

ACCOUNT OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE SUPPOSED CEMETERY OF  
THE HOSPITAL OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST, AT HOSPITALFIELD,  
NEAR ARBROATH. BY ANDREW JERVISE, Esq., Cor. MEM. S.A. Scot.

During the autumn of 1860, while a field was being broken up by the plough upon the estate of Hospitalfield, bits of human bones were brought to the surface. Fortunately, the proprietor, Patrick Allan-Fraser, Esq., F.S.A. Scot., was walking along with the ploughman at the time; and on making further search, Mr Fraser discovered portions of more than one skeleton, upon which, with the laudable view of having the place more fully searched, agricultural operations were suspended. The weather proving very unfavourable, it was not until the 26th of February following that the investigations were proceeded with. These were conducted under the joint superintendence of Mr Fraser and myself, when excavations were made at the place where the bones were first discovered, and over an area of about 60 feet in length by about 40 feet in width, which was considerably more than the apparent extent of the cemetery. Within the space of about 10 or 12 feet square, which was laid open around the spot where the remains were first observed, no fewer than five or six skeletons were found; and on making trenches about 5 feet apart, skeletons were got lying in pretty regular rows. They were all remarkably entire, the teeth being in most cases quite fresh, and exhibiting but few signs of disease ever having existed. The bodies appeared to have been laid at full length. The heads were towards the south-west, with the exception of those of some children and that of a mere infant, which lay from north to south. In only two cases skeletons were found to overlie each other; and it is worthy of remark, that two of the skele-

tons, though pretty deeply buried, wanted the skulls, and that the spine of one of them was very much twisted and deformed. No trace of coffins, either of wood or stone, nor pieces of cloth, or other wrappings, were visible. It is computed that there were in all, from 100 to 120 skeletons, male and female, within the area.

The field in which these remains were found, is bounded on the south by the Dundee and Arbroath turnpike, immediately east of the porter-lodge of Hospitalfield, and but a short distance south-west of the mansion-house. The cemetery occupies a knoll or hillock of soft sand, within 200 or 300 yards of the sea; and although the field was first cultivated only about the beginning of this century, the oldest inhabitants never heard of its being the site of a burial ground. On the south side of the knoll the skeletons were not more than from six to twelve inches below the surface, while those towards the north (where the ground partakes more of earth and loam) varied in depth from about eighteen inches to two feet. It is probable that the skeletons on the south side of the hillock had at one time been deeper, and that in process of time, and from frequent tillage, a considerable depth of sand had been blown away. Foundations of old whinstone walls were discovered on the south-east and west sides of the cemetery; and under the latter of these walls portions of skeletons were found, over which the wall or dyke appeared to have been built.

It is somewhat remarkable that the skeletons above mentioned were almost all in an equally entire state, and exhibited but comparatively trifling evidences of absolute decay, arising, probably, from the sandy nature of the soil in which they were buried. It ought to be added, that the bones of such of the skeletons as were found to be within reach of the plough, were carefully collected together and buried in a pretty deep pit, over which Mr Allan-Fraser proposes to lay a broad flag of Arbroath pavement, briefly inscribed.

When traces of human remains were first found here, various reasons were assigned as the cause. Some supposed that they were those of suicides; others asserted that they were those of the reputed victims of one "Bomaroy," who, it is said, kept an hostelry or lodging in a secluded part of the neighbourhood, within these 70 or 80 years, and who, as tradition avers, was not over-scrupulous in the acquirement of

self. But apart from the greatness of the number of skeletons that were discovered, and the regularity of the interments, it is clear that these conjectures are unworthy of a thought; and that the more probable idea is, that the place had been used as a cemetery for the Hospital of St John the Baptist, which, it is as evident, was connected with the Abbey of Arbroath, as that it had stood near to this spot. It is uncertain whether the foundations of the walls which were found on the north-east of the cemetery were those of the chapel of the hospital; but according to the chartulary of Arbroath, these lands were known in 1325 as "Spedalfeilde," and then belonged to the Hospital of St John the Baptist.<sup>1</sup> "Spitalfelde and Chapel of St John," are mentioned in an Inquisition of the Almory House of the Abbey of Arbroath, 26th Nov. 1464; and on 23d August 1485, it appears that George of Brana, Bishop of Dromore, consecrated the Chapel of St John the Baptist, and dedicated the altar thereof.<sup>2</sup> In 1490, the lands of the Church of Abernethy and the Chapel of Dron were let to tenants by Abbot David of Arbroath, for a sum of money in hand, which was required for the immediate repair of the Chapel of the Infirmary—"Capelle Infirmitorii."<sup>3</sup>

Of the Chapel of St John the Baptist, there is no further record. At the dissolution of the monasteries, the Abbacy of Arbroath, which included the Chapel of St John and the lands of Hospitalfield, fell to the second son of the Regent Arran. Subsequently it was possessed by Esme, Duke of Lennox, and on his death in 1583, it was again given to the Hamiltons. Having ultimately become the property of Sir Patrick Maule (afterwards the first Earl of Panmure), the Abbacy continued in that family until the attainder of 1715. It was in 1664 that the lands of Hospitalfield were acquired from George, second Earl of Panmure, by James Fraser, a cadet of the Philorth family, of whom Mrs Allan-Fraser is the last direct descendant.

<sup>1</sup> Reg. Vet. de Aberbrothoc, p. 309. Mr Miller, in his excellent work, "Arbroath and its Abbey" (1859, p. 127), remarks in reference to Hospitalfield, that "The remains of the chapel and burying-ground have not as yet been identified, and await discovery—we have no doubt, at some future day, in the vicinity of the mansion-house."

<sup>2</sup> Reg. Nig. de Aberbrothoc, pp. 141, 226.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 268.