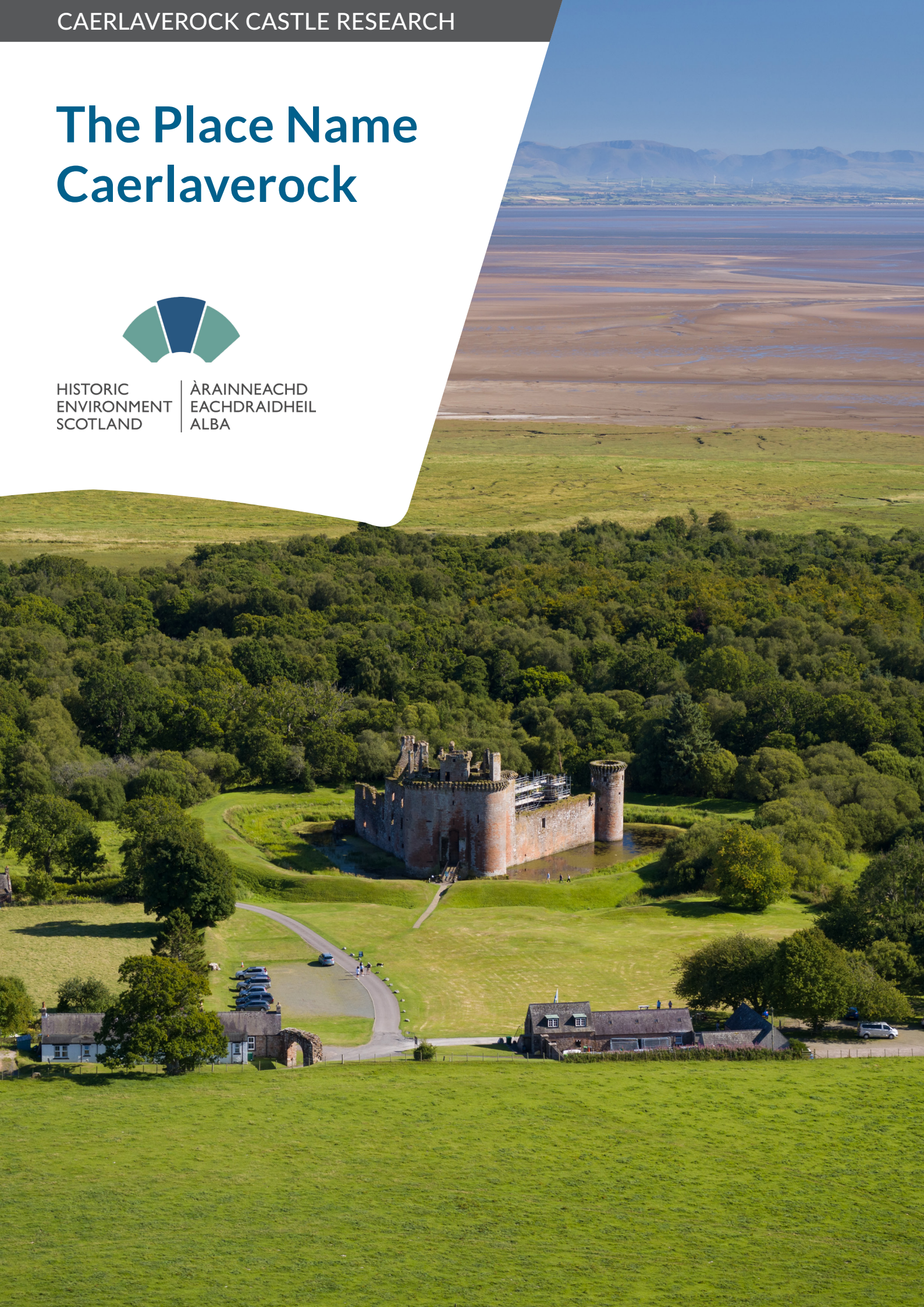


# The Place Name Caerlaverock



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# The Place Name Caerlaverock

## Alan James

This paper explores the origins of the place name Caerlaverock, Dumfriesshire, proposing a Brittonic origin referring to a fort, presumably the one on Wardlaw Hill, distinguished by its proximity to the tidal bore in the estuary of the River Nith. 'Brittonic' refers to a historic language which was used throughout most of Britain in the early first millennium AD. It evolved into Welsh, Cornish and Breton and, in what later became southern Scotland and English Cumbria, it remained current until the eleventh century as a language akin to Old Welsh, called 'Cumbric' by modern-day scholars.<sup>1</sup>

In his classic work on *The History of the Celtic Place-Names of Scotland*, W. J. Watson declared, 'The old spellings are all like the present', citing *Carlaverok* in a 1371 entry in *The Register of the Great Seal of Scotland*.<sup>2</sup> E. Johnson-Ferguson, in *The Place-Names of Dumfriesshire*, cites *Carlauerok* in *The Register of the Bishopric of Glasgow* in 1275.<sup>3</sup> Timothy Pont's map of around 1590, followed by Joan Blaeu's, 1654, has *Carlaurock*.<sup>4</sup> Robert Gordon's, 1644, has *Caerlaberok*; this is apparently the earliest use of *Caer-*, reflecting recognition of its likely equivalence to the Welsh word.<sup>5</sup>

On the basis of these recorded forms, we may infer that the name is probably a Brittonic formation, and we can be reasonably sure that the first, generic, element was *cair*, Modern Welsh *caer*.<sup>6</sup> The primary meaning of this word seems to have been 'an enclosed, defensible site'. Several names with this element in southern Scotland and northern England are sites of Roman forts or other military works,<sup>7</sup> while others are, or are close to, hillforts or other prehistoric defences.<sup>8</sup> Wardlaw, with both hillfort and neighbouring Roman camp, is surely the eponymous *cair* at Caerlaverock.

It is striking that *cair* is virtually the only Brittonic element found in the north in combination with personal names. Some of these may be historic, even legendary,<sup>9</sup> though as place names they need not necessarily be ancient. Such names could

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<sup>1</sup> See James 2025, vol. 1, Introduction.

<sup>2</sup> Thomson and Balfour Paul, vol. 1, no. 408, cited in Watson 1926, 368.

<sup>3</sup> Innes 1843, vol. 1, lxx, cited in Johnson-Ferguson 1935, 6.

<sup>4</sup> Pont c.1583-96; Blaeu 1654.

<sup>5</sup> Gordon 1644. Note that there are also Carlaverock in Tranent, East Lothian, and possibly *Carlaverick*, somewhere in Roxburghshire or Selkirkshire, but the latter may be an error for Caerlanrig.

<sup>6</sup> James 2025, vol. 2, under *cajr*.

<sup>7</sup> Examples include Cardurnock (Bowness, Cumberland), Carleith (Duntocher, West Dunbartonshire), Carlisle (Cumberland), Carmuir, Easter and Wester (Falkirk, Stirlingshire), Carriden (West Lothian), Carvoran (Greenhead, Northumberland), Carzield (Kirkmahoe, Dumfriesshire), Castlecary (East Dunbartonshire), Cramond (MidLothian), Kirkintilloch (East Dunbartonshire), and compare the list in Taylor with Márkus 2012, 317.

<sup>8</sup> Examples include Caerlanrig (Cavers, Roxburghshire), Cardrona (Innerleithen, Peebleshire), Carfrae (Haddington, Berwickshire), Carwinley (Arthuret, Cumberland; and see Guy 2026, 3, 6), and Carwinning (Dalry, Ayrshire).

<sup>9</sup> Examples include Cardunneth Pike (Cumrew, Cumberland), Carmaben (Dolphinton, Lanarkshire), Carruthers (Middlebie, Dumfriesshire), *Carthanacke* (= Maidencastle, Watermillock, Cumberland), Carvoran (as above), Carwinley (as above), Carwinning (as above), and even – in a sense – Carlisle. Note that in the case of Carlisle, *Cair-* may not have been prefixed to the name *Luel* before the ninth or tenth century, and there is reason to believe that other *cair-* names may be no earlier, or had that element added to a pre-existing name.

have been creations of the central medieval period, inspired by local legends that may or may not have had a basis in actual history. The possibility that Caerlaverock belongs in this category is one we shall have to consider. Others might well have been named after contemporary or recently remembered local chieftains or landholders,<sup>10</sup> and again these are at least as likely to have been players in a period of expansion and reorganisation of farming, landholding and settlement in the central Middle Ages as at any earlier date.

Again, assuming the records are as consistent as Watson claimed, we can take the second, specific element to have been pretty much unchanged up to the present time, as 'laverock'. In particular, the second, stressed, syllable consistently shows the vowel /a/; the intervocalic consonant seems to have been fricative /v/, though Pont's spelling implies liquid /w/ developing to a diphthong /au/, such variation being widely paralleled.<sup>11</sup>

The most plausible antecedent for such a form would involve an early Brittonic root *\*labar-*, paralleled in Gaulish place and personal names, and reflected in Middle Welsh *llawar*, Modern *llafar*, 'loud, clear, vociferous, resounding, resonant, sonorous'.<sup>12</sup> The suffix would have been *-ōg* -, Modern Welsh *-awg* or *-og*.<sup>13</sup>

In south-west Scotland, *lavar* combines with various suffixes in stream names, presumably 'noisy' ones. Examples in south-west Scotland include Lavery Burn (Girvan, Ayrshire), Lavern Burn (Durisdeer, Dumfriesshire), Lavern Water (Barrhead, Renfrewshire), Louran Burn (Minnigaff, Kirkcudbrightshire) and Lowran or Lowring Burn (Kells, Kirkcudbrightshire). So, might Caerlaverock preserve a lost stream name, *\*lavar-ōg*? It's difficult to visualise the ancient landscape – archaeological and scientific work has confirmed how frequently shifting the geography of the Solway coast has been.<sup>14</sup> The site is at the seaward tip of the ridge that separates the Nith estuary from Lochar Moss and is now separated from even the highest Solway tides by a wide stretch of merse. So the slow-flowing Lochar Water, and other minor burns nearby, aren't obvious candidates for 'chatterly' streams now, though, allowing for the lowering of relative sea level and the shifting sands of the Firth, a burn flowing down from the ridge might, a couple of millennia ago, have emptied straight into the sea, more like the ones further west in Galloway that still are quite 'chatterly'. But, on the other hand, *\*lavar-ōg* may not necessarily have named a burn, it might have referred to some other 'noisy' water feature: one such is indeed close by Caerlaverock, the famously roaring tidal bore which sweeps up the estuary of the Nith from the Solway Firth.<sup>15</sup> This may be the best explanation for the name.

However, we need to consider other possibilities that have been put forward in many publications. For a start, the matter is complicated by the obvious resemblance between 'laverock' and the Middle English or Older Scots word for 'a skylark', from Old English *lāferce*. Undoubtedly this would have been noticed; late

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Caerketton Hill (Lasswade, Midlothian), Cardonald (Abbey, Renfrewshire).

<sup>11</sup> James 2025, vol. 2, under *laβar*.

<sup>12</sup> *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* 2011. Related words in the Brittonic languages include Old Cornish *lauar* which glosses Latin *sermo*, 'speech', and Breton *lavar* 'word'; it is cognate with Old Irish *labar*, becoming Irish and Scottish Gaelic *labhar*, and is related to Latin *lambo* 'I lick', Germanic *\*lap-* as in Old English *lappian*, 'to lap' as in 'lap up', and Greek *láptein* 'to lap up'.

<sup>13</sup> James 2025, vol. 2, under *-ōg*. *\*lavar-ōg* becomes Modern Welsh *llafarog* 'vocal, voiced, uttered, spoken, loud (of voice, &c.), shrill; vocalic' (*Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* 2011) and more generally in the Celtic languages the adjectival senses imply 'talkative, boastful', the nominal 'a chatterbox' or 'a boaster'.

<sup>14</sup> Brann 2004, chs 2, 10; Tipping et al. 2022; Solway Firth Partnership 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Solway Firth Partnership 2021.

Cumbric *lavarog* (with the final, unstressed syllable weakened) would have been pronounced almost the same as *laverock* by speakers of Older Scots or Middle English, and folk etymologies associating the place with skylarks would have naturally followed from this, but they can hardly be reconciled with the evidently Brittonic generic element, *cair*.

As for the supposed association with the legendary Llywarch Hen, the tradition that Caerlaverock Castle was founded by a son of his can be traced to one of a series of articles on *The Mabinogi of Taliesin* in *The Cambrian Quarterly*, 1832.<sup>16</sup> Subsequent versions of an association between Caerlaverock and semi-legendary events, in which both Llywarch and a lark's nest both appear in medieval Welsh literature, are expertly reviewed by Ben Guy;<sup>17</sup> but, so far as the origin of the place name is concerned, and despite its uncharacteristically uncritical acceptance by such a reputable philologist as W. J. Watson,<sup>18</sup> there is no good reason to suppose that –laverock preserves the name Llywarch. There is no documentary evidence to support this etymology; as observed above, the stressed medial syllable was definitely /lav/, with a variant /law/, neither of which could be a regular reflex of \**Līvarch* > Llywarch. The vowel in the final syllable, –ock, might be explained away – as it is, rather weakly, by Watson – as an epenthetic insertion, but its appearance as a full syllable as early as 1275 favours a pre-existing long vowel. It could be argued that the ‘skylark’ word influenced the development of the name Llywarch, but that would be less plausible than the simple falling-together of *lavarog* with *laverock* as proposed above.

So, I propose that \**Lavarōg* ‘loud one’ may most likely have been the name that Brittonic speakers gave to the loud tidal bore that sweeps up the Nith estuary, and that the original \**Cair-lavarōg* was on Wardlaw, a fort within earshot of that striking phenomenon.

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<sup>16</sup> Edwards 1832, 366, cited in Bartrum 1993, 483.

<sup>17</sup> Guy 2026.

<sup>18</sup> Watson 1926, 368.

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