
7 SITE NARRATIVE

7.1 13th- to 15th-century occupation

The earliest phase of site use appears to be as a yard area and probably dates from the 13th century. The earliest pottery found on the site was recovered from the backfill of the well (262) and is dated to the 13th or 14th centuries AD, suggesting that the well was in use in the high medieval period. The large pit (285) in the south of the site shows that sand-quarrying was taking place, presumably to extract building materials for the expanding town.

7.2 15th/16th-century abandonment or cultivation?

The site-wide Phase 2 layer (226) and the lack of any evidence for a property division suggests that the area formed a single unit in the 15th–16th centuries. The land in this phase contained midden material, including butchered animal bones. Some evidence of skilled butchery of a range of animals possibly indicates that a trade butcher worked nearby, or perhaps owned and used the land. However, it seems most likely that during this period the land was used simply for cultivation, or even stood empty for a time.

7.3 16th-century sand quarrying

The two large pits (282) and (338) probably represent sand-quarrying for use in building materials for the ever-expanding town. This practice was confined to the south of the site, as the north of the site was relatively undisturbed in this phase. They were adjacent to Phase 1 pit 285. Presumably the earlier pit was uncovered and found to contain unsuitable sand, and therefore the new quarries were moved slightly further east to get the desired material. The material used for backfilling of these pits contained concentrations of abraded pottery, indicating their deliberate in-fill with residual material which may be derived from earlier middening. The brick from the latest fill suggests a final infilling in the 16th century. The presence of these quarries is further evidence for the apparent abandonment of the site in the previous phase.

7.4 Late 16th-/early 17th-century burial ground

The ground was used for human burial at some point between the mid to late 16th century and up to 1631. The radiocarbon date range puts the

skeletons between 1440 and 1650; this date range is reduced when finds dated to the 16th century which were recovered from the deposits that the graves were cut through, are considered. The presence of dental attrition attributed to the smoking of clay pipes would suggest that the skeletons were buried after the introduction of tobacco pipes to Britain in the late 16th century. Balmerino House was built in 1631, and it is unlikely that bodies would have been buried outside the front door of the house. Thus, a date of approximately 1590 to 1631 could be inferred from the evidence presented above.

There are at least two explanations for the presence of these burials within the grounds of Balmerino House. One possibility is that the burials were of soldiers killed in the Siege of Leith in 1560. The stature of the skeletons (above average height at that time), and the site's proximity to the eastern defensive wall of the French-built town fortifications, lends some weight to this interpretation. However, this is credible only if the wear seen on the teeth of two of the two skeletons was caused by something other than clay pipe use, and this is doubtful.

The favoured explanation is that the burials were originally part of a formal cemetery, based on the following evidence. South Leith parish church, originally a chapel dedicated to St Mary and attached to the collegiate church of Restalrig, is situated on Constitution Street, some 120m to the south of these burials. The church was used as a parish church from the 1560s following the demolition of Restalrig Church, although this status was not formally confirmed until 1609. The church occupies a roughly central position within the present graveyard. If these burials were originally part of it, then the graveyard must have been truncated by the expansion of Leith Town in the 17th century. The presence of disarticulated remains of at least two further individuals suggests that a dedicated, long-term graveyard was located here, rather than a short-term burial ground. The approximate north-south alignment of these burials remains an enigma, especially given the apparent conformity of the rows of graves within the current churchyard, but it is at present unknown how common this practice might have been in post-medieval Scottish churchyards.

7.5 17th-century manor house and gardens

Balmerino House was built by John Stewart, Earl of Carrick in 1631 and sold to Lord Balmerino in 1643. Major development and landscaping of the site took place with its construction. The ground was landscaped and raised to create ornamental gardens.

The excavation revealed the position of the entrance stairway and the garden retaining wall in front of the house. The foundations bear little resemblance to the shape of the splayed staircase shown on the illustration published by Grant (1882), although presumably the easternmost line of the footings represents the position of the bottom step, with the other walls supporting the sweep up to the front door.

To each side of the stairway, elements of the repair of domestic drainage for the house were revealed, in the form of Phase 5 sump tanks (230 and 240). After sump 230 filled up and became unusable, the

second sump (240) was dug and a new drainage culvert (210) constructed. The old sump was latterly backfilled with a dump of malformed clay smoking pipes, most of which date from 1630–40, with one exception that dates from 1650. Therefore a date after 1650 can be assigned to the abandonment and realignment of the sumps, and presumably either the construction or extension of the staircase.

The building and land were sold to the church in 1848. St Mary's Star of the Sea Roman Catholic Church was built on part of the garden in 1853, and Balmerino House was finally demolished in the 1970s.