

REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING AT PROVOST SKENE'S HOUSE, GUESTROW, ABERDEEN.

NGR NJ 94198 06385



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SUMMARY

In November and December 2011, Judith Stones, Aberdeen City Council and Cameron Archaeology undertook a programme of archaeological monitoring of a number of service trenches excavated at Provost Skene's House, Guestrow, Aberdeen (NGR NJ 94198 06385)

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Circumstances of the Project

- 1.1.1 Aberdeen City Council, as part of the updating of Provost Skene's House, and in relation to the imminent demolition of St Nicholas House, needed to incorporate new services to Provost Skene's House.
- 1.1.2 All the archaeological work was carried out in the context of Scottish Planning Policy (SPP) Planning Advice Note (PAN 2/2011) and Scottish Historic Environment Policy (SHEP), which state that archaeological remains should be regarded as part of the environment to be protected and managed.
- 1.1.3 This report comprises the results of the archaeological monitoring of the relevant groundworks associated with the developments at Provost Skene's House.
- 1.1.4 A full professional archive has been compiled in accordance with best practice and professional standards, and with current UKIC guidelines (1990). The archive will be deposited at RCAHMS and Aberdeen City Council and the project is also registered with the Online Access to the Index of archaeological investigations (OASIS).

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Location and Topography

- 2.1.1 The site is centred upon National Grid Reference NJ 94198 06385, at Provost Skene's House, Guestrow, within the city centre and lying to the north of the main shopping thoroughfare of Aberdeen, Union Street (Illus 1). The site lies in an urban built-up townscape setting at approximately 21.23m AOD.

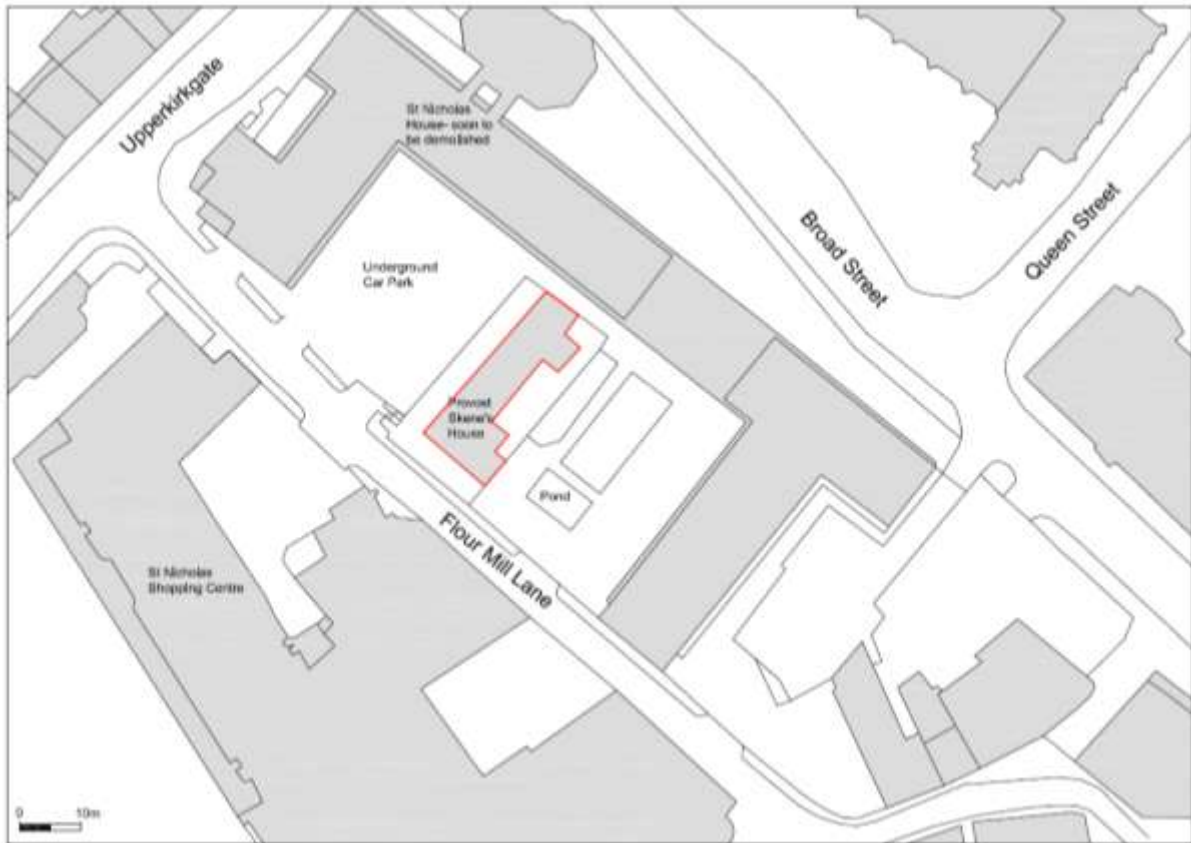
2.2 Historical Background

- 2.2.1 Provost Skene's House was built in the 16th century, and is one of the Aberdeen's few surviving examples of early burgh architecture. The first reference to the plot of land was in 1545 when Alexander Knollis took possession of the site on Guestrow, one of Aberdeen's principal streets at that time (Aberdeen City Council 1994, 3). The house (NJ90NW 52), centred on NGR NJ 94198 06385, dates originally to the mid 16th century as a plain, three-storeyed block. The building was extended in length several times before being acquired in 1669 by George Skene, to whom its present form is principally due. There is a painted gallery of probably dating to the ownership of Matthew Lumsden 1622-1641, plasterwork of 1676 and the building was restored 1951-3. The bedroom and panelling in the Georgian drawing room are noteworthy (Bogdan and Bryce 1991, 24).
- 2.2.2 The earliest reference to the Guestrow dates from the late 14th century (Carter and Gardener 1953, reports, 1).

During much of the 19th century it was a House of Refuge; later; and until its restoration began, it was a common lodging house. The First Edition Ordnance Survey Mapping shows it as the 'Victoria Lodging House' (Illus 8), the proprietor from 1885 until 1926 being John Lyall Groat, an Aberdeen Merchant (*ibid*, reports, 9).

2.2.3 Until the 1930s, the house was “*approached by a narrow pend and hemmed in closely by buildings rapidly degenerating into slums, its roofline was a medley of chimney stacks of varied heights and materials and its walls were scrofulous with decayed harling, scarred by modern brickwork insertions and festooned with a bewildering complexity of rainwater pipes*” (Carter and Gardener 1953, 1). From the 1920s, many houses in the Guestrow were demolished, with the aim of regenerating the area. A successful campaign was launched to save the Provost Skene’s House building and an extensive refurbishment programme, delayed by war years, began in 1951 and was completed in 1953. This programme included the demolition of two later buildings which abutted against the house (Carter and Gardener 1953, 1). Before restoration, the House was known as No. 45 the Guestrow, and also as Cumberland’s House (after the Duke of Cumberland who occupied the house in 1746 prior to taking his troops to Culloden), but is now all that survives of a street, in existence since the middle of the 15th century and which housed some of the most important of the burgesses (Carter and Gardener 1953, 2).

2.2.4 The area is rich in archaeological remains including scatters of Mesolithic and later flints at several neighbouring sites including Queen Street and Broad St (Dent 1982, 26-34) and 16-18 Netherkirkgate (Cameron and Stones 2001, 28-39). Substantial well-preserved medieval remains were also found at these two sites as well as at 43-57 Upperkirkgate/Flourmill Brae (Stones 2001, 50-58) just north of the current site and at Marischal College on the opposite of Broad Street (Cameron forthcoming). Small watching briefs have taken place both outside and inside the house on previous occasions; nothing has been recovered from the external trenches. During repair work to central heating pipes, part of the stone floor of the old kitchen was uplifted within the 17th-century part of the house. No archaeological deposits were found, but a stone incised with the letters 'THHR' was discovered. It had been part of the floor and after being recorded, was replaced (Cameron 1991, 24).



Illus 1 Plan showing location of Provost Skene's House



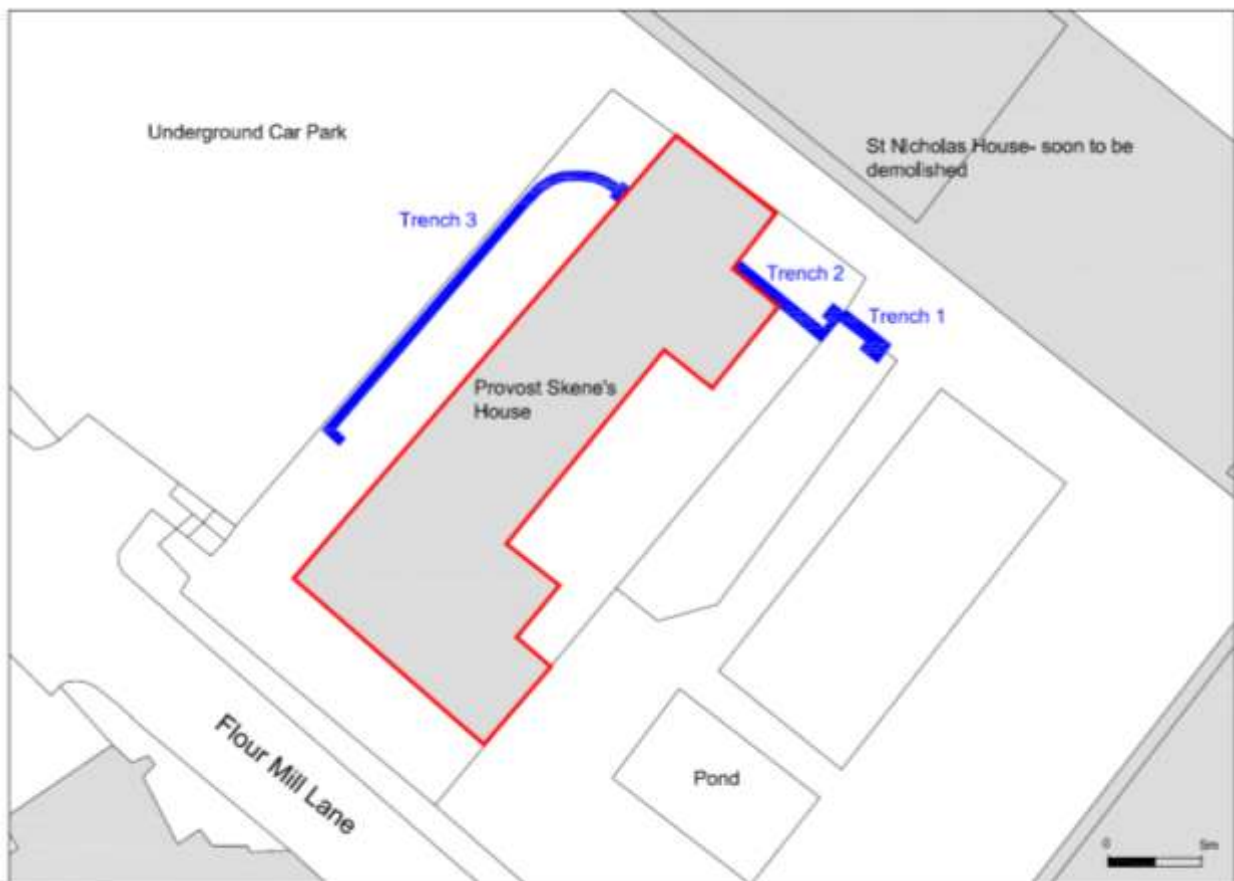
Illus 2 Stone inscribed 'THHR' found on floor of Provost Skene's House kitchen

3. RESULTS

3.1 The Archaeological Monitoring

3.1.1 The watching brief was carried out between the start of November and 15th December 2011. The results of the monitoring are outlined below.

3.2 Watching Brief Results



Illus 3 plan showing location of trenches excavated

3.2.1 **Trench 1:** Trench 1 was excavated to incorporate cabling for a new security camera to be installed at Provost Skene's House. It was located at the north eastern corner of the building on the south-eastern side (Illus 3). It was L-shaped, measuring 3m in length and 1.2m in width at its south-easternmost extent. It was deepest at its south-eastern extent, where it was excavated to a depth of 0.7m (Illus 4). This revealed a 0.35m deposit of mid grey-brown topsoil overlaying an orange sandy natural.



Illus 4: South-eastern extent of Trench 1, facing south-east

3.2.2 **Trench 2:** Trench 2 was excavated to incorporate cabling for a new security camera to be installed at Provost Skene's House. It was located at the north eastern corner of the building on the south-eastern side (Illus 3). Unfortunately, upon arrival on-site, this trench had already been both excavated and backfilled (Illus 5). Apparently it had been excavated to a depth of about 3 feet (0.9mish), and within the north-western half, an "original slate floor" was observed at its base (Excavators, *pers. comm.*). This was left *in-situ*.



Illus 5: Backfilled Trench 2, facing south-east

3.2.3 First Edition Ordnance Survey mapping of the area, dating to 1867 (Illus 8) shows that this trench may have been within what was once part of the Provost Skene's House Building, so the appearance of the "floor" may suggest that traces of this part of the building, or subsequent abutting building, since demolished, still survive sub-surface. Unfortunately it had not been subjected to archaeological monitoring, but does indicate the high potential for earlier remains to survive in the area, and the importance of

having archaeological mitigation procedures in-place when excavating in the vicinity.

- 3.2.4 **Trench 3:** Trench 3 was excavated to provide a new water main to Provost Skene's House. It was located to the north-west of the building (Illus 3). It began with a drill hole through the wall of the building itself, at the north-eastern extent of the trench (Illus 6), followed by a curvilinear trench, 0.5m in width and running across a distance of 22.5m, the majority of the length being 4.12m to the north west of the building (Illus 2).

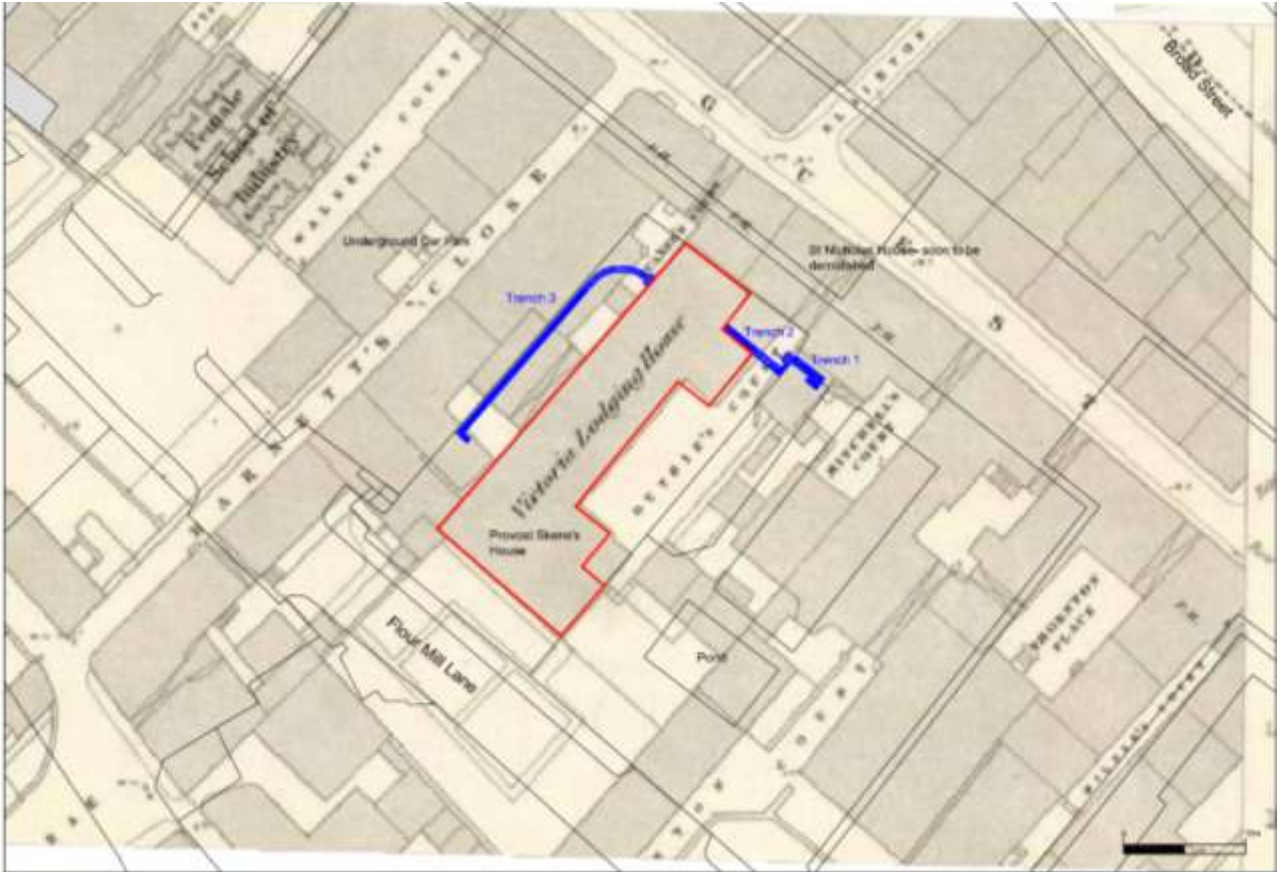


Illus 6: Drill hole through wall at north-western extent of Trench 3

- 3.2.5 The northern side of a manhole was encountered 3m south-west of the north-eastern extent of the trench. Otherwise, a dark-brown topsoil ranging from between 0.3m and 0.35m overlying an orange-brown silty soil was all that was observed from Trench 3. The depth at the north-eastern end was 0.6m and the trench gradually got deeper to a maximum of 0.8m in depth at its south-western extent (Illus 7).



Illus 7: Trench 3 facing south-west



Illus 8: First Edition Ordnance Survey mapping 1867 (copyright National Library of Scotland)

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusions

- 4.1.1 Despite the high potential for archaeological remains to survive sub-surface, no significant archaeological remains were uncovered during this work.

4.2 Recommendations

- 4.2.1 It is recommended that further trenches excavated in the area are monitored by archaeologists.

5. REFERENCES

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6 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Aberdeen City Council for commissioning the project. In addition, further thanks are extended to the Lead Curator of Local History and Archaeology at Aberdeen City Council for all advice relating to the project.

The archaeological watching brief was undertaken by Cat Peters and Judith Stones. The report and the accompanying illustrations were prepared by Cat Peters and Alison Cameron, and the project was overseen by Judith Stones, Aberdeen City Council.

APPENDIX 1 PHOTOGRAPHS



Provost Skene's House (1)



Provost Skene's House (2)



Provost Skene's House (3)



Provost Skene's House (4)



Provost Skene's House (5)



Provost Skene's House (6)



Provost Skene's House (7)



Provost Skene's House (8)



Provost Skene's House (9)



Provost Skene's House (10)



Provost Skene's House (11)



Provost Skene's House (12)



Provost Skene's House (13)



Provost Skene's House (14)



Provost Skene's House (15)



Provost Skene's House (16)



Provost Skene's House (17)



Provost Skene's House (18)



Provost Skene's House (19)



Provost Skene's House (20)



Provost Skene's House (21)



Provost Skene's House (22)



Provost Skene's House (23)



Provost Skene's House (24)



Provost Skene's House (25)



Provost Skene's House (26)



Provost Skene's House (27)



Provost Skene's House (28)



Provost Skene's House (29)



Provost Skene's House (30)

Photograph Number	Title
1	Trench 2
2	Trench 2
3	Trench 2
4	Trench 2
5	South-eastern extent of Trench 1
6	South-eastern extent of Trench 1
7	Location of Trench 1
8	Location of Trench 1
9	Trench 3- eastern extent
10	Trench 3- eastern extent
11	Location of Trench 3
12	Location of Trench 3
13	Location of Trench 3
14	Trench 3 facing east
15	Trench 3 facing east
16	Trench 3 facing east
17	Trench 3 facing east
18	Trench 3 facing east
19	Drill hole through wall at eastern extent of Trench 3
20	Drill hole through wall at eastern extent of Trench 3
21	Location of Trench 3
22	Location of Trench 3
23	Location of Trench 3
24	Location of Trench 3
25	Trench 3 facing west
26	Trench 3 facing west
27	Trench 3 section
28	Trench 3 section
29	Provost Skene's House, general shot
30	Provost Skene's House, general shot