

# The burgh of Inverurie, Aberdeenshire: archaeological evidence from a medieval lordship

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper offers a review of recent archaeological investigations in Inverurie and places them in the historical context of the 12th-century Lordship of Garioch. Results of excavations in the Stanners, close to the Bass of Inverurie, suggest that this was not the original location of the burgh. The probable site of the burgh on the modern High Street has failed so far to produce any evidence for medieval activity. This negative result is explained by reference to the likely nature and function of the burgh in the 12th and 13th centuries. It is suggested that burghs like Inverurie have little in common with the better-known trading burghs and should be treated as components of a medieval lordship.*

## INVERURIE AND THE BURGHS SURVEY: ARCHAEOLOGICAL AGENDA

In the 1970s a surge of interest in the archaeology of medieval Scottish burghs highlighted two issues: the potential for significant results from archaeological investigation contrasting strongly with the lack of knowledge of the archaeological deposits in almost all of the burghs. By the end of the 1970s it was only in Aberdeen and Perth that the archaeological potential had been realized to any extent, and here the results were extremely encouraging (Holdsworth 1987; Murray 1982). Progress in these two burghs was consolidated by the establishment of the Urban Archaeology Unit in Perth in 1978 and the City of Aberdeen Archaeological Unit in the following year. In an attempt to address the wider lack of knowledge about the medieval burghs, and to place future archaeological work on a firm footing, in 1976 the then Ancient Monuments Division of the Department of the Environment established the Scottish Burgh Survey in the Department of Archaeology, University of Glasgow (Murray 1984). Over a period of six years from 1977 to 1983 Gourlay & Turner, and latterly Turner-Simpson & Stevenson, researched and produced summary reports on the history and archaeology of 53 Scottish burghs. As Murray (1984, 8) has noted, the choice of burghs for the survey was somewhat random with no explicit criteria for selection but the emphasis was clearly on the earlier foundations (pre-1450), based on Pryde's (1965) list of settlements with burgh status.

The report on Inverurie (Gourlay & Turner 1977) was one of the earliest to be produced by the Scottish Burgh Survey and was typical of many of the reports on the smaller burghs: scanty early documentation as well as a lack of recent archaeological work left basic questions unanswered about the history of the burgh. The history of Inverurie, as summarized by Gourlay

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& Turner, is brief and straightforward. For interpretation they relied primarily on the Revd John Davidson's monumental *Inverurie and the Earldom of the Garioch*, published in 1878, with more recent analysis by W Douglas Simpson (1943; 1949). The origins of Inverurie lie in a substantial grant of land in the Garioch by King William I to his younger brother David in 1178 × 1182. David, soon to become Earl of Huntingdon, established the *caput* of his new Lordship at Inverurie and by the end of the century he had constructed a castle (the Bass of Inverurie), moved the parish church to Inverurie and founded a burgh. After the early decades of the 13th century the records fail and Inverurie's role in the Wars of Independence is not explicitly documented. A substantial documentary record starts only in the mid 16th century with the re-creation of Inverurie as a royal burgh under Queen Mary in 1558.

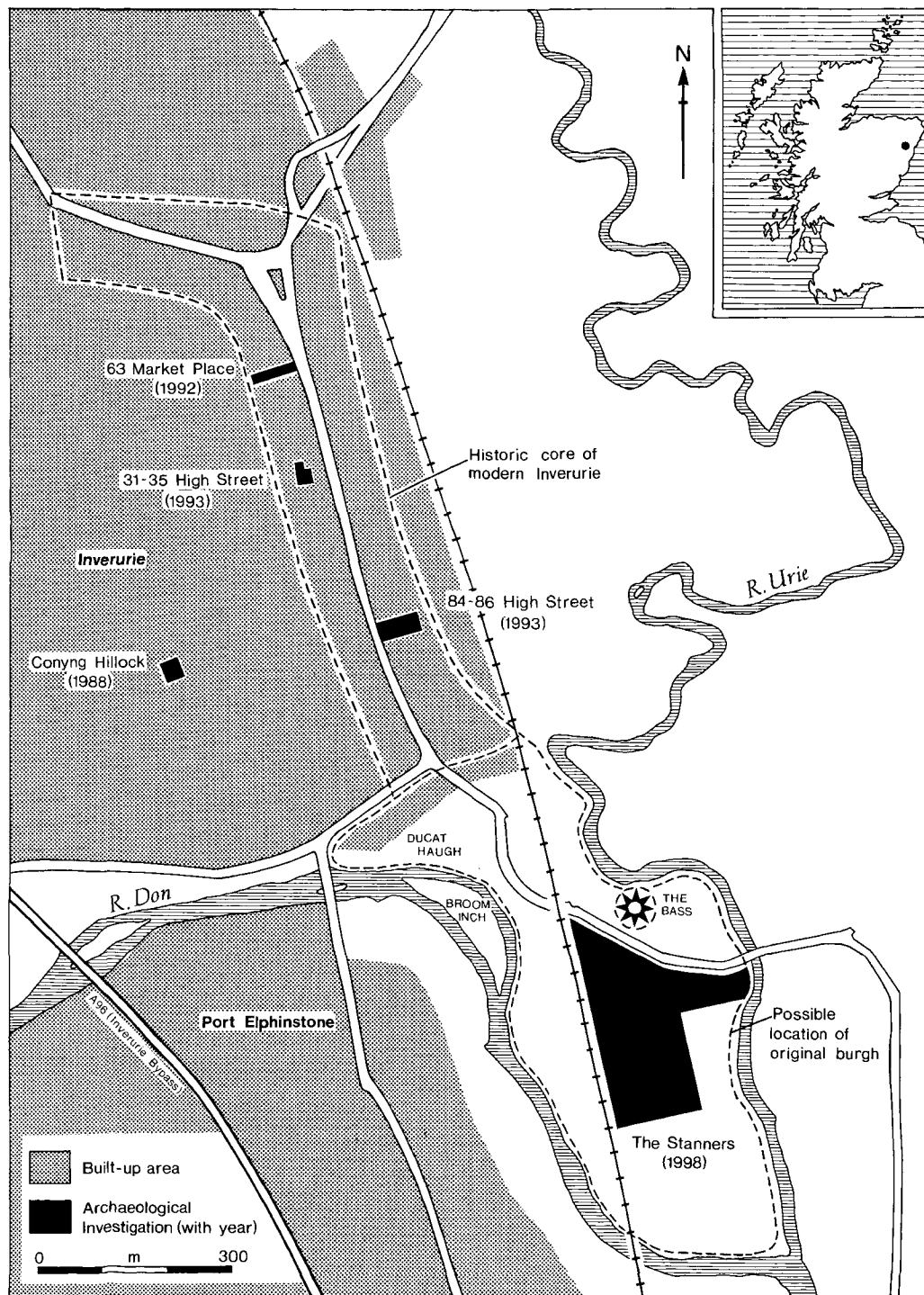
Gourlay & Turner (1977, 7) identified two principal archaeological issues requiring attention in Inverurie. First, there was the question of the original location of the original burgh. According to Simpson (1943, 127) this was an area now known as the Stanners to the south of the Bass and enclosed by the confluence of the Rivers Don and Urie (illus 1). He suggested that the burgh was moved, perhaps in the early 14th century, to the present High Street when the declining need for defence was balanced by the advantages of a site off the floodplain of the Don. Simpson had no direct evidence for this history and Gourlay & Turner treated it with due caution. It should be noted that their reference (Gourlay & Turner 1977, 8) to cropmarks of timber buildings in the Stanners arises from a misunderstanding and must be discounted (I Shepherd, pers comm). Regardless of the lack of evidence, Simpson's assertion inevitably raised the question: where was the original site of the burgh? The second issue emphasized by Gourlay & Turner was the need to date the development and expansion of the burgh on its present site. Progress on both of these issues required archaeological investigation and they recommended that all development sites should be investigated, both within the present historic core at the High Street and in the Stanners beside the Bass (areas marked in illus 1).

Since 1977 the Burgh Survey report on Inverurie has acted as a trigger for archaeological investigations in the burgh and, to date, there have been five development-led investigations. There has also been progress in the field of historical research culminating in the publication of the study by Keith Stringer (1985) of Earl David of Huntingdon, the founder of the burgh of Inverurie. The purpose of the present report is therefore twofold: to assess the findings of the recent archaeological and historical investigations and to discuss the implications for our understanding of the history of Inverurie; and, in the light of these findings, to review our current approach as archaeologists to the small medieval burghs and, in particular, highlight the role of the Lordships in the creation and shaping of burghs in Scotland.

## RECENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN INVERURIE

### WATCHING BRIEFS AND TRIAL TRENCHING ON THE HIGH STREET, 1988–93

Redevelopment of land within the core of the burgh in the vicinity of the High Street has so far led to four small-scale archaeological investigations (see illus 1 for site locations). These were typical urban evaluations comprising watching briefs or limited trial trenching and all yielded negative results as far as the medieval burgh is concerned. No features or artefacts of medieval or early post-medieval date were noted during any of these investigations.



ILLUS 1 Inverurie: the modern town and locations of archaeological investigations (Based on the Ordnance Survey map © Crown copyright)

*Conyng Hillock*

Watching Brief (1988): I Shepherd, Grampian Regional Council (DES 1988, 14)

A watching brief was maintained during the erection of a dwelling house and garage near the base of Conyng Hillock. This substantial prehistoric funerary mound, a Scheduled Ancient Monument, was the primary target of the watching brief but the mound also lies within former burgh backlands on the west side of the High Street.

*31–35 High Street*

Watching Brief (1992): C Moloney, Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust

A watching brief was maintained during construction work on a backlands site behind 31–35 High Street.

*84–86 High Street*

Trial Trenches (1993): R Cachart, Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust (DES 1993, 34)

Five trial trenches were excavated on the frontage and in the backlands of this property. The frontage was disturbed by a modern cellar; in the backlands there was a deep topsoil with a number of features containing modern artefacts.

*63 Market Place*

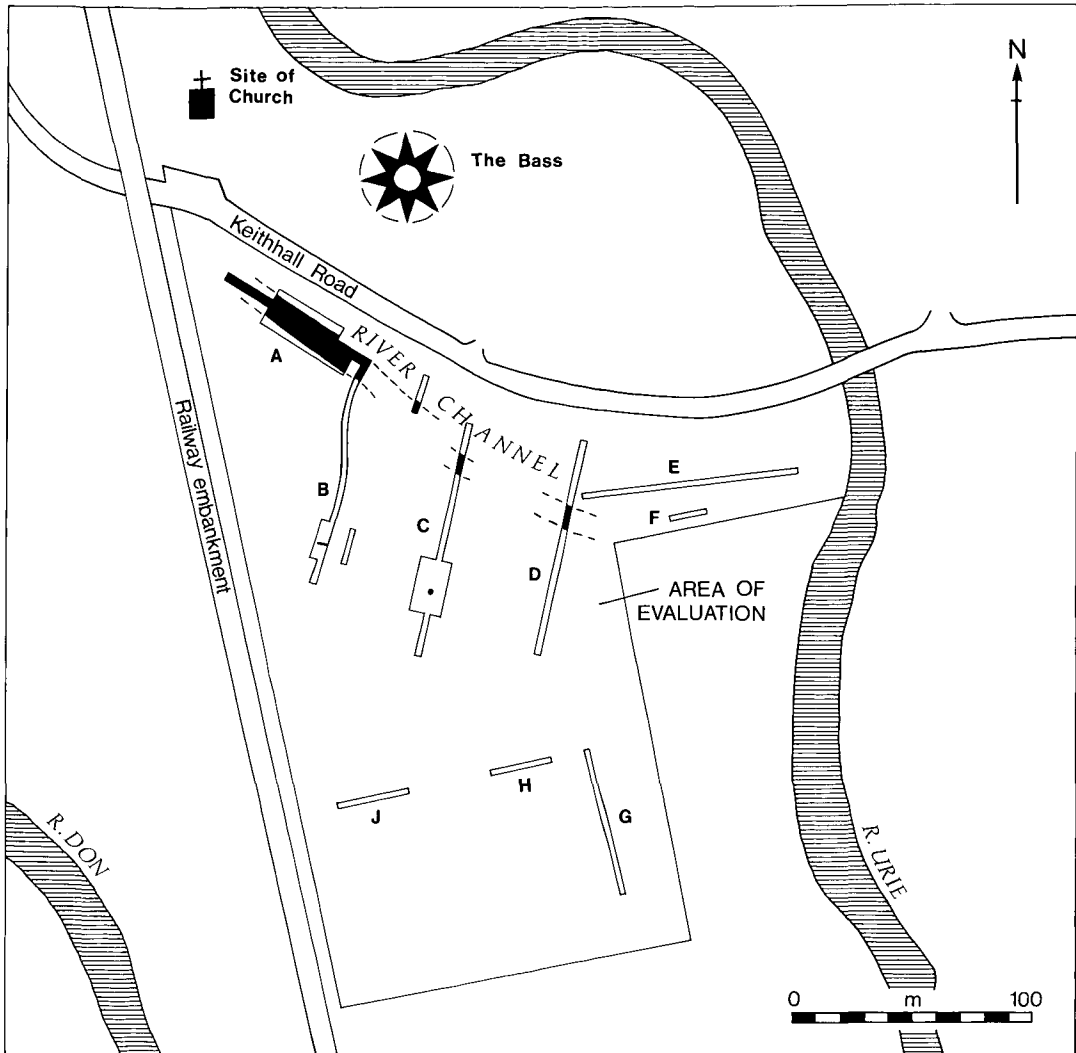
Watching Brief (1993): J R Mackenzie, Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust (DES 1993, 34)

Monitoring of foundation trenches close to the street frontage revealed only modern deposits.

## EXCAVATIONS IN THE STANNERS

The fifth archaeological investigation in Inverurie was undertaken by Headland Archaeology early in 1998 and involved the evaluation of a 5 ha site in the northern part of the Stanners, adjacent to the Bass of Inverurie (illus 2). The results are summarized here and a full account has been deposited at the National Monuments Record of Scotland (RCAHMS) and Aberdeenshire Sites and Monuments Record.

Excavation revealed deep accumulations of alluvium over the Stanners which continued below the watertable. Occasional fragments of pottery and a spindle whorl were recovered from the alluvium and a few isolated features of uncertain origin were identified below alluvium at the lower limit of excavation. A belt of infilled river channels was located at the northern edge of the Stanners, running parallel and adjacent to the Keithhall Road (illus 2). A substantial assemblage of medieval pottery was recovered from the channel fills in Trench A. Analysis of this assemblage of 136 sherds by Derek Hall (SUAT) identified three principal types: East Coast Redware (54% by weight), Yorkshire Ware (36%) and White Gritty Ware (4%). The sherds derived predominantly from jugs and a 13th- to 14th-century date has been proposed for the assemblage. The much smaller collection of pottery from the alluvium (25 sherds) had a similar composition with the exception of single sherds of post-14th-century Low Countries Redware and 15th- to 18th-century Reduced Greyware. The pottery provides a *terminus post quem* date for the infilling of the river channels but the fills could be significantly later in date if the pottery has been re-deposited. Two samples of wood from waterlogged basal channel fills were radiocarbon dated to provide an independent age estimate. However, the results indicate that the wood is of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age date and must have been reworked from older fluvial deposits.



ILLUS 2 The Stanners, Inverurie: location of 1998 archaeological investigations

## DISCUSSION

### THE ORIGINAL BURGH IN THE STANNERS?

The excavations of 1998 represented the first opportunity to test Simpson's (1943) proposal that the burgh was located in a protected position on the Stanners from its foundation up until the 14th century. The extensive trenching undertaken in 1998 failed to produce any positive evidence that the burgh had existed here. Isolated features were encountered beneath alluvium but in one case contained probable prehistoric pottery and in other cases were apparently natural channels. The presence of considerable quantities of medieval pottery in the river channels requires explanation but there is no need to look any further than the adjacent castle. The assemblage

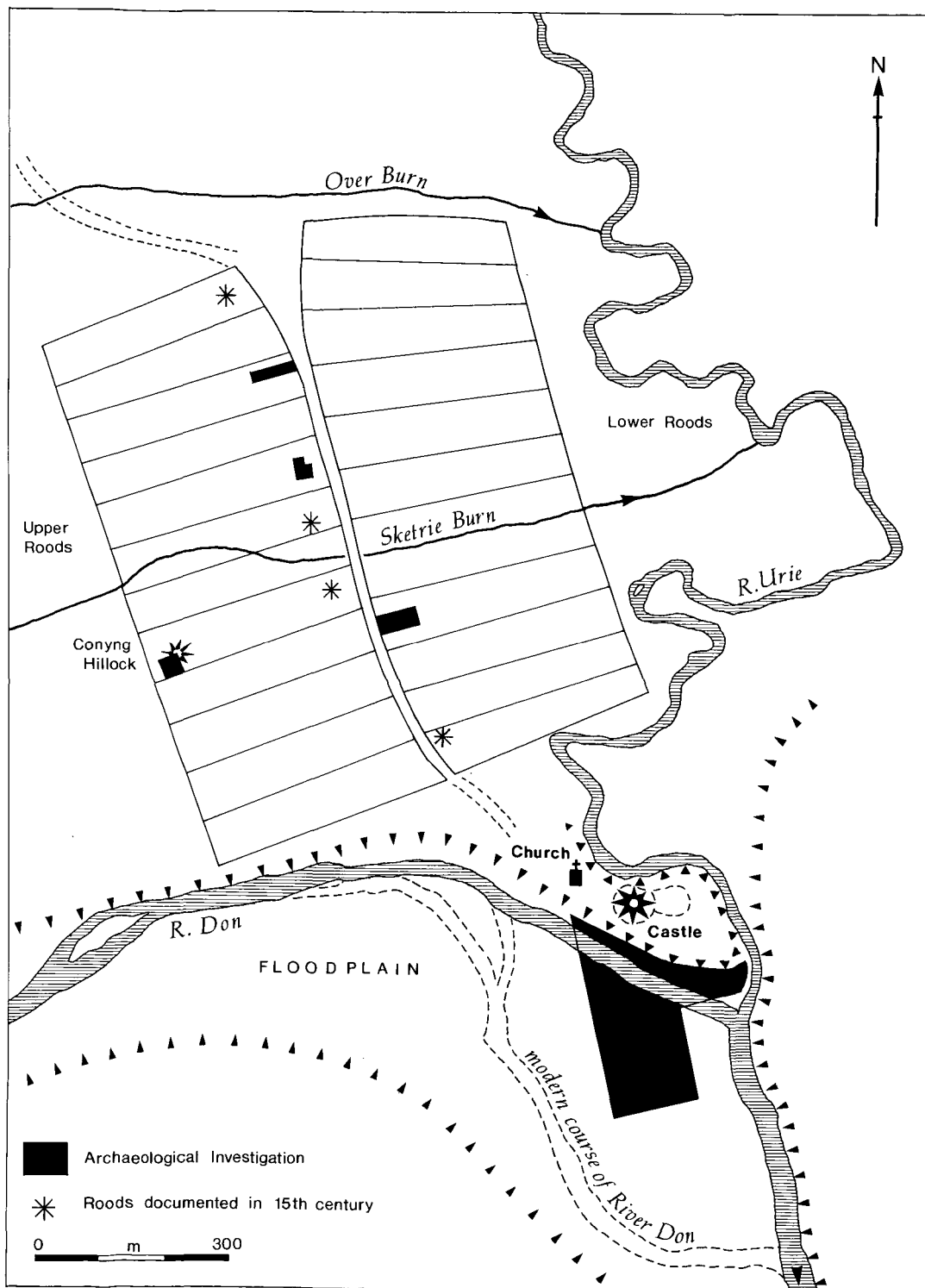
contains a high proportion of quality Yorkshire Wares including part of an aquamanile, which would fit with the high status of the site, at least in the 13th century.

Negative evidence is always an unsatisfactory basis for interpretation and it remains arguable that remains of the original burgh do exist in the Stanners. However, a substantial body of evidence can now be mustered to suggest this is at least highly unlikely.

The 1998 evaluation encountered deep deposits of alluvium in the Stanners on what is still the floodplain terrace of the Rivers Don and Urie. These deposits were principally overbank silts, created by the deposition of sediment during flooding by the rivers. The pottery found within this alluvium indicates that the top metre at least is of medieval or later date, and regular flooding has continued to the present day (Tawse & Allan 1925). The channels encountered during the evaluation along the northern edge of the floodplain appear to mark a former course of the River Don which must have flowed eastwards past the castle and met the River Urie a little below the present Urie bridge on the Keithhall Road (illus 3). Again, pottery indicates a medieval or later date for the infilling of the channels. The precise dating of this fluvial activity is crucial to an interpretation of the 12th-century topography of Inverurie. An actively aggrading floodplain, evidenced by the accumulation of the overbank silts, would not have been chosen as a site for the burgh since it would have been uninhabitable due to flooding. Similarly, if the Don at that time had flowed adjacent to the castle there would have been no area of land encircled by rivers on which to locate the burgh, and the Stanners would not have existed. There is no evidence by which to date the onset of the aggradation of the floodplain. In part this reflects difficulties in excavating any deeper than the present-day watertable where pre-medieval alluvium might be encountered. It also reflects the limitation of the artefact-dating evidence which appears to be confined to a short period during which pottery was reasonably abundant in the 13th to 14th centuries.

The dating of the former course of the River Don is better understood. The earliest detailed map, Roy's Military Survey of Scotland (1747–55, sheet 30/1), shows the Don and Urie much as they are today, even the Broom Inch (illus 1) is present in the Don just below the older bridge. The main channel of the Don has migrated southwards to this course in recent centuries and formerly flowed over what is now the Ducat Haugh before turning south to flow immediately adjacent to the medieval churchyard (illus 1). Davidson (1878, 27–8) referred to this area as the 'banks of old Don'. Funds were provided in 1698 to erect a bulwark for the protection of the churchyard against river erosion (Davidson 1878, 345) indicating that this channel was active in the late 17th century. The Stanners itself is referred to in detail in documents from the beginning of the 17th century onwards (Davidson 1878, 185) by which time the Don must have abandoned the channel identified during the archaeological excavation. This documentary evidence for the more recent course of the Don, combined with the pottery dating, restricts the period that the excavated channel must have been infilled to between the 13th and 16th centuries. Arguing from negative evidence, ie the absence of later pottery types in the channel fills, it may be proposed that the Don shifted its course as early as the 14th century. It is likely, therefore, that the excavated channel does represent the course of the Don during the early history of the burgh.

The dating of the fluvial evidence remains imprecise but it can be argued, on the balance of probabilities, that in the late 12th century when Earl David was establishing his new Lordship centre at Inverurie the land now known as the Stanners was simply not suitable as a location for his burgh. The known later site on the High Street must be the most likely location for David's original burgh and this conclusion is explored in the next section. One other important conclusion follows from the archaeological evaluation of the Stanners: it appears that the castle was constructed on a site surrounded by water except for a tongue of land 100 m wide on its west side



ILLUS 3 Inverurie: reconstruction of layout of 12th-century settlement based on archaeological and historical data

between the Urie and Don, commanded by the Bass itself. The significance of this site with its obvious military advantages is discussed further below.

#### THE ORIGINAL BURGH ON THE HIGH STREET?

The conclusion arising from the archaeological investigations in the Stanners seems at first to run counter to the evidence that has accumulated over the past decade from the more limited investigations in the High Street. On all four occasions there has been no evidence for medieval activity, not even a single residual sherd of medieval pottery in later deposits. In an unpublished report produced by the Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust after the most recent of these investigations at 84/86 High Street in 1993 (NMRS MS/957/45) the following conclusion was drawn:

From the results of this monitoring it may be argued that the modern town does not lie on the remains of the medieval burgh. The absence of any earlier occupation on a major High Street frontage [ie 84–86 High Street] is quite marked and the absence of any residual artefacts seems to imply a different location. However it is still possible that major 19th-century redevelopment of the burgh scarped away any earlier deposits.

So, as in the Stanners, absence of evidence for the medieval burgh in the High Street was used to suggest that this was not the site and therefore archaeologists should look elsewhere; but no other sites have ever been proposed and there are no plausible locations. In the face of mounting negative evidence for the burgh from the archaeologists two possible explanations can be examined: first, that the medieval burgh never existed on the ground; second, that the medieval burgh did exist but remains archaeologically invisible.

The documentary evidence for the early existence of the burgh was examined in detail by Davidson (1878) and briefly reviewed by Simpson (1943) and Gourlay & Turner (1977). More recent research by Stringer (1985) has identified contemporary documents unknown to Davidson and has significantly enlarged the admittedly tiny collection of historical documents relating to Inverurie. Evidence that the burgh was actually established in the late 12th century is provided by records of land grants within the burgh. The earliest (dated before 1185) record the granting of tofts in the burgh of Inverurie to Simon and Robert of Billingham (Stringer 1985, *Acta* of Earl David 8 & 9). These are followed by the well-documented grant of a toft in the burgh to Lindores Abbey, part of a much larger grant of lands and revenues to this Abbey which was founded by Earl David. This grant is dated to 1190 × 1195 by a charter of confirmation from William I (Barrow 1971, 358). Continued interest in the development of the burgh is documented by further grants to Lindores Abbey by Earl David's son John. At some time after his succession to his father's titles (1219 × 1237), Earl John granted the Abbey his rents in Inverurie, half a toft that had belonged to Robert de Bourtie, and roods held by Bernard and Utting Rufus (Lindores Cartulary XVII & XVIII). These various land grants do no more than confirm that blocks of land were laid out in the site of the new burgh; we gain no information about how the land was used or how the burgh developed. Despite these limitations, it is clear that land grants were made in the new burgh over a period of at least 35 years both to incoming Anglo-Normans and to the Abbey.

Davidson's (1878, 25) identification of the earliest documented Lindores Abbey toft as a piece of land adjacent to the former medieval parish church appears to be no more than optimistic



speculation and cannot be confirmed. For evidence regarding the original location of the burgh it is necessary to work backwards from more recent documentary sources. Analysis of early 17th-century records by Davidson (1878, 389–98) shows that the burgh at that time comprised two sets of parallel roods laid out along either side of the 850 m long High Street: the Upper Roods to the west and the Lower Roods to the east of the road (illus 3). Davidson calculated that originally there may have been 108 roods on each side (ie 12 groups of nine roods) and he related this to the so-called ‘twelfth part’ lands which were other burgh lands held through ownership of burgh roods. This 17th-century burgh layout can be traced back before the 1558 re-foundation of Inverurie through a surviving group of six dispositions dating from 1464 to 1486 which relate to rents from burgh roods. The locations of these roods, according to Davidson (1878, 118), are shown in illus 3 and they are clearly spread throughout the 17th-century burgh. This demonstrates two important points: first that the High Street burgh was, at the latest, a late-medieval creation and, second, that it was not enlarged substantially in the post-medieval period (*contra* Gourlay & Turner 1977). No relevant documents survive from the period between the early 13th and the late 15th century so it is necessary to speculate as to the likely origins of what by Scottish standards is a large coherent burgh plan. The only plausible historical context for such an ambitious scheme is Inverurie as *caput* for the Lordship of Garioch under Earl David in the late 12th century. In 1251 the Garioch lands were inherited through marriage by the Bruce Lords of Annandale. In 1326, as the Regality of Garioch, they became the marriage portion of Christian Bruce, sister of King Robert I, and were inherited by the Earls of Mar who were descendants of her first husband, ultimately passing to the Crown in 1435. There is no evidence that any of these superiors of the Lordship or Regality during the poorly documented later medieval period were closely involved with Inverurie.

#### THE BURGH AND THE MEDIEVAL LORDSHIP

The results obtained from 20 years of opportunistic archaeological investigation in Inverurie can hardly be described as substantial. The difficulties of excavating within existing towns are well recognized: small areas, randomly selected by development pressures, will rarely prove individually to be useful archaeological samples. But it is argued that the accumulation of fragments of information will ultimately yield useful insights into the history of a settlement. In some cases this optimism appears to have been justified: North Berwick, for example, where Hall & Bowler (1998) have demonstrated the progress achieved in understanding the development and functioning of this small burgh. In the face of more positive results from other burghs it is easy to dismiss Inverurie’s results as ‘disappointing’, place them to one side, and wait for more evidence to accumulate. However, it is argued here that this attitude is based on misplaced expectations of what a burgh such as Inverurie should yield. The archaeological results can both support our current understanding of the history of the burgh and actually enhance that understanding.

The motivation for the creation of burghs that is most often stressed is the promotion of trade, in particular foreign trade, and burgh status is closely linked with trading monopolies and other related privileges. However, military or administrative functions were also significant and even the primary function of burghs in some cases (Whyte 1995, 57). According to Stringer (1986) Inverurie is a clear example of a burgh established with military and administrative functions. The military significance of Inverurie relates to the wider political situation in the 12th century that led directly to the creation of the Lordship of Garioch. Moray was suppressed as a semi-independent territory in 1130 by David I but repeated insurrections occurred through the later 12th century and Crown authority continued to be fragile in that region. In creating the

Lordship of Garioch in 1178 × 1180 William I gave control of the principal land-route into Moray to David, his younger brother and heir to the throne. His purpose was clearly to secure access to Moray in the event of further armed opposition. The route through the Garioch passed between the extensive territories of the Earldoms of Mar and Buchan and William could not necessarily count on their allegiance. Earl David therefore established Inverurie as his principal military and administrative base from which to control his newly acquired Lordship. The military role for Inverurie probably diminished soon after its foundation. By the early 13th century the immediate threat created by instability in Moray had receded and the Earldoms of Mar and Buchan had both passed by marriage into the hands of Anglo-Norman families, the Durwards and Comyns. Constables of Inverurie Castle are documented up to 1248 but the fact that the castle did not apparently feature in the events of the Wars of Independence at the end of the 13th century strongly suggests that it had already been abandoned. The castle probably also ceased to be the administrative centre for the Lordship after 1251 when the land passed to the Bruces and by 1359 business was certainly being conducted at the Manor of Ardtannies, 1.5 km up the Don from Inverurie.

The role of a burgh at Inverurie in the late 12th and early 13th century is best summarized in Stringer's own words:

[The burgh's] trade can scarcely have extended beyond the profits of local exchanges and the limited opportunities they offered for commercial success. Indeed it seems unlikely that the plantation was originally intended to assume an economic role transcending immediate requirements. Almost everything about the settlement evokes the special franchised hamlets or 'pseudo-burghs' of Anglo-Norman Ireland and the French *bourgs*, distinct from ordinary villages but still of fundamentally rural aspect . . . For Norman England itself, it has recently and cogently been argued that magnates often had modest expectations of their burghal creations as the support group of military and administrative centres. Earl David's burgh at Inverurie, a simple *burgus castris*, would seem to conform closely to this model (Stringer 1985, 70).

We should therefore expect to find evidence for a rural settlement, principally involved in agriculture, adjacent to a major military and administrative complex. The archaeological evidence to date supports this model. Inverurie is located on the main route into Moray and its castle was established on a strong defensive site, surrounded by water. The motte is a modification of an existing natural mound (Davidson 1886), a practical move adopted by many castle-builders in this area. Pottery from the castle itself and from the adjacent river channel provides evidence of the wealth and status of its inhabitants but little is known of the castle buildings other than a tantalizing reference to a jointed timber structure in the ditch that surrounds the motte, observed during major landscaping of the site in 1883 (Curle 1919). The administrative function of the castle cannot be detected in the available archaeological evidence but the early establishment by Earl David of the parish church of St Appolinarius adjacent to the castle brought together spiritual and temporal authority on one site. The burgh was laid out close to the church and castle on an open, level site that offered good agricultural land. The remarkable size of the burgh, apparently 850 m in length, compares with the frontage available in the most successful 12th-century trading burghs such as Perth. However, as Inverurie was not a trading burgh this comparison is misleading; the large size of Inverurie is not the product of a long trading frontage. Instead it may be interpreted as a group of substantial agricultural allotments. The failure to

identify medieval structures in the burgh is frustrating but, considering the general invisibility of lowland rural medieval settlements in Scotland, it is hardly surprising.

The burgh of Rattray, also in Aberdeenshire, provides the best studied archaeological model for Inverurie (Murray & Murray 1993). Thirteenth-century Rattray comprised a series of properties laid out over 550 m along a single road between church and castle. The buildings, located on the front of the lands, were constructed from timber and turf and they owe their archaeological survival to the subsequent abandonment of Rattray. At Inverurie the chances of detecting these superficial remains on the modern frontage are remote. The absence of medieval pottery from the burgh lands in Inverurie is striking and contrasts strongly with Rattray where pottery was common in the medieval ploughsoil. Pottery was actually manufactured in Rattray and was widely used by the inhabitants. Its absence at Inverurie suggests that pottery was used little or not at all in the burgh, despite the presence of imported wares at the castle. The extent to which pottery was available in rural agricultural settlements in this part of Scotland is not known as sites yielding medieval pottery assemblages have been high-status castles. If this is a correct interpretation of the evidence from Inverurie it makes the medieval burgh more or less invisible to the small-scale archaeological investigations that can take place in the modern town.

## CONCLUSIONS

Significant progress has been achieved in our understanding of the archaeology of the burgh of Inverurie. The issue of the location of the 12th-century burgh has been resolved beyond reasonable doubt and this allows the debate to move forward to an assessment of the nature and development of the burgh on the High Street site. Archaeological and historical data appear to be converging on the conclusion that the burgh was never more than a rural agricultural settlement. When compared with the successful coastal trading burghs it is unlikely to ever yield complex and informative archaeological deposits; however this conclusion should not diminish archaeological interest in Inverurie. The tendency for archaeologists to treat the medieval burghs in isolation as a group of similar sites is unfortunate because it ignores the true historical context of a settlement like Inverurie. The settlement was established as an integral component of Earl David's Lordship of Garioch, to serve the military and administrative demands of the Lordship. It performed this function until a new political situation and changes of ownership led to the abandonment of Inverurie as the chief place of the Lordship. The archaeology of the burgh should therefore be aligned with other sites within the Garioch rather than other settlements with burghal status; recent work at the Castle of Wardhouse, 3 km west of Inch, provides a prime example. Here, trial excavations by Yeoman (1998) have shed light on the residence of one of the Lordship's second tier of landowners, Bartholomew the Fleming, who had been established there by the Earl before 1230. The continued use of Wardhouse as a residence up to the 17th century contrasts with the early abandonment of the castle at Inverurie and presumably reflects the diverging interests of their owners.

The transfer of Inverurie from Scottish burgh studies to Lordship studies could usefully be applied to other Scottish burghs and the excavations at Rattray have already been published in this context (Murray & Murray 1993). Lochmaben, an archaeologically unknown burgh, owes its existence to the massive 12th-century castle of Lochmaben which was the *caput* of the Lordship of Annandale after its transfer from Annan (RCAHMS 1997, 188). Lochmaben survived as a substantial single-street village, much like Inverurie before the arrival of the railway in the 19th century. Other foundations did not survive the loss of the original military and administrative functions. Examples include Urr in Galloway, an impressive castle with a burgh documented by

1262 but not subsequently, and Staplegordon in Eskdale, a mid 12th-century castle with a burgh in existence by 1285 (RCAHMS 1997, 197). Both are now green-field sites and, taking Rattray as a model, would repay closer examination.

It is hoped that this change of approach by archaeologists will transform many sites from 'unsuccessful' poor relations of the major trading burghs to important components of the provincial Lordships that were such a significant feature of feudal colonization in 12th- and 13th-century Scotland (McNeill & MacQueen 1996, 183)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was stimulated by the results of the recent excavations in the Stanners, Inverurie, undertaken for Headland Archaeology by Colm Moloney, assisted by Louise Baker and Alan Hunter Blair. That project was commissioned and funded by North of Scotland Water Authority (NoSWA) in advance of the construction of a new water treatment works for Inverurie; NoSWA have also provided the funding for the production and publication of this report and I wish to thank Mr Clive Kennedy of NoSWA for his support throughout the project. The excavations were undertaken at the request of Mr Ian Shepherd, Aberdeenshire Council Archaeologist, who provided useful advice and information on the archaeology of Inverurie. Many people have contributed to the writing of this paper and I would particularly like to thank Derek Hall (SUAT) for his work on the pottery from the Stanners and for information about earlier investigations by SUAT in Inverurie; Richard Tipping (University of Stirling) for advice on the fluvial sediments; and Ian Fraser (RCAHMS) for sharing his knowledge of the medieval history of the Garioch.

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*This paper is published with the aid of a grant from North of Scotland Water Authority*