

# The Scottish Burgh Survey – a review

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## INTRODUCTION

In volume 112 of these *Proceedings* Proudfoot (1982) examined the background to the creation of the Society's Field Survey and discussed the value of the contribution it made towards the compilation of a more comprehensive survey of archaeological sites and monuments in rural Scotland. It is not only in rural Scotland that such detailed survey work has been needed: towns also, for the past decade or so, have been undergoing intensive redevelopment especially in their historic cores. A limited amount of urban rescue excavation in towns such as Aberdeen and Edinburgh in 1973 gave an indication of the possible archaeological wealth of Scottish towns and also showed that a more structured approach was necessary if limited resources were to be deployed effectively. The need for a survey of Scottish towns was paramount and in 1976 the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments invited the Department of Archaeology of the University of Glasgow to produce a series of reports on the historic towns of Scotland. This Scottish Burgh Survey, as it became known, has to date produced reports on 53 towns in Scotland. It is the intention of this article to review these reports and to attempt to assess their value and contribution towards the study of Scotland's medieval towns.

## BACKGROUND: THE NEED FOR URBAN SURVEY

### ENGLAND AND WALES

Almost any discussion of the growth and development of town archaeology in Britain must perforce begin with *The Erosion of History* (Heighway 1972). This report, published by the Urban Research Committee of the Council for British Archaeology identified the importance of town archaeology, discussed the ways in which it was threatened and made recommendations as to how the rescue of archaeological deposits should be organized. An essential part of the publication was the inclusion of graded lists of towns worthy of attention in England, Wales and Scotland. Following Heighway (1972), reports highlighting the problems of urban renewal appeared for many of Britain's historic towns. Some were major works, such as *The Future of London's Past* (Biddle *et al* 1973) which comprised both text and an elaborate series of maps with colour overlay showing the extent of the threat which redevelopment posed to evidence of the city's growth from the Roman through to the medieval period. Although these reports were pioneer studies and led to the creation of urban archaeological units in most of England's major historic towns (cf Fowler 1980), the work of survey still continues, particularly at a more regional level. In 1977, *Historic Towns in Somerset – Archaeology and Planning* (Aston & Leech 1977) was pub-

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lished with the intention of identifying guidelines for priorities in rescue excavation in those historic towns in Somerset which were most seriously threatened by redevelopment. It was also hoped that the survey would be used by the County and District Councils 'not only in examining the constraints imposed on development by the historic environment but also in considering Local Plans, the designation of Conservation Areas and the subsequent preparation of schemes of enhancement' (Aston & Leech 1977, 1.4). More recently, in 1983, with *Historic Towns in Essex – An archaeological survey* (Eddy & Petchey 1983) the job of survey at county level has been even further refined with the categorization of towns on a scale of priorities and a fuller discussion of the legislative means by which protection for individual areas and sites is best achieved, especially through the better integration of information in both Structure and Local Plans.

#### SCOTLAND

The section in *The Erosion of History* (Heighway 1972) dealing with Scottish towns was to be regarded as an interim assessment of the situation as the Urban Research Committee of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland was then working on a similar report for Scotland. This report, *Scotland's Medieval Burghs – An archaeological heritage in danger* (Simpson 1972) also appeared in 1972 and set the case for the exploration of towns in advance of redevelopment in a Scottish context. Attention was drawn to a list of Scottish towns in which there was some degree of danger to the archaeological heritage. Of these, 11 were seen as being seriously threatened and within the report particular attention was drawn to seven of these: Aberdeen, Dumbarton, Edinburgh, Elgin, Linlithgow, Perth and Stirling. In his summary of recommendations, Simpson (1972) requested the Secretary of State for Scotland to finance surveys and rescue excavations where necessary; he exhorted local authorities to appoint archaeological officers to ensure in particular that archaeological interests were effectively represented within planning processes; and he invited universities to train and provide posts for a larger number of archaeologists. Archaeological societies, museums and private developers were all seen as having a role to play in the task set out in the report.

The publication of these recommendations was followed by four years of sporadic excavation conducted on an *ad hoc* basis in towns such as Edinburgh (Schofield 1976), Perth (Bogdan & Wordsworth 1978), Glasgow, St Andrews, Elgin (Lindsay forthcoming) and Aberdeen (Brooks, Dent & Greig in Murray 1982). It was not until 1976 that some of the long term recommendations of the report began to be implemented. In that year two archaeologists were appointed in Aberdeen for an initial period of three years. They were employed under the auspices of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland and financed by the Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments): they were housed by courtesy of the City of Aberdeen in the city's Department of Planning and Building Control. This not only provided for the first time, full excavation for an extended period but also ensured the much sought-after archaeological safeguard within the planning processes. In 1979 the two archaeological posts in Aberdeen were taken over by the local authority and the whole Archaeological Unit is now a fully integrated section of the City of Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums Department. The planning links having been firmly established during the initial three years, the location of the Unit within the Museum structure now ensures the longer term care and curational needs of the excavated material. The results of the first eight years of archaeological exploration in Aberdeen have recently been published (Murray 1982).

Over the same period the success of the excavations in Perth led in part to the creation in 1978 of the Urban Archaeology Unit, also under the auspices of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, whose role was to provide a continued archaeological presence in Perth, combined with exploration in other Scottish burghs where no archaeological cover existed. In 1982 the work of

the Urban Archaeology Unit was taken over by the Scottish Urban Archaeology Trust Ltd (Murray 1983).

It was also in 1976 that another major contribution towards the study of the medieval town in Scotland was initiated – work on the Scottish Burgh Survey began.

## THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SCOTTISH BURGH SURVEY

Much has been written on the origins of Scottish urbanization and the growth and development of the country's medieval towns. Geographers, in particular, have recently addressed themselves to this problem, Adams (1978, 22) inclining towards an emulation theory, while Dicks (1983) favours continuity of settlement from pre-urban nuclei. Of the two, Dicks in his essay *The Scottish Medieval town – a search for origins* (1983, 28) emphasizes the role that urban archaeology can play in unravelling these mysteries yet he fails, in his assessment of the evidence, to refer to the long term archaeological work being undertaken in two of Scotland's medieval burghs, Aberdeen and Perth. Talbot (1980) placed the Scottish medieval burgh in the context of the medieval town in Britain and, based on Pryde (1965), drew our attention to the fact that up to 1846 a bewildering total of 482 burghs was recorded. Of these 81 were Royal burghs of the King, 54 were founded between 1124 and 1450 and were not dependent on the king and 345 were founded between 1450 and 1846 as burghs of barony and regality. Clearly not all of these burghs merit either detailed survey or excavation and so some process of reduction is necessary.

In order to help in the careful husbanding of severely limited resources the Scottish Development Department (Ancient Monuments) in 1976 'invited the Department of Archaeology in the University of Glasgow to produce a series of reports on the historic towns of Scotland, to provide the background for further urban research and to furnish local authorities with archaeological and historical information necessary for planning purposes' (letter from the Principal Inspector of Ancient Monuments for Scotland, circulated with each report to local authorities and other bodies). To date, surveys have been published for 53 former burghs<sup>1</sup> (fig 1) and it is hoped that coverage will extend to Glasgow, Dumbarton, Dunblane, Kilmaurs, Kirkintilloch and Cumnock if funds are available (Talbot 1984).

The team, which commenced research and publication in 1976, consisted of Anne Turner Simpson who produced the historical sections and Robert Gourlay (until 1979) and Sylvia Stevenson (1979–83) who prepared the reports on the archaeological implications and development. They were based in the Department of Archaeology in Glasgow University under the direction of Professor Leslie Alcock and Mr Eric Talbot (Talbot 1984).

## THE REPORTS

### FORMAT

Each report is cheaply produced as an in-house publication of the Glasgow University Archaeology Department at a unit cost of £1<sup>2</sup>. They are in an A4 format, using single sided duplicated sheets for the text and a series of maps, some of which are fold-outs. They are stapled and bound in a plastic spine and have covers of light card in varying colours, bearing the name of the town and the aim of the report, eg *Historic Haddington – the archaeological implications of development*. Reports vary in size between 11 pages for *Rothsay* and 49 pages for *St Andrews*. Edinburgh, Leith and Canongate are included in a single volume comprising 91 pages at a cost of £2.50.

This method of production has made it possible to keep the unit cost extremely low and has

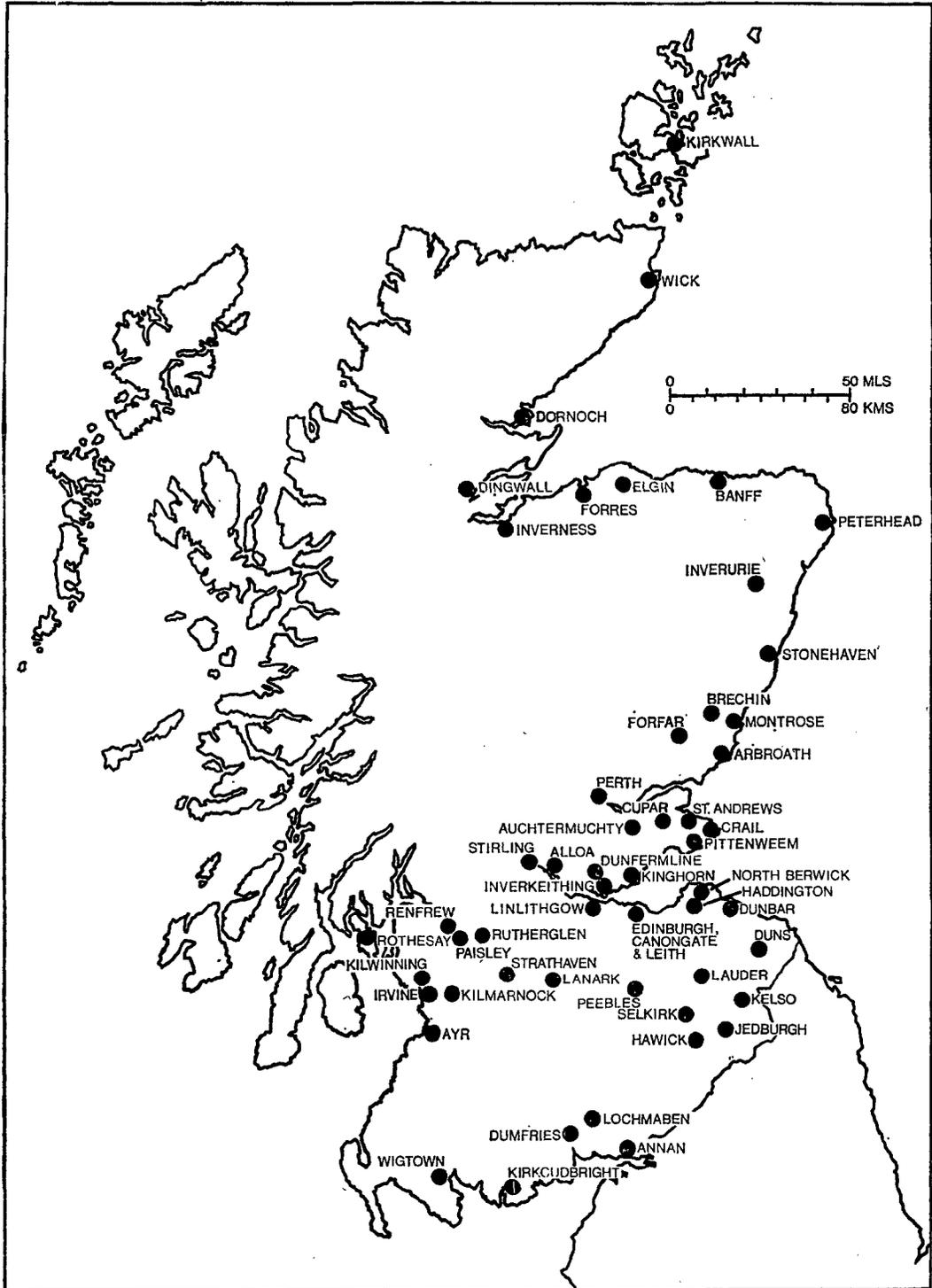


Fig 1 Scotland, showing the burghs for which surveys have been published

also facilitated speedy production with as many as 15 volumes appearing in one year (1981). The low cost was an important consideration in view of the number of free copies that were to be distributed, eg to planning authorities.

The surveys are in two parts. The historical section includes an introduction, historical background and a discussion of burgh morphology and buildings, while the second part deals with the archaeology. References and cartographic sources are adequately listed.

A niggling inconsistency is that the reports published up to 1979 do not have a list of contents while those published after 1979 do. Another regrettable oversight in the production of this series is the absence of an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) or, more importantly, an International Standard Series Number (ISSN). The lack of an ISSN in particular deprives the series of inclusion in the British Library Cataloguing Data which are circulated to other libraries and booksellers.

#### THE CONTENTS

As is stated in the preface to each report the surveys 'attempt to identify those areas within the burghs which were developed at various periods of their history up to approximately 1800 and to locate within these areas sites which are of particular historical importance'. It is the intention of this review to look at the totality of each report and its value to users of the surveys: in order to do this they will be discussed under the same headings which were used throughout the reports themselves.

#### *History*

The writer is not competent to question the reliability or otherwise of the data contained within the historical section of the surveys (cf Barrow 1983). The introduction to each historical section contains a discussion of the physical location of the site and any place-name evidence that may exist for it. The 'historical background' includes the date or dates the town achieved burgh status and its history from the early medieval period to the eighteenth century. Under the heading 'burgh morphology' street layout is examined in detail as well as other important constituent town features such as the market areas, ports or gates, defences and harbours and bridges where they exist. The documentary evidence for structures such as castles, parish churches, chapels, tolbooths, abbeys, friaries and priories, schools, hospitals and mills, is then presented. In general the historical section of each survey is consistent throughout the whole series and appears to achieve its basic objective.

#### *Archaeology*

The archaeological part of the *Burgh Surveys* presents more problems. Due to the change of personnel there are marked differences in style, content and presentation between those produced before and after 1979. In the pre-1979 reports the archaeological dimension is examined under the following headings: 'previous work', 'archaeological problems', 'archaeological potential', 'future development', and 'summary and recommendations'. Most of the same headings were used after 1979 although the order differed.

*Previous work* The information contained under this heading in all the volumes is straightforward and refers to any archaeological excavation or observation that may have taken place and includes a list of any finds of interest within the burgh with a note on their significance.

*Archaeological problems* In the pre-1979 reports this section is less than satisfactory, being on the whole superficial and lacking any discernible structure. The survey for Brechin will serve here as a general illustration. It states, as do many of these reports, that

'it is virtually unknown whether wattle, heavy timber or substantial stone was used to construct the various domestic, public and industrial buildings throughout the town, particularly during the earlier centuries of the burgh's development. Even less is known of the domestic possessions of the Brechin townspeople; their pottery, tools and other equipment. Here, excavation alone can provide the answers'.

The report immediately continues, 'Other, more specific problems exist which for reasons of space will not be gone into here' (*Brechin*, 11). This extraordinary statement is made in a report whose very aim is not only to define the specific problems that prevail in the burgh but, moreover, to suggest as precisely as possible where the answers are likely to be found. The plea of a lack of space cannot be supported in a series whose size can vary, as already stated, between 11 and 46 pages. The *Brechin* report amounts to only 13 pages.

By contrast, the post-1979 reports adopt a different and more thorough approach. Here, every element of the medieval town such as the town walls, ports, the town plan, early buildings and materials, churches, friaries and other important public buildings is examined and the archaeological problem in relation to each is discussed. It should, however, be said that due to a great deal of unnecessary repetition of historical data and indeed to the introduction of new historical data this section is perhaps longer than it needs to be. It can be said in this context that a greater degree of overall editorial control would have been helpful in avoiding this sort of repetition between the two parts of the surveys.

*Archaeological potential* One obviously recognizes the great difficulty in assessing the archaeological potential in towns where no previous excavation has taken place (which is the vast majority) but statements such as

'the present buildings in the older parts of the town may not have had foundations deep enough to have removed all traces of earlier occupation. Cellars and basements, which penetrate more deeply and are, therefore, more destructive, appear from street level to be few' (*Banff*, 8)

are too vague to be of any real value.

This is vastly improved in the post-1979 surveys where the areas of archaeological priority are clearly defined with six figure map references and the street names underlined for emphasis.

*Future development* In the earlier reports this section is generally brief, outlining what development has already taken place within the town and what is destined for the future. But again statements such as

'Here and there old and derelict buildings within the town centre will be demolished, with the probability that the vacated sites will be used for car-parking, at least in the short term'

are made without any precise locations for such buildings being given in either the text or the maps.

The later reports start with a summary of the development in the historic town centre and identify sites under immediate threat. A number of policy objectives are outlined, not, as is pointed out, in order of importance but rather as guidelines for future research as opportunities arise.

*Summary and recommendations* The textual part of the archaeological section of the pre-1979 surveys ends with a summary and recommendations which again would have had greater impact if they had been set out more clearly as a series of points. By contrast, this is where the post 1979 archaeological sections begin. A summary of the development in the historic town centre is presented and sites under immediate threat are identified. The recommendations are itemized and specify where excavation could usefully be carried out.

*Maps* As stated earlier, perhaps the most important part of the archaeological section of the surveys is the maps. There are usually three maps. The first is a location map placing the burgh in its regional setting, in the later reports there is the useful addition of a small inset showing the burgh's position on the map of Scotland. The other maps show burgh expansion up to the 17th century with the location of important historic buildings (all categories) and the areas of archaeological interest showing the location of redeveloped sites, sites presumably open and cellars and deep foundations where they are apparent. These maps are undoubtedly of immense value although one may raise questions as to the manner of production. For example, the choice of Letratones that are not significantly varied when reproduced and which often merge or black out completely is annoying and could have been avoided. In the earlier reports simplified maps have been used, based on the Ordnance Survey, which convey an immediate and readily understood picture of the information being imparted, but the absence of finer detail such as house numbers must make their use difficult for the planner or serious researcher. In the later reports, the maps are reproductions of the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey maps with the information contained in the text outlined on them. While the pre-1979 maps convey more easily an impression of the size and extent of the medieval towns the later reports do allow for more detailed referral.

## DISCUSSION

The Scottish Burgh Survey has undoubtedly made a major contribution to the study of the medieval town in Scotland and in many instances, as Talbot (1984) claims, it has produced the first modern account of the history of a burgh; they are also probably the most accessible accounts. Their real worth, however, must be assessed in the light of their use to the many diverse interests for whom they have been produced: the Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, planning authorities, archaeologists, historians and laymen.

The Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust is the main body undertaking archaeological exploration in those Scottish towns which do not have a permanent archaeological presence. A major component of the Trust's work is the vetting of planning applications and the monitoring of threats that occur within the historic cores of the medieval towns. A quick reference to the Survey (should one exist) for the particular town has proved in practice to give the archaeologist the basic information he or she requires on the historical background, the position and relevance of the site and its proximity to important features of the medieval town (Philip Holdsworth pers comm).

To the planner, provided the reports reach the appropriate person within any particular authority, the maps are perhaps the most important element and it is in this context that the more detailed maps are more valuable. The long discursive historical narrative is not necessary to the planner who would accept a statement by an accredited historian as to the historical importance of their particular burgh and so the briefest of historical outlines would suffice. This does not, of course, invalidate the historical introduction to each report but suggests that the addition of a short abstract would have been helpful. The presentation of the archaeological problems and the identification of areas of priority within a town are welcomed by the planners but more care needs to be taken to present them in the most concise and immediate manner possible. In particular one might recommend the indexing of sites by street names. An example, based on Aberdeen, might read:

Upperkirkgate, nos 33–46. Frontage. Para 3:4  
nos 49, 52, 66. Backlands. Para 3:5

general. Para 1:6  
 port, possible. Para 4:1  
 Broad Street, nos 29, 38. Frontage. Para 3:6  
 market, possible. Para 5:2  
 publication. Para 6:1

To send a copy of a relevant survey to a planning authority and to hope that it will have immediate effect is in many instances not enough. Follow up contact is required and occasional monitoring is necessary if the survey is not to lie gathering dust on a shelf like so many other circulars that are received from central government and which do not carry statutory obligations. This function could possibly be absorbed into the work of the Scottish Urban Archaeology Trust.

The Inspectorate of Ancient Monuments, Scottish Development Department, commissioned the surveys in 1976 in order that they might be provided with the necessary background information upon which to base a policy for urban research in the future. As they have now ceased to fund the exercise one wonders whether they feel that the remit of the survey has been discharged and that they now have sufficient data on which to formulate their future policy, or if this cessation is part of the rationalization of activities indicated by Proudfoot (1982, 5) between the SDD(AM) and the RCAMS in regard to survey, and if so does it mean that RCAMS will continue the work of the Burgh Survey?

To date, surveys have been published for 53 Scottish burghs, with the possibility of a further five if funds allow. Ignoring the 345 burghs founded later than 1450 (although Paisley and Duns are both examples of burghs erected after that date), 81 Royal burghs and 54 which were founded between 1124 and 1450 and not dependent on the king remain. As it has nowhere been expressly stated what criteria were used for the selection of towns to be surveyed, one must assume that the choice was a fairly random one, based mainly on Pryde's list (1965). How else can one account for the inclusion of Kilwinning, a small abbatial settlement until the 16th century with no current threat to the historic core of the town (*Kilwinning*, 5) and the exclusion of Nairn, a royal burgh dating to c 1190; or the inclusion of Auchtermuchty but the exclusion of Auchterader. Nor can the element of threat have been a major factor in the selection of towns in the survey. In very many cases there are no large scale redevelopments mooted and in a number of cases the historic core of the town is within a conservation area (eg Auchtermuchty). At any rate it is clear that the survey is far from being complete and as a consequence it is difficult to see how the SDD(AM) can have a sufficiently broad data base on which to frame future policy.

## THE WAY FORWARD

There can be little doubt that, regardless of specific criticisms, the Burgh Surveys produced so far provide an excellent corpus of basic information. This collection of basic data must be extended to those historically important towns not as yet covered. Once this has been achieved there is an urgent need for synthesis on a regional or a national basis if the SDD(AM) are to achieve their stated aims. Such regional studies would require a change in format and proper editing to provide an attractive product for the general market and an effective tool for planning purposes; a good example of this type of publication is *Historic Towns in Essex* (Eddy & Petchey 1983).

The Burgh Survey can be seen as the first step in a comprehensive approach towards the protection of Scotland's historic burghs – but much work still requires to be done.

## NOTES

1 List of *Burgh Survey* reports published to date (with dates of publication).

|  |                       |
|--|-----------------------|
| Alloa (1983)                             | Kelso (1980)          |
| Annan (1981)*                            | Kilmarnock (1981)     |
| Arbroath (1982)                          | Kilwinning (1981)     |
| Auchtermuchty (1981)*                    | Kinghorn (1981)       |
| Ayr (1978)*                              | Kirkcudbright (1977)  |
| Banff (1977)                             | Kirkwall (1977)       |
| Brechin (1977)                           | Lanark (1981)*        |
| Crail (1981)                             | Lauder (1980)         |
| Cupar (1981)                             | Linlithgow (1981)     |
| Dingwall (1982)                          | Lochmaben (1980)      |
| Dornoch (1982)                           | Montrose (1978)       |
| Dumfries (1977)                          | North Berwick (1981)* |
| Dunbar (1981)*                           | Paisley (1982)        |
| Dunfermline (1978)                       | Peebles (1977)        |
| Duns (1981)                              | Perth (1982)          |
| Edinburgh, Canongate<br>and Leith (1981) | Peterhead (1982)      |
| Elgin (1982)                             | Pittenweem (1981)     |
| Forfar (1981)                            | Renfrew (1981)        |
| Forres (1982)                            | Rothesay (1978)       |
| Haddington (1978)                        | Rutherglen (1979)     |
| Hawick (1980)                            | St Andrews (1981)*    |
| Inverkeithing (1981)                     | Selkirk (1980)        |
| Inverness (1977)*                        | Stirling (1977)       |
| Inverurie (1977)                         | Stonehaven (1978)*    |
| Irvine (1980)                            | Strathaven (1983)*    |
| Jedburgh (1981)                          | Wick (1983)           |
|  | Wigton (1981)         |

\* The asterisk denotes those volumes out of print in Spring 1984

2 The *Burgh Surveys* are available from the Department of Archaeology, University of Glasgow.

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