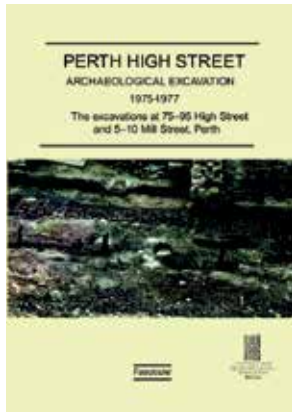
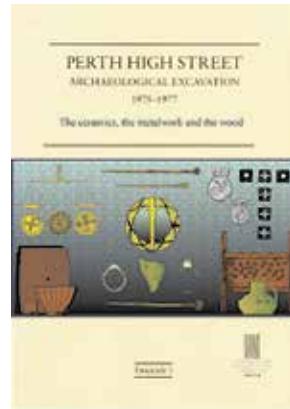


Review Article: Perth High Street, Archaeological Excavations, 1975–77. Published by Tayside and Fife Archaeological Committee (TFAC)

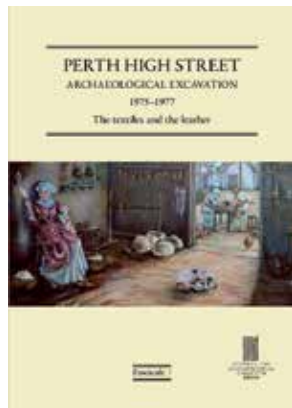
Patrick Ottaway*



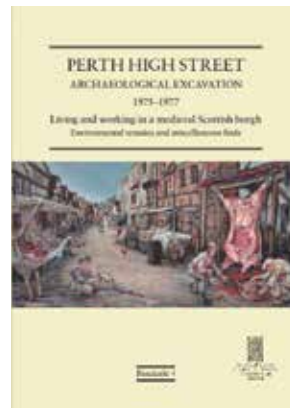
Fascicule 1: *The Excavations at 75–95 High Street and 5–10 Mill Street, Perth* (2010)
pp xii + 242 illus 166 ISBN 978 0 9561783 4 3



Fascicule 2: *The ceramics, the metalwork and the wood* (2012)
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Fascicule 3: *The textiles and the leather* (2012)
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Fascicule 4: *Living and working in a medieval Scottish burgh, environmental remains and miscellaneous finds* (2011)
pp x + 169 illus 64 ISBN 978 0 9561783 5 0

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The publication of the Perth High Street excavations is a major event in the history of urban archaeology, not just in Scotland, but in Britain as a whole, if not Western Europe. The excavations took place in 1975–7 and so the gestation period for the four fascicules, which have appeared in 2010–12, has been a long one, but the authors, contributors and sponsors are to be congratulated for doggedly sticking to the task. What has emerged is a fitting tribute to the memory of the inspirational excavation director, Nicholas Bogdan, who died prematurely in 2002.

As is so often the case with urban excavations of the 1970s, bringing the results into the public domain has been a difficult task. One gets some flavour of this in David Perry's introduction to Chapter 2 of Fascicule 1. The High Street excavation was undertaken in an era when it was often difficult to secure access to sites and to raise funding for the work. A good deal rested on the shoulders of dynamic individuals like Bogdan who were able persuade land owners and public authorities to support them. Unfortunately, little provision was usually made during the excavation for post-excavation analysis and reporting. The prevailing attitude, for good or ill, was that all the attention should be focused on getting the stuff out of the ground before the developer's bulldozers moved in. As a result, in the case of High Street, an all too familiar sequence of false starts, conferences intended as fresh starts, changing personnel, 'misunderstandings' (Fasc 1: 103), reorganisation of the archive etc took place and matters were, of course, sadly complicated by Bogdan's untimely death. That what we now have before us is such an important contribution to the study of so many aspects of medieval archaeology is remarkable.

Fascicule 1 has an excellent historical introduction, principally authored by Tom Beaumont James, followed by a detailed, 'blow by blow' report on the excavations by David Perry and a discussion of the buildings by Hilary Murray. On an accompanying CD, the

site is related to old maps of Perth and there is a very detailed description of the standing buildings which had been demolished before the excavation. In addition, there is an account of the geology of the Perth region and the worked stone catalogue. Fascicule 2, concerned with the ceramics, metalwork and wood, has principal contributions by Derek Hall, George Haggarty and the late Alan Vince on pottery, by Alison Goodall on non-ferrous metalwork, Julie Franklin and the late Ian Goodall on ironwork, and on worked wood by Alice Curteis, Carole Morris and Nicholas Bogdan himself. Fascicule 3 deals with textiles (by Penny Dransart, Hilary Bennett and Bogdan) and leather (by Clare Thomas and Bogdan). Fascicule 4 contains reports on environmental remains and miscellaneous finds by a number of different contributors. Data tables for the fascicule are presented on a CD. The use of these CDs for additional data is a wheeze often used in reports these days to save paper, but one wonders whether they will still be readable in 50 years, perhaps ten years, even if they have not dropped out of their little jackets precariously glued to the back covers. Putting the material on line with the Archaeological Data Service at York University might be a better bet.

The site lay in the heart of the medieval town of Perth, between High Street to the south and Mill Street to the north, the latter lying more or less on the line of the town defences. The principal excavation area – the 'South Sector' – encompassed parts of four medieval rigs (tenements). Little of the street frontage itself could be examined, except in Phase 1, as it was lost to later cellars, but otherwise the archaeological remains of the medieval period were very well preserved. There was little modern intrusion and ground conditions ensured survival of a great range of organic materials, from the timber of the structures to the wooden artefacts and the textiles – as well as such microorganisms as parasites of the human gut. A treasure trove indeed! Excavation also took place on a smaller scale in the northern part of the site near Mill Street – the 'North Sector' –

where *inter alia*, some traces of the defences were found.

In the South Sector, six archaeological phases were identified: I, pre-1150; II, c 1150–1200; III, c 1200–50; IV, c 1250–1300; V, c 1300–50; VI, post-medieval and modern. Phases I and II were partly dated by dendrochronology of building timbers, but otherwise dating was primarily by pottery. Phase VI encompassed remains of the Old Parliament House of 1606, which was incorporated into a masonic hall of the early 19th century. Little in the way of dating evidence is cited for the North Sector phases, although remains of the defences can be dated by reference to other sites and documentary sources.

Although pioneering in its time, the High Street site is now, of course, one of many archaeological excavations that have elucidated the history of medieval Perth in the last 30 or so years. In *Perth: Archaeology and Development of a Scottish Burgh*, David Bowler (2004) refers to 60 excavations and 150 watching briefs, and they have moved on the study of such themes as the effect of flooding in the town, the street plan and the defences. However, it is worth concentrating on the special contribution of High Street; it is still the most extensive excavation in Perth, and these reports will ensure that it continues to set the agenda for future work. To begin at the beginning, one should look first at what has been learnt about the origins of the burgh at Perth. The first burgh charter may belong to the reign of King David I (1124–53), but one would not expect this to have been granted to a piece of open land with no demonstrable potential for settlement and economic development. The king's motivation was, after all, to generate revenue through taxation of his burghers. James (Fasc 1: 2) suggests that a settlement on Watergate, on the west bank of the River Tay, at what would become the town of Perth, had its origins in the late 11th century, if not before. The High Street site appears to show that there was also settlement pre-charter c 200m farther to the west. In Phase I there was a sequence (divided

into six subphases) of buildings, pits and middens to which a *terminus ante quem* is given by two dendrochronology dates of 1150–1 and another of 1155–9 from oak posts in the first building (5) of Phase II. As Perry notes (Fasc 1: 107), there is some discrepancy between radiocarbon dates, for example, on carbonised material on early pottery, and the dendrochronology, but one can probably be happy with a late 11th or early 12th-century date for the beginning of Phase 1.

It is not entirely clear what sort of settlement Phase I represents. As far as the town plan is concerned, Spearman's analysis of Perth's plan (1988), revised by Bowler in 2004, suggests that this was of limited extent in the mid-12th century, although the tenement pattern already had an urban character. This was clearly demonstrated at High Street where the early buildings lay on the frontage whilst cess and refuse were disposed of to the rear, as one has come to expect in medieval urban tenements. Furthermore, the use of pits from the beginning strongly suggests a settlement which was intended to be of some size and, therefore, required a measure of discipline in its disposal procedures. It is striking how often one finds this in newly founded, or refounded, medieval towns in Britain; pits are, in their way, just as significant as markers of incipient urbanism as the street plan and tenement pattern.

The High Street site witnessed a complex sequence of development from the late 12th century until the middle of the 14th; for periods thereafter, the archaeology was not so well preserved. As in many other successful medieval towns, the rigs filled up with buildings and other structures; refuse disposal in pits and middens led to the steady rise of ground level. The debris of daily life, of a great range of crafts and of commerce is witness to a thriving and reasonably prosperous community about whose character one can say a good deal. In 1992 I wrote, after discussing the extensive use of local raw materials in Scottish towns: 'We should not get the impression, however, that [they] were no more than big villages' (Ottaway 1992: 175–6).

By way of enlarging on this, I went on to refer to distinctive aspects of material culture and diet. Now that we have the High Street report, this important question of what made Perth different from other settlements in its region and allowed it to stand alongside other urban places in Britain can be returned to in more detail. To put it another way, if one did not know about the burgh charter or even the street plan, would the artefacts and environmental material from High Street tell us that there was something distinctive about the settlement it represented?

Defining a settlement as urban, and, therefore, different in character from other settlements in its region, will always be somewhat problematic as it rests on a number of criteria, some economic, some societal, others to do with physical features. Seen from an archaeological point of view, these criteria have been most usefully set out, perhaps, by Martin Biddle (1980: 100) in his discussion of Anglo-Saxon towns. Particularly relevant to the present discussion, perhaps, are ‘a relatively large and dense population’, ‘a diversified economic base’, and ‘plots and houses of “urban” type’. In addition to distinctive attributes, however, one ought also to look at the role a place played in relation to its region and the power it was able to exert over it. After asking ‘What counts as a town?’ Fernand Braudel (1988: 180) concludes: ‘the town stood above all for domination and what matters most when we try to define or rank it, is the capacity to command and the area it commanded’. Braudel was working largely with documentary evidence (for French towns) for legal matters, trade, immigration, etc, but his conclusion can be readily addressed through archaeological evidence for the extent to which a place like Perth exchanged people, commodities and ideas with its surrounding region and the wider world.

Discussion of Perth’s status as an urban place may begin with the buildings. High Street has given us the largest group of medieval buildings in Scotland, all of which were constructed entirely of timber until the end of the 13th

century. Wattle and earth-fast posts were used in the early periods. The quantity of different sorts of wood required in the town suggests active woodland management in the region, although there are few documentary references for this (Fasc 2: 223). Two successive buildings (17 and 15) on the frontage in the earliest phase were laid out with long axes parallel to the street, but were divided in the centre along a rig boundary. Subsequently, the buildings were laid out with their long axes perpendicular to the street, an urban characteristic necessitated by the typically narrow and elongated form of the rigs. Beginning in the late 13th century, a progressive development of construction techniques began, which is probably witness to the work of specialist builders; an example of the sort of division of labour possible in towns. Some of the new developments, such as wall sills, whether timber or stone, occurred in towns elsewhere Britain in much the same time periods as they did in Perth. Unusually sophisticated was a late 13th-century aisled hall (Building 18) divided into two or more rooms, each thought to have had different functions. Dated to the 14th century were two buildings (50 and 51) constructed, at least in part, of stone, which was evidently becoming more common for the residences of high status persons in Scotland, as in England, in the late medieval period. Here is a good example of social differentiation, represented by building, which is another characteristic of towns. Whilst on the subject of stone buildings, one might note that although the CD for Fascicule I has a description of Perth’s geology, none of the stones found on the site was characterised geologically in any detail. This might have been useful as an addition to the study of town and hinterland relations, as none of Perth’s building stone is local to the site itself.

The artefacts from High Street present us with a fascinating assemblage that combines evidence for life as it was lived on a day-to-day basis with that of other, less routine aspects – such as religious observance and even warfare. It is immediately striking that, although individually

many of them are unremarkable, the sheer quantity of artefacts makes the whole something quite the opposite. The tools, the iron fittings and dress accessories, to take three examples, and much of the textile and leatherwork are probably little different from what one would have found in Scotland's medieval villages and farmsteads. However, because of the unusual ground conditions in towns like Perth, it is to sites like High Street that we must turn for an insight into the material culture of the country as a whole. Where better to learn about its ironwork, for example, than in High Street's assemblage of over 500 catalogued items?

The crafts represented here include metalworking, leatherworking and textile production as well as butchery and the processing of animal hides. Different crafts being practiced alongside one another and in and around buildings also used as residences, is very characteristic of medieval urban places. Taken together, the evidence speaks of a town supplying not only local needs, but also the region as a whole, and forming one end of a local commercial network which also drew in, or 'commanded', as Braudel might say, its products and resources. What may have been exported beyond the Perth region is hard to tell, but we can identify imports that suggest commercial networks more extensive than the simply local. These networks may have carried hides, wool or textiles, for example, to distant lands. A very useful trading contacts map appears as *illus 118* in *Fascicule 1*. These are the sort of contacts which, again, mark Perth out as urban and gave it a privileged place in the settlement hierarchy. The most exotic import was probably silk from Byzantium, or even China, which was used, for example, as decorative stitching on shoes or made into hair nets (*Fasc 3: 47–50*). It should be noted, moreover, that silk was found in Phase I contexts, thereby giving us a small piece of evidence for Perth's urban status before the mid-12th century. Also imported from overseas was wine from France or the Rhineland in barrels or casks which were then broken up for other uses. Walrus ivory arrived from

Scandinavia to be carved, for example, into a charming little handle with a jolly hooded male head at the top (*Fasc 4, illus 52, 45*). Medieval Perth clearly had a society in which there were people with the sophisticated tastes to demand commodities other than what was available locally and had the money to pay for them.

Less exotic was the pottery of which the site yielded some 40,000 sherds. The earliest ware is thought to be imported and to have predated a local ceramic tradition with its origins in the 12th century. Thereafter, none the less, imports remained a significant component of the pottery assemblage, notably glazed decorated wares from Yorkshire (Scarborough Ware and similar), apparently making up 7% of the total assemblage. Wares also came from elsewhere in England, the Low Countries and France. An important component of *Fascicule 2* is a detailed chemical analysis of selected sherds by Alan Vince, which sheds new light on the varied sources of Perth's pottery. Because there is so much of it and because it is more or less indestructible, pottery is often used, by default, as an important basis for assessing the sources of a settlement's imported goods as a whole and the fortunes of its economy. Other materials are usually less diagnostic as to source and those that are (foodstuffs or textiles, for example) usually survive much less well in the ground. It is a pity, therefore, that the High Street pottery report has virtually no quantification data, although they are routinely presented in any substantial study of recent times. Imports from beyond the local area, whether of pottery or other commodities, presumably formed a fairly small component of Perth's trade (whether measured by quantity or value), but it would have been useful to get some handle on this from the pot and some impression, thereby, of how the extent of trade rose and fell through time.

It is, of course, not only goods that travelled over the networks of the medieval world, but also people and ideas. As far as the latter is concerned, it is clear that it was a part of Perth's urban personality to have a population

firmly in touch with ways of thinking about the manufacturing and design of material culture which were circulating throughout Britain and beyond. For example, local potters were influenced by wares from north-east England and the Low Countries, leading to copies of jugs and dripping pans respectively. The ironwork assemblage carries not a hint of a local flavour and would be readily recognisable in any town or settlement in Britain. The same could be said of the leatherwork (Fasc 3: 298) in respect, for example, of the shoe types. In addition, the designs on the sheaths are very similar to those found elsewhere, including London; this may suggest they are imports, but they are equally likely to be local products. As far as textiles are concerned, the 2/1 twill woollen fabrics have much in common with contemporary fabrics from all over northern Europe (Fasc 3: 59).

Both Perry (Fasc 1: 113) and Hodgson et al (Fasc 4: 6 and 34) note that a burgh like Perth would have had certain trading privileges which constrained inhabitants of the region to bring produce to its own market. This being the case, we get a very good impression of the character of this produce, not least its meat-yielding livestock. An important aspect of what one might call this 'managed' trade is thought to have been the export of hides. In excess of 20,000 fragments of animal bone, identified to species, from High Street in itself speaks of a production of meat and other animal products rather greater than could have been consumed by the medieval population of Perth itself (Fasc 4: 43). In addition, simple percentages of animal bones by fragment count from the three 'food forming mammals' (cattle, sheep/goats and pigs) might well suggest a trade in hides (Fasc 4: Table 15). All but two of the 14 Perth assemblages quoted had cattle at over 60%, although similar figures can be quoted for some English towns, such as York (Bond and O'Connor 1999: table 78) but not others, like Winchester, heavily involved in the wool trade, in which sheep bone numbers are dominant (Strid 2011).

Beef was clearly the main meat in the urban diet, perhaps to a greater extent than in the surrounding region, although few data are available for comparative purposes. Less expected was the extent to which goat was consumed (at least 4.9% of bones of the food-formers) and, if by humans rather than dogs, this may be one aspect of a distinctly Scottish character in the Perth diet which shows the town drew upon supplies from the harsh Highland regions where goats alone were able to find sustenance. The sheep may also have been typically Scottish in being more 'spindly legged' than their English counterparts (Fasc 4: 17) as well as having wool coloured with natural pigment (ie akin to the primitive Orkney and Shetland sheep of today; Fasc 3: 67).

In my brief account of Perth in 1992, I referred (p. 176), as part of my argument for Perth's distinctive urban status, to evidence for an unusually varied diet including geese and swan. Quantities of bird bone at High Street were small, probably because soil sieving was not part of the site routine as it would be today. Even so, I was a little disappointed to find that there was actually only one swan bone from High Street (Fasc 4: 51)! There were, however, over 300 goose bones and evidence for a variety of other avian species, some of which must have been eaten, including duck, heron and grouse. In addition, three bones of Golden Eagle give a distinctly Scottish flavour to the bird bone assemblage.

The natural environment of the Perth region is well illustrated by the botanical remains from High Street. The samples were very rich in species, although largely preserved by carbonisation rather than waterlogging. What is striking is the way the remains show us the town drawing in resources from a variety of ecological zones, including wetlands, heath and moorland (for heather), fertile agricultural land (for wheat) and less good land (for oats and bere). The woodlands were extensively exploited for timber, fuel, bark for tanning

and a variety of woods for artefacts such as bowls, stave-built vessels and an extraordinary drain sluice (Fasc 2: illus 196, 526). In addition, alongside the imported material culture, there is evidence for figs and walnuts, imported foodstuffs for the wealthy, perhaps from southern England or the Continent. The town also reached out into the local marine environment, exploiting its fish resources. There were, perhaps, surprisingly few salmon bones, given the Tay's reputation as a salmon river; instead the most frequently consumed species was cod, taken in the Tay estuary and off the east coast of Scotland. Perth, like the coastal towns of England, clearly participated in what has been called a 'medieval fishing revolution', based largely on the technology required to catch cod in large numbers (*Current Archaeol.* 2008).

In conclusion, the archaeology of the High Street site at Perth shows us the emergence of a distinctive settlement which, from the earliest phase, appears to be urban in character. A boost to Perth's fortunes was no doubt administered by the grant of burgh status with the accompanying monopolies which secured its dominant position in the region. We see the development of tenements and buildings of urban type occupied by a population engaging in a variety of crafts and also in trade which, on occasions, extended well beyond the region. The wealth generated allowed the creation of a diverse and stratified society in which status was demonstrated through buildings, clothing, personal possessions, diet and forms of religious observance (for the last, see the illuminating essay by Mark Hall and the late Brian Spencer in Fasc 2).

As one might infer from the preceding discussion, the data from the High Street excavation have, for the most part, been very thoroughly researched and presented. In fact there is considerably more discussion of some categories of the finds than one would normally expect in a site report. Aspects of what we are told about the textiles, for example, appear to

be only tangentially relevant to the High Street material. As a result, the publication as a whole rather lacks 'focus' in a number of places. However, had there been greater editorial control, one would probably have lost some very interesting and stimulating contributions – such as, for example, 'Dress from medieval Perth: the evidence from the site' which ranges far and wide in Scotland and beyond. Copy editing of the text appears to have been commendably thorough and I spotted very few typos.

Another welcome feature of the fascicules is the high quality of the illustrations throughout. The excellent site photographs are, of course, a tribute to Nicholas Bogdan's management of the excavation, but the finds illustrations and plans are also of a high standard – it is good to see ironwork, for example, clearly depicted and at a sensible scale. The site plans are presented as loose leaves in a folder at the back of Fascicule I. They are larger than the page size to allow reproduction at a reasonable scale (c 1:130) and are clear and well presented. However, the numbers could usefully have been made bolder or a bit larger. Alternatively, certain parts of the plans could have been reproduced at a larger scale. As they stand, I suspect that even someone with perfect eyesight (not me) will find it a test to read the numbers, which makes working through the site report rather hard going. The same could be said of the main section through the site (illus 18), which might usefully have been reproduced at a larger scale on a loose leaf.

These comments on the site plans are, of course, relatively minor matters and one never likes to end a review on a negative note. I will therefore conclude by saying that I love archaeological site reports and, in particular, I love the amazing details that the specialists give us, like the wooden cover used to keep an oarport weatherproof when not in use. Apparently this implies a vessel with a greater freeboard than one whose oars were operated from T-holes on the gunwale (Fasc 2: 322).

Suddenly, a vision of a great trading vessel sailing up the Tay is conjured up by an item most of us would have passed over unnoticed. I also love site reports because, although intended to be an objective account of the material, supplemented by informed discussion of its significance, they can be so revealing of their authors; their personalities, their interests and even their relationships to others. In the case of these Perth fascicules I felt that, for much of the time, I was reading texts which had been written with great affection, dedicated to the memory of a friend and colleague, an exemplary member of my profession.

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