
3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

North Berwick is situated on the east coast of Scotland, overlooking the Firth of Forth. Together with Haddington and Dunbar, it is one of three royal burghs in East Lothian. The town began in the medieval period and grew to be one of the major settlements in the centuries following. In the later medieval period its fortunes fell and it remained this way until the arrival of the railway and its transformation into a popular seaside destination.

The origins of the burgh are unclear. The earliest records indicate that North Berwick as a settlement was certainly in existence by the reign of David I (1124–53). The Earls of Fife were given the lands and manor of North Berwick at this time, and it is thought that Duncan I, Earl of Fife (1136–54), founded a nunnery there between 1147 and 1153. An early church of St Andrew is known to have existed near the current harbour, and this is likely to date from this period, or even earlier. The church at the harbour was intended to serve the pilgrims who travelled from this point over to Earlsferry in Fife on their way to St Andrews. The first written record of St Andrews as a place of pilgrimage is in the 10th century (Yeoman 1999, 53), but it is not known exactly when the route from North Berwick to Earlsferry was established. It has been claimed that a ferry port for pilgrims was in existence from the 8th century (Turner Simpson & Stevenson 1981, 14) and recent excavations (Addyman forthcoming) at the site of the medieval Church of St Andrew at the harbour should shed more light on this and the origins of the church.

The earliest documentary evidence of North Berwick dates from 1177, in a document where the chaplain of St Andrew's Church in North Berwick is a witness. In 1199 the church, along with the hospital and other areas of land, was confirmed as the property of the nunnery by Malcolm, Earl of Fife. North Berwick's status as a burgh is known from the 14th century onwards, although initially it was a baronial burgh linked to the Douglas family; the first Earl of Douglas had the right to have a port and erect a custom-house and a tron, given by Robert II in 1373 (New Statistical Account (NSA) 1845, 323). It had been made a royal burgh by the reign of James I (1406–37) and appears in various official documents throughout the 15th and 16th centuries.

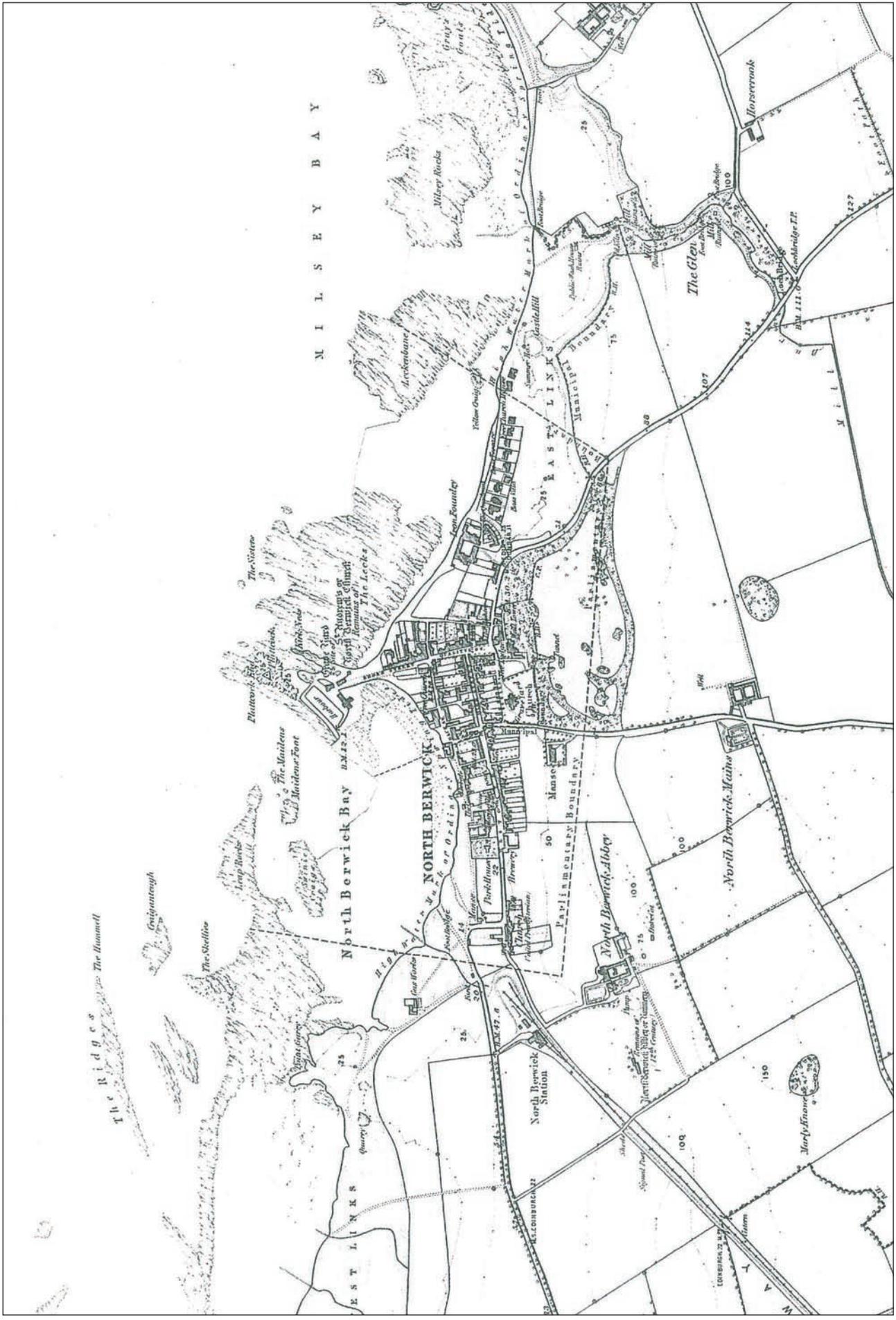
The burgh would originally have benefited from its position as the crossing point for the ferry on a major

pilgrim route, although in the late 11th century Queen Margaret had given permission for another pilgrims' ferry across the Forth further upstream (at 'Queen's Ferry'). This would undoubtedly have taken away some of the trade that the pilgrims provided and the fortunes of the town may have declined as a result. However, the fall of Berwick-on-Tweed, one of the largest trading burghs in Scotland, to the English in 1333, meant that North Berwick and the other burghs of East Lothian (Dunbar and Haddington) benefited and took this share. In fact, North Berwick had the largest share of trade of these three towns.

By the 17th century the fortunes of the town appear to have been on something of a downturn. St Andrews' position as a focus of pilgrimage had begun to wane in the 16th century (Yeoman 1999, 69) and the development of Queensferry as the favoured route, perhaps because it also allowed pilgrims to visit St Margaret's shrine in Dunfermline, had also taken its toll.

Despite North Berwick's share of the trade from Berwick-on-Tweed, the rival towns of Haddington and Dunbar began to take over as the main trading towns in the area. The levels of taxes paid by Dunbar in the 16th century were regularly two to three times that of North Berwick, and this continued into the 17th century (Turner Simpson & Stevenson 1981, 2). Additionally, North Berwick no longer had a market or fair by the end of the 17th century, as in 1695 parliament attempted to revive these activities. It is also thought that a proper harbour was never constructed by the Earl of Fife, and this certainly seems to be confirmed by the fact that the town had only two fishing vessels in 1692 (Turner Simpson & Stevenson 1981, 3). It is interesting to note that St Andrews appears to suffer a similar decline around the same time (Rains & Hall 1997, 3).

Visitors to North Berwick confirm the status of the town in the 18th and early 19th centuries, describing it as 'illbuilt' and 'melancholy' (Turner Simpson & Stevenson 1981, 3), and also indicate that there was no great trade or manufacture in the town. It was only in the second half of the 19th century that the situation of the town began to improve, with the presence of a railway line from Edinburgh bringing visitors and improving access. A foundry was constructed at the east end of town during this time (Ordnance Survey 1854, *illus 2*), evidence of the improvements that the railway provided.



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