

Excavation at 17-21 Castle Street, Forfar, 1979

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SUMMARY

A limited excavation was undertaken to sample the archaeological deposits within the medieval burgh. Two light timber structures of a medieval date were discovered along with gullies and other possible property divisions. Only two medieval pits were excavated. The post-medieval period was represented by a layer of garden loam which was disturbed by two series of 19th-century latrine slots. Despite a total depth of 1.7 m of archaeological deposits, few finds were recovered and bone was poorly preserved.

INTRODUCTION

The site was excavated between 19 May and 17 June 1979 with funding from SDD (Ancient Monuments Branch) prior to redevelopment by the owners, F W Woolworth & Co Ltd. Although the area available for excavation was limited, the site was undertaken as a trial sample of Forfar's archaeological deposits. The area excavated lay at the rear of Woolworth's property, some 55 m W of Castle Street, near the market centre of the medieval town.

Forfar originally consisted of two main streets, now known as East and West High Street and Castle Street. These form a 'T' in plan with the market cross at the junction (fig 1). The town was an established administrative centre by the reign of Malcolm IV (Barrow 1960, 43) with a royal residence and sheriff, possibly at an early castle (*St Andrews Liber* 1841, 354). The town probably achieved burgh status towards the end of Malcolm IV's reign (Pryde 1965, 12). Numerous royal charters were issued from the burgh in the reign of William I (Barrow 1971, map). However, by the reign of David II, the number had declined considerably (McNeill & Nicholson 1975, 62) indicating that by this time Forfar had lost much of its early importance.

EXCAVATION METHOD

Initially an area 6 m square was excavated by machine, removing c 0.8 m of overburden and garden loam. Features which appeared at this level were excavated by hand and then an additional c 0.5 m of garden loam was removed by machine, except in the NW corner of the site where no further excavation took place. The remaining area was then excavated by hand to a depth of 1.5 m below the present ground surface in the W half of the site and 1.7 m in the E half where natural was reached. The above depths were determined by archaeological levels and the area investigated was reduced because of the lack of time and insufficient space for spoil. Most of the hand excavation was carried out by the writer alone.

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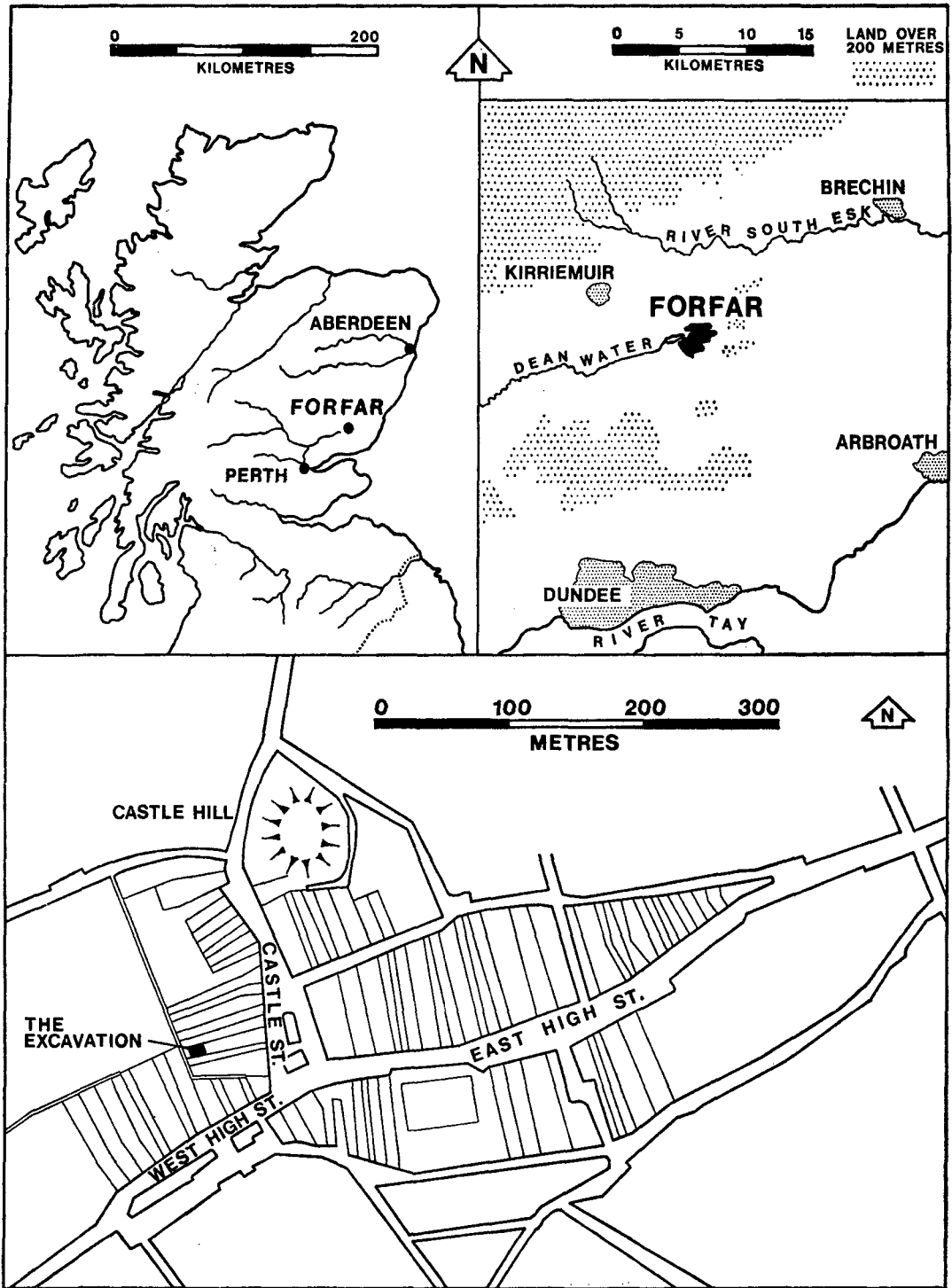


FIG 1 Location and plan of Forfar showing position of excavation

THE EXCAVATION

The full excavation records are housed at the National Monuments Record of Scotland, 54 Melville Street, Edinburgh. The earliest layer of archaeological interest, 1094, was excavated in the E half of the trench only although it extended on all sides beyond this, thickening to the E (fig 3). This layer consisted of a dark brown silt mixed with gravel and flecks of charcoal and overlay natural sands and gravel. Resting on 1094 was a clean creamy-grey sand, 1023, which also extended beyond the E half of the site where it was excavated. In the SE corner of the excavation, this layer had been used to form the floor of a light timber structure (structure A, fig 2). The evidence for the N and E divisions of this building consisted of a double row of off-set 'postholes', 1063-78. These were shallow features ranging in depth from 0.04 to 0.1 m with diameters of c 0.14 m. Considering their ephemeral nature they are unlikely to have represented anything more than a fence or light wall. The posts may, however, have derived some additional support from a layer of brown sandy silt, 1091, which built up around them from the interior of the structure. This layer formed the occupation floor of structure A and had been severely trampled into layer 1023, below. This trampling made the interpretation of ephemeral stakeholes 1079-90 in the interior of the structure extremely difficult. However, these features seemed to have been inserted into the floor trample rather than the clean sand floor, 1023, suggesting that they formed a secondary feature of the building. The function of the single shallow posthole, 1035, to the N of structure A is also uncertain.

No finds were associated with structure A or any earlier contexts so that dating rests purely on the relative stratigraphy of later layers and the continuity of wall alignments which strongly suggest a medieval date for structure A.

After structure A had gone out of use and the walls removed, an E-W gully, 1026, was dug just N of the previous structure's wall line (figs 2 and 3). This feature cut through floor layer 1091 and removed the edges of postholes 1035, 1067 and 1071. It was only excavated in the E half of the site although it concinued into the E and W sections. The shallow gully was c 0.25 m deep by c 1.25 m wide with a slightly curving base. The main fill consisted of a light brown silty sand which was siltier around the edges where there were also small patches of silty clay. This may suggest that the feature had been open for some time. However, the primary function does not appear to have been drainage. Similar features have been found during excavations at Canal Street, Perth (Blanchard & Spearman, forthcoming), Castle Street, Glasgow (Chilton 1980) and High Street, Elgin (Lindsay, forthcoming) where they were seen as early property divisions. Considering the continuity of fence and wall lines on the same alignment as the gully in Forfar, a similar interpretation may be indicated for this feature. However, this would conflict slightly with the positions of later boundaries of the property. Unfortunately, not enough of gully 1026 or the later boundaries could be excavated to make any general discussion of the continuity of plot divisions possible. However, the impression gained was that the plot boundaries did change (see feature 1030 below). One sherd of medieval pottery was recovered from fill 1062 of gully 1026 which provides the first clue to dating.

One posthole, 1043, 0.3 m in diameter, appeared in the fill of the gully but was only discovered during cleaning after machining, so that the exact level from which the posthole was cut could not be ascertained.

Gully 1026 and the remains of structure A were sealed by a thick deposit of clean sand, 1024, which formed the general foundation and floor of a second structure (structure B, figs 2 and 3). Set into the sand were the foundation trenches of the N and W walls, 1027 and 1048 respectively. Unfortunately, the N wall of structure B had been heavily disturbed by a robber trench, 1047, so

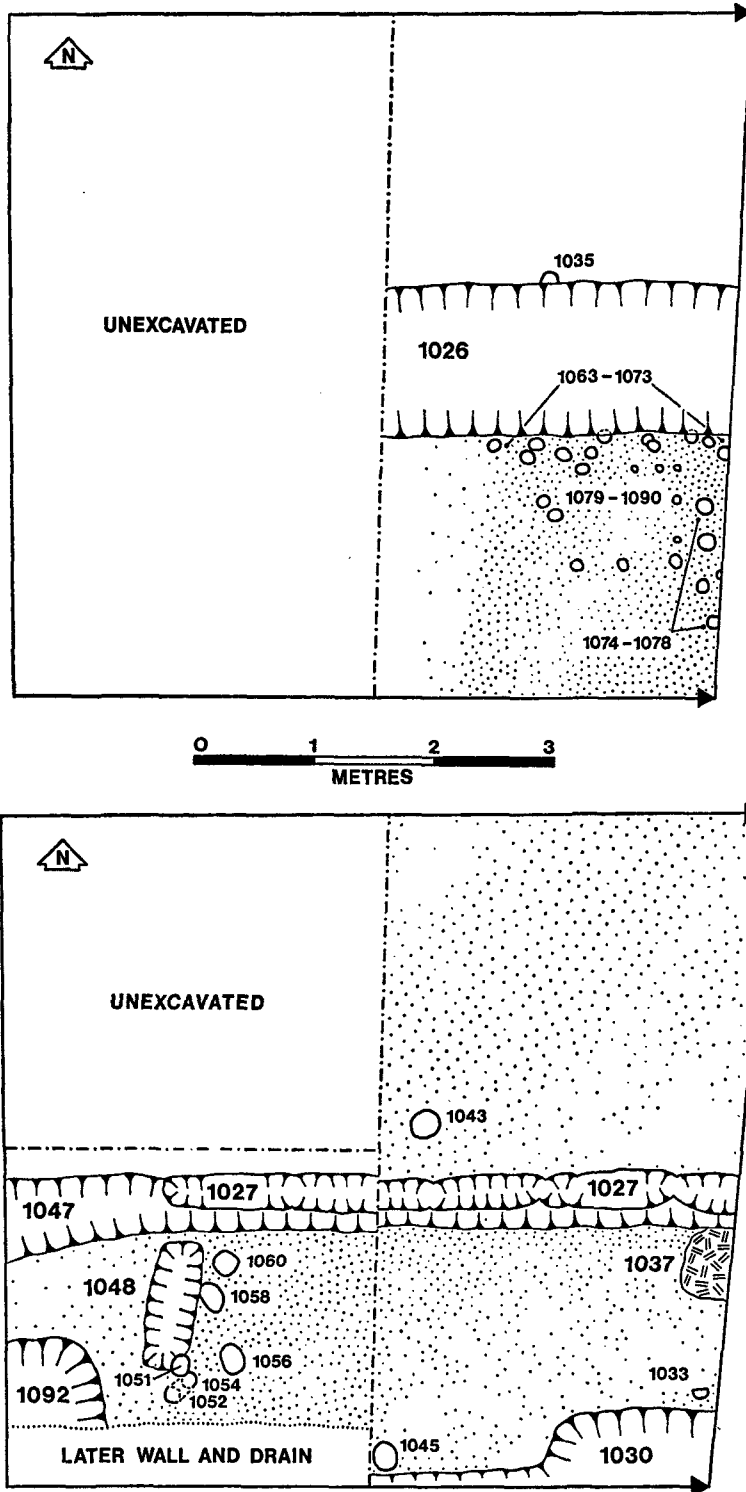


FIG 2 Forfar: plans of structure A (top) and structure B (bottom)

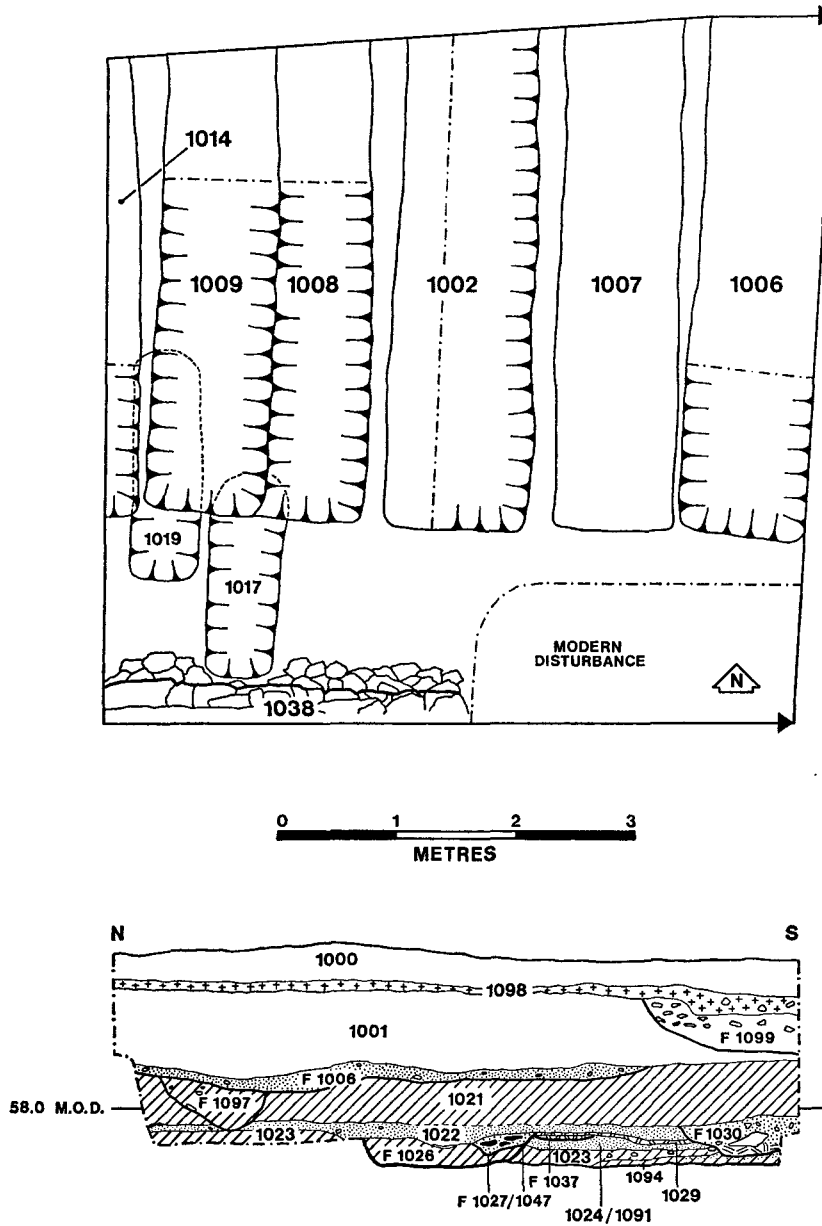


FIG 3 Forfar: plan of post-medieval features and E main section

that only the very base of the foundation trench survived. To judge from these remains, the foundation trench had originally been some 0.15 m deep and appeared to consist of several irregular linear features more than 1 m by 0.3 m with possible additional postholes. The wall line extended some 4.8 m from the E edge of the excavation and was met by the W wall of structure B. Beyond this no trace of any structural features could be found, although the robber trench continued on the same line across the full length of the trench. In view of the ephemeral nature

of the foundation cut's remains, it may be that all trace of the foundation cut had been obliterated; alternatively, the nature of the wall line may have changed at this point. The latter suggestion is supported by slight changes in the nature of the robber trench W of the junction of the two walls, 1027 and 1048. Whereas previously it had been a regular cut backfilled with lenses of shelly sand and loam, W of wall 1048 it became more irregular in shape, the fill now being largely composed of loam. Moreover, the flooring layers were markedly different on either side of wall 1048 implying that the interior of the structure lay to the E and that an enclosed yard lay to the W.

Features inside structure B included a cluster of shallow postholes, 1051, 1052 and 1054, which were all about 0.1 m in diameter and 0.08 m deep. The position of these features at the SE end of wall 1048 suggests that they may represent the remains of uprights at one side of an entrance-way, the other half of the entrance lying just outside the area of excavation. A brown clay silt floor-trample, 1029, which overlay the clean sand floor, 1024, inside the structure, became mixed in this area with a compact surface of dark silty sand, 1050, which lay outside the structure. This would imply that there was an entrance at this point in the wall.

Other internal features included three shallow depressions by the W wall, 1056, 1058 and 1060. These were all c 0.05 m deep and 0.2 m in diameter, cutting into the clean sand floor, 1024, with fills of brown silty sand. Any interpretation of these three features is difficult as they could well have been caused by any number of human actions. Nevertheless in view of their size and position, they may have been caused by timber posts being pressed into the floor of the structure either as part of some internal furniture or as props to the wall of the structure itself. Feature 1045 was slightly larger than the three features discussed above, being 0.3 m in diameter by 0.15 m deep, but the fill and profile were similar so it too may have been a post-impression.

Stakehole 1033 had a more humic fill, suggesting that whilst the posts mentioned above had been removed the stake had either rotted *in situ* or been broken off at ground level. The final internal feature of structure B was a burnt clay hearth, 1037, which protruded from the E section. It was at least 0.6 m wide and 0.1 m thick, although the edges had been broken and mixed with floor trample, 1029, which in the vicinity of the hearth also contained a greater quantity of ash and charcoal.

To the W of structure B a possible pit, 1092, cut through the compact external surface, 1050. This feature was located in the SW corner of the excavation so that its full extent could not be discovered. The pit was at least 0.3 m deep and extended some 0.7 m into the excavated area. It was filled with sandy clay and midden material including some pieces of very poorly preserved wood.

The only pottery recovered from structure B and associated features were four sherds from the internal floor trample, 1029.

After structure B had gone out of use, the above features were sealed by 0.15 m of a brown sandy gravel, 1022, which extended across the whole site. Cutting this was a linear feature, 1030, which ran along the S edge of the excavation (figs 2 and 3). The feature was some 0.39 m deep with a primary fill of grey sand and rubble. This was overlaid by a fill of dirty clay silt, parts of which included some organic material, possibly the remains of stakeholes. Unfortunately, for safety reasons it was not possible to examine this feature fully and it was excavated with caution only in the E half of the site. However, as later property boundaries were directly above this feature, 1030 may represent part of an earlier property division. Thirteen sherds of medieval pottery were recovered from the gravel, 1022.

This was followed by a build-up of c 0.55 m of sandy loam, 1021, suggesting a prolonged period of orchard or garden use. Cut into this was a gully, 1041, running parallel to the S section (not illustrated). The gully lay 1 m N of the S section and was 0.7 m wide by 0.5 m deep. In places,

the sides had been crudely lined with flat stones, most of which had slumped inwards. The gully had then been back-filled with river-washed cobbles. The feature was hand-excavated in the W half of the site only so that its full length was not ascertained although it did not extend to the E section. The purpose of the feature is again problematic. Although the lining of flat stones may suggest drainage, not enough of the feature was excavated to allow any firm conclusions to be drawn about its function. To the N of gully 1041 a sub-rectangular pit, 1015, cut through the garden loam, 1021. The pit was c 1 m by 1.2 m in plan and was filled with c 0.5 m of brown silty loam which gave no indication of any particular function for this feature.

Six sherds of medieval pottery and an iron object were recovered from fill 1042 of gully 1041. A further 13 fragments of medieval pottery were found in fill 1016 of pit 1015. All of these sherds were heavily abraded and it may be that they were re-deposited from the digging of these features in the sandy loam, 1021. In any event, these features and the garden loam represent the latest possible medieval contexts on the site.

Once gully 1041 had been abandoned the feature was sealed by a thin layer of loam, 1040. Cutting through this layer was a foundation trench, 1039, of a wall, 1038. The wall ran along the S edge of the excavation (fig 3). It was well-built of mortared whinstone, upon a foundation of large river-washed boulders. In the W half of the site the wall stood four or five courses (0.2 m) high, and was c 0.25 m wide at the top. It had been severely damaged in the E half of the site by a modern drain and in this area it was removed by machine. The remainder of the wall was left *in situ*. Contemporary with the wall were two sequences of broad rectangular slots all of which were aligned N-S (fig 3). The first series was a group of three slots 1017, 1019 and 1096. 1096 only appeared in the W section after cleaning. Slots 1017 and 1019, separated by c 0.06 m, were 0.25 m deep and 0.6 m wide. They were cut away to the N by later slots so that their full length of more than 2 m was not recovered; both were filled with orange gravel and lenses of humic silt. The function of these features will be discussed with the second series of slots. Associated with the first sequence of slots was a pit, 1097, which only appeared in the E section during cleaning. The sandy loam fill contained bovine skeletal remains.

Post-medieval and modern pottery sherds were recovered from foundation trench 1039 and from fill 1018 of slot 1017. One residual clay-pipe bowl, probably made between 1620 and 1640, was also found in the fill 1018 (fig 4, 3).

The features noted above were sealed by a layer of loam, 1005, which was cut by the second series of rectangular slots 1002, 1006-9 and 1014. Spaces of c 0.1 m existed between the parallel trenches which were larger than those already mentioned, being c 0.25 m deep and 1 m wide. All ran S from the N section for c 5.5 m leaving room for access of c 1.4 m between them and wall 1038. All the fills were composed of gravel with lenses of sandy silt, especially near the bases; 1006 and 1009 contained quantities of rubble mixed with gravel. The only relationship between them was that 1009 just cut 1008 which may suggest that they were dug consecutively from the rear of the plot forward. The function of these features and the earlier ones, 1017, 1019 and 1096, is most likely to have been as latrine slots for the disposal of night soil. These were a common feature in towns before the introduction of more modern sewage systems; in Forfar this was introduced in the last quarter of the 19th century (Adam 1967). Similar features have been discovered in Elgin (Lindsay, forthcoming) and Scalloway (Hall & Lindsay, forthcoming).

Modern pottery and clay-pipe fragments were recovered from latrine slots 1002, 1008 and 1009 which would also suggest a mid-19th century date for the second series of slots (fig 4, 2).

These later slots were sealed by a further layer of garden loam, 1001, and finally rubble associated with the demolition of the County Hotel stables to the S, 1099, and the construction of Woolworth's present store, 1098. At this time a layer of garden loam, 1000, was deposited forming

the latest layer on the site. All these modern layers were removed by machine with finds classified as 1000 which acted as a general unstratified context for the whole site.

CONCLUSIONS

Dating evidence for the site is disappointing. The quantity and quality of the pottery is only sufficient for a division of the site into medieval and modern periods. This has meant that only limited comparisons can be made with major pottery collections from elsewhere in Scotland. Other artefactual evidence from the medieval deposits is limited to a single iron object. There was also a noticeable lack of pits in the area of excavation and their absence, whilst helping to preserve the two structures A and B, may explain the general scarcity of finds.

The excavation was undertaken primarily to help to assess the archaeological deposits of Forfar. The major finding of the site was, therefore, the discovery of some 1.7 m of archaeological deposits. The preservation of both bone and organic material was, however, extremely poor. In addition, although the low lying nature of the town and the former proximity of Loch Forfar might suggest that anaerobic conditions could exist elsewhere in the town, no evidence of these was found.

It is always difficult to assess the implications of a single small excavation for the rest of a burgh's archaeology. Unfortunately, the sampling of one medieval property can not be taken as representative of soil conditions even in adjoining plots. It is not in the least uncommon for neighbouring properties to have had radically different uses and consequently different soil build-ups. Nevertheless, the existence of such a depth of deposits, including structures so far from the street frontage, bodes well for any further excavation in Forfar.

APPENDIX 1

CLAY PIPES

P J Davey

Twenty-six fragments of clay tobacco pipe were recovered from the excavation from four context groups. While the small numbers involved do not allow confident dating of the pipe-containing layers, the sample is an interesting one. The material is discussed below in context order.

1000: this group of 23 fragments included 20 which, on the basis of clay type, bore diameter, stem thickness and form, are of 19th-century date. One mid- to late-19th century bowl is marked T. CLARK/ FORFAR (fig 4, 1) and is presumably by a local maker of that name. The A of Forfar has been miscut in the die. One stem fragment is stamped BUR, which is probably the first part of the stamp BURNS CUTTY, which was very popular with Scottish makers at this period. The three remaining stems are poorly made in a coarse off-white fabric and have wide bores and thick stems. They would appear consistent with a local production during the first half of the 17th century.

1001: this single stem and heel fragment appears, on the basis of clay type, firing conditions, surface texture and form to be of Dutch origin, probably belonging to a low quality product of the period 1640-80 (Duco 1981, fig 131).

1009: this mid-19th century bowl is stamped BALME/MILE END on the front of the bowl facing the smoker (fig 4, 2). Three makers called Balme working at Mile End, London, are known from Directories:

Paul Balme 1832-66 of Mile End Wharf

William Balme 1856-61 of Mile End Road

George Balme 1867-76 of Mile End Road (Oswald 1975, 130-3)

It is not possible, on present evidence, to decide which of these produced the Forfar pipe. This is not a stray occurrence of a London maker's products in Scotland. Balme pipes have also been found at Aberdeen and together with Swinyard's products seem to be the main serious competitors in Scotland with the

pre-eminence of the Glasgow factories. As Swinyard moulds are preserved in Aberdeen it is possible that Scottish finds of Balme pipes are also locally made, for the moulds were purchased when the London makers finished production (Davey 1982).

1018: a smoked, milled and burnished bowl of early- to mid-17th century type. It may well be an import from London (Atkinson & Oswald 1969, 178, fig 7) made probably between 1620 and 1640 (fig 4, 3).

In summary, the pipes from Forfar are mainly of 19th-century date, with a small group from the 17th-century. Local production together with importation from elsewhere is indicated during both periods.

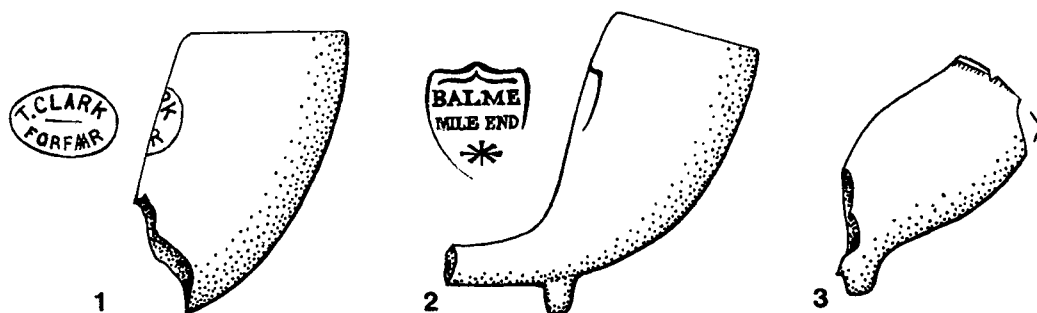


FIG 4 Forfar: clay pipes (scale 1:1)

APPENDIX 2

POTTERY

Christine Scott

The total number of pottery sherds recovered from the excavation amounts to 149 sherds. With such a small assemblage it was possible to describe each sherd in detail. Although such a limited sample cannot provide statistical trends, the stratigraphical distribution of the sherds does allow approximate dating of phases. Initial sorting divided the sherds into three groups. Ninety sherds are obviously modern. Two are believed to be post-medieval as they have the thick, even, glaze and heat skin often noted on post-medieval pottery (G Haggarty, pers comm). The remaining 57 sherds are medieval in type.

The modern sherds were given the fabric code Foa m and categorized by glaze type. The post-medieval and medieval sherds were described by the colour of the fabric, slip and glaze, if present, and any other distinguishing details. They were then further sorted into fabric groups by examining the inclusions visible in a 10 mm long break at $\times 30$ magnification. By this method five groups, Foa 1 to Foa 5 were recognized together with seven sherds representing six fabric types which bear no resemblance to any of the Foa fabrics or imports found on Urban Archaeology Unit sites in Perth. It is hoped that further comparison with other fabric types will lead to their identification.

Groups Foa 1, 3 and 4 have parallels in pottery from excavations in Perth where they have been given the common name Perth Local and equivalent fabric numbers. The kiln site for this ware has not yet been located but it is believed to be close to Perth. Group 5 has also been found in Perth but it is not thought to have been made there. Group 2 belongs to the white gritty type paralleled from medieval sites in many parts of Scotland.

Foa 1, 3 and 4 have in common a fine grained ($\leq 5\mu\text{m}$), reddish-yellow to light brown micaceous clay with quartz inclusions and unidentified black particles. Foa 3 and 4 are distinct from Foa 1 as both have red inclusions believed to be either fragments of decomposed Old Red Sandstone or areas of staining from other minerals. A major difference between these groups is the percentage of inclusions, mostly quartz, within the fabric. Foa 1 has less than 2%, Foa 3 around 6%, and Foa 4 around 25%. Fabric Foa 5 has a similar clay matrix but has around 65% inclusions, mostly quartz but also rock fragments. It is so coarse that it seems likely that some of the inclusions could have been added as temper.

Thin-sectioning, carried out by Mr E Cox, verified the fabric divisions and identified possible clay sources. The inclusions in groups Foa 1, 3 and 4 consist of metamorphic and granitic fragments associated

with the local raised-beach deposits from the Tay, Earn and Almond Valleys. The clay source for fabric Foa 5 is probably the Strathmore area where there are thick glacial drift and fluvio-glacial deposits.

None of the post-medieval or medieval sherds is large enough to calculate vessel form and only two sherds could be joined. However, since over a third of the sherds have a slip of white, red or brown and about half have a green or brown glaze it is possible to assume that many of the vessels represented were of a better quality than cooking pots. There are two rimsherds, one from 1029, Foa 2, and the other from 1042, Foa 3, which have parallels with rims within the Perth rim type series. There are also two sherds with basal angles. Drawings of these are stored in the archive.

The pottery divides the site into two periods. The lower stratified deposits are securely dated to the medieval period as here the pottery-bearing contexts produced only medieval sherds. Unfortunately any subdivision of this period is impossible without imports or other datable finds. The second period, lying above the garden loam, 1040, is dated to the 18th–20th centuries by the modern pottery and clay pipes. Residual post-medieval and medieval sherds were found along with the modern material. There are no deposits which have only post-medieval sherds. The unstratified material comes from machining the overburden, modern material and layer 1021.

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