

Excavations at two sites in Old Aberdeen

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with contributions by Susanne Atkins & Stewart Thain

ABSTRACT

Two sites were excavated between 1986 and 1987 at frontage sites on the pre-19th-century thoroughfare out of Aberdeen to the north, as part of an overall programme to establish the nature of medieval deposits in Old Aberdeen. Despite 19th- to 20th-century disturbance, it was possible at both sites to establish, perhaps surprisingly, that the earliest evidence of activity was of 17th-century date. At the Don Street site five small domestic kilns were excavated. The projects were funded by Historic Scotland (former HBM/SDD).

INTRODUCTION

The lack of redevelopment within the Conservation Area of Old Aberdeen over many years has meant that few opportunities have arisen for archaeological exploration. The following report summarizes the results of two excavations, both positioned on frontage areas on the main medieval route out of Aberdeen to the north (illus 1 & 2). The principal purpose of the excavations was to test for medieval layers on the sites, and for that reason, in the time available, exhaustive studies of the later buildings could not be undertaken. These excavations were funded by Historic Scotland (formerly HBM/SDD).

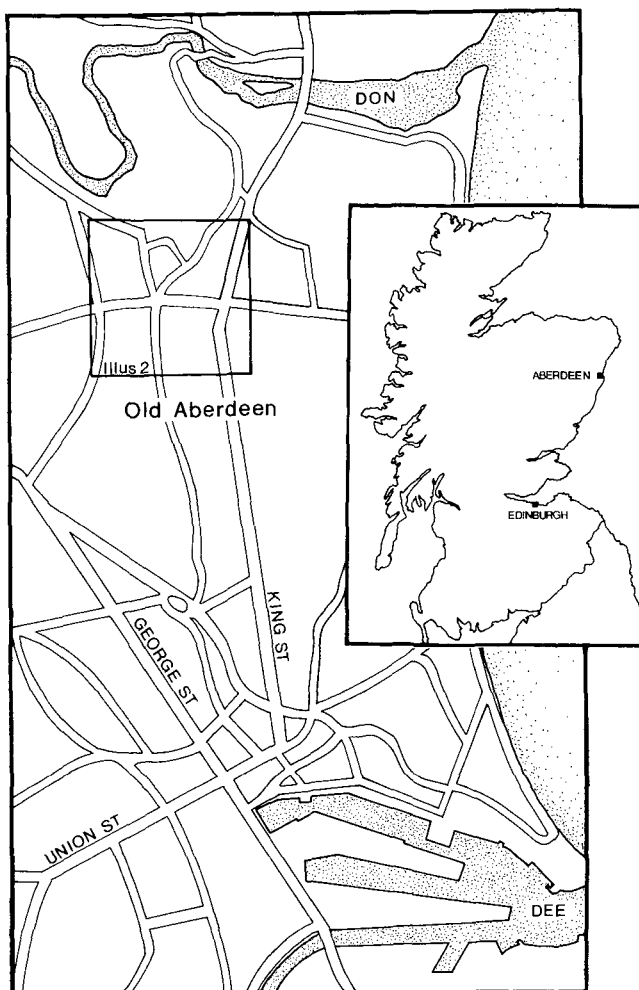
64–72 DON STREET

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The settlement of Old Aberdeen developed around St Machar's Cathedral in the 12th century and was created a free burgh of barony by James IV in 1498. The burgh maintained a distinct identity until 1891 when it was absorbed into the City of Aberdeen. Don Street runs in a north-east direction from the burgh's medieval High Street to the 14th-century bridging point over the river Don at the Brig o' Balgownie; it thus formed the main routeway into the hinterland. Numbers 64–72 Don Street lies on the east side of the street opposite the site of Chaplain's Port, one of the former gates opening into St Machar's precinct. In the 19th century this portion of the street was known variously as Seaton Gate or Seaton Dykes, owing to its proximity to Seaton Estate to the north-east.

The earliest cartographic representation of Old Aberdeen, Parson Gordon's map of 1661¹ (illus 3), shows the area which was to become 64–72 Don Street lying at the north-east extremity of the burgh and occupying two tenements which stretched east from the street frontage to a back lane

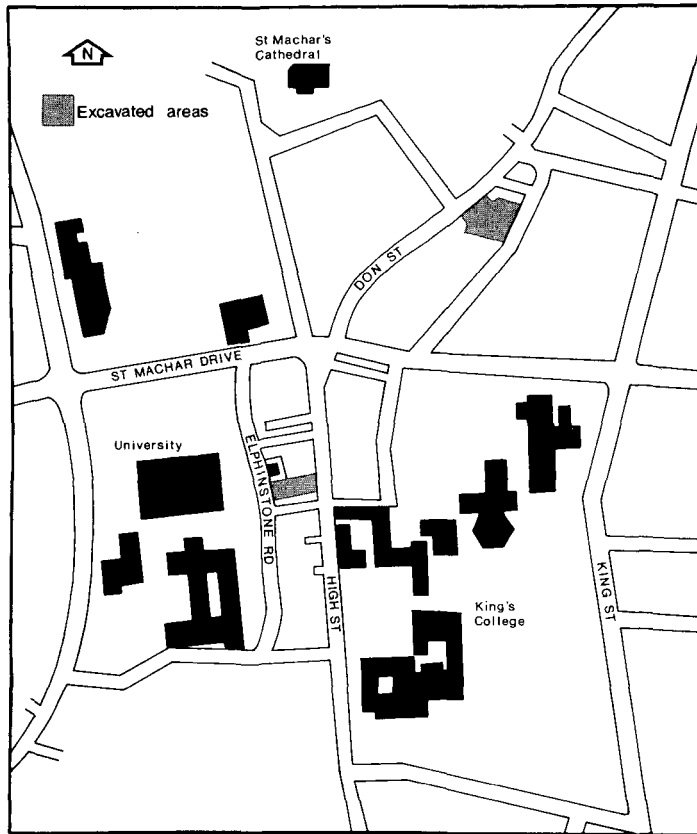
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ILLUS 1 Location map. (Based on the Ordnance Survey maps
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marking the boundary of the burgh croftlands. Two buildings are marked lying parallel to the street frontage on the foreland of each rigg with an additional two lying at right angles to the former on the inland. The backland at this date is shown as enclosed land associated with the dwellings on the foreland and inland. Patterson's stylized map of 1746² indicates a similar layout while Taylor's more detailed map of 1773³ delineates two small structures which have developed on the backlands. The alignment of buildings on the foreland and inland have altered by the time of the earliest Ordnance Survey map⁴ which shows a larger building on the inland angled at 45 degrees to the street. A hand-drawn plan of 1894⁵ marks the subdivision of the plots into nos 64–72 Don Street.

Scots law was such that the earliest title deeds to the site record only ownership of the land rather than occupancy or tenancy, and describe tenement boundaries only in terms of the ownership of adjacent properties. The nature or number of buildings on a tenement or any associated domestic,



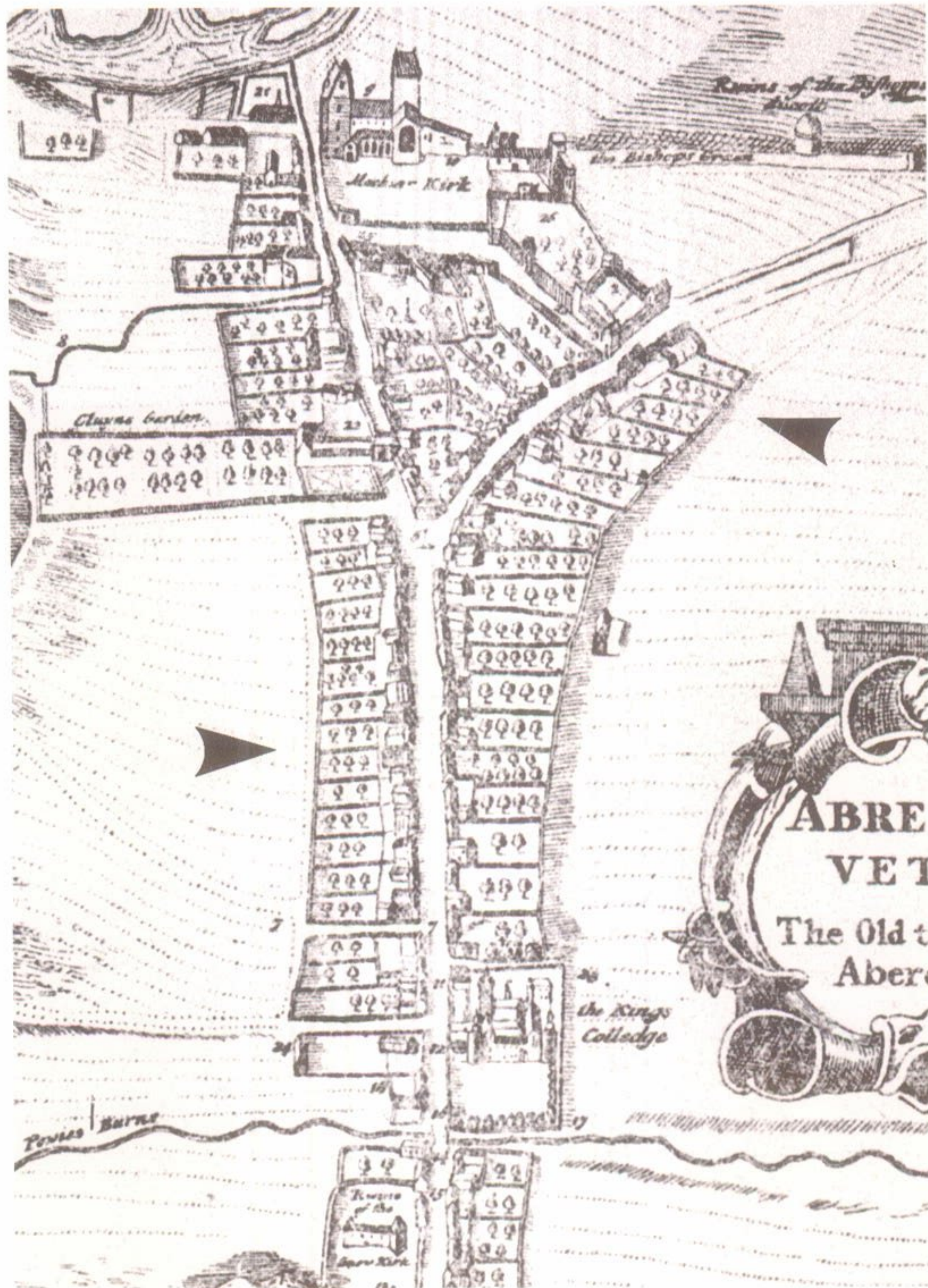
ILLUS 2 64–72 Don Street and 81 High Street location map. (Based on the Ordnance Survey maps © Crown Copyright)

commercial or industrial activity is rarely referred to. A disposition relating to part of the site in 1774⁶ is unusual in that it describes a two-storey, stone-gabled forehouse with a back brewhouse. A close, probably running along the former boundary line, separates this tenement from that adjacent to the north, with which it shared a draw well.

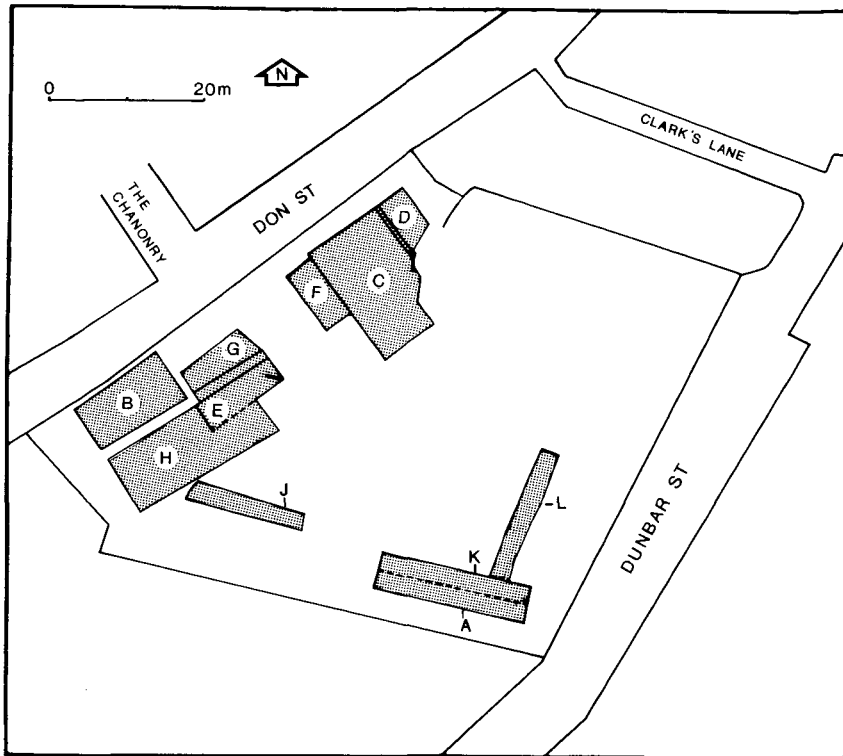
In the late 19th century the property passed into the hands of two landed families: the Hays of Seaton who acquired nos 70–72 and the Patons of Grandholme who owned nos 64–68.⁷ Greenhouses were erected on the site in 1945/6 as part of a market gardening enterprise and remained there until the site became vacant in the early 1960s.⁸

THE EXCAVATION

Eleven trenches totalling 844 sq m were excavated in August and September 1986 (illus 4). The site was large and it was felt that discrete trenches positioned over the whole area would be the most valuable use of resources. Most of the trenches were located on the Don Street frontage, but three trenches were placed at the east of the site near Dunbar Street, to assess the level of activity in that area. Archaeological features were found in Trenches B, C, D, E, F, G and H and these will be



ILLUS 3 Portion of Parson Gordon's map of 1661 indicating the approximate locations of the sites at Don Street (r) and High Street (l).



ILLUS 4 64-72 Don Street showing position of trenches. (Based on the Ordnance Survey maps © Crown Copyright)

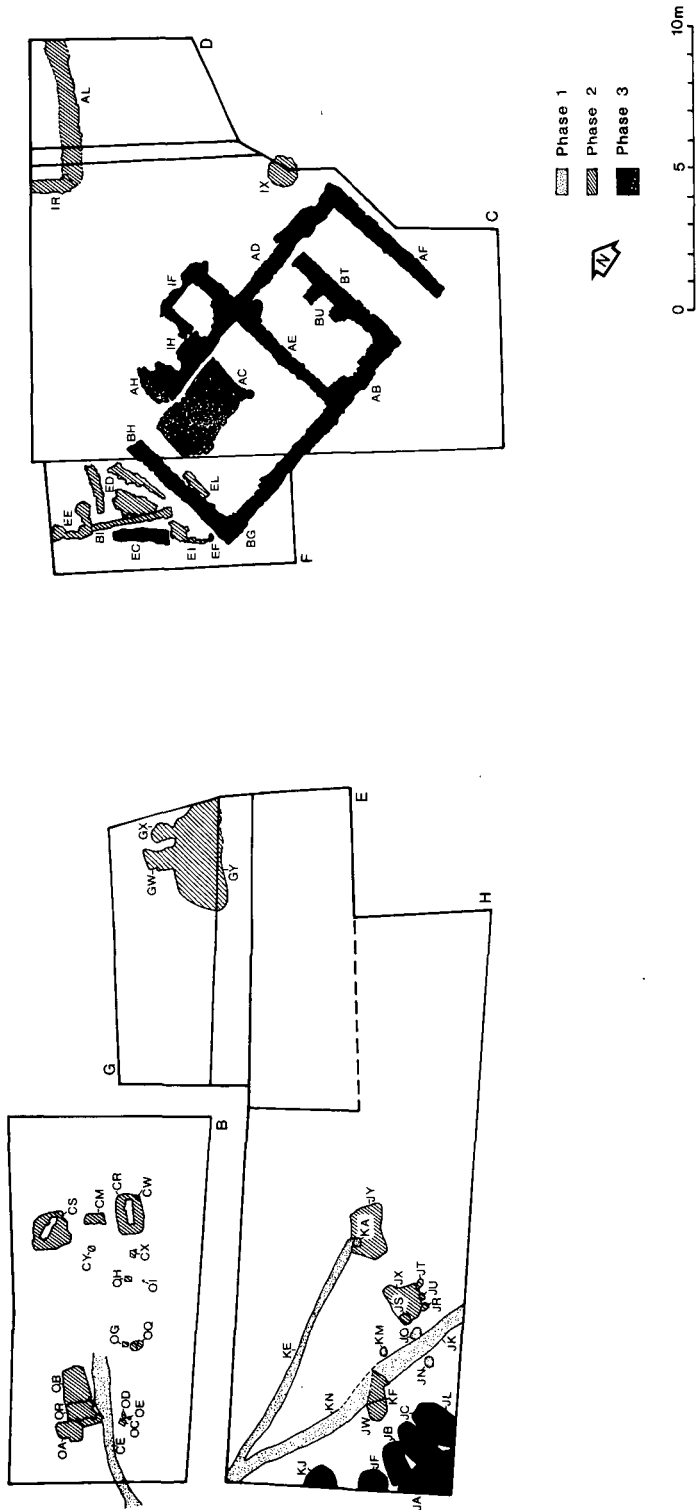
discussed below. Area A consisted of garden soil overlying clay subsoil and Areas J and K were disturbed by modern activity. These trenches will not be referred to again in the text. Areas A, J, K and L were excavated by machine, the rest being excavated completely by hand.

Phase 1: 17th century (illus 5)

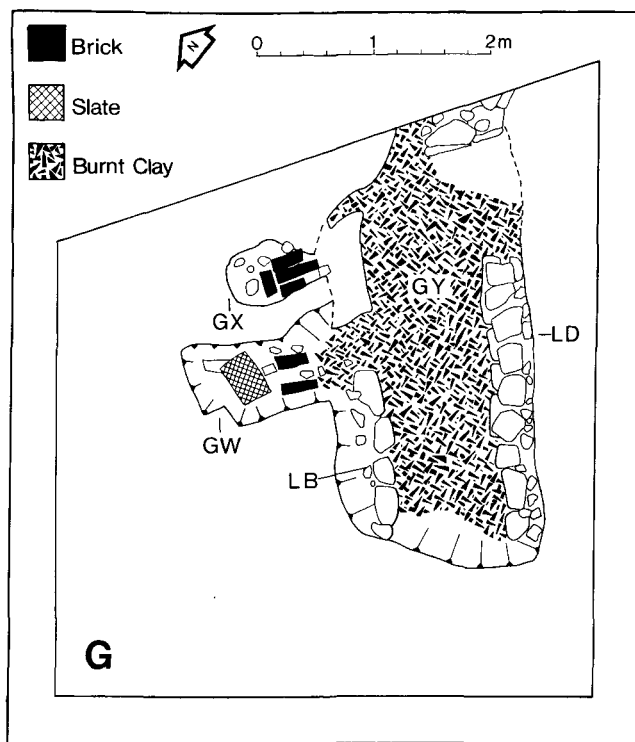
Ditches The earliest features on the site were ditches KN and JK, which were probably sectors of the same ditch, and stake-holes KM, KA, JO and JN. Also probably in this phase was ditch KE. The features in this phase contained pottery of a 17th-century date. Ditch CE in Area B was less well defined than the other ditches found, but was cut by Phase 2 features, and probably, therefore, belongs to this phase.

Phase 2: 17th-18th century (illus 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 & 10)

Buildings The 17th- to 18th-century phase of the site included two cottages whose façades were still visible on the Don Street frontage. Two fragments of stone and clay-bonded wall, AL and IR (illus 5), were the only evidence which remained of one, whilst a second cottage was represented by walls BI and EE. Wall BI was less substantial than the other examples and may have represented an extension to the back of the cottage, although it may not have post-dated the main structure by very long. Possibly associated with building BI/EE



ILLUS 5 64-72 Don Street: Phases 1-3



ILLUS 6 64-72 Don Street: Phase 2 kilns GW and GX and raking pit GY

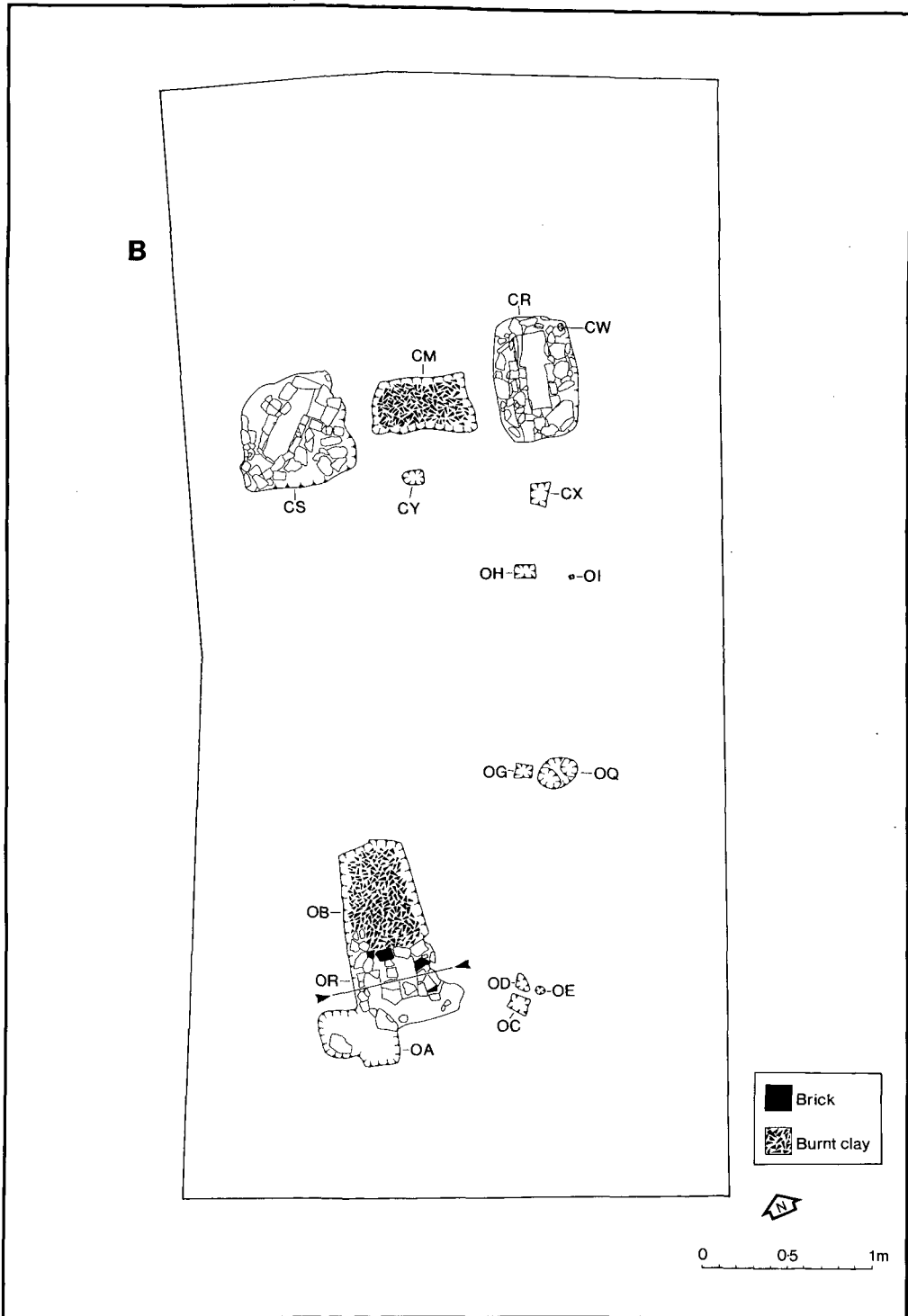
were fragments of internal and external cobbled surfaces ED and EI. These cottages may have been the remains of the buildings visible on Gordon's map of 1661 (illus 3).⁹

Sections of clay-bonded wall, AD and EL, were probably part of the first phase of the building constructed at 45 degrees to, and set slightly back from, the frontage as seen on Taylor's map of 1773.¹⁰ Wall AD does not appear on illus 5 in Phase 2, because although it was initially constructed in this phase, it was rebuilt on the same alignment in Phase 3 (see illus 5 & 11). There is no ceramic evidence for the dating of this earlier phase of AD or of EL.

Well A stone-built well IX (illus 5) was also partly excavated. The phase to which it belongs is not certain because no dating evidence for its construction was found and no stratigraphic evidence linked it with the rest of the site. However it seems reasonable to conjecture that it may be the draw well shared by two properties, mentioned in a 1774 document.¹¹ Its fill contained residual 17th-century local wares including slipwares and late 18th-century creamwares.

Kilns Near the frontage were a group of small kilns GW, GX, CR, CS and OR (illus 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 & 10). They were all cut into the clay subsoil and were constructed of brick, except OR which was primarily of stone.

Kilns GW and GX (illus 6) were adjacent to each other in Area G. No stake holes associated with these kilns were found nor any other evidence of a roof or cover, as the kilns had been truncated by later activity. Both were filled with charcoal and other charred material. Analysis of this material provided no evidence as to their use. Each of these kilns had a single opening into associated raking pit GY (illus 6), which was filled with



ILLUS 7 64-72 Don Street: Phase 2 kilns CS, CR and OR with associated raking pits and stake-holes



ILLUS 8 64-72 Don Street: Kiln CR, facing south, Scale = 0.3 m

burnt organic material, clay, burnt tile, stone and brick fragments. A fragment of creamware from this feature suggests a date up to c 1800. Two small lengths of wall, LB and LD, were positioned along the bottom of the pit. Both wall fragments were burnt on their internal faces.

Kilns CR and CS (illus 5, 7, 8 & 9) were brick-built and adjacent to each other, separated by a shallow pit, CM. The kilns were filled with rubble whereas CM contained layers of burnt clay, presumably where the contents of the kilns had been raked.

Kiln OR (illus 5, 7 & 10) was the only kiln found on this site which was constructed mainly of stone. It had one opening, blocked with large stones, and was filled with burnt clay and ash. Two shallow pits, OA and OB, were associated with this kiln. Pit OA was filled with rubble and contained a 17th to 18th-century knife-trimmed jug base. Pit OB contained burnt organic material and clays.

A number of features including stake-holes, a section of 'path' and a stone surface were found in the area of kilns CR, CS and OR, but the area was so heavily disturbed by later activity that it was impossible to associate these features with the kilns. It is possible, however, that the stake-holes represented traces of supports for a roof or cover for the kilns. It is not known if these structures were freestanding or whether they were associated with other buildings, as no evidence had survived.

It has been suggested that the kilns may have been clay pipe kilns, but this theory has been rejected due mainly to the lack of material evidence from the fill or surroundings of the structures. These kilns were too small and poorly constructed to allow the build up of high temperatures which would have been required for the firing of clay pipes or any other commercial industry (Allan Peacey, pers comm). A very small amount of pottery was excavated from the kilns, suggesting a probable late 17th- to 18th-century date. There is, therefore, a possibility that these kilns may be associated with the brewhouse included in the description of the site written in 1774,¹² but it has been impossible to determine the use for which they were built from archaeological evidence.



ILLUS 9 64–72 Don Street: Kiln CS, facing south-west, scale = 1 m

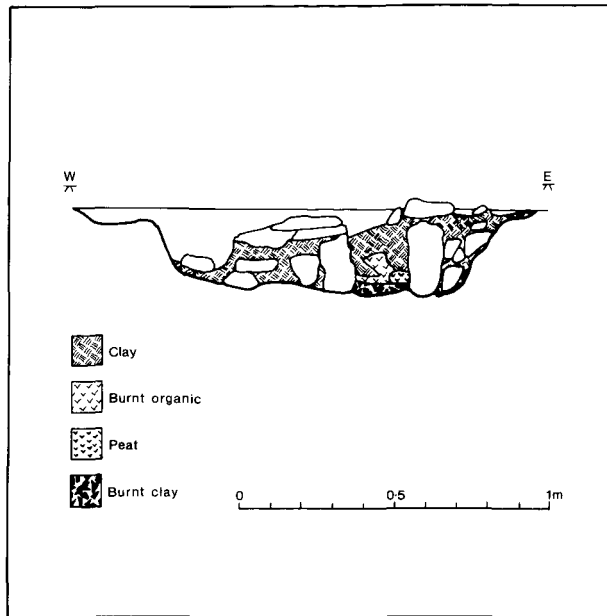
Pits Phase 2 in Area H consisted of pits KF and JW (illus 5) which may relate to this phase which but had been disturbed by later activity. Burnt areas JX and JY and stake-holes JR, JS, JT and JU, may have at one time been associated with a hearth or kiln, but no evidence of one was found in the vicinity. The pottery suggests an 18th-century date.

Phase 3: 18th–19th century (illus 5 & 11)

Areas C and F contained evidence of an 18th- to 19th-century building (illus 11), which consisted of mortared stone walls AF, AD (which was originally constructed in Phase 2), AB/BG and BH. Features EC and EF (illus 5 only) were also stone and mortar walls which may be associated with this phase, as they overlay the Phase 2 cobbled surface ED. The building had two internal partition walls, AE and BT. In wall AD there appeared to be a blocked doorway IL, which survived only as a section of the wall with different construction from the rest, overlain by a thin layer of dirty yellow clay. The relationship of Feature IF to the main building is not certain but it may be a small porch or extension. Alternatively, in view of the quite substantial nature of this building's foundations, it is possible that it had a second storey, in which case this feature might represent the base of a forestair. Feature BU was probably the base of a chimney, representing the position of a fireplace.¹³ Portions of internal and external cobbled flooring AC, AH and IH were excavated. It is possible that this is the building described in 1774¹⁴ as a two-storey, stone-gabled 'forehouse'.

In Area H during this phase, the main features were pits JA, JB, JC, JF, JL and KJ (illus 5). They were large pits with uniform fills presumably excavated for the extraction of sand. The small amount of pottery again was very mixed but suggested an 18th to 19th-century date.

Trench L (illus 4 only) contained a shallow ditch PB and mortar-bonded wall PF. In addition a well, PC, and stake holes PD and PE were located but left unexcavated. Based on the finds from this trench, these features belong to Phase 3 or 4.



ILLUS 10 64–72 Don Street: Section through Kiln OR (see illus 7 for position)

This phase contained a variety of 18th to 19th-century pottery including a fragment of an 1887 Queen Victoria Jubilee bowl.

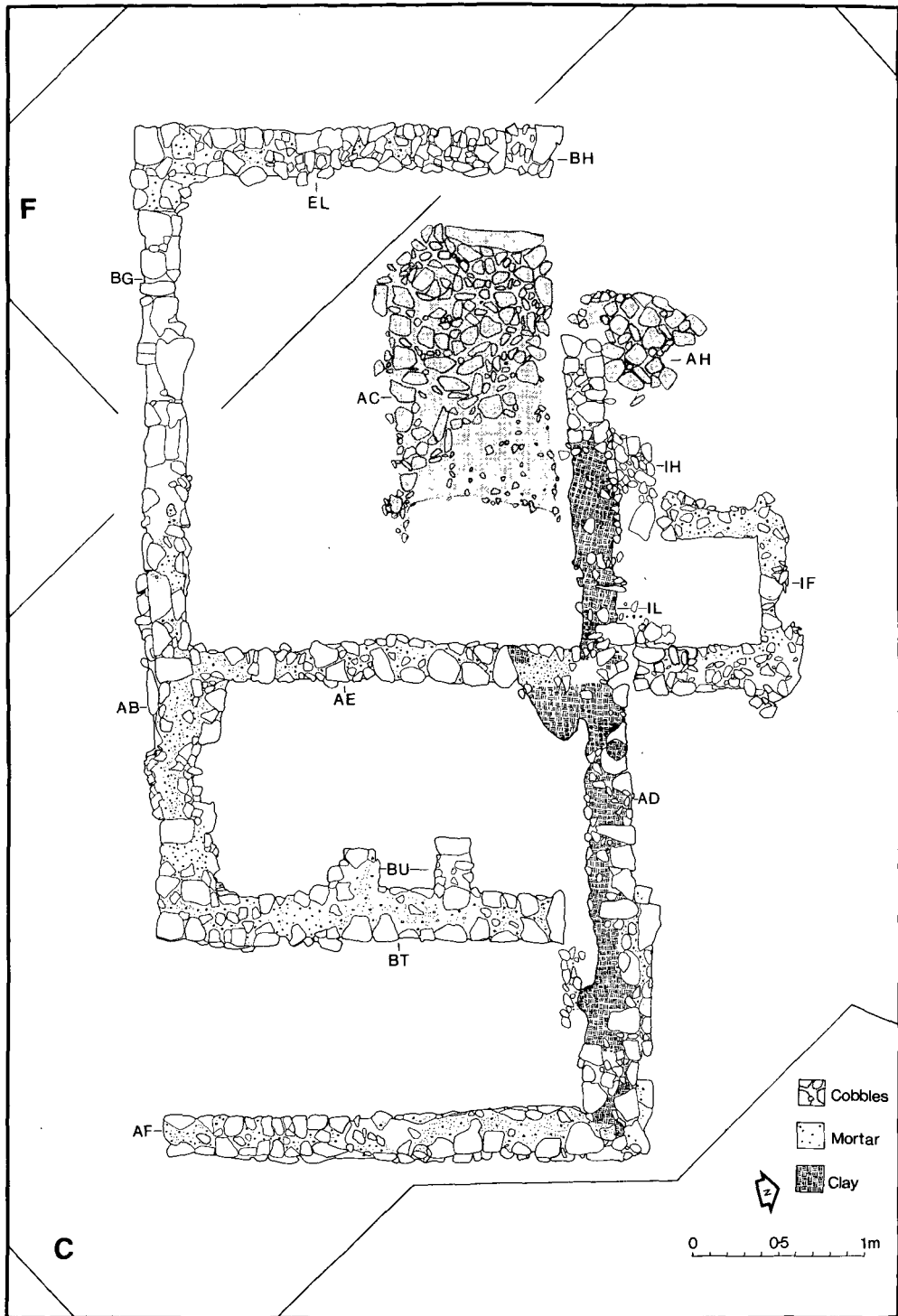
Phase 4: 19th–20th century (not illustrated)

In this phase the area was used as a market garden. Archaeological evidence for this activity included linear depressions filled with loose soil and rubble. Bases for greenhouses were also noted. A large amount of residual pottery was found, but 19th- and 20th-century pottery dates this phase up to the middle of the 20th century when the buildings on the frontage were demolished.

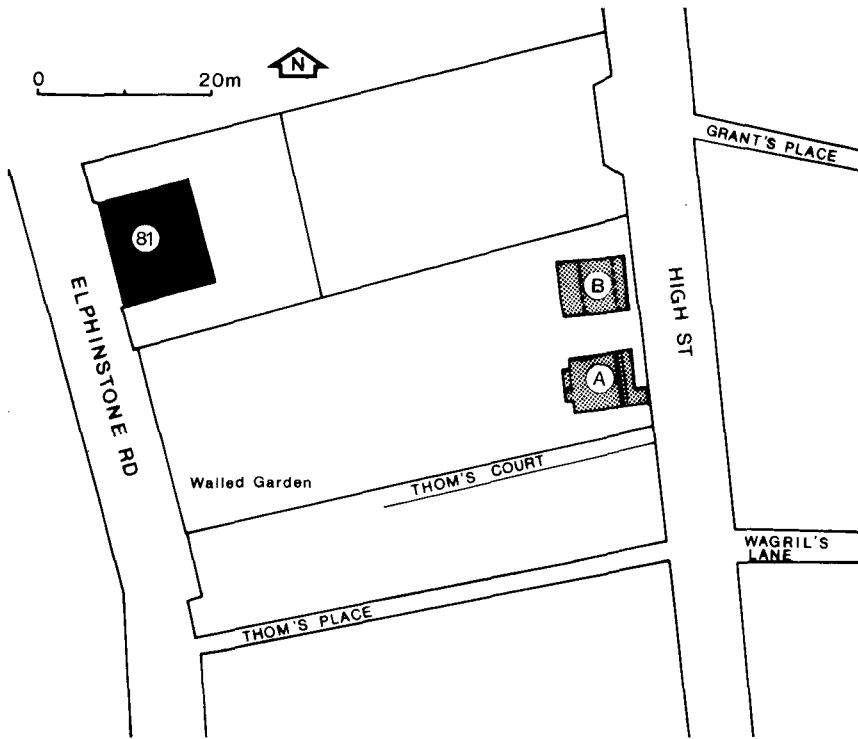
81 HIGH STREET

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Old Aberdeen's High Street (illus 2 & 3), the main thoroughfare in the burgh and site of the medieval market, once formed the northern section of the road linking that settlement with Aberdeen to the south. The walled garden of 81 High Street, within which the excavation took place, lies on the west of the street, bounded to the south by Thom's Court and to the west by Elphinstone Road. The surviving title deeds to the property date from the mid-17th century to the present day;¹⁵ the earliest sasine, from 1660,¹⁶ is near contemporaneous with the first map drawn of the burgh.¹⁷ Gordon's map of 1661 (illus 3) shows buildings on the street frontage with property boundaries running west and bounded on that side by the lane that later developed into Elphinstone Road. The sasine, however, merely contains a standard phrase referring to the 'tenement of land and yard with the houses and biggings built or to be built thereon'. Taylor's map of 1773¹⁸ shows a realignment of structures on the site, which now lie gable-end to the road as a result of the colonization of the inland and backland.



ILLUS 11 64-72 Don Street: Phase 3 building AD



ILLUS 12 81 High Street showing position of Trenches A and B within walled garden. (Based on the Ordnance Survey maps © Crown Copyright)

By 1867¹⁹ the entire tenement had been redeveloped as an ornamental garden, possibly designed for the large house to the north, purchased by the MacLeans of Coll in the late 18th century.²⁰ In 1929 the site passed to the Traill family²¹ and thence to the University of Aberdeen in 1981.²²

THE EXCAVATION

Two trenches were excavated in the area of the walled garden during three weeks of May 1987. No access was possible for mechanical excavators, and so, owing to the large build-up of garden soil, only a small proportion of the garden was explored. The aim of the project was to establish whether any archaeological levels, particularly of medieval date, survived in this part of the High Street.

Areas A and B (illus 12) totalled 105 sq m and were positioned as close to the frontage wall of the site as possible. As this was essentially a trial excavation, no attempt to join the trenches was made. Stratigraphy was fairly poor and the phases should therefore be taken as a general guideline only.

Phase 1: Pre-17th century (illus 13)

The earliest phase on this site consisted of several very insubstantial features. A stake-hole AI and possible hearth AL were the most tangible of these. No pottery was found from this phase in either trench.

Phase 2: 17th–18th century (illus 13)

Feature AE was a very shallow linear depression running north/south through Area A, but not detected in Area B. It may have been a boundary within a property, or a robber trench representing the rear wall of a frontage building, although, if the latter, it seems unexpectedly near (2.20 m) to the current street frontage.

Post-hole AF was set into the south end of linear feature AE and may have been from a later phase. Cobbles AK, and a scatter of stones AM may have been contemporary with the cobbles in Area B. The pottery from this phase was mainly dated to the 17th-century, but 18th-century creamware and salt-glazed wares were also found.

Cobbles CI were roughly laid in Phase 2a, and may have been the first layer of a surface, or a levelling layer below a more substantial cobbled surface. Phase 2b sand and stones 221 (not illus) and 223 accumulated on top of the cobbles. The main cobbled areas CH, CG and CL (not illus) occurred in Phase 2c. Dividing the two areas of cobbling was CD, a clay-filled linear feature, possibly a wall foundation trench or boundary ditch. Feature CM was a semicircular area of compressed stones, possibly levelling for a natural depression. Clay pipes and pottery from this level suggest a 17th-century date.

The slightly later Phase 2d cobbling, CN and CF, may have represented areas where the main layers of cobbles had been patched. Associated with these later cobbles were linear patches of yellow clay 216 and 217 (not illus), which may have bordered the cobbles. The burnished clay pipe stem from this level suggests a date in the 17th or early 18th century.

Phase 3: 18th–19th century (not illus)

This phase marks the beginning of the use of this area as a garden, typified by the first build-up of the garden soil layers. Again much residual 17th-century pottery was found, together with a Charles I Scottish copper twopence or turner 1642–50, but some fragments of late German stonewares suggest an 18th- to 19th-century date.

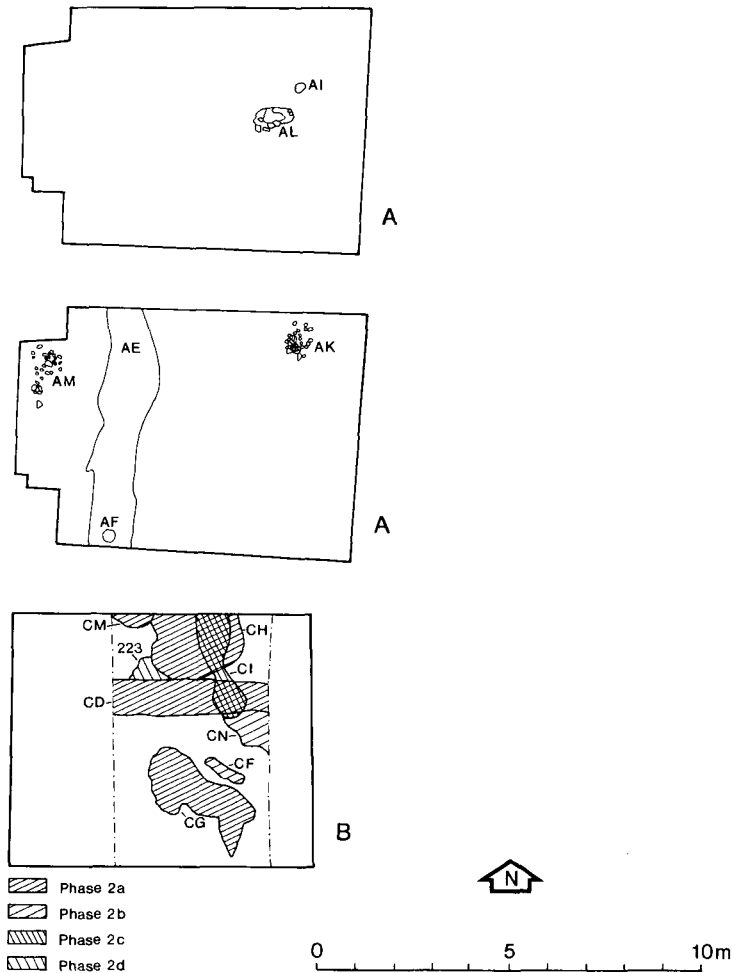
THE FINDS

THE POTTERY

The pottery from both the High Street and Don Street sites was very fragmentary due to heavy disturbance and the nature of the sites. Very little of the pottery was well stratified. Both assemblages contained only coarse wares, with little porcelain or good quality ceramics. Much of the pottery was probably from local or east coast sources.

64–72 Don Street

A small amount of the pottery from this site, particularly from Area H, was well-stratified 17th-century material. The bulk of the pottery was 18th- to 19th-century in date. Roughly a quarter of the assemblage was made up of large, yellow, internally glazed storage jars. These were almost certainly of local manufacture and may derive from the Seaton pottery. A large number of garden-related vessels reflect the use of the site as a market garden in the 19th and 20th centuries. Imports include a small number of German stonewares including two fragments of Westerwald-type ware. Many sherds are undoubtedly products of a Scottish pottery tradition, but have not been more firmly identified, as yet.



ILLUS 13 81 High Street: Area A Phase 1 (top) & 2 (middle); Area B Phases 2a-2d (bottom)

81 High Street

The pottery assemblage from this site consisted primarily of 17th-century local wares, mainly jugs. The remainder consisted of yellow and brown internally glazed earthenware storage jars (possibly from the Seaton pottery), creamware, white salt-glazed wares and a small amount of stoneware, all dating to the 18th and 19th centuries. Of particular note are a fragment of polychrome Westerwald-type ware and the foot of a Rouen tin-glazed large open dish with scalloped edges, dating to the early 18th century. There is also a blue and white sprig-moulded Staffordshire jug of early 19th-century date. A small amount of blue and white transfer printed and sponge-glazed pottery was excavated along with three fragments of green and yellow slipware with sgraffito decoration. The assemblage includes creamware and white salt-glazed wares of possible Prestonpans type. Some of

the vessels display stilt marks. A registration mark can be seen on the base of a tin-glazed plate dating from the period 1842–67.

THE CLAY PIPES

Susanne Atkin

A small number of clay pipe fragments were excavated from the sites, mainly from Phase 3 and 4 contexts. At 64–72 Don Street, two Phase I examples may possibly date to the 17th century. Number 81 High Street produced a small, fragmentary group of clay pipe fragments, mainly undatable.

THE COINS

Stewart Thain

A small number of fairly worn later Scottish (milled) and modern British coins were found from these sites. The majority were in unstratified or poorly stratified contexts. They make up a good representative sample of the ‘small change’ in use over more than 200 years. However there is a lack of Victorian coins which is noteworthy. A ‘cartwheel’ penny, found in a cardboard pouch, may have been a keepsake and was probably lost sometime in the present century.

CONCLUSIONS

The earliest substantial or dateable archaeological evidence from these sites was from the 17th century. At 64–72 Don Street, it took the form of two ditches, and some stake holes. It is possible that some pre-17th century levels may have been obliterated by the effects of later gardening and semi-industrial activities on the shallow stratigraphy of the site, but it is significant that no medieval pottery was recovered from the site. There was less comparable disturbance at 81 High Street, and although the deep overburden of soil allowed only small areas to be opened, there was again a notable lack of medieval material of any sort, although a single stake hole and a hearth in Phase 1 could be dated stratigraphically only as pre-17th century. On the whole the slight evidence of possible buildings, boundaries and surfaces at 81 High Street might seem to imply a higher level of development in the 17th century at that location than in Don Street, where the angles and directions of the ditches suggest drainage ditches rather than plot boundaries. If, indeed, they are the latter, then they certainly have little of the regularity shown, at least towards the east portion of the site, by Parson Gordon on his map of 1661²³(illus 3).

Both sites indicated an increase in activity as the 17th century progressed into the 18th, reflecting the picture available from cartographic sources. It is interesting to note some potential contacts in the 18th century at 64–72 Don Street between archaeological and documentary sources for the draw-well and the substantial stone building (Phases 2 and 3). Regrettably the surviving remains of the small kilns seemed to have proved sufficient only to tantalize, rather than to define their certain function.

Clearly there is a need, should opportunity arise, to examine further areas in Old Aberdeen. Meanwhile, from these two particular excavations there emerges a picture of a settlement, of which the physical presence, except for major foci such as Cathedral and University, may have been relatively slight prior to the 17th century.

NOTES

- 1 Gordon J, 1661 'A Description of New and Old Aberdeens; with the places nearest adjacent' in *Collection of Early Maps relating to Aberdeen*, 1901 reprint, Aberdeen City Archives.
- 2 Patterson, G & W 1746 'A Survey of New and Old Aberdeen with the Adjacent Country between the Rivers Dee and Don', in *Early Maps, ibid.*
- 3 Taylor G, 1773 'A Plan of the City of Aberdeen. The Old Town and adjacent country', in *Early Maps, ibid.*
- 4 Ordnance Survey 1st edn, 1867, 6 in:1 mile, Aberdeenshire LXXV, 3,23.
- 5 Plan of the property at Don Street belonging to W R Paton, 1894. Title deeds 64–72 Don Street, *op cit.*
- 6 Disposition by Thomas Skene to Alexander Garrioch, 9 April 1774. Title deeds relating to 64–72 Don Street 1774–1988. Ref. IPDONOO1.DM.FM.AA, J.D. Paton's Trust, Paull & Williamson, Solicitors, Aberdeen.
- 7 Title deeds, 64–72 Don Street, *ibid.*
- 8 Valuation Roll for 1962–3, St Machar's Parish. Aberdeen City Archives.
- 9 Gordon J, 1661 'A Description of New and Old Aberdeens', *op cit.*
- 10 Taylor G, 1773 'A Plan of the City of Aberdeen', *op cit.*
- 11 Title deeds, 64–72 Don Street, *ibid.*
- 12 Title deeds, 64–72 Don Street, *ibid.*
- 13 Walker, B 1978 'Preliminary Report on the Cottage at Orchilmore, Moulin, Perthshire'. *Scott Vernacular Building Group Newsletter*, 4 (1978), 41–5.
- 14 Title deeds, 64–72 Don Street, *ibid.*
- 15 Title deeds relating to 81 High Street, 1666–1981. Conveyancing Department, University of Aberdeen.
- 16 Sasine in favour of William Anderson, 1660. Title deeds 81 High Street, *ibid.*
- 17 Gordon J, 1661 'A Description of New and Old Aberdeens' *op cit.*
- 18 Taylor G, 1773 'A Plan of the City of Aberdeen', *op cit.*
- 19 Ordnance Survey, 1867, *op cit.*
- 20 Sasine in favour of Hugh MacLean of Coll, 1770, Title deeds, 81 High Street, *op cit.*
- 21 Deed of Assumption in favour of Elizabeth Traill, 1929, Title deeds, 81 High Street, *op cit.*
- 22 Disposition in favour of the University of Aberdeen, 1981, Title deeds, 81 High Street, *op cit.*
- 23 Gordon J, 1661 'A Description of New and Old Aberdeens' *op cit.*

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