
5 THE EXCAVATED SECULAR BUILDINGS

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INTRODUCTION

At present (1981), the archaeological evidence of medieval and post-medieval secular buildings in Aberdeen is derived from five sites: 42 St Paul Street, 12-26 Broad Street, 2-28 Queen Street, 6-8 Castle Terrace and 45-47 Gallowgate. The total number of buildings excavated is very small, covering as it does a date range of late 12th to 17th century and a spatial range including both frontage and backlands sites. We can, however, begin to define some of the construction types in use and to isolate those areas, particularly of the medieval town, where we should concentrate future effort. Comparison between the Aberdeen buildings and those from other Scottish burghs, in particular the large sample from Perth, allows some very tentative conclusions concerning the status of the builders.

The structural groups based on the walling are the same as those used in the report on the buildings from Perth High Street (Murray, in PHSEC, forthcoming) and in a general discussion of the Aberdeen and Perth buildings (Murray, 1980).

MEDIEVAL PERIOD, LATE 12TH TO 14TH CENTURY

For the medieval period most of the evidence comes from the backlands site of 42 St Paul Street and from the frontage sites on Broad Street and Gallowgate.

Plan

No complete ground plan has been excavated but the position of the buildings in relation to the rig boundaries often allows some assessment of their size. All the buildings were rectangular, some having rounded corners owing to the wattle construction. The backlands buildings lay with their long axis at right-angles to the street, along the rigs. No complete width was excavated but they can be estimated as 4-5 m by comparison with the position of the property boundaries, as the width of the buildings was probably limited by the width of the rigs (as in Perth). Increase in size would generally have been lengthwise. The length variation on the 42 St Paul Street site was from CO which was 7.70 m to DI which was 9.60 m. SAN and BQ may have been up to 12 m long but this can only be based on negative evidence. There was no evidence of internal partitions but CO appeared to have had two separate zones within the building; the N end which had a gravel floor and where the wattle was clay daubed could be interpreted as the 'better' or possibly living end, while the S end may have been the working area or possibly even the byre. A contemporary building in Perth High Street (B4) had a small byre attached to, but not communicating with, one end of the house and these buildings may represent a fairly simple stage of development when a number of animals were kept in the backland rigs. Of the Aberdeen buildings only SAN had a surviving hearth, but for various reasons such as floor cleaning and the use of external hearths and possibly braziers, hearths alone do not appear to be a reliable indicator of function.

Evidence of the ground plans of the frontage buildings is piecemeal as in both 12-26 Broad Street and 45-47 Gallowgate excavation was limited to small areas in the undisturbed passages between the cellars of later buildings. Such evidence as there is appears to suggest, surprisingly, that some of the frontage buildings may have stood with their long axis parallel to the street but that they were smaller than the backlands buildings. In 45-47 Gallowgate one end of a frontage building (AP) survived. It was 3.60 m wide externally and, if projected to the nearest rig boundary, the length parallel to the street would have been c 5-6 m. Similar calculations on the Broad Street site yield possible ground plans of c 4.3-4.5 × 6 m, with the long axis parallel to the street. On both sites the buildings were set a couple of metres back from the apparent street frontage. The main impression, therefore, is of small buildings filling most or all of the frontage width. The evidence is slight but it does not at present suggest multi-storied structures in these areas at this period. A few very deep post-pits could be interpreted as associated with the support of a gallery or upper floor, but this cannot be substantiated until more complete plans are excavated. This interpretation of the frontage structures is, as stated, based on fairly piecemeal evidence but it does, as far as it goes, agree with the Perth High Street evidence. It should be stressed, however, that the frontages could be expected to have varied from one end of the town to the other. On more important commercial frontages, multi-storied buildings may have been in use quite early, while on the lesser streets and on the limits of the roads leading out of town, single-storied structures may have continued in use much later.

Wall construction

The bulk of the excavated information concerns wall material. Within the period two main types of wall material have been identified; post-and-wattle and heavier timber used for ground sills. The most common material was wattle and this can be subdivided according to its relationship to the weight-bearing structure. In Group 1a there were no additional supports and although a very light roof could have been supported solely by the wattle it is arguable that the wattle was in fact merely the revetting of a thick cladding of turf, manure, mud or clay (although clay is less likely as it would be expected to have survived in the archaeological evidence). Two of the St Paul Street buildings (BQ, DI) appeared to be of this construction but, as they were badly damaged by later intrusive features, this suggestion must remain tentative. Part of a wattle building on Gallowgate (AR) was only identified by post-bases, but did not appear to have had any larger posts or planks beside the wall.

In Group 1b there is some evidence of additional support posts or planks alongside the walls of the building. There were four examples from 42 St Paul Street (CO, SAN, TAB, TAP). Two were fragmentary but apparently similar to SAN which had additional posts along the inside of the lateral wall and on both sides of the gable wall. CO had planks along the lateral wall. As no complete plan was excavated it is impossible to decide to what extent these supports were paired across the building, but the fairly irregular positions of the surviving posts and planks suggests that pairing was unlikely.

Wattle buildings of Group 1b construction have been found in 12th- to 14th-century contexts in Perth (Murray 1980, 40-1) and Kings Lynn (Clarke and Carter 1977, fig 29). The same structural idea, using planks on either side of a light post-and-wattle wall has been found in a mid 11th-century building excavated in Pederstraede, Viborg (Nielsen 1968, 31-2) and in late 10th- to early 11th-century walls in Lloyds Bank site in York (Addyman 1974, fig 12:4 and pers comm 1981 concerning dating). Walls with planks on one side of the wattle only, comparable to CO, have also been found in York (Addyman 1974, fig 12:1).

There was no clear Group 1c (double wattle wall) or 1d (wattle set in a ground-sill) but Group 1d is a possible interpretation of the ground-sills discussed in Group 2 where there was no evidence of the type of infill material. One burnt structure in Gallowgate which appeared to have had a wall based on a sill may have been of this construction as there was a large amount of twig charcoal in the debris. In Scotland, this construction has only been definitely identified in Kirk Close, Perth (Blanchard 1980, 36, fig 3).

Daub has only been found with any certainty in building CO where clay containing cow hair for binding (see p 000) was found on the inside of the N wall of the building. There was no other positively identified daub but the flooring in the interior and yard of SAN stopped 0.06-0.14 m

away from the inner and outer faces of the wattle, suggesting that some form of cladding had covered this width when the flooring was laid down; mud, manure or turf are all possible. Equally some wattle structures may never have had any cladding (cf Washington Wilson photograph, Loch Duich) and its use may be dependant on the function of the building. The general lack of evidence may, however, often be a reflection of the limitations of archaeological observation rather than of a real absence of daub. Burnt daub from a midden context in Queen Street comprised a thick heather core with clay daub, the original association was lacking but this may have come from a building.

There are several details of wattle construction which can be paralleled elsewhere. Wattle crossing the base of an entrance, as in BQ, has been found in 12th- to 14th-century contexts at Perth (Murray, PHSEC, forthcoming) and in 11th-century contexts in Dublin (Murray 1981, 60, fig 12, 13). A full-scale reconstruction in Aberdeen has confirmed the view that an unbroken band, 0.10-0.20 m high at the base of the entrance and a similar band above the door opening, stop the wattle from splaying on either side of the entrance and avoid weakening of the whole structure.

The vertical groove up the inner face of the N jamb in building CO may be due to reuse of the timber, but in Dublin (Murray 1981, fig 10) similar grooves were used in the outer faces of the jambs to contain the loose ends of the wattle wall and it is possible that this groove in the jamb of CO may have been used to house one end of a wattle hurdle used as a door, the other side perhaps being pegged to the S jamb. Doors of this type were in use in 19th-century Ireland (Lucas 1956, 18) and may have been more common than more expensive plank doors.

No complete building plan with a heavier timber wall on a ground sill (Group 2) has been found in Aberdeen. Portions of five timber sill-beams have been found and several low stone foundations may have held others. Most of the sills (Gallowgate: AAE, AT, BE; Broad Street: Trench 5: FN19, Trench 1: FN 18; St Paul Street: SR) were very decayed but one of the Gallowgate examples (AAE) had a clear groove along the upper surface and this was tentatively recognised on one of the others. There was no trace of the superstructure in any of these examples (except as referred to above with reference to the Gallowgate structure AP where only the sill foundation survives but which may have been in Group 1d construction). Some of the sills were on a foundation of a single line of flat stones, others lay directly on the earth. At least two were associated with earthfast vertical timbers but none of the sections of sill recovered showed any evidence that the sills had been jointed to the uprights or that uprights had been mortised into the sills.

Roofing

Some evidence of roofing came from 42 St Paul Street, buildings CO and SAN, and Broad Street, Phase 4, Plot 2, all of which had posts or post-pits on the longitudinal axis or at the centre of the gable, indicating a directly supported ridge. As discussed in the reconstruction of SAN the simplest reconstruction consistent with the general standard of construction would be a series of rafters inclined between the ridge and the wall-line. At the wall they could be supported either individually by the additional supports or by a pseudo wall-plate held by the supports. There is no direct evidence for the roofing material (for possibilities see reconstruction of SAN).

POST-MEDIEVAL PERIOD, 15TH TO 17TH CENTURY

The only excavated domestic structure from Aberdeen that can be attributed to this period is building JC on 42 St Paul Street (p 73). The archaeological dating evidence is scant but appears to place it between the 15th and 17th centuries and Stell (pers comm 1981) has suggested that, on structural grounds, it could be mid-16th century in date. It can be reconstructed as a two or more storied building with probably clay-bonded rubble-stone walls. In the initial phase there may have been a ground level entrance opening into a passage running the length of the building, in fact the passage between properties absorbed into the building. However, at some stage, possibly soon after the original

construction, what appears to have been a forestair was added to give a front access at first floor level and any possible ground floor front access was blocked.

An iron smithy or blacksmith's workshop excavated at 6-8 Castle Terrace (Chapter 2:9) could be dated to the 17th century. The original early 17th-century structure was a semi-cellared building built into a slope with clay-bonded walls and possibly an open ended frontage held on timber posts. In the mid-17th century, it was rebuilt and the walls were mortar-bonded.

The only other excavated structures of this date in the town are short scrappy lengths of wall that cannot be interpreted.

CONCLUSIONS

Excavated in isolation, such a small number of fragmentary buildings would render general theories impossible but a comparison of the medieval structures with the very similar contemporary buildings, not only from towns outside Scotland, such as Kings Lynn but more particularly within the Scottish context from Perth, shows that the wattle buildings were fairly typical of the smaller buildings of 13th- and 14th-century Scottish burghs. They may tentatively be interpreted as the houses and workshops of the poorer inhabitants and lesser craftsmen, the majority of the urban population. The pressure on frontage sites for shops and prestige dwellings makes it likely that most of these lesser buildings would have been in the type of location in which we have so far found them: the backlands.

The materials used in the wattle of the smaller medieval buildings are relatively quickly replenished. Willow, ash or rowan, for example, once cut will sprout straight branches from around the stool, causing coppicing, albeit accidental or deliberate. The branch growth is ideal for wattles at three to five years. This lighter timber is easy to cut and light to transport. Moreover, these buildings needed no specialist craftsmen for their construction and are likely, in most cases, to have been built by their occupants.

There is a very slight indication from the Gallowgate and Broad Street sites that more elaborate buildings with ground sills were in use in the medieval period on some frontages in Aberdeen but even these appear to have been fairly simple structures using earthfast upright timbers and with no apparent or surviving (we cannot tell which) jointing between sill and vertical. There is not yet any evidence here of a true timber-framed tradition preceeding the use of predominantly stone building techniques, albeit that there is evidence elsewhere in Scotland (Stell 1980 and Hay 1976) that timber-framed techniques were known by the 16th century when they were quite commonly used in association with stone structures, for example in the construction of galleries and frontages. The apparent absence of a tradition of wholly timber-framed buildings may reflect an archaeological problem rather than the real structural sequence. To positively identify such structures by excavation, we would need well preserved timbers, but these late medieval and frontage layers are in the very levels and areas where disturbance by cellarage and by the deep foundations of stone buildings is greatest and where the timbers are less likely to be sealed in conditions that will preserve them. If, as is possible, the sills were put on substantial stone foundations then our chance of identifying the possible superstructure diminishes. The best that one can yet say is that the Group 1d wattle construction and the Group 2 constructions contain elements that show some move towards such a tradition in the late 14th century and there are, as mentioned, relics of a timber-framed tradition in some 16th- and 17th-century buildings (Stell 1980). It seems probable that, at some social level, the timber-framed tradition may indeed have been adopted in Scotland but that factors such as the limited availability of suitable timber may have encouraged an early transition to stone.

Unfortunately, isolated stone foundations are often difficult to interpret or even to date. Often they have been reused as foundations for later walls and all related levels destroyed: lacking any architectural detail, dating is often very vague. Both of the secular stone buildings of the post-medieval

period excavated so far in Aberdeen are of types not surviving among the few standing buildings of this date which are all fairly big townhouses (Provost Ross House: 1593; Wallace Tower, Benholm Lodging: 16th century; Provost Skene's House: 17th century). Building JC from 42 St Paul Street, which may have been domestic, is smaller in scale than these but appears nevertheless to have been a multi-storied building, possibly in its initial phase incorporating the rig passage into the structure to gain the maximum width in the available space. Its freestanding position makes it unlikely to have been a tenement and it may possibly be interpreted as a burgh dwelling.

The Castle Terrace building is really an example of a separate development, the increasing specialisation of workshops. As a small smithy, one of the main considerations in its construction would be to minimize the fire risk. This type of structure rarely survives as a standing building as, when new industrial techniques are introduced, new buildings are often needed.

In these excavated structures we are really glimpsing bits of two separate traditions. The medieval frontage structures and post-medieval building JC show the development of the types of buildings probably built by specialist craftsmen for clients who were burghesses. These are most likely to have been open to the influence of outside fashions and would have had the most freedom, in real as well as legal terms, in their choice of building materials. In contrast, the medieval wattle buildings of the backlands may be seen as the self-built homes and workshops of the poorer inhabitants of the town and these are most likely to have used simpler materials and to have been more closely linked to the traditions of the rural hinterland and could be expected to have adopted new fashions more slowly.

One of the interesting possibilities for future research will be to see to what date the wattle tradition continued and what succeeded it in towns such as Aberdeen. Did a tradition of self-building continue or was it largely replaced by properties being developed as tenements and rented out by rich entrepreneurial burghesses. Certainly this would appear to have been largely true in centres of population pressure such as Edinburgh (for a more detailed discussion see: Stell 1980, 4-5), but it may not have been true to the same extent in Aberdeen where the pressure on land was much less.

There are obviously many questions left to answer but these structures indicate some of the problems to which future work can be directed.