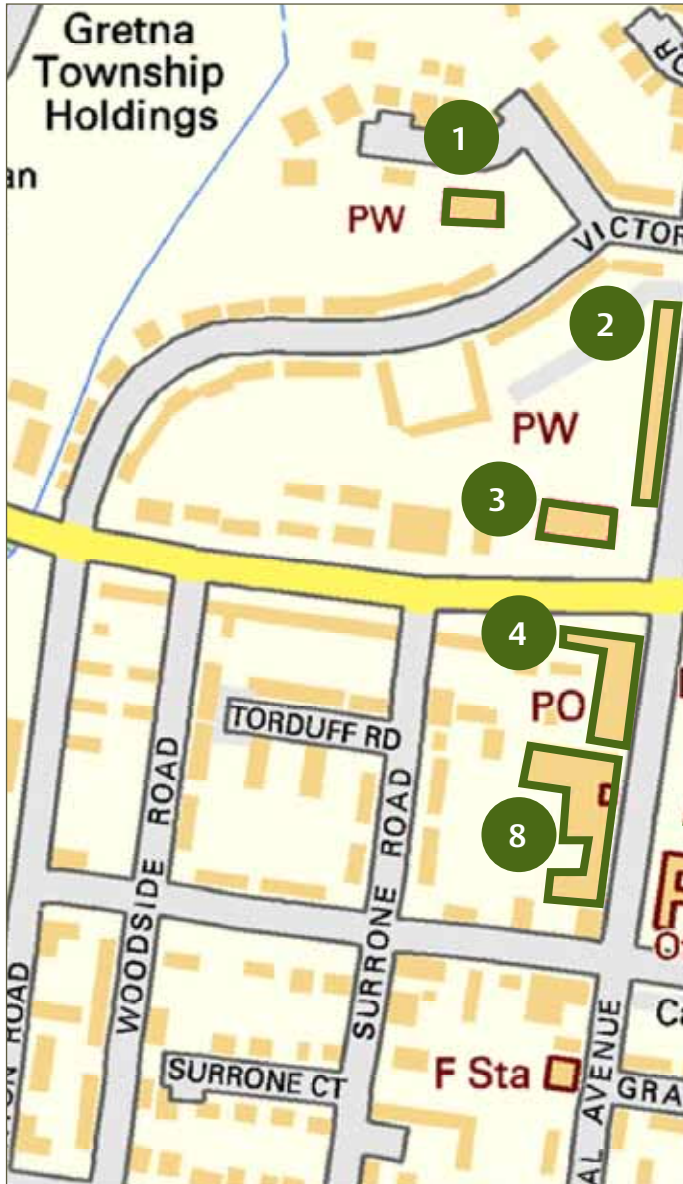
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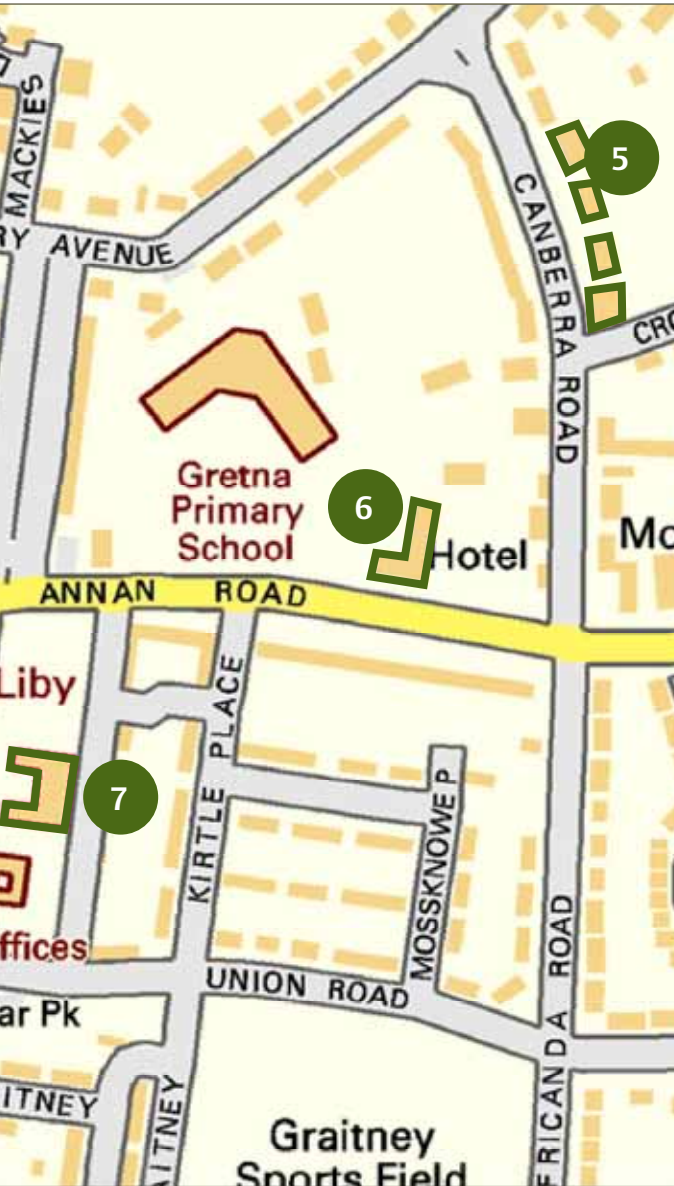
All Saints Episcopal Church. Geoffrey Lucas, 1917



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Corner of Central Avenue and Annan Road





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Canberra Avenue

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Hunters Lodge Hotel,  
former Staff Club

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Central Avenue, Richard  
Greenhow Centre, former  
Institute

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Former cinema, Central  
Avenue

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# HOUSING THE WORKERS

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With so many workers to house quickly, it is no surprise that the majority of the buildings in Gretna are domestic housing. The timber huts no longer exist, but the red-brick houses, of varying sizes, define the character of the town today. Mostly either terraced or semi-detached, the houses sit on wide, curving streets and each has a garden to front and rear. Each street has its own unique decorative features – evidence of the care and attention given to the design process. The majority of the roofs on the properties are pitched, with slopes to all four sides, rather than gabled, which is more common in Scotland. The pitched shape gives the houses a more rural Arts and Crafts character. Some of the semi-detached houses in Glasgow Road and Canberra Road have long, low, sloping roofs, prominent gables and tall chimney stacks. Others in Canberra Road have segmental-arch detailing over some of the windows and small, hexagonal windows.

Victory Avenue includes the only self-contained U-plan courtyard, where the housing is arranged around three sides forming a picturesque grouping. Small courtyards like this are important features in garden-city designs. The houses have discreet decorative details in the overhanging canopies above the entrance doors and on the gables on the south side of the courtyard.

Prominent chimney stacks form a recurring architectural theme throughout the town and are particularly impressive in the houses in Canberra Avenue where they dominate the skyline. Here the brickwork forms decorative bands in the stacks.



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8. Victory Avenue (© Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk))
  9. Victory Avenue
  10. Central Avenue





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- 11. East end of St Andrews Church of Scotland
  - 12. West end of St Andrews Church of Scotland
  - 13. Richard Greenhow Centre in Central Avenue
  - 14. Anvil Hall, former St Ninian's Roman Catholic Church
  - 15. Interior of the former St Ninian's church  
(© Crown Copyright: RCAHMS. Licensor [www.rcahms.gov.uk](http://www.rcahms.gov.uk))



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## A THRIVING COMMUNITY

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Public buildings were integral to planning the town.

The Institute was a key building for the residents and it now contains a library. With its U-plan shape and decorative brickwork, it is a fine civic building with an interesting roof profile. The stacks on this building, in common with other chimney stacks throughout the town, are a prominent feature. It had reading rooms for the workers and was a centre for recreational activities.

Another building essential for the community was the hospital. Built to a distinctive butterfly plan, it had its own lodge at the entrance. The plan form can still be clearly seen, although the building's function has changed. Set in its own grounds, there would have been green space for the patients' tranquillity and recreation.

Three visually striking churches were built for the spiritual well-being of the workers. The former Roman Catholic church, by C Evelyn Simmons and dating from 1917, is a large, brick building in a Byzantine style with a pantile roof and a low, octagonal tower above the crossing. The theme of distinctive rooflines is continued here with a variety of roof heights adding interest to the architecture of the building.

All Saints Episcopal church is by Geoffry Lucas and also dates from 1917. It stands on a prominent site at the centre of the town and has small windows and a massive, square tower-base, intended for a tower which was, in fact, never built. The Rectory is located next door.

St Andrew's Church of Scotland is by C M Crickmer and is a simple, cruciform shape. It has a low, windowed nave with a prominent tower at the east end with round-arched windows and a low, pitched roof, which gives the building an Italianate feel.



# [Historic Scotland]

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This booklet is part of a series celebrating Scotland's unique places. Each gives a brief overview of the town, city or countryside area and explores the value that the historic environment brings to these places, looking at key buildings or structures, and highlights aspects which make them special. This booklet on Gretna also accompanies a webpage which will introduce you to the town.

[www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/gretna](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk/gretna)

Historic Scotland is an executive agency of the Scottish Government charged with ensuring that our historic environment provides a strong foundation in building a successful future for Scotland. One of our duties is to compile and maintain statutory lists of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. We have a dedicated team which researches and assesses listing proposals and reviews.

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## FURTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

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[www.devilsporridge.co.uk](http://www.devilsporridge.co.uk)

Gordon L. Routledge, *Gretna's Secret War*, (1999).

Rhona Wilson, *Old Gretna* (1999).

[www.historic-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk)

## TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS

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Text by Joan Richardson.

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Front Cover photograph: Canberra Road

Not all buildings mentioned in this booklet are listed as buildings of special architectural or historic interest. If exploring Gretna, please respect residents' privacy.

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