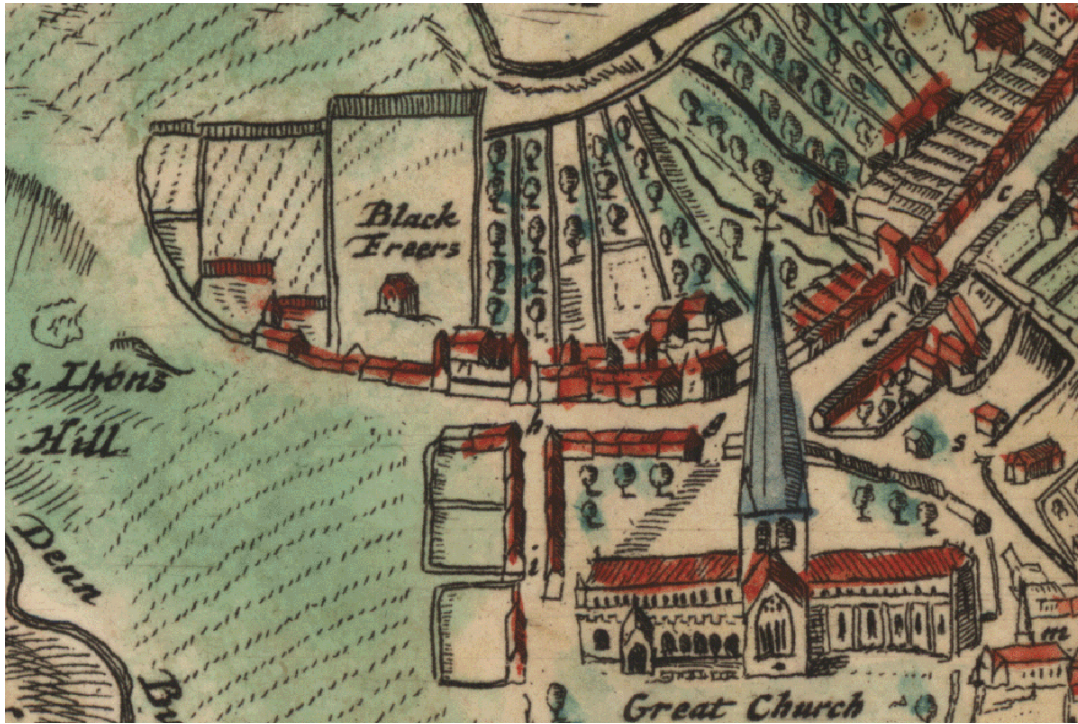


Robert Gordon's College, Schoolhill, Aberdeen Archaeological watching brief



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Robert Gordon's College, Schoolhill, Aberdeen

Archaeological watching brief

Introduction

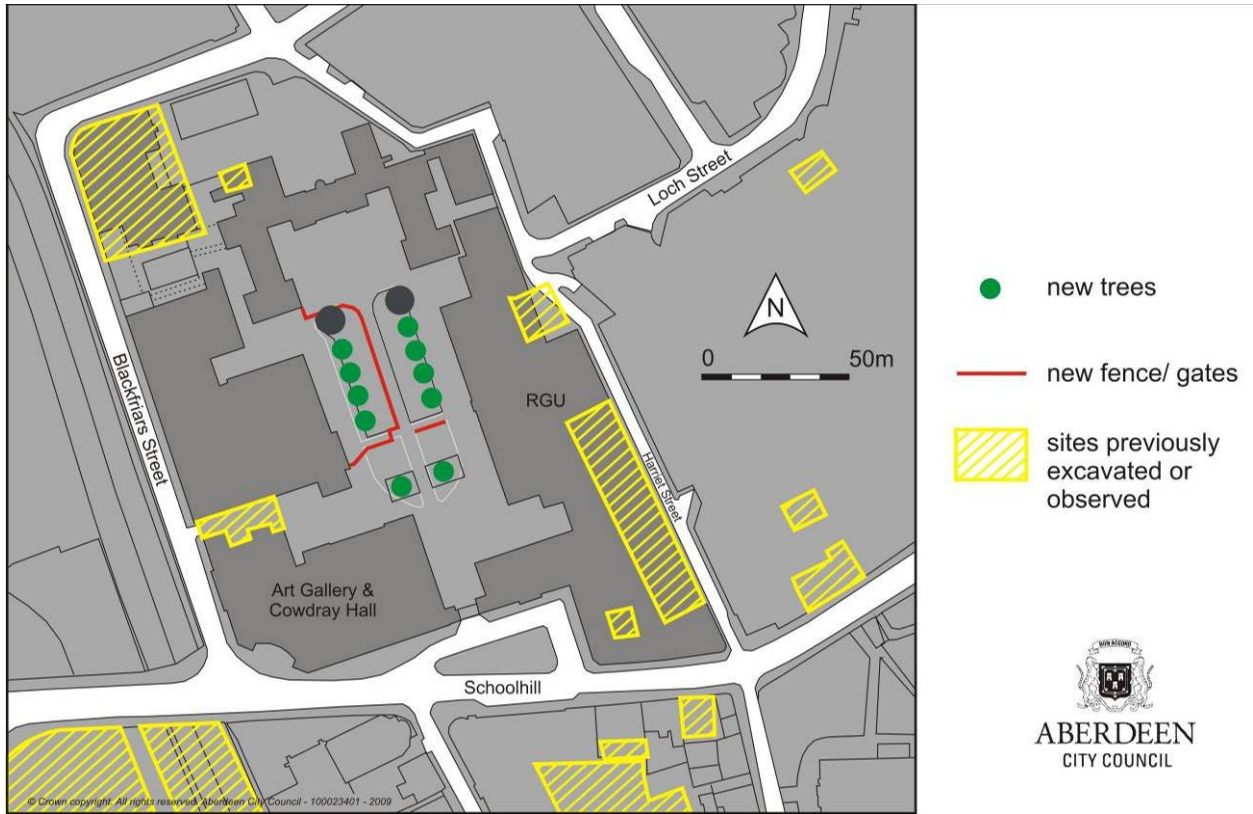
This site lies in an important historic area on the north-western fringes of the medieval Royal Burgh of Aberdeen. The site now occupied by The Robert Gordon University, Robert Gordon's College and Aberdeen Art Gallery was the location of the medieval Dominican or Blackfriars friary, from its foundation in the early to mid-13th century until the Reformation in 1560.

The house of the Blackfriars, or Dominicans, is said to have been founded by Alexander II sometime between 1222 and 1249. There are few details of the layout of the friary, but newspaper articles detailing the finds made during building operations at the site between 1833 and 1923 appear to suggest a concentration of buildings towards the central and western portions of the area (Dennison and Stones 1997, 37-9) Milne 1911 states that in the course of excavations in 1833 some remains of the friary were found. It appeared that the front was 60 feet long and faced the south. Strathdee asserts that 'the original (Robert Gordon's) Hospital building stands on the site of the main Friary buildings; the College Gymnasia and swimming pool are where the chapel and other buildings once stood. The MacRobert Hall and the Art Gallery were built over the Dominicans' burial ground. On digging the foundations of the Gallery large numbers of the bones of those interred were found' (Strathdee, 1970).

As well as the church and the usual residential and domestic buildings, which presumably existed, the friary complex included a barn, a kiln, a dovecot and a garden and orchard (Dennison and Stones 1997, 37). By 1503, the complex housed a prior and 13 friars. It was destroyed by the Protestant reformers in 1560 and its lands and revenues used to endow the new Marischal College on 26 September 1592 (C Croly pers com).

Gordon described the Dominican house as being entirely vanished by 1661 suggesting that the friary's good stonework had been removed from the site, probably for use in local buildings.

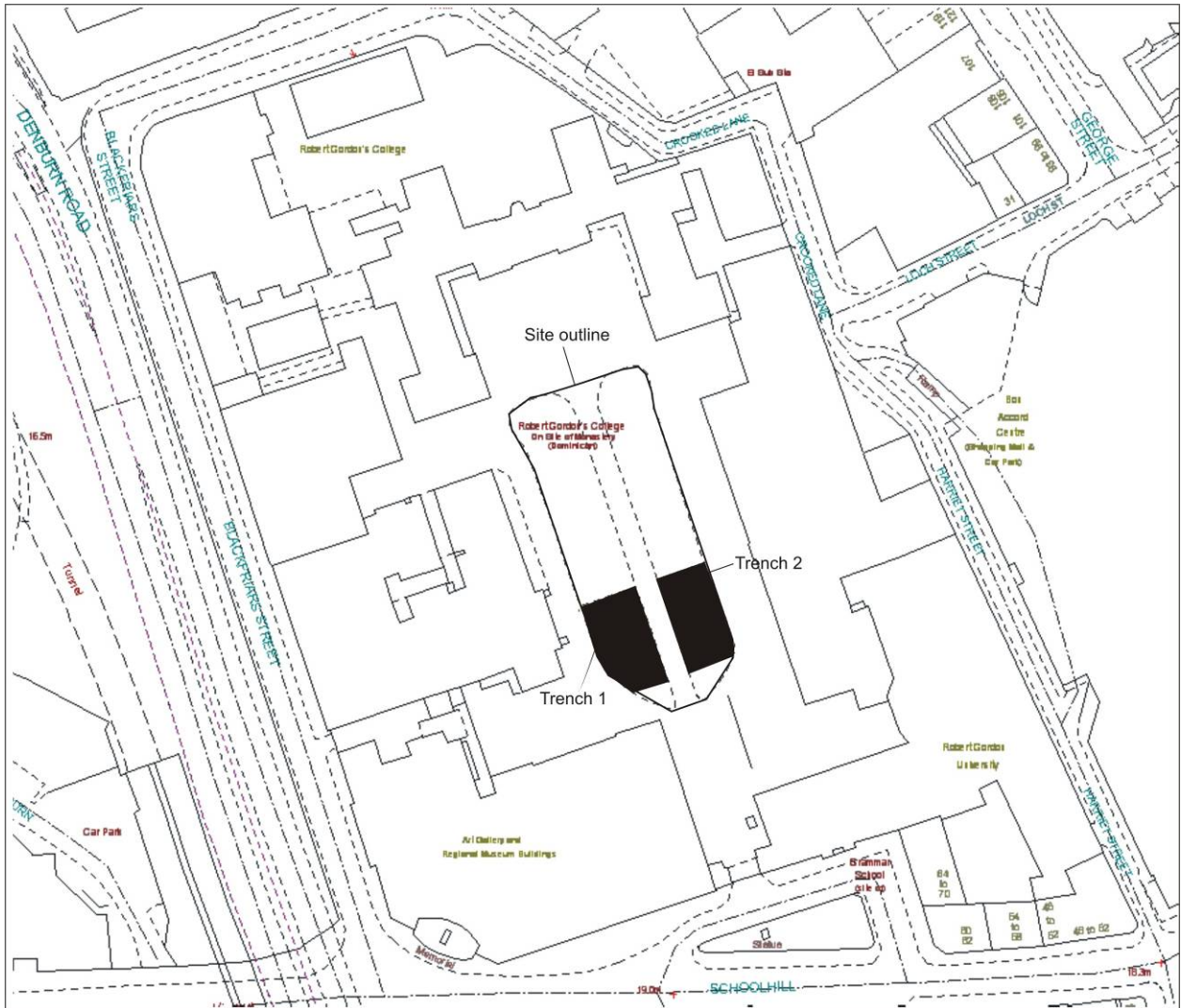
There has been one small archaeological excavation within the grounds of Robert Gordon's College, in the north-west portion of the site. In 2000, prior to alterations to the school library, an archaeological assessment revealed partial remains of a 'U'-shaped ditch, containing an assemblage of 18th-century finds. It was interpreted as part of the fortifications dug around Robert Gordon's Hospital in 1746 to create the building known locally as 'Fort Cumberland', when Aberdeen was occupied by Government 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 (Cameron 2000). Earlier observation during development of a larger area further west, next to Blackfriars Street, produced no significant results. Other excavation and observation work in the general campus area, notably along Harriet Street, has produced evidence of medieval and later deposits, although it also revealed a degree of scarping in the 19th century, which may have removed earlier material.



Plan of the 2009 soft and hard landscaping works

The watching brief

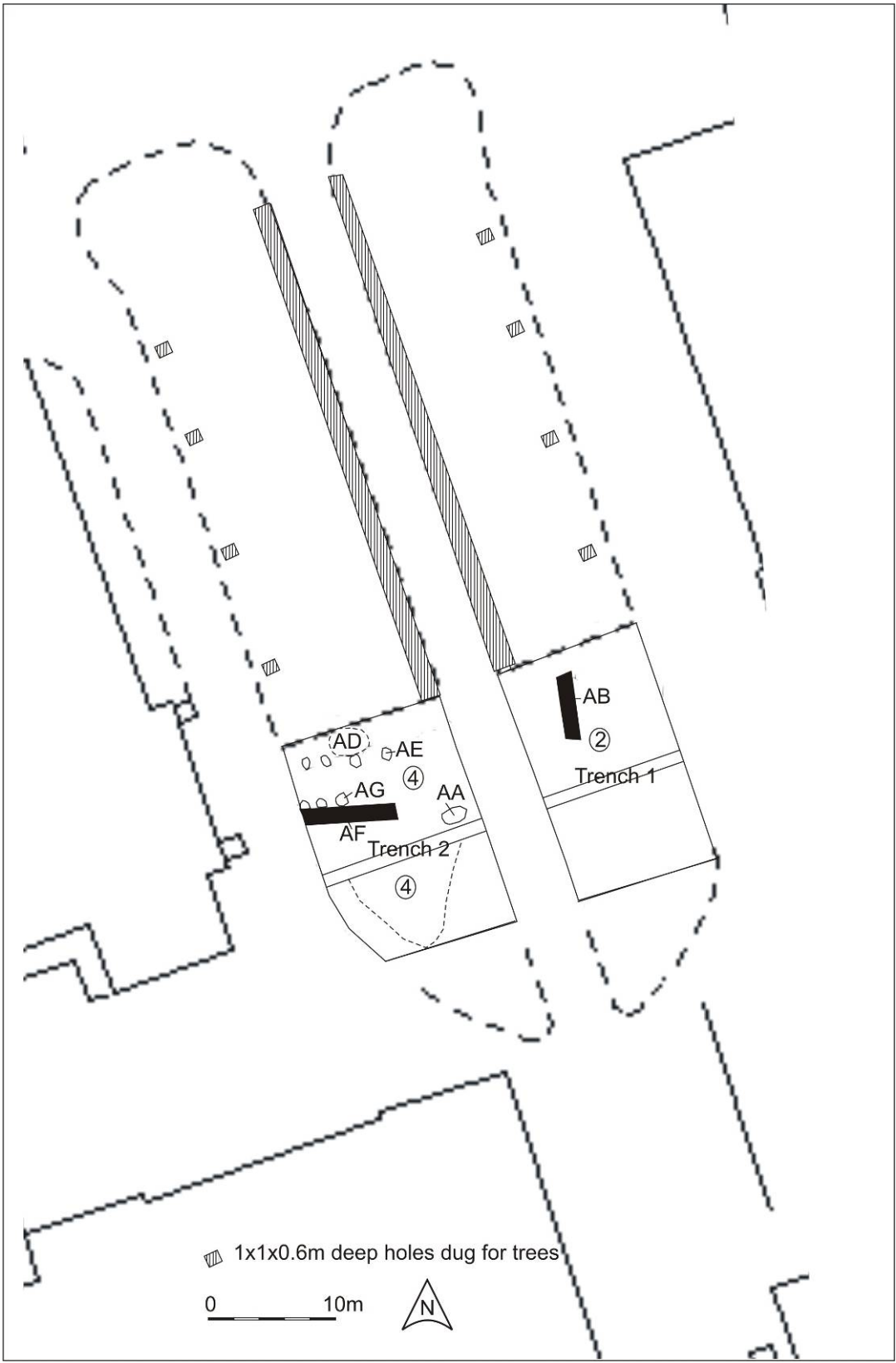
The watching brief took place between 21-25 July 2009 (see Specification for work, Judith Stones, July 09). The archaeological work was commissioned by Yunming Ness, Halliday, Fraser, Munro, and Aberdeen City Council Archaeological Unit were sub-contracted by Robertson (contact Colin Hart). The work was carried out in conjunction with Beacon Plant Hire.



Plan showing site outline and location of trenches 1 and 2

The results

Three phases of occupation were identified from the watching brief. Further details will be available when the post-excavation work is complete and the finds identified and a report produced for publication.



Plan showing locations of features detailed below

Phase 1

Two walls foundation trenches (AB and AF) were identified (see above). AB was 5m long and at least 1m wide. It survived at the north end as large blocks of mortared granite, and on the west side as a line of small stones. The east side of the wall had been robbed in antiquity. Along the west side of the wall foundation was a line of stone roof tiles (see Phase 2 below).



Wall foundation AB, Facing south. The stone roof tiles are on the right of the wall.

The second wall foundation, AF survived to 7m long and consisted of a U-shaped trench 1.1m wide, 0.3m deep. A small section was cut through this feature and the section cleaned and recorded. The wall foundation consisted of three large stones in the base of the trench with sand, loam and mortar packed around the stones (see section below).



Wall foundation trench AF, facing west



Section through wall foundation trench AF showing large stones in the base of the trench

Phase 2

Evidence of the demolition of these buildings took the form of stone roof tiles along the west side of wall foundation, AB, which were set into the ground where they had been discarded from the roof during demolition. These stone tiles were very similar to those found at the Carmelite friary excavation (Cameron *et al* forthcoming; see Aberdeen City Council Sites and Monuments online -

<http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/smrlImage.asp?id=1629&iid=5&title=12%20Martin's%20Lane>). A layer of demolition material (Layers 2 and 4) was recorded in both trenches and this was largely left *in situ*. In places where this was removed during cleaning or machining, fragments of medieval worked stone, window glass, pottery and glazed floor tiles were recovered. A small number of human bones and larger amounts of mammal and fish bones were also found. These will be identified by specialists.



Stone roof tiles (right) along the west side of wall AB

Phase 3

A shallow scoop, AA, 1 x 05m in size and 0.3m deep had been dug through the demolition material in Trench 2 to rebury a small number of human remains. These were probably found during digging or building work at the site, identified as human and carefully re-interred.



Disarticulated human bones reburied in a shallow scoop, AA

Two linear stone features (possibly drains; AE, AG) and a burnt area (possibly a hearth; AD) were also recorded in outline during these works; they were left undisturbed under the sub-base and so were left undisturbed by the development.

Other trenches were watched by an archaeologist. Trenches (1m wide and 0.3m deep) along the inner edges of the grassed area (see plan and photo below) were dug for new fences. Eight pits 1 x 1 m in size and 0.6m deep were dug for the planting of trees. No archaeological deposits were identified in any of these trenches. The clean, probably imported topsoil in this area is c 0.6-0.8m deep.



Trench along the edge of the grass for fencing



Pits for tree planting, with trees and Robert Gordon's College in the background, facing north

Finds

A small assemblage of ceramic floor tiles, stone roof tiles, shell, medieval pottery and mammal and fish bone was recovered from the site. These will be reported on in due course.



Recommendations

The Post-Excavation Research Design is attached with costs to complete this programme of archaeological work.

Any further construction work at this site should have archaeological input, including resurfacing, or any excavation work.

Acknowledgements

Thanks particularly to Bill Emslie, Robertson and Iain Miskelly and Stuart, Beacon Plant Hire.

References

Cameron, AS 2000 Robert Gordon's College, Aberdeen. Discovery and Excavation in Scotland; and unpublished report available from address above.

Cameron, AS *et al* forthcoming Excavations at Aberdeen Carmelite friary. Internet Archaeology.

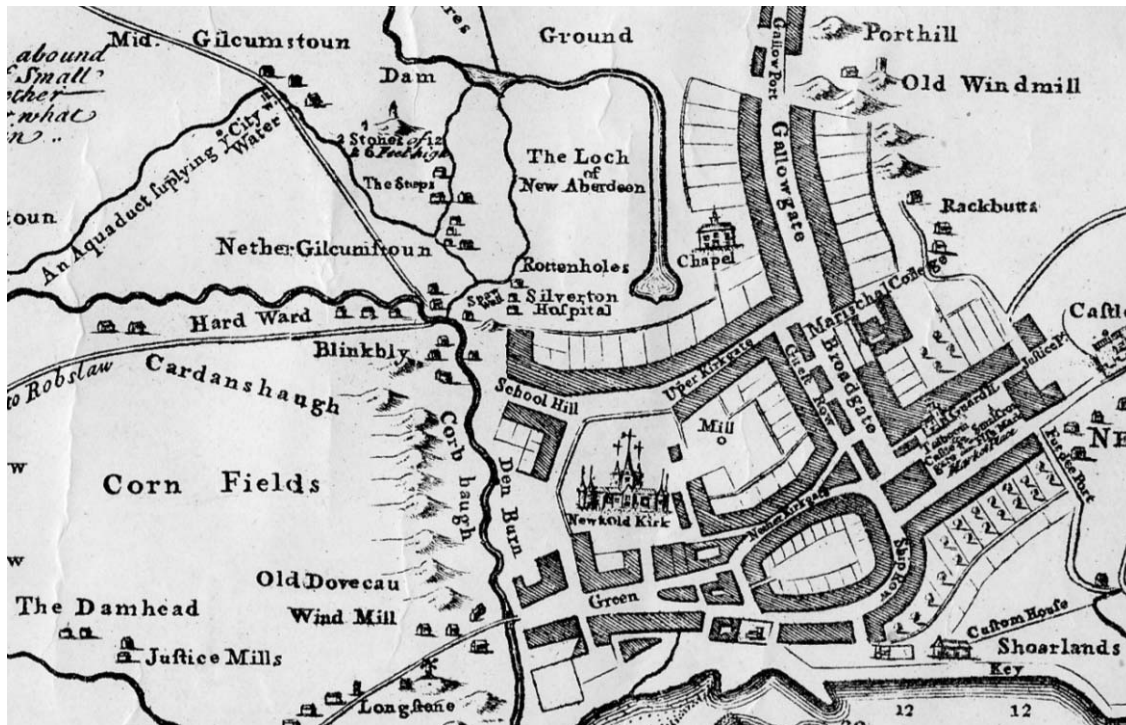
EP Dennison and J Stones 1997 *Historic Aberdeen*, Scottish Burgh Survey. Aberdeen

Milne, J 1911 Aberdeen. Aberdeen

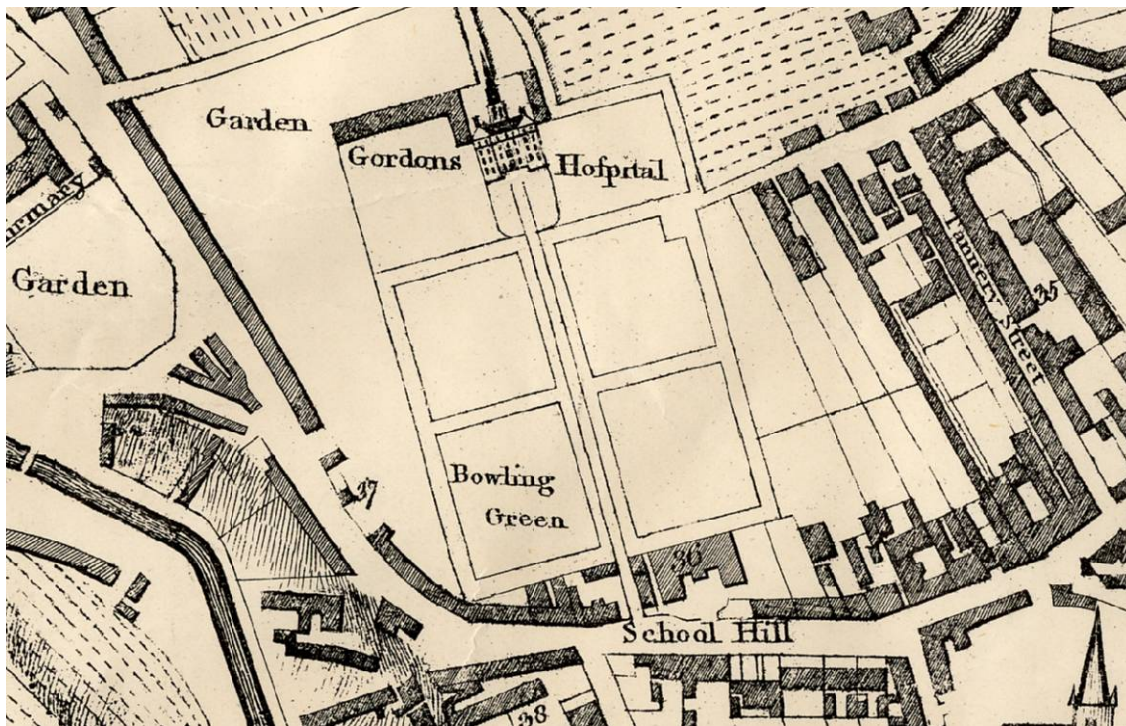
R B Strathdee 1970 *In a Friary Garden*. Aberdeen.

Strathdee, RB 1973 'A Gordonian looks at the School Hill. Aberdeen.

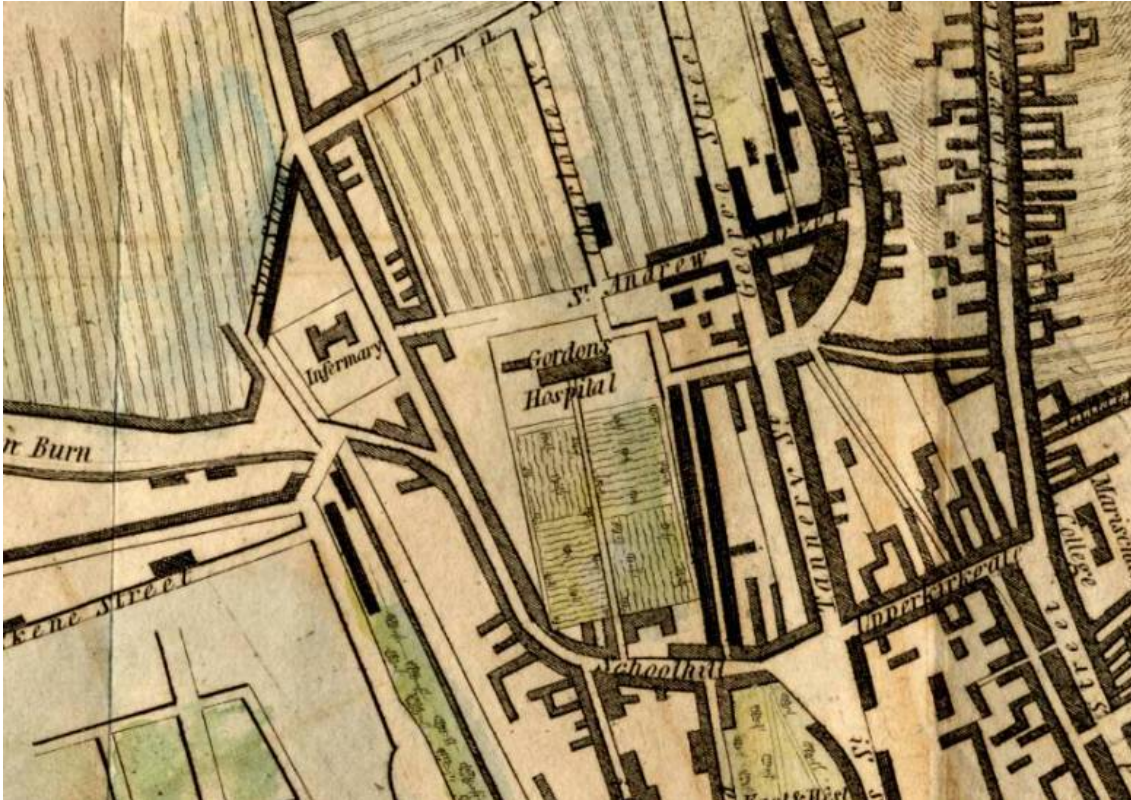
APPENDIX 1: MAPS



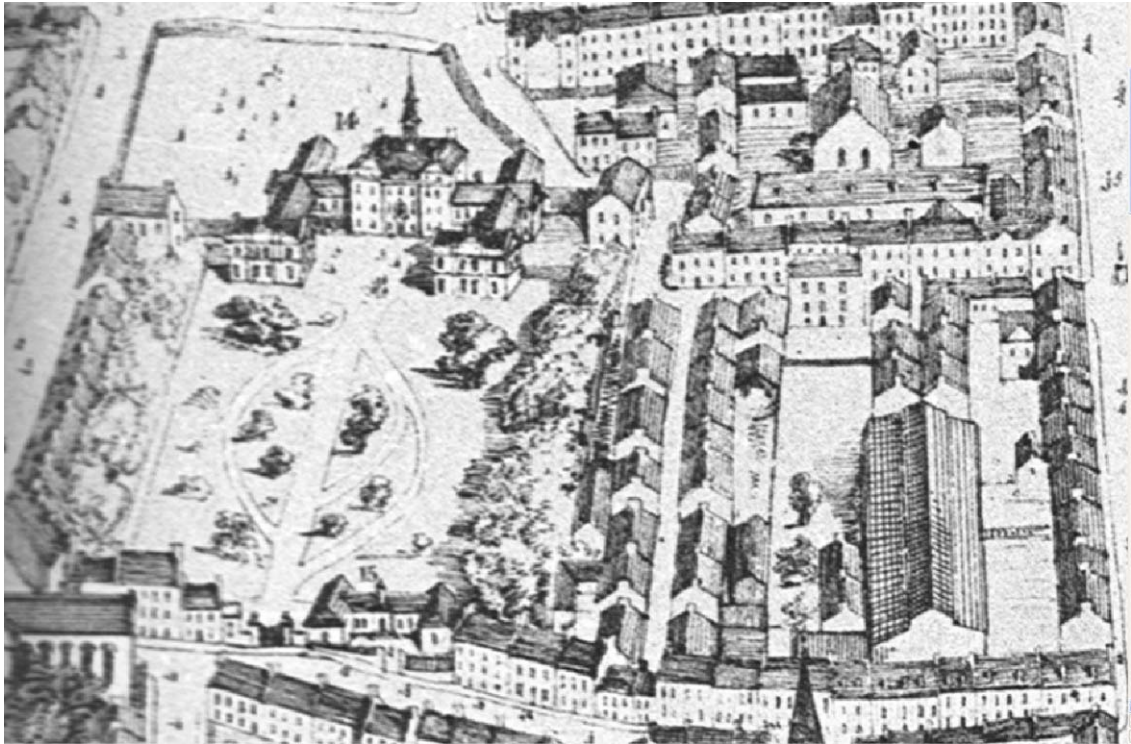
Paterson's map, 1746



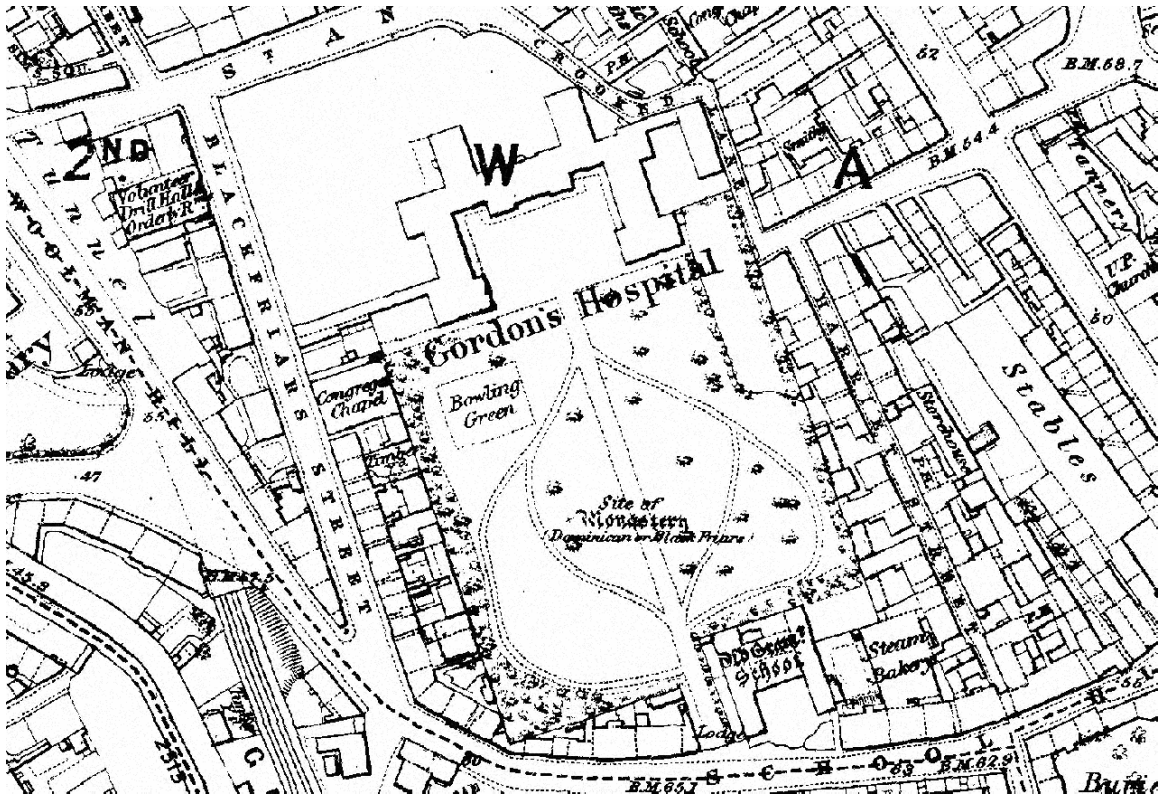
Milne's map, 1789



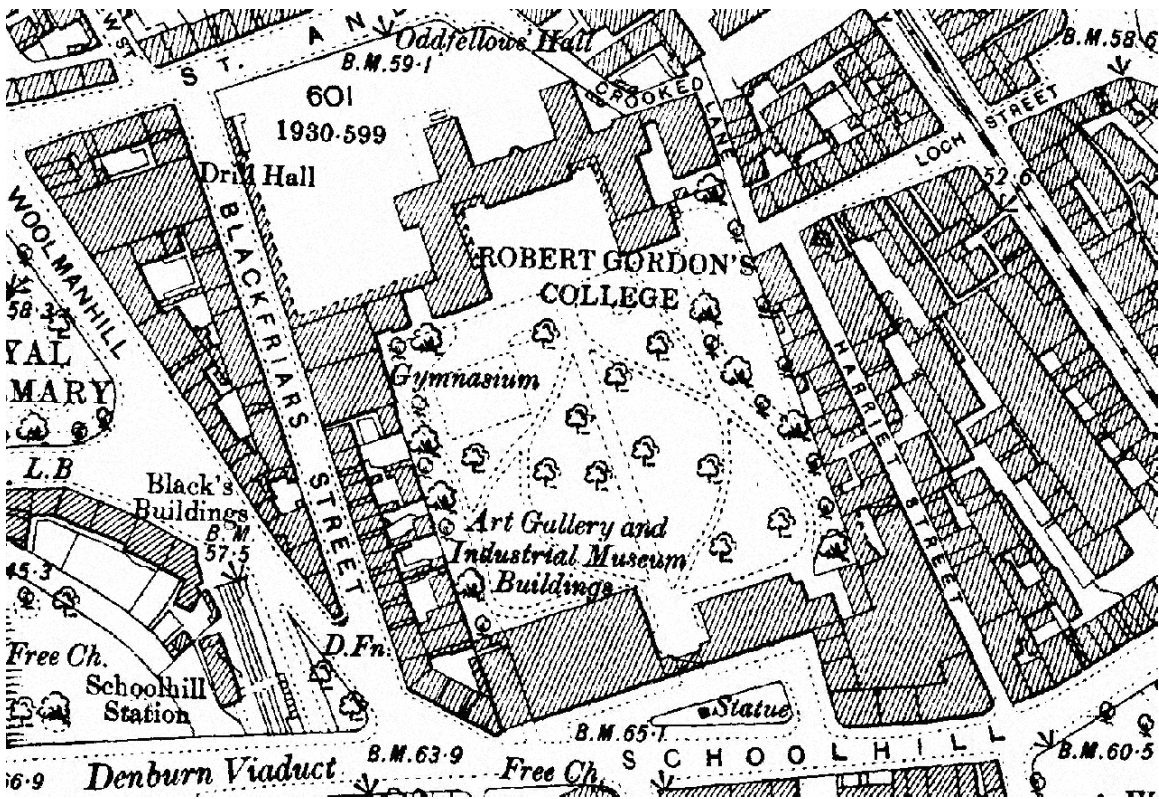
Thom's map, 1811 showing 'Gordon's Hospital'



George Washington Wilson elevation, c1850



1867 Ordnance Survey map of the area



1901 Ordnance Survey, showing gymnasia mentioned in newspaper reports

APPENDIX 2: SPECIFICATION FOR WORK

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL, MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Robert Gordon's College, Schoolhill, Aberdeen –A8/1738

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 9390 0643) is shown on the enclosed map extract. It is currently car park with some central landscaped areas. The present development includes the excavation of pits for new trees as well as some fencing. The site is of major archaeological and historical significance and any ground disturbing works will have archaeological implications.

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, Planning Advice Note 42, Scottish Planning Policy 23 and the Scottish Historic Environment Policies.

3.0 Historical and Archaeological Background

This site lies in an important 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 friary, from its foundation in the early to mid-13th 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 19th and early 20th-century construction campaigns. There has been one small archaeological excavation within the grounds of Robert Gordon's College, in the north-west portion of the 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 18th-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 during development of a larger area further west, next to Blackfriars Street, produced no significant results. Other excavation and observation work in the general campus area, notably along Harriet Street, has produced evidence of medieval and later deposits, although it also revealed a degree of scarping in the 19th century, which may have removed earlier material.

4.0 Requirements for Work

This site is of major archaeological and historical significance and any ground disturbing works will have archaeological implications. Two aspects of ground-breaking works have currently been identified in the plans for the present development: the excavation of pits 1 metre deep for trees and the excavation of sockets for fencing and new gates. The tree pit excavations must be directly supervised by an archaeologist, while the digging of sockets for fencing must be watched by an archaeologist. The tree pits should be dug first, as that process will provide information about the nature of any archaeological deposits before the post sockets are excavated.

It is possible that requirements for archaeological work may need to be refined by the Keeper of Archaeology, in discussion with the archaeological contractor and the developer once the location of the Second World War bunker, thought to lie on the site, has been determined.

4.1 Archaeological supervision of excavation for tree holes

All excavation and groundbreaking work associated with the placing of trees within the site must be directly supervised by an archaeologist, who must be approved by the Keeper of Archaeology, Aberdeen City Council. The archaeologist must control the process of excavation and record any features and finds that are revealed. If significant archaeological deposits are uncovered, which in the opinion of the Keeper of Archaeology will be adversely affected by piecemeal excavation for tree pits, then a decision may have to be taken to exclude tree planting in certain areas, or to undertake a larger archaeological excavation to examine the ground further in advance of tree planting.

4.2 Watching brief over digging of sockets for fence and gate posts

All groundworks associated with the provision of new fencing and gateways must be watched by an archaeologist approved by the Keeper of Archaeology. The archaeologist must record any features and finds that are revealed.

5.0 Timetable

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

6.0 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.

7.0 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.

8.0 Recording Systems

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

9.0 Monitoring Arrangements

It is necessary for the City Council Planning Authority to monitor the progress and effectiveness of the archaeological work. 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.

10.0 Reporting Requirements for all archaeological work

Provision must be made for:

10.1 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.

10.2 Specialist conservation, examination and identification of artefacts found during the archaeological work

10.3 Preparation of plans, sections, reconstructions and finds drawings to publication standards.

- 10.4 The sorting and analysis of records and the production of a written report on the work.
- 10.5 Its publication in a manner appropriate to the scale of the work, as defined by the Keeper of Archaeology.
- 10.6 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 archaeological work.
- 10.7 Copies of the 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.

11.0 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 (Nicholas Holmes, National Museums of Scotland, Queen Street, Edinburgh EH2 1JD) for disposal to an appropriate museum.

12.0 Timescale

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

13.0 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.

14.0 Conclusion

The archaeological work is to be carried out in compliance with this brief. 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.

July 2009

APPENDIX 3: PHOTOGRAPHS



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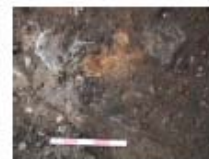
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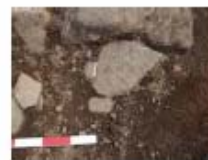
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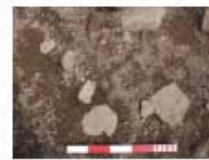
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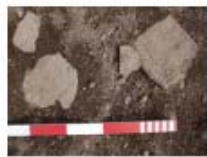
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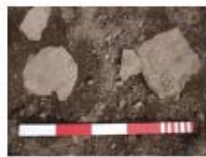
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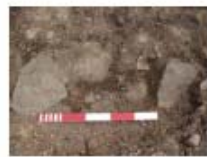
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