

# Excavation at 45-47 Gallowgate, Aberdeen

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## SUMMARY

*Excavation of a small site at 45-47 Gallowgate, Aberdeen yielded evidence of 15 phases of occupation on the line of the medieval and post-medieval street frontage. This is the first site to be excavated on the important western route into the medieval burgh and gives some indication of the changing status of this area of the town from the 13th to the 19th centuries. Remains of timber and wattle buildings add to the small number of medieval street frontage buildings yet excavated in Scotland. Examination of the well stratified pottery sequence confirms the main trends of the far larger corpus of pottery published from 42 St Paul Street Aberdeen (Murray 1982) and thereby confirms the validity of the sequence.*

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\*Hill of Belnagoak, Methlick, Aberdeenshire

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 Clay moulds **R M Spearman**  
 Clay roof tiles **H K Murray**  
 Clay pipe **P Davey**  
 Stone **N Trewin**  
 Flint **J B Kenworthy**  
 Lead **H K Murray**  
 Iron **H K Murray**  
 Bone **C Smith and G W I Hodgson**

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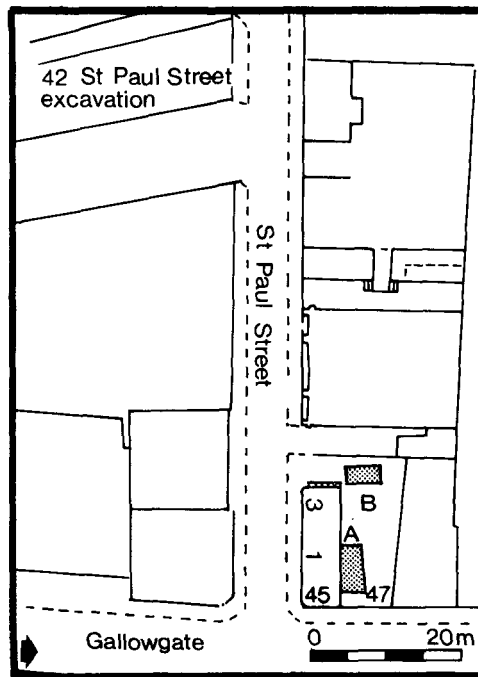
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INTRODUCTION

Excavation took place at 45-47 Gallowgate, Aberdeen from 6 August to 26 October 1979. The work was carried out by the Aberdeen Archaeological Unit (now part of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums Department) with the aid of grants from the Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments).

The site, which lay at the corner of St Paul Street and Gallowgate (illus 1) (NGR NJ 941 065), included the area of 45-47 Gallowgate and 1-3 St Paul Street. These properties, which were under threat of redevelopment, had been demolished some years earlier and the most recent use of the site had been as a car-park.

A survey carried out by the then City Council in 1946 showed that all these properties had been cellared. No passages were depicted on either the 1867 or 1967 OS maps but, as this was the only frontage site available in the area, it was decided to machine out the area of the cellars and



ILLUS 1 Site location

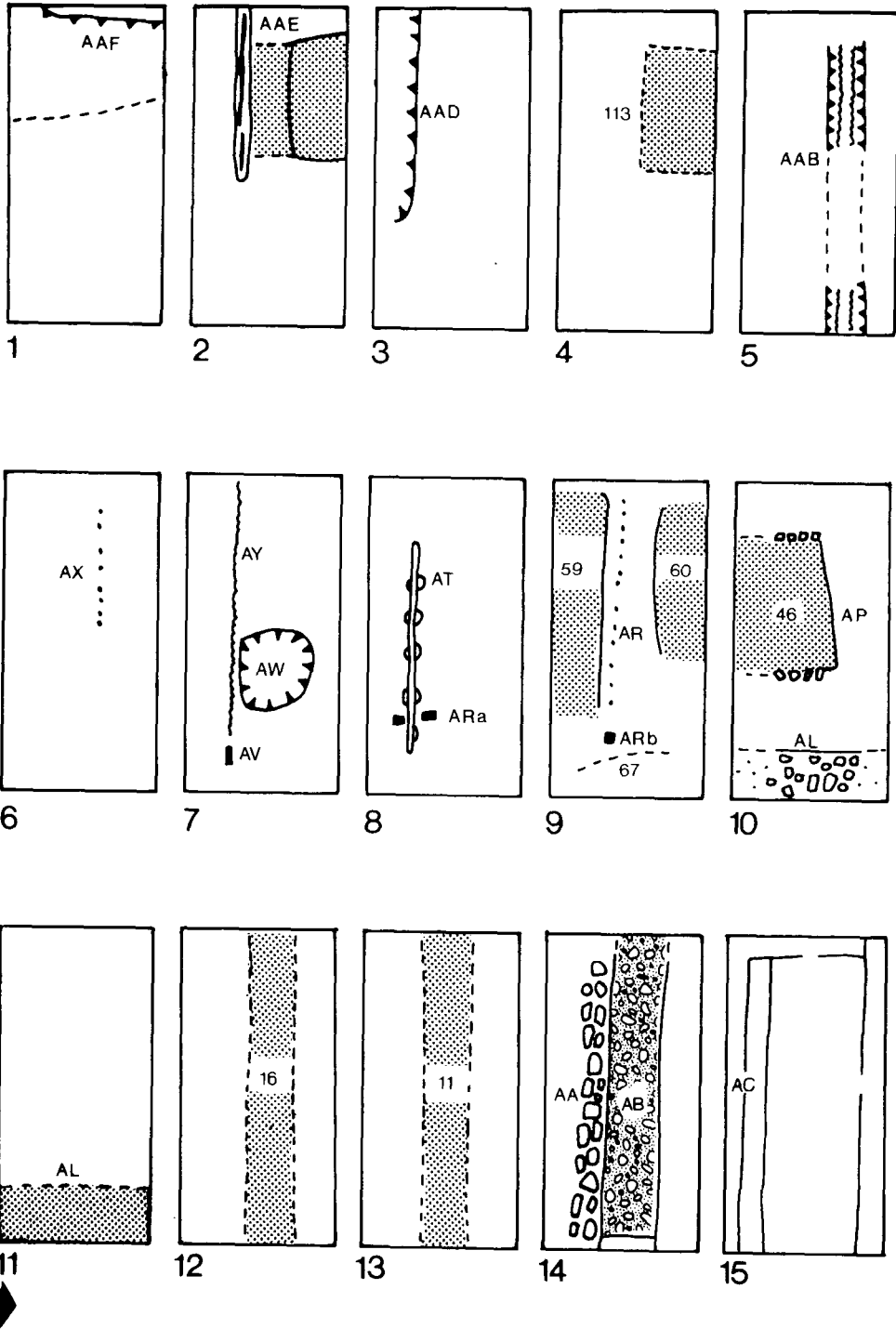
see if any medieval layers remained undisturbed between or below them. This preliminary examination revealed a pond between the cellar walls of 45 and 47 Gallowgate, so a trench (Area A: 3 by 6 m) was excavated by hand covering the whole of this passageway. Most of the back of the site had also been cellared with the exception of a small area behind 3 St Paul Street where a second trench (Area B: 2.5 by 5 m) was excavated. There was no possibility of a physical link between these two areas. The cellars on the site had cut to a depth of 3 m and destroyed medieval deposits in all other areas. As the excavation in Areas A and B revealed total depths of c 2.5 m stratified deposits above natural, it is possible that some pits might have survived below the cellars but the potential evidence did not appear to justify the mechanical removal of such a large area of rubble fill.

### SUMMARY OF THE SITE EVIDENCE

Excavation below the passage between 45 and 47 Gallowgate, in Area A, revealed a continuous sequence of site use from the early 13th century to the 19th century. The entire sequence, which has been divided into 15 phases, was sealed by the passageway so there was little problem of contamination (except directly beside the cellar cuts) and the pottery from this area of the site can be used as a well-stratified 'clean' group for purposes of percentage fabric analysis to date the occupation sequence (fiche 3: E10). This analysis shows a heavy preponderance of east Scottish gritty wares in the earlier Phases (1–5) with local Aberdeen wares gradually replacing them from Phases 6 to 10. English imports included Scarborough, Yorkshire, East Anglian, South English and London products, the majority of which were predominant in Phases 6–10. A small percentage of Continental imports derived from the Low Countries, France and the Rhineland. The pattern of the variations in the popularity of the individual fabrics is very similar to that established by the far larger corpus from the nearby site of 42 St Paul Street (Murray 1982, 116–76) and by this comparison the Gallowgate pottery would appear to date Phases 1–5 to the 13th century and Phases 6–10 to the 14th century.

Phases 11–14 appear to have been post-medieval but yielded little datable material. Clay pipe-stem fragments from Phase 14 have been dated by Davey (fiche 3: G14) to the 17th and 19th centuries. The pottery from the small backland area of the site (Area B) could not be treated as a clean sample for percentage analysis, owing to considerable disturbance by modern service pipes, but the overall trends can be used to link the two areas in broad chronological bands.

The earliest use of the site (illus 2: Phase 1) can probably be dated, therefore, to the early 13th century. There was a lack of any identifiable late 12th-century material such as the Developed Stamford ware, some of which was found on 42 St Paul Street. At this stage there was little evidence of building on the area of frontage excavated, which seemed to have been an open yard with a cess pit. However, in Phase 2, a building was constructed on the north property, with walls of grooved sill-beams on a stone foundation (illus 3). The use of sill-beam construction in this context is more sophisticated than the contemporary post-and-wattle buildings on the 42 St Paul Street backlands site (Murray 1982, 224–8). There was no evidence concerning the superstructure of the wall which may have consisted of either planks or wattle set in the sill. After this building was demolished the property boundary was established or redefined on this site by a ditch dividing the north and south properties. The fill of the ditch contained significant quantities of scrap leather and offcuts (Stones: fiche 3: F9, Cat 4, 14–20) and large quantities of cattle hair (Ryder: fiche 3: F13), suggesting that both some final preparation of hides and the manufacture of leather goods were carried out, probably in the south property. In the contemporary levels in the north property there was part of an ash spread and the overlying deposits contained fragments



ILLUS 2 Area A: key plan, all phases



ILLUS 3 Area A: Phase 2, looking E

of clay moulds (Cat 44–52) (illus 5) which Spearman (fiche 3: G11) would identify as having produced small domestic vessels such as ewers and plates. There was also part of a pin mould (Cat 44). A whetstone (Cat 65) and a stone vessel fragment (Cat 66) (Trewin: fiche 4: A4) from the overlying yard build-up may also have been connected with what appears to have been a metal-casting workshop on the north property in Phase 3 and possibly extending into Phase 4.

In Phase 4 a floor of hard-packed yellow sand was laid over the north property but there was no associated building and it is possible that this was sand used to clean up the yard area, a feature which has been found elsewhere in Aberdeen at this period.

Subsequently, in Phase 5, the boundary was redefined by a wattle-lined ditch between the two properties. The fences which formed the wattle lining had originally extended at least 0.3 m over the top of the ditch, as upstanding walls. The silt and sand fills of the ditch suggest that the ditch was often waterlogged and may have acted as a drain from the Gallowgate street. After the collapse of the lining fences, the ditch was levelled by throwing in scrap timbers including the rim

of a bowl (Cat 41), part of a circular basket base (Cat 38) and a fragment of carved decorated wood (Cat 42).

Throughout these phases the backland area (Area B) behind these properties was a midden, with no traces of structures in the small area possible for excavation. One mould fragment from the midden (Cat 48) provides a further link with the frontage properties.

In Phase 6, which can be dated by the pottery to the beginning of the 14th century, the boundary was again redefined, apparently by a wattle fence. The property directly on either side of the fence appears to have been used as open yards, so that it would appear that the full width of the frontage was still not built up at this stage. This was emphasized in Phase 7, by the presence of a large cess pit in the north yard. Among the finds from the pit there was a cloth fragment of fine well-made twill (Cat 37) of a type known in Scottish medieval contexts in Perth. The fragment bore signs of sewing but it was just a worn rag and its original use is uncertain (Bennett: fiche 3: G1).

After a further accumulation of organic deposits, probably within an open yard, a structure was built on the south property with one wall extending within the excavated area. It was of sill-beam construction set on a stone foundation and apparently associated with a large earth-fast post, which would suggest a fairly substantial structure. Too little remained for reconstruction. This building was sealed in Phase 9 when the boundary fence was re-built and sand yards/floors were laid over the excavated area of both properties.

The most interesting building on the site was found on the south property in Phase 10. A gravel floor was bordered on the east and west sides by low stone foundations, presumably to hold sills. The north side lacked a stone foundation but the abrupt edge to the floor suggests that a sill had lain directly on the earth on this side (illus 4). The use of earthfast sills next to sills on stone foundations has been observed in roughly contemporary structures in Perth (Murray, forthcoming), and it probably differentiates between load-bearing and non load-bearing walls. The E–W dimension of the building was 3.8 m and on the basis of the fairly standard rig width of 5 to 6 m, the N–S dimension of the building, which lay across the width of the plot, would probably have been within a maximum of 6 m. This size is similar to the estimated sizes of the buildings excavated on the Broad Street frontage in Aberdeen (Dent *in* Murray 1982, 26–34), but it is less than many of the backland buildings both on the Aberdeen site at 42 St Paul Street and from Perth High Street excavations (Murray, forthcoming). The pressure on the frontage plots may, arguably, have produced the use of multi-storeyed structures at an earlier stage than in the backlands where expansion could be lengthwise, but there was no evidence to suggest that this particular building had been multi-storeyed. The building had burnt down and the debris included much smaller diameter twig/branch charcoal, possibly derived from wattle, either set in the sills, as has been found in a slightly later context in Perth (Blanchard 1980, 36), or possibly from roof underlay. Straw charcoal may have derived from thatching material. No heavier timbers such as the sills could be identified but it is possible that if they had been only partly burnt they might have been salvaged for firewood or even reuse. There was a quantity of burnt clay, but it lacked wattle or plank impressions and could not be certainly identified as daub. There was insufficient to suggest predominantly clay walls.

A large amount of pottery was found in the layers associated with the destruction and therefore almost certainly contained in the building at the time of the fire. This included a minimum of six Scarborough-ware vessels (Fabric 19, Cat 57–60; Fabric 18, Cat 61–62), and one of Fabric 37 (Cat 63). Remembering that only about a quarter of the length of the building was excavated, this suggests a fairly prosperous, although not necessarily rich, household with quite a few imported pottery vessels.



ILLUS 4 Area A: Phase 10, looking W

Contemporary with the building there was a band of cobbles lying parallel with the edge of the modern Gallowgate. This can be interpreted either as a frontage to the building or possibly as the edge of the medieval street itself. Unfortunately, excavation could not be extended across the modern pavement to verify this.

During the same period of activity on the frontage there was the first evidence of building in the backland of Area B, with traces of an earthfast sill-beam and part of an associated clay floor. The disturbance of the area did not allow further interpretation of this structure.

After the destruction of the Phase 10 building the frontage appears to have been semi-derelict, with a thick deposit of homogeneous 'garden earth' overlain by small dumps of rubbish and a few scrap planks. While this could only be observed in the small area excavated it suggests a decreasing pressure on land if any of the frontage could remain unbuilt.

The final phases of activity can only be dated broadly to the post-medieval period and from the 15th to the 17th century there appears to have been a series of paths extending down the



boundary towards the backland. At some stage a large building with massive clay-bonded stone walls was built in the backland area; part of one wall was excavated in Area B. The wall was 1.4 m wide, suggesting a fairly impressive structure and it is tempting to suggest that this might be identified with the stone building shown on this backland area in Parson Gordon's map of Aberdeen in 1661. A far lighter clay-bonded wall built parallel to the south side of the frontage path in Phase 14 may have been part of a far smaller frontage building, any further traces of which have been removed by the cellars of the 19th century. In the 19th/20th century the passage remained, but it appeared to have been incorporated in the buildings as an internal passage.

## DISCUSSION

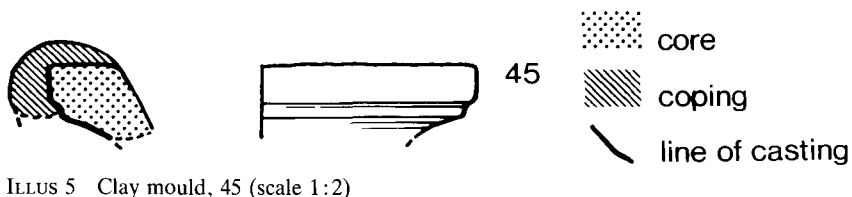
The Gallowgate site is important as it is the first excavation on the route into the burgh from the west and also because it differs to some extent from the evidence from the nearby St Paul Street site. There was no evidence of late 12th-century use of the site so it is possible that the Gallowgate remained fairly open while Upperkirkgate was beginning to be developed. In the 13th and early 14th centuries there were some buildings on the Gallowgate frontage but there can have been no great demand for property as open yards and even cess-pits extended right up to the frontage. Throughout this period there was rubbish dumping but no further development apparent on the area of backland excavated. This is in marked contrast to the St Paul Street site where the backlands behind the Upperkirkgate were well occupied by the 13th century (eg Murray 1982, Phase 5: illus 24).

During this time of low pressure on land in the Gallowgate there was some craft industry on the properties (illus 5). Although the total quantity of industrial waste is small it is nevertheless greater than any equivalent from the far larger St Paul Street site and is considered to have derived from a very small area of either of the adjacent properties.

Towards the middle of the 14th century Gallowgate appears to have increased in popularity: the backland began to be built up, there were buildings on the frontage and what appears to have been a paved street was constructed along the line of the front of the site.

After this, however, the nature of the property appears to have changed with a derelict period followed by construction of a path lying between the adjoining properties. By the 17th century there was a large stone building on the backland, probably with smaller buildings on either side of the path on the frontage.

The differences between the patterns of popularity between Gallowgate and Upperkirkgate are perhaps best understood in terms of the earlier development and popularity of the areas nearest the markets of Broad Street and Castle Street and the routes towards the shore and harbour, with the later development of the narrow ridge of ground between the Loch and the marshes which led to the west and extended to the less well developed land routes. By the 14th century the main area of the town was heavily built up and so some of the wealthier inhabitants may have sought property on the hitherto less popular Gallowgate. It is interesting that the most



marked redefinition of the property boundary on the Gallowgate site, the wattle-lined ditch of Phase 5, appears to have been contemporary with the redefinition and reorganization of the boundaries on the St Paul Street site. Many more sites will need to be excavated before this coincidence can be developed into any general statement concerning boundaries in the city as a whole but it does suggest that around 1300 there may have been moves to make the property boundaries clearer.

The apparent lack of building in Phase 11 may be the result of the lowering of the burgh population after the Black Death of the mid 14th century. It is similar to the sort of evidence seen in the St Paul Street site at the same period.

It is against this background of the varying fortunes of different areas of the town that one must assess the material wealth of this frontage as opposed to the evidence from the St Paul Street backlands. The overall range of pottery (as the most complete indicator of material culture surviving) was nearly identical. However, this may merely mean that, as might be expected, the pottery on 42 St Paul Street derived from the frontage on Upperkirkgate rather than from the occupants of the fairly small wattle buildings on the backlands. The buildings themselves, therefore, as the only non-mobile criterion of wealth, are important and it is interesting that throughout the 13th and 14th centuries on the Gallowgate frontage and in the 14th-century development of its backland, the only structures which could be identified as buildings used sill-beams with grooving to carry a superstructure of wattle or planking. The only associated earthfast posts were large squared timbers set in considerable post-pits and wattle was only found used as yard fences. This is in direct contrast to the St Paul Street site where the buildings were all of earthfast wattle with small round earthfast posts for roof support. This single criterion suggests that, irrespective of the varying popularity of the different streets and areas of the town, the frontage buildings were still in general built better than those in the backlands, and this supports the suggestion (Murray 1982, 227) that the St Paul Street buildings were basically occupied by dependants or tenants of the frontage owners.

Far more work both on the frontages in general and on Gallowgate itself is needed to expand the evidence from this small site.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The excavation of the site was funded by the Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments) and carried out by members of the Aberdeen Archaeological Unit, now part of the City of Aberdeen District Council Art Gallery and Museums Department. The author is also grateful to all those who assisted on the excavation, to all specialists who have examined material from the site and to the conservation department of the Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments) for the treatment of some of the artefacts.

Photographs by B R White. Illus 19–26 by Jan Dunbar.

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*This paper is published with the aid of a grant from the Scottish Development Department  
(Ancient Monuments)*