

**The Robert Gordon University Forensic Labs, St Andrew Street,  
Aberdeen.  
Archaeological watching brief**



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## **Summary**

*In June 2008, Aberdeen City Council (ACC) Archaeology Unit carried out an Archaeological Watching Brief on the excavation of a foundation trench at The Robert Gordon University Forensic Labs, St Andrew Street, Aberdeen.*

*A rough-stone, mortar bonded wall was located during excavations. This feature probably pre-dates the 19<sup>th</sup> century. No other archaeological features were discovered during the watching brief.*

*The top of the wall was located at the base of the foundation trench. It was possible therefore, to lay the foundations and preserve the wall in situ.*

*No further archaeological work is considered necessary on this project.*

## **1. Introduction and Background**

In June 2008 Aberdeen City Council (ACC) Archaeology Unit undertook an Archaeological Watching Brief on the excavation of a foundation trench at the site of a proposed extension to The Robert Gordon University Forensic Labs, St Andrew Street, Aberdeen.

The watching brief was commissioned in direct response to a Specification for Archaeological Evaluation written by the Keeper of Archaeology ACC (Stones J. June 2007). This clearly sets out the parameters for the archaeological watching brief, namely, to identify and record any and all archaeological features encountered during sub-surface excavations and to take the appropriate measures to ensure that no harm comes to archaeological features that may be significant enough to be preserved *in situ*.

The project was commissioned by The Robert Gordon University, Fairhurst was the main contractor, while Davidson & Muirson Ltd and Anderson Construction carried out the excavations on site, Stewart Buchanan and Alison Cameron carried out the archaeological fieldwork on behalf of ACC.

### **Historical and Archaeological Background**

The following is an appraisal by the Keeper of Archaeology, as set down in the Specification for Archaeological Evaluation of the archaeological and historical factors that determined the rationale behind the current work.

*This site lies in a significant historic area on the north-western fringes of the medieval burgh of Aberdeen. The site now occupied by The Robert Gordon University, Robert Gordon's College and Aberdeen Art Gallery was the location of the medieval Dominican or Blackfriars monastery, from its foundation in the early to mid-13<sup>th</sup> century until the Reformation in 1560. Newspaper accounts between 1833 and 1923 provide evidence of the discovery of buildings and human remains, presumably associated with the Friary, during various 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century construction campaigns. There has been one small archaeological excavation within the grounds of Robert Gordon's College, about 55 metres south of the present St Andrew St site. In 2000, prior to alterations to the school library, an archaeological assessment revealed partial remains of a 'U'-shaped ditch, containing an assemblage of 18<sup>th</sup>-century finds. It was interpreted as part of the fortifications dug around Robert Gordon's Hospital in 1746 to create Fort Cumberland, when Aberdeen was occupied by Hanoverian troops in the months leading up to the Battle of Culloden. The excavation work also uncovered medieval material, including window glass, pottery and human, fish and animal bones (brief report by Alison Cameron available from Aberdeen City Council Archaeological Unit; Discovery and Excavation in Scotland, 2000). Earlier observation of an area further west, next to Blackfriars Street, produced no significant results.*

*The present site lies on the opposite side of St Andrew Street from Robert Gordon's College. It is likely that in the medieval period it lay outside the precincts of the Blackfriars monastery, on the fringes of the Loch of Aberdeen.*

### **Previous Developments and Disturbance**

*This area has been built up from at least the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and appears so on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1867. The current site, a small courtyard between buildings of The Robert Gordon University, may well have been disturbed during large-scale construction work in its vicinity and has also been cut by drainage excavations in the past. Its location, however, suggests the need for a watching brief over groundworks (Stones J. 2008).*

## 2. Objectives and Methodology

The objectives of the Watching Brief are:

- To identify the location, nature and extent of any features or objects of archaeological importance that would be damaged or destroyed by the proposed groundworks.
- To record archaeological features located in situ to the highest professional standards.
- To propose arrangements for the safeguarding where possible, of any archaeological features or finds identified. These will need to be agreed with the Keeper of Archaeology, Aberdeen City Council.
- To make sure that the needs for archaeological conservation and recording are met without causing any unnecessary delay or disturbance to the development project.

To this end:

- All archaeological features and deposits encountered to be fully excavated by hand and recorded by using pro forma recording sheets and a continuous unique numbering system.
- All plans, sections, profiles and elevations to be drawn at 1:10, 1:20 and 1:50 as appropriate.
- Drawings to be made in pencil on permanent drafting film. The depth of all principal features and levels will be calculated in meters relative to Ordnance Datum. Plans, sections and elevations will be annotated with depths as appropriate. All features and sections will have photographs taken to produce a photographic record consisting of digital photographs (The latter will be deposited with the National Monuments Record of Scotland, Edinburgh).
- All archaeological work will be undertaken following guidelines recommended by the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA, 1999).

### Finds & Samples

Finds of objects will be subject to the Scots Laws of Treasure Trove and Bona Vacantia and reported by the archaeological contractor to the Secretariat of the Treasure Trove Panel (Dr Alan Saville, National Museums of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JD) for disposal to an appropriate museum.

The post-excavation of finds will be processed by an approved archaeological contractor employing a recognized specialist.

Specialists in relevant subjects will be employed as appropriate to deal with archaeological artifacts recovered during work.

A bulk sample of deposits to be made where there is likelihood of organic or dateable remains, on-site factors to determine size of sample. All bulk samples to be submitted to an approved contractor who will submit relevant material reports on the results.

Any human remains which are encountered must initially be left *in situ*. Their removal will be a matter of discussion with the Keeper, Archaeology (who must be notified within 12 hours of their Discovery) and will comply with the provisions of Scots Law.

### Reporting

A report on the findings of the work will be sent to the Keeper of Archaeology, the City of Aberdeen Planning Services and the client. A summary of the work undertaken will be submitted to the Council for Scottish Archaeology's publication *Discovery & Excavation in Scotland*.

## Archive Deposition

The project archive, including written, drawn and photographic elements (together with a summary of the contents of the archive) will be deposited with the National Monuments Record Scotland (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland). The archive will be prepared in accordance with the requirements of the RCAHMS.

## Operational Factors

The archaeological contractor will at all times follow and conform to the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and other various regulations and the Codes of Conduct and Approved Practice and Standards of the Institute of Field Archaeologists of 1999. All plant will be provided by the client.

## Fieldwork

The watching brief was carried out by Stewart Buchanan and Alison Cameron between the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of June 2008.

### 3. Fieldwork and Results

A trench (irregular in plan, see fig 1.) was dug within a small courtyard (see plate 1) to a mean depth of 1.20m. The foundations of the existing university building were revealed at the eastern end of the trench (see plate 2.)



**Plate 1.** View E over excavated area.



**Plate 2.** E end of trench showing foundations

A linear feature was located (aligned W-S/W E-N/E) at the base of the trench. This proved to be a wall (or the foundations of a wall) made up of rough cut blocks of pink granite (between 0.15-0.30m in size), bound together with a hard, yellow lime mortar. The top of the structure was visible for 7m in the





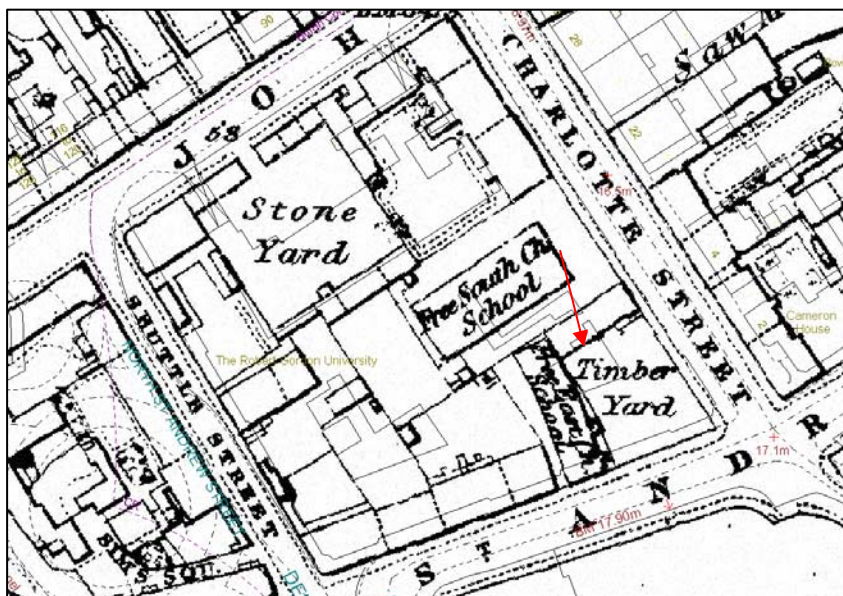
**Plate 3.** Linear structure, view to east.



**Plate 4.** Linear structure, view to west.

base of the trench and did not appear to terminate at the point at which it was no longer possible to follow it below the 1.20m depth of the foundation trench. It was not possible to determine the diameter or the vertical extent of the structure, although it was at least 0.70m in diameter and 0.21m in height.

#### 4. Conclusions and Recommendations



**Plate 5.** First edition O/S maps 1867. Red arrow indicates wall.

The alignment of the linear structure fits in well with the known spatial arrangements of the buildings in this part of post medieval Aberdeen. Indeed it is possible that the structure (although a little too far to the north) is the northern boundary wall (or foundations for the wall) of the Timber Yard seen in the O/S first edition map of 1867 (see Plate 5.). Plate 5 shows the first edition map overlying its modern

counterpart.

There was no finds evidence from the watching brief to help date the wall, although its structural morphology with the rough cut stone and lime mortar is similar to structures in the Aberdeen area that date from before or around the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

It was possible for the groundworks contractors to lay the foundations so as to preserve the structure intact and *in situ*. Because of this, no further archaeological work is considered necessary.

## **5. References**

Stones, J. June 2008. *'The Robert Gordon University Forensics Labs, St Andrew St, Aberdeen Specification for Archaeological Work.'*

Aberdeen City Council Sites and Monuments Record -  
[http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/ACCI/web/site/App/SMR/xsm\\_Introduction.asp](http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/ACCI/web/site/App/SMR/xsm_Introduction.asp)

IFA (1999) *'By-laws, Standards and Policy Statements of the Institute of Field Archaeologists. Reading.'*

First edition O/S maps 1867 & second ed. 1901.

## **6. Acknowledgements**

Jan Dunbar (Illustrations, fig 1.) of ACC Archaeology Department and Duncan Thomson of Anderson Construction.



DSCF2057



DSCF2058



DSCF2059



DSCF2060



DSCF2061



DSCF2062



DSCF2063



DSCF2064



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DSCF2066



DSCF2068



DSCF2069



DSCF2070



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## **ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL, MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES**

### **The Robert Gordon University Forensics Labs, St Andrew St, Aberdeen Specification for Archaeological Work**

This specification gives an outline of the archaeological value of this site and indicates the works which will be required to record and protect any surviving archaeological deposits.

#### **1.0 Site Location and Description**

The area of the site (NJ 9382 0656) is shown on the enclosed map extract. It is currently a small open yard area with a concrete surface, between buildings.

#### **2.0 Planning Background**

The request for this archaeological work is made in the context of National Planning Policy Guideline no 5, Archaeology and Planning, which states that archaeological remains should be regarded as part of the environment to be protected and managed. In paragraph 14, planning authorities are advised that they should ensure that archaeological factors are fully considered in both the development planning and development control processes. Paragraph 16 urges planning authorities to regard archaeological remains as a finite and often highly fragile resource vulnerable to needless or thoughtless damage or destruction. Paragraph 25 states that the implications of development proposals for ancient monuments and their settings should be considered at the outset of the development control process. It is appropriate for planning authorities to request, where appropriate, the prospective developer to arrange for archaeological fieldwork and ensure that relevant information on the cultural heritage is taken into account in any environmental assessment that may be necessary (paragraph 24).

#### **3.0 Historical and Archaeological Background**

This site lies in a significant historic area on the north-western fringes of the medieval burgh of Aberdeen. The site now occupied by The Robert Gordon University, Robert Gordon's College and Aberdeen Art Gallery was the location of the medieval Dominican or Blackfriars monastery, from its foundation in the early to mid-13<sup>th</sup> century until the Reformation in 1560. Newspaper accounts between 1833 and 1923 provide evidence of the discovery of buildings and human remains, presumably associated with the Friary, during various 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century construction campaigns. There has been one small archaeological excavation within the grounds of Robert Gordon's College, about 55 metres south of the present St Andrew St site. In 2000, prior to alterations to the school library, an archaeological assessment revealed partial remains of a 'U'-shaped ditch, containing an assemblage of 18<sup>th</sup>-century finds. It was interpreted as part of the fortifications dug around Robert Gordon's Hospital in 1746 to create Fort Cumberland, when Aberdeen was occupied by Hanoverian troops in the months leading up to the Battle of Culloden. The excavation work also uncovered medieval material, including window glass, pottery and human, fish and animal bones (brief report by Alison Cameron available from Aberdeen City Council Archaeological Unit; *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, 2000). Earlier observation of an area further west, next to Blackfriars Street, produced no significant results.

The present site lies on the opposite side of St Andrew Street from Robert Gordon's College. It is likely that in the medieval period it lay outside the precincts of the Blackfriars monastery, on the fringes of the Loch of Aberdeen.

#### **4.0 Previous Developments and Disturbance**

This area has been built up from at least the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and appears so on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1867. The current site, a small courtyard between buildings of The Robert Gordon University, may well have been disturbed during large-scale construction work in its vicinity and has also been cut by drainage excavations in the past. Its location, however, suggests the need for a watching brief over groundworks.

## **5.0 Requirements for Work – watching brief**

An archaeologist must be present to observe all groundworks associated with this development, to record any features or finds which are discovered and to report on any such findings.

## **6.0 Timetable**

A timetable must be agreed for the various stages of work so that provision can be made for monitoring by the Keeper, Archaeology.

## **8.0 Staff Structure**

A list of key project staff with qualifications and experience will be submitted by the archaeological contractor. The use of unwaged staff will not normally be acceptable.

## **9.0 Health and Safety /PLI**

Such concerns and responsibilities are primarily a matter for the archaeological contractor who must submit evidence of conformity to the Health and Safety at Work Act and possession of public liability insurance to Aberdeen City Council.

## **11.0 Recording Systems**

These must be specified and should include the structure for site record.

## **12.0 Monitoring Arrangements**

It is necessary for the City Council Planning Authority to monitor the progress and effectiveness of the watching brief. Stages at which monitoring is appropriate will be agreed between the archaeological contractor and the Keeper, Archaeology. The possibility of random inspections should not be excluded.

## **13.0 Reporting Requirements**

Provision must be made for:

- 13.1 Specialist examination of animal and human bone and of any preserved or organic material. Any finds of human bone must be reported immediately to the Keeper, Archaeology.
- 13.2 Specialist conservation and examination of artefacts found during the watching brief.
- 13.3 Preparation of plans, sections, reconstructions and finds drawings to publication standards.
- 13.4 The sorting and analysis of records and the production of a written report on the work.
- 13.5 Its publication in a manner appropriate to the scale of the work.
- 13.6 The preparation of a catalogued archive and its deposition in the City Council's Sites and Monuments Record and the National Monuments Record of Scotland within six months of the end of the watching brief.
- 13.7 Copies of the watching brief report should be sent to the Keeper, Archaeology, the applicant and the Planning Authority. A brief survey of results should be submitted to *Discovery and Excavation in Scotland*, along with the appropriate fee. An OASIS report must also be provided.

## **14.0 Small finds**

Finds of objects will be subject to the Scots Laws of Treasure Trove and Bona Vacantia and reported by the archaeological contractor to the Secretariat of the Treasure Trove Panel (Dr Alan Saville, National Museums of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JD) for disposal to an appropriate museum.

#### **15.0 Timescale**

The written report must be produced within four weeks of the end of the field work.

#### **16.0 Further Information**

Additional information about the site, or this brief, can be obtained from the Keeper of Archaeology, Whitespace, 60 Frederick Street, Aberdeen AB24 5HY. Tel (01224) 523658.

#### **17.0 Conclusion**

The watching brief is to be carried out in compliance with this brief and in the context of NPPG 5. The selection of any archaeological contractor will be subject to approval of the Keeper, Archaeology. Work should be carried out in close liaison with the Keeper, Archaeology.

June 2008