

The Church of St Nicholas, Aberdeen

by John Hunter

The Church of St Nicholas lies in the centre of Aberdeen flanked to the E by Correction Wynd, named after the House of Correction established there in 1636, and to the W by Back Wynd, formerly Wester Kirkgate (fig 1). The building stands on a small hill overlooking the Denburn estuary although much of its stature has now been lost by the elevation of Union Street. Close to the S lies the Green, location of the 'Palace' of William the Lion and the centre of the medieval burgh. The histories of the Church and the burgh are inseparable and the spiritual and prestigious value of this Church throughout the mediaeval period is noted in many of the charters mentioned below. The dedication to St Nicholas, the Patron Saint of sailors, is indicative of the importance of the Church in a town whose livelihood depended almost entirely upon the sea. Sir Samuel Forbes of Foveran in his 'Description of Aberdeenshire', written about the time of Mar's rebellion, recalls how no other city in Scotland sent forth ships carrying cargoes of greater value, and that the loss of a single ship from Aberdeen was more serious than the loss of ten ships from other towns (Spalding Club 1843, 48).

The earliest records of Christianity in Aberdeenshire are vague. Machar, one of the followers of Ninian, is reputed to have established a Celtic foundation 'ubi flumen, praesuli instar baculi, intrat mare'¹. This would presumably lie in the region now covered by Old Aberdeen. Machar died in France in 594 and the later Cathedral built in Old Aberdeen is dedicated to him.

The earliest mention of the Church of St Nicholas appears in a Papal Bull of Adrian IV in 1157 (Spalding Club 1845, 5) in which revenues are assigned to both the Church of St Nicholas, Aberdeen, and to the Church of St Machar, Old Aberdeen. There is clear distinction between Aberdeen denoted as a burgh (burgum) and Old Aberdeen denoted as a town (villa). Although it is possible that the burgh of Aberdeen was established before the time of Bishop Edward who is mentioned in the Bull it is unlikely that the Church can be much older than the burgh itself. The establishing of a mint which often appears with burghal status did not occur in Aberdeen until the reign of William the Lion (1165–1214).

However, according to tradition and based upon the writings of Parson Gordon of Rothiemay (Spalding Club 1842, 14) and the clergyman Alexander Keith (Spalding Club 1843, 205), the date of the founding of the Church is believed to be as early as 1060. Gordon's treatise gives an unusually precise description of the original building. He describes it as having a nave with eight pillars on either side and being 117 ft in length. Including the two aisles it was 66 ft wide. The two transepts were 74 ft in length from N to S and 24 ft across. Originally the Church had been completed by a narrow chancel with a round apse. This was replaced in 1498 by a new choir 86 ft in length and 64 ft wide, with three tall windows extending 18 ft to the east. This gave a total length of 245 ft. Despite the vast size, the upkeep and the extensive alterations which were eventually undertaken throughout the mediaeval period were financed almost entirely by the citizens themselves.² Keith's description is concerned to a greater extent with the furnishings and

decor of the Church. The dimensions he gives are the same as those given by Gordon and this suggests a common source. However, they differ with regard to the number of doors.³ Unfortunately neither of them reveal their sources.

The town is mentioned in 'Haraldssona Saga' (Athalbarnarson 1941-1951, III, 328) in reference to a Norse chieftain called Eysteinn who around the year 1153 steered along the eastern coast of Scotland and brought his ships to the town of Apardion (Aberdeen) 'where he killed

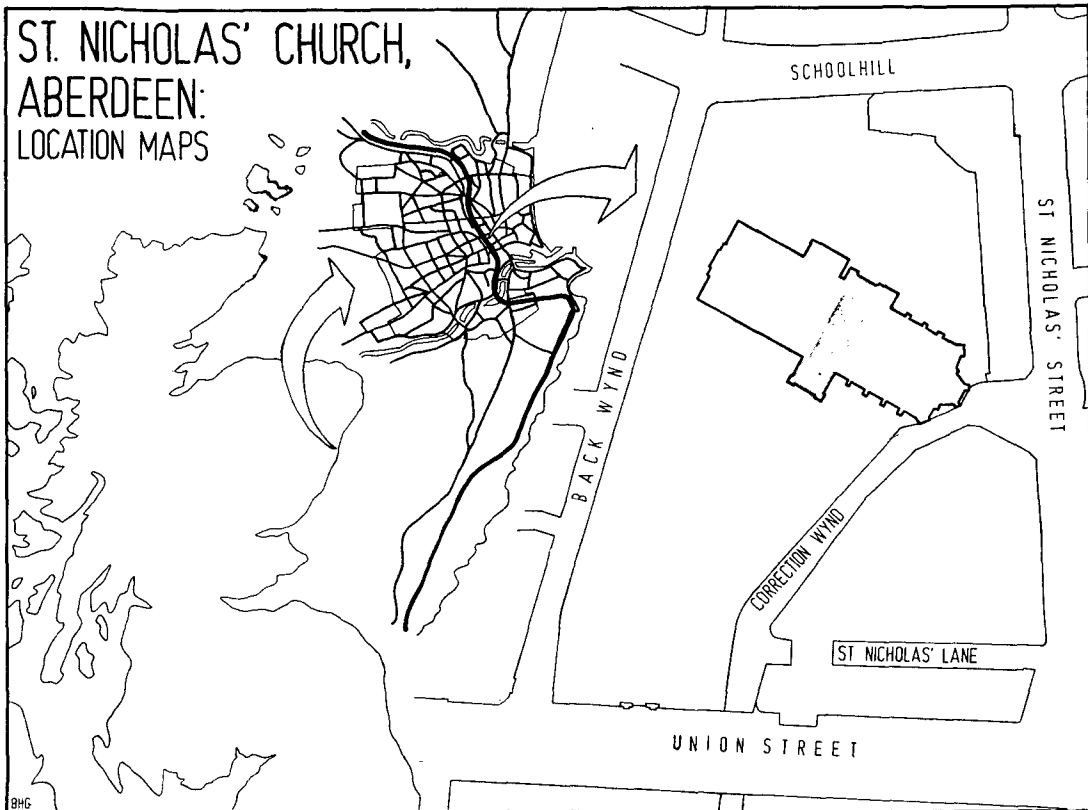


FIG 1

many people and wasted the city'. This destruction may be somewhat exaggerated for less than ten years later a reference in 'The Orkneyinga Saga' (Anderson 1973, 155) tells how Swein, son of Asleif, and one of the last of the Viking leaders spent a month's holiday at Apardion as guest of Malcolm IV.

The prosperity of Aberdeen and the parallel prosperity of the Church is reflected in one of the oldest of the city charters granted by William the Lion around the year 1180 which discloses that in the second quarter of that century the people of Aberdeen were already united with other communities under a 'free Hanse' or set of trading rights. The erection of a royal residence for William between the Green and the Dee emphasises the importance of the town in early times. Only this 'Palace' and the Church of St Nicholas, both stone buildings in a town constructed predominantly from timber, were to survive the great fire which devastated Aberdeen in 1244.

A further destruction took place in 1336, this time by the English forces, but here there is no record of the effect on the Church. The restoration of the nave in 1357 may have been in consequence.⁴

The later development of the Church is more accurately recorded. The transepts themselves which traditionally date to the original building were extended to the south in 1355 (Spalding Club 1888-1891, IX, 14) by Provost William Leith of Barnes to allow space for a new altar. Mention of a new glass window presented in 1339 by William of Merenez (Spalding Club 1888-1891, IX, 15) may refer to the window inserted in this new gable. At about this time a chapel seems to have been added to the E side of the N transept causing one of the earlier windows to be built up and requiring the insertion of a large doorway in the E wall.⁵ At the beginning of the fifteenth century the demand for more altars and chantries increased until at the time of the Reformation there were said to be over thirty in number.⁶ In the early fifteenth century during the time of expansion St Mary's Chapel was built at the E side of the old apse. It was completed in 1435. In 1498 a new choir was dedicated, the building of which had commenced under the guidance of Bishop Spens.⁷ No expense was spared. The masonry was imported from Morayshire, the lime from Dysart and the lead from England. In 1518 St Michael's door in the N wall of the N transept was blocked (Spalding Club 1888-1891, 352) and a large window inserted above.

The advent of the Reformation caused a long period of deterioration both in the fabric and adornment of the church. In 1559, shortly after the landing of John Knox in Leith, the silver and ornaments of the Church were handed over to the magistrates for safe keeping.⁸ They were never returned. The Church was fortuitously spared the extensive looting which occurred at Old Aberdeen where the entire wealth of the Church of St Machar including the bells was put aboard ship for Holland. Shortly afterwards the ship sank not far from Girdleness. At St Nicholas' the altars were removed, the stalls sawn away and the pipes of the organ packed into cases (Spalding Club 1888-1891, 384). The vast Church itself was simplified by the blocking of the transepts from the nave and choir by stone walls (Spalding Club 1888-1891, 380). This divided the building into the two churches which stand today, separated by an area consisting of the transepts and the crossing, both of which became mutual ground.

By the early eighteenth century the West Church began to show signs of decay. By 1732 it had been abandoned and fell to the ground shortly afterwards. In 1746 the Duke of Cumberland used the ruins to store provender for his cavalry. The West Church was rebuilt to a design by James Gibbs and was completed in 1755.⁹ The East Church was pulled down in 1837 for the simple reason that it was old, and replaced by a new building. The work was carried out by Archibald Simpson using granite from Dancing Cairns Quarry. Part of the N transept was used as a coal house. The final event in the history of the Church occurred in 1874 when a great fire destroyed the tower and the famous bells. The tower was rebuilt largely using the existing masonry.

Architecturally therefore the oldest standing parts of the Church are the N transept (Collison Aisle), the crossing and the S transept (Drum Aisle). With the exception of St Mary's Chapel the remaining structures are of modern date. The architecture is of the transitional style, dating to the late twelfth or early thirteenth centuries. The piers which carry the tower are of similar style and have square abaci supporting round arches. On the E and W walls of the Collison Aisle are two clerestory windows, one of which has angle shafts with carved caps and mouldings. In a recess in the N wall constructed for the effigies of Provost Collison and his lady now lies the effigy of Provost Davidson who died at the battle of Harlaw in 1411. His remains were removed during building work and his tomb-stone, noted at the time, has since been lost.

THE EXCAVATION

The Drum and Collison Aisles had for some time suffered from dampness to the detriment of the freestone walling. The surveyors' report on the problem recommended a thorough restoration of the fabric including the installation of a heating system. Prior to any work being carried out the Church Committee wisely decided that the threatened area should undergo archaeological investigation.

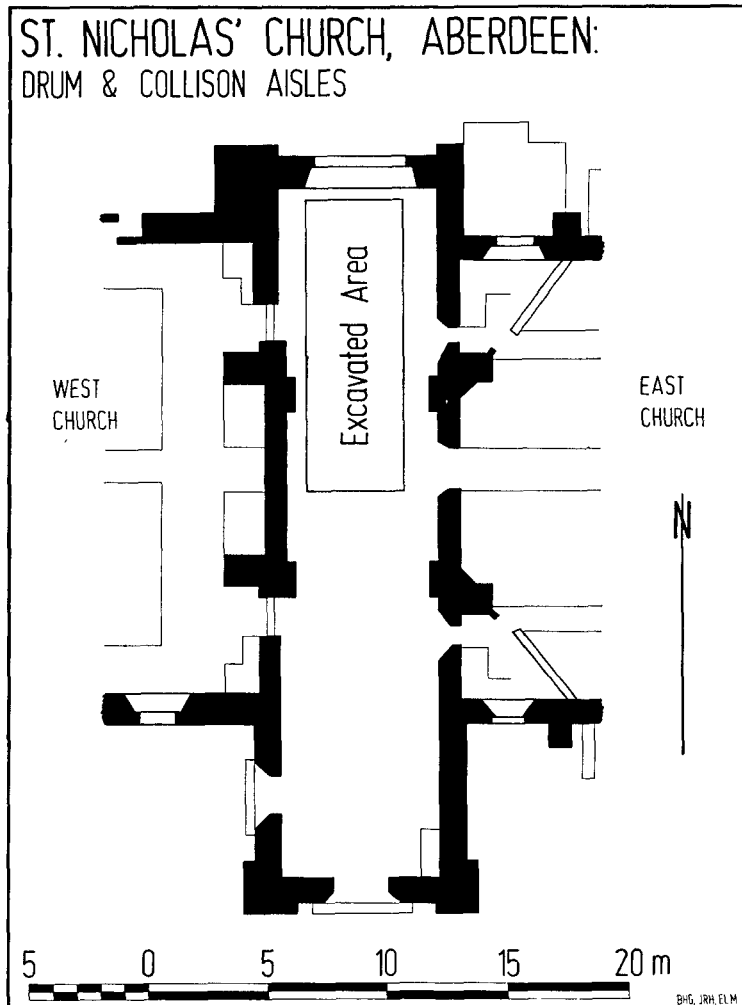


FIG 2

The area selected consisted of the entire region of the Collison Aisle and the N half of the crossing (fig 2). If Parson Gordon's account of an eleventh-century Church has any truth then the Aisles are architecturally not of the primary building phase. Excavation in this area might reveal traces of this vast 'Norman' building whose apse, according to Gordon and an eye-witness in 1837 (Walker, 1871, 207) lay under the present East Church. Any porticus or structure lying

to the north would be shown. The general regularity of layout of ecclesiastical buildings suggests that any wall lines revealed to the north of the E-W axis of the Church would be mirrored in the southern area. Excavation could be extended in that direction if necessary.

The excavation was carried out during March and April 1974 financed by the Department of the Environment for Scotland and with a grant from the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. Problems of lighting were overcome by the use of six 500-watt photoflood lamps, two of which were mobile. The dry nature of the earth made stratigraphical interpretation difficult and this could only be remedied by constant spraying with water. Safety factors to some degree limited the extent of the excavation in that no work could be carried out in the close proximity of standing features. Furthermore, the sand which had been used for levelling purposes in the Aisle always presented the threat of unstable sections.

PRE-REFORMATION FEATURES (fig 3)

The earliest datable feature proved to be the NW pier of the tower, the foundations of which were sectioned by the W edge of the trench (fig 5). The pier had originally been constructed on a mound of re-deposited orange clay and large stones. The piers themselves had been underpinned in more modern times and set with concrete. Wedged within the stones of the original foundation was a silver half-penny of Malcolm IV who reigned between 1153 and 1165. Reference to the Church in the Papal Bull of 1157 consequently places the building of the transepts between 1153 and 1157. Adjacent to the foundation and lying to the E was a hard stony surface set in the orange natural gravel. This showed traces of burning but contained no datable material. Much of the excavated area had been disturbed by burials. With one exception all these burials were orientated E-W parallel to the axis of the Church. The exception was a disturbed burial at the E side of the crossing. Both the grave cut and the disposition of the body were orientated approximately 30° out of alignment. The skeleton was of a young adult, approximately 5 ft in height, female and slightly built. The femurs, tibiae and fibulae were noticeably bowed. The grave cut was post-dated by a late medieval support wall which severed the skeleton at the neck.

In the Collison Aisle the earliest features were difficult to date with any degree of accuracy. They appear to represent part of the foundations of an unknown structure and consist of possibly two wall foundations, one running from the W section to the centre of the Aisle and the other bonded into it running northwards. They consisted of large undressed stones cut into the natural and bonded together with a fill of heavy brown soil. This contained a single sherd of a pottery jug dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Both foundation lines were cut into a series of burials the fills of which produced fragments of a medieval bone comb together with a sherd of unglazed pottery dated to the twelfth or early thirteenth century. This was the earliest pottery on the site. Later building in the Aisle had destroyed any association these foundations may have had with the early features in the crossing. To the N they were cut by a large stone structure. This consisted of a flat base of massive faced stones and was rectangular in shape. Both the N and S walls had been removed, the E wall had been re-used as part of a later building and the W wall, the tumble of which was clearly visible, had fallen. At the S end was a construction trench which contained a bronze blank and two sherds of pottery dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries. At the N end of the structure was a disturbed area consisting of a heavy dump of large stones and rubble lying against the N wall of the Aisle. This contained a single sherd of late fifteenth- or early sixteenth-century pottery set within the stones. This disturbance centred around the blocked doorway partially visible in the N wall of the Aisle and is presumably associated with this. The date of the blocking is recorded as being 1518. The relationship between the structure and this

St Nicholas' Church: Drum & Collison Aisles: EXCAVATED FEATURES 2

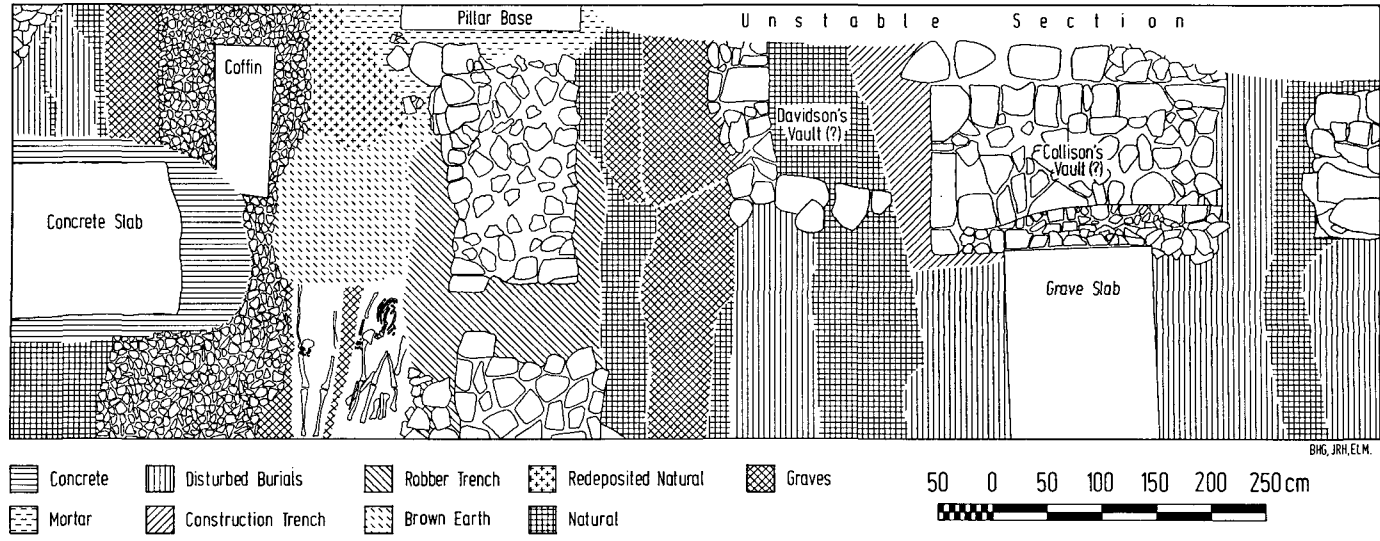


FIG 3

blocking was not clear, but the little evidence that there was suggests that the structure post-dated the blocking. On this basis it can be dated to no earlier than the sixteenth century. One can only assume from its position and size that it was originally some form of tomb or vault. It is too late to be the tomb of Provost Davidson (d. 1411) and the only tomb known to have been laid in this area was for Provost Collison after whom the Aisle was named.¹⁰ It seems likely that this was a family burial place. The effigies of Collison and his lady at one time lay in this area but were later moved.

POST-REFORMATION FEATURES (fig 4)

Shortly after the Reformation a supporting or cross-wall was set between the two N piers of the crossing. This had since been robbed, but the robbing trench clearly indicated its position. Part of the wall protruded from the E section and consisted of large stones loosely packed together and filled with mortar. The construction was such that it could never have been load-bearing and it may have been used as a form of buttressing between the piers when the blocking of the transepts took place. The material in the wall consisted of some re-used masonry, of which one piece was of particular interest. This was a fragment of an altar table showing traces of a design consisting of possibly five Maltese crosses in relief. The poor construction of this cross-wall must have necessitated its replacement sometime later by another wall of similar dimensions but of slightly better construction. This lay only across the W half of the crossing and butted against the NW pier foundation. It had been deliberately strengthened at the E end. The re-used masonry from the construction of the wall suggests a date no earlier than the seventeenth century.

Sometime during the eighteenth century and presumably during the restoration of the West Church which had fallen in 1742 the Aisles and crossing were extensively disturbed. There is no written evidence that the Aisles themselves became ruinous, but the storage of furniture from the West Church in the East Church at this time suggests that the Aisles were not a place of safety. This is attested archaeologically with the insertion, throughout the excavated area, of a layer of levelling earth which in places was over one metre thick. This may indicate that the Aisles were in need of considerable renovation and that the floor level was raised from the earlier floor level shown by St Michael's door in the N wall. This levelling post-dates the later of the two buttressing walls in the crossing.

Although much archaeological potential may have been lost by this alteration, the layer in itself was of considerable interest. It was almost totally homogenous and may have been extracted from a single location. The presence of numerous disturbed human bones suggests that the earth had been taken from consecrated ground. The finds from this layer provided a cross-section of items dating from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Much of the earlier material consisted of pottery sherds, the majority of which could be dated prior to the fifteenth century. The later material was represented by fragments of clay pipes, few of which exhibited any decoration. Other finds included fragments of glazed medieval floor tiles, medieval window glass and vessel fragments, melted lead from window comes, roofing clips and building debris. There were two coins. One was an Anglo-Hanoverian jetton and the other a mutilated two-penny piece of Charles I (1632-1642).

Shortly after this at the time of Simpson's rebuilding of the East Church, a coal house and associated room was constructed in the N Aisle. Collison's vault was re-used with the W wall extended southwards until it butted against the support wall in the crossing. This produced a large chamber of approximate dimensions 9 m by 3 m with access gained by a lower doorway at the SE corner of the vault. The elevation of this can be seen in fig 6. No roof remained. On the

St Nicholas' Church: Drum & Collison Aisles: EXCAVATED FEATURES 1

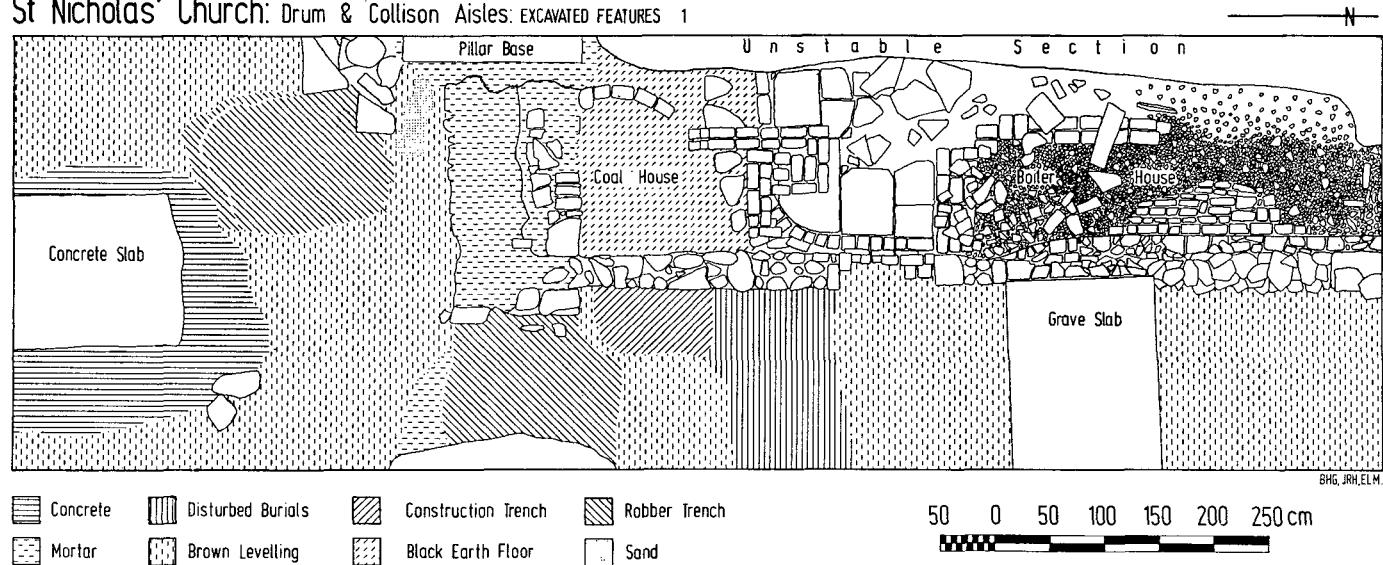


FIG 4

exterior the floor level was formed by a hard-packed layer of mortar leading down to the entrance. The interior of the structure showed two phases of use. The first was represented by a cobbled floor of which only small traces remained. Access was through the door in the E wall. The second phase was represented by the strengthening of the E wall, the blocking of the door and the plastering of the interior. The floor was constructed of bricks and flagstones. Access now was gained by a raised entrance at the E end. The existing buttressing wall had been built up and utilised for this purpose. The entire length of the E wall was made level with the use of smaller stones and a tomb-stone was inserted with its W end mortared to the top of the wall. The tomb-stone which was of Belgian marble was dedicated to Robert Johnson, Provost of Aberdeen in 1635. This stone had been noticed by Logan in his description of the Church in 1818 (Spalding Club 1888-1891, 460), but he describes it as being in the S transept and not in the north. Beneath it lay the dismembered remains of numerous skeletons presumably disturbed during building and packed there as a token of respect. The entire structure had subsequently been cut from east to west by a heating duct flanked by two stone retaining walls.

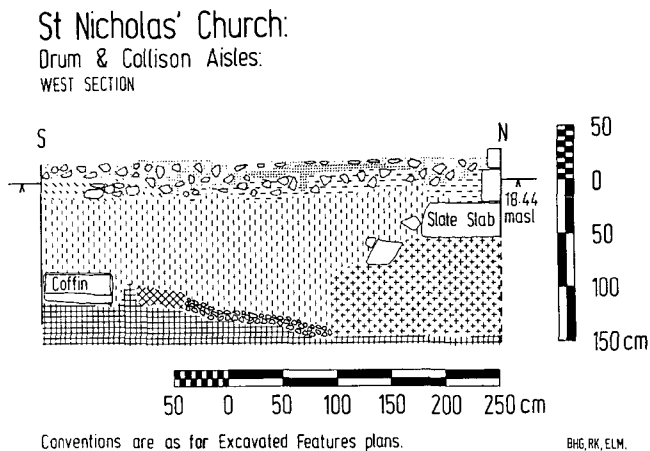


FIG 5

In the NE quadrant of the crossing a grave had been cut into the mortared surround of the coal house. The tomb-stone had been removed but the supporting stones were still visible. The grave itself had been re-cut and the contents removed. Traces of coffin remained. There is no record of this action which was probably caused by the rebuilding of the tower in the late nineteenth century.

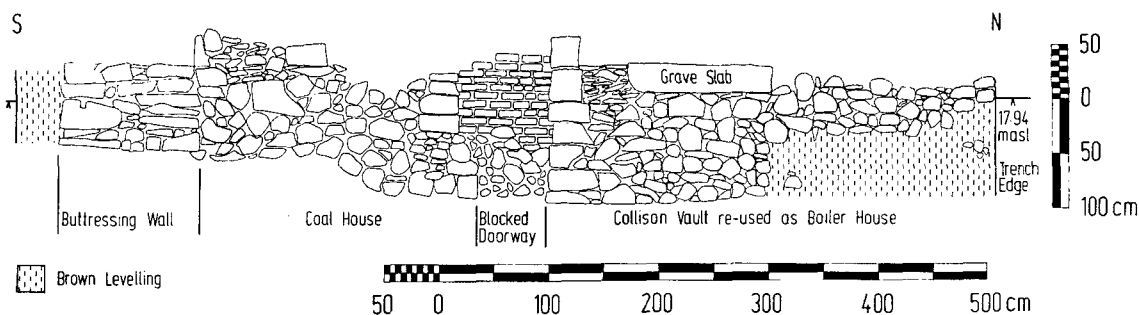
The great fire of 1874 which destroyed the tower also destroyed the wooden roof of the coal house and chamber, and traces of charred timber remained. This destruction sealed fragments of several Victorian pottery jars and a glass bottle. During the rebuilding the structure was filled with rubbish, sand and plaster from the walls. Also at this time a large 'concrete' platform was constructed in the centre of the crossing. This protruded into the S edge of the excavated area and was constructed of rubble and flint mortared with lime. Its position, in the very centre of the crossing, suggested that it had been used as a stable base for the hoisting of the granite in the building of the tower. Associated with this rebuilding was the underpinning of the piers in the crossing.

CONCLUSIONS

The dating of the building of the transepts to between 1153 and 1157 directly relates to the transitional style of architecture. The question remains as to whether the transepts and crossing are part of the original buildings or represent a later addition. Neither Gordon nor Keith mention the transepts as being a separate stage of development. Indeed, they are in proportion to the rest of the building described and on these grounds alone the entire structure would seem to be of a single phase. If the Church was built around the year 1060 as Gordon suggests it would pre-date the nave at Dunfermline and even Durham Cathedral, and this is unlikely.¹¹ Furthermore, if the Church dates back to the eleventh century then the establishment of the burgh must also be moved

St Nicholas' Church:

Drum & Collison Aisles:
EASTERN ELEVATION OF FEATURES



BHG, ELM

FIG 6

back. In relation to the dating of other burghs in Scotland this would be extremely early.¹² The dating of the coin makes it almost impossible that the transepts were built before the Norse raid of 1153, and even when the Bull of 1157 presents the Church to Bishop Edward it can hardly have been completed. Added to this, the image of St Nicholas, which according to the Chartulary existed from the foundation of the Church, is given its earliest date as February 2nd 1278/9 (Spalding Club 1881–1891, 41). It seems therefore almost certain that the transepts were part of the original Church mentioned by Gordon, the foundation of which took place shortly after the Norse raid of 1153. It should also be borne in mind that the mention of this raid gives the earliest known evidence for the existence of Aberdeen.

The two foundation walls in the Collison Aisle, post-dated by a single sherd of thirteenth- or fourteenth-century pottery, may belong to a tomb or vault. They were clearly re-used by Simpson as foundations for his own structure in 1837. The stones are much larger and cruder than those used by Simpson and the foundations are wide enough and sufficiently solid to support a large wall. Provost Davidson, who died at the battle of Harlaw in 1411, was said to have been buried before the altar of St Anne (in the N Transept) near the great arches of the steeple and on the N side. This location coincides with the position of the foundations and the dating is perfectly possible from the archaeological evidence. The foundations were cut at the N by the Collison tomb but Davidson's body must have remained undisturbed for his skeleton complete with purple cap was revealed during the building of the coal house and moved. The exact position of the burial was not recorded.

The thick levelling layer of earth which was laid down in the eighteenth century across the whole of the area strongly suggests that both the West Church and the Aisles had become ruinous. This is verified (in the Chartulary) only for the West Church. The remaining post-Reformation features in the Collison Aisle are associated with the coal house. The coal was stored at the S end while the N area was presumably used to house the boiler. The flat base of Collison's tomb would have provided an admirable platform for this. In the crossing the two buttressing walls were the only features of significance. The poor quality of their construction makes them appear futile, but there seems no other reason for their presence. Although it is possible that they supported wooden screens it is unlikely that such broad stone bases would have been required.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Kirk Sessions of St Nicholas' Church provided the opportunity for this excavation to take place and were both generous and helpful throughout. I would like to offer them my thanks and especially to Mr A C Huie whose enthusiasm and administrative assistance were invaluable. My thanks also go to Dr Grant Simpson, Department of History, University of Aberdeen, for his continual help and guidance. Among the many others whose help is gratefully acknowledged are Mr John Souter from the Town Planning Department, Miss Lisbeth Thoms who kindly examined the pottery, Mr Geoffrey Stell for his comments and help with the fragments of masonry, Miss Helen Cayton for examining the skeletons and Mr John Casey for his assistance with the coins. I am also indebted to Miss Elaine Morris who carried the main burden of the post-excavation work and to Mr Brian Gill for drawing the final plans. Finally, to all those who assisted during the excavation, especially to the many volunteers from Aberdeen, I am extremely grateful.

NOTES

- 1 The legend relates how Columba instructed Machar, one of his Irish disciples, to preach the Gospels in the North and to found a Church at a place where the river flowed in the form of a Bishop's crozier.
- 2 Professor Cooper commented that 'No king, no prince, only one prelate, and only one peer are recorded among its benefactors' (Spalding Club 1888-1891, xxxvii).
- 3 Keith mentions a West or King's door to the Church. This is not shown on Gordon's plan.
- 4 Between 1340 and 1362 no fewer than seventeen benefactions are recorded (Spalding Club 1888-1891, 8-17).
- 5 There is no documentary record of this. The arched entrance stands in the Eastern wall of Collison Aisle.
- 6 Even in 1439 there were said to be thirty chaplains including the vicar (Spalding Club 1888-1891, 102).
- 7 Thomas Spens offered the second tithes of the parish for the building of the choir (Spalding Club 1888-1891, 335). His successor Robert Blacader, subsequently withdrew this. The work was eventually completed under Bishop Elphinstone.
- 8 An inventory was made of these treasures (Spalding Club 1888-1891, 374).
- 9 Gibbs (1674-1754), himself an Aberdonian, designed the new building but never lived to see it completed.
- 10 John Collison was Provost of Aberdeen in 1521.
- 11 In Scotland only the Church built by St Margaret at Dunfermline arose before the year 1100 (Robertson 1891, 41). Durham Cathedral was completed in 1133.
- 12 The majority of Scottish towns appear to have no specific status before the reign of David I (1124-1153), (Spalding Club 1842, viii).

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