

Aberdeen and its Hinterland, 1500-1700

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This project, which is funded by Historic Scotland, is a pilot project to assess how much there is in the way of evidence, both (primarily) historical and archaeological, for examining how Aberdeen and its hinterland^[1] interacted, between the years 1500 and 1700. This is a very broad remit: however the emphasis has been on trade and economic interactions. We studied one area of Aberdeen's hinterland in greater depth, both examining any historical remains and conducting a number of field walking exercises, coupled with attempts to locate the site of any older farm buildings.

Perhaps a brief introduction to the area of the hinterland we studied in depth. The area and parish is called Peterculter and lies approximately 12 miles to west and slightly to the south of Aberdeen city centre, along the north side of the Dee. It is now administratively part of the city of Aberdeen. The name Culter seems to come from two Gaelic roots: cul and tir, meaning back country.^[2] It is an area that has been settled for some time: scatters of mesolithic flints, a number of Bronze age cairns and the scheduled remains of a roman marching camp are all known.^[3] Historical documents for the area start in the twelfth century.^[4] By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the two main land owners in the parish were on the west the Irving family, lairds of Drum^[5] and on the east was the Cumming family as lairds of Culter estate.^[6]

The first stage, in this project, was to look at what work had already been done, both on hinterlands in general and on Aberdeen. Aberdeen it must be said is served by both a wonderful and complete set of civic records, in the town's archives, which can be complemented by the extensive collections in the University of Aberdeen's archives. Partly because of this abundance of archival material Aberdeen is also well served by historical analysis and research.

It is worth beginning with the *Old Statistical Account* of 1794's entry for Peterculter. What is important about the *Account*, inter alia, is that it does seek to examine how the hinterland and city interacted: one point made by the author is that the parishioners had recourse to the city's infirmary and medical skills.^[7] This is a significant issue, which we can trace back through history as the hinterland depended upon the skills and level of specialisation which could develop in the city. He also comments on the production of hosiery in Peterculter for sale in the royal burgh.^[8]

The issues which concerned the authors of the *Account* also interested many Victorian writers. Thus Alexander Smith's 1875 two volume *A New History of Aberdeenshire* deals with what produce was sold at the time and at what cost.^[9] In 1900 William Watt wrote, in his *History of Aberdeen and Banff*: 'All through its history the town of Aberdeen had been a place of considerable trade...the centre to which the produce of the adjacent county was forwarded for sale and export...'^[10] Smout deals with the history and development of the burghs in this period and he touched upon aspects of the manner in which burghs generally interacted with their hinterlands: e.g. how burghs depended upon their hinterlands for population supplies.^[11] Smout also spends some time examining the issue of intermarriage between merchants and landowners. He comments that often the daughter of a merchant would marry the son of a local landowner, or vice-versa. This resulted in a situation where the burghs in question would be encircled by a ring of estates owned by people who were at once merchants and landowners; this is important for the study in Aberdeen.^[12]

There is also the work of Booton, which stemmed from his doctoral research.^[13] This deals with Aberdeen's inland trade in the medieval period, examining how Aberdeen's commercial success was based on its role as entrepôt centre for its rich hinterland.^[14] Booton comments that in the later medieval period the trade of Aberdeen was sophisticated, although the majority of goods was made up by foodstuffs and raw materials. However, he also dwells upon some aspects of manufacturing within the burgh itself. For example, he notes that in the export salmon trade the barrels in which the goods were transported were made within Aberdeen itself. Booton also comments that there was a specialist trade in silver and gold in Aberdeen.

Booton makes use of the excellent civic records in Aberdeen's Town House. Indeed these records provided the starting point for this study also: what Booton did for the medieval period can be extended to the early modern for the purposes of this study. The principal form of civic records are the Council Registers, extracts of which were published in the nineteenth century by the Spalding Club. The Registers are the records of the Bailie and Head Courts of the Burgh. They contain remains of court cases and injunctions concerning trade which give invaluable glimpses of both what was traded and to a lesser extent how.^[15]

It is worth drawing attention to the University of Exeter's Web site. On this there is the Scottish Economic History database, 1550-1780. Maintained by Dr Gibson of the Geography Department, it is divided into 5 categories: crop yields, demographic statistics, price index, wage index and weather conditions. It is searchable by area: the indices for Aberdeen are re-constructed from the original Council Registers. These are invaluable resources, the indices for Aberdeen, for example, for prices are categorised according to product and give all data concerning prices. However, it must be said that all this information is given as raw data. From these and in use with the other sources mentioned a database of what was sold could be constructed. Moreover, used with other sources this adds greatly to our knowledge of trade.

There is also Louise Taylor's excellent 6-volume publication of all Council letters from 1552 to 1681. In Volume 1 she has published a council memorandum of business, which is divided into two heads of affairs. The second head reads:

It is cum in custume that tua or thrie dayes befor the mercatts sett down the merchands
Of uthers burrowes forstall the mercat be going in the cuntrie at the Kirk of Alford and
Uther quhare bying of playding and uther waris at the dwelling houssis of persones that
sel the same and maks as it wer a privat mercat to tham selffis befor the mercat begins
to the great hindrance of thair nechtbours merchands

Moreover this memorandum continues that many merchants were now going straight 'with thair creamies [wares for sale] and merchandice to nobill mennis housses and sells thair wairs and made mercatts therat'^[16] Thus from this we get derive an excellent glimpse of the mechanisms of trade.

Importantly this work represents only a drop in the ocean of the sources utilised thus far. By any, even conservative, estimates it might be suggested that the *Extracts* represent less than 10% of the material in the Council Registers. The burgh's records, aside from the Council Registers, also contain in varying boxes parts of the papers of many of the families who were lairds in the hinterland and who were also merchants in Aberdeen and part of the town's government. In other words, the living embodiment of the links between town and country, i.e. the people Smout was talking about. In the city archives there are the papers the Menzies family who were lairds of the Pitfoddels (in the hinterland) area and dominated burghal politics in the sixteenth century. These documents have been used to a much lesser extent and therefore would repay, greatly, much fuller analysis. There are also the Burgh's Propinquity

Books, for 1589-1603 and 1637-1797. These are testimonials given by the burgesses affirming a persons relationship to other individuals: they are an unrivalled source for details of the mobility of both the urban and rural population in and around Aberdeen. Used in conjunction with the 1696 Poll Tax returns these may go along way to answering how far Aberdeen was dependent on population supplies from its hinterland.

However the city archives tells us only really about the city. The first means of supplementing them is to use parish records. For St Peter's, the church of Peterculter, (now a heritage centre) the records start in 1674^[17] and do provide useful insights into the interaction of burgh and hinterland. Thus on 3 June 1694 the roof of the church was in need of repair. Whilst the materials could be got locally the Kirk session still needed to hire a slaterer from Aberdeen.

The University of Aberdeen's archives and Geography departments hold important collections of material. The Geography department has the MacDonald Collection of maps.^[18] For Peterculter the folio contains some 1867 OS maps, as well as a number of late nineteenth century plans for feuing lots in Peterculter. However they also contain a map of the estate of Culter, i.e. the part originally owned by the Cummings, from 1798.^[19] These maps render the area under cultivation, they also give the value for each field and indicate whether it is an in field or out field, occasionally giving field names. They also reveal the name of the tenant farmer and the location of the farm buildings.

This can then be combined with the Poll Tax returns of 1696^[20] to trace the history of these respective farms back another hundred years. The Poll Tax returns are also very useful for showing what trades were carried on in Peterculter in 1696. This ties in well with the records of St Peter's, in the sense of being able to trace how far each village was self sufficient in terms of skills and how dependent they may have been on the royal burgh. The Poll tax returns show that out of 310 names, there were 3 tailors, 1 butcher, 1 smith, 2 shoemakers, and significantly 10 weavers. It would seem from this that Peterculter probably produced a surplus of cloth etc for sale. Robert Tyson points out that two groups were missed from the Poll Tax, the destitute poor and children under 16. He estimates that, on average, these groups can be interpreted as representing 2.5% (in the former instance) and 33% (in the latter).^[21] Therefore: 310 people represents 64.5% of the population. We are missing approximately 35.5%, which can be calculated, and a total of 480 is arrived at. However, this is by no means a certain figure, it must be treated with caution, but even so remains useful.

The second main historical collection which is of primary importance to this study also comes from the archives of University of Aberdeen. This is the papers of the Cumming family from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. These are in a very large collection, known as the Duff house papers, and known by the number MS 3175. In total this class mark represents some 7487 boxes of papers.^[22] Although the vast majority do not relate to the Cumming family there are approximately 20 boxes which are of direct relevance to this project. These fascinating and utterly invaluable documents reveal much about the estate, how it was run and the life of the tenants at the time. However, it also contains a series of butchers' bills for 1720 and 1721, one for each month. These reveal that Cumming shopped for luxury meats in the royal burgh, despite being the laird of an extensive agricultural estate. Aside from this Sir Alexander, the 15th laird, in 1710 re-built a lot of his manor house, Culter house. The accounts for all this building work are revealing in the same way that St Peter's parish records are revealing: the majority of the labour, skills and materials could be found

locally but in certain cases the skills and specialisation of the royal burgh were necessary for the completion of the work. Thus we find that the glazing work had to be carried out by trades men from Aberdeen.

Using the 1798 map with our modern maps, we identified a number of farms which are in approximately the same area now, cultivating the same area, as in 1798. The 1696 Poll Tax returns allowed us to show that these farms were also in use in the seventeenth century. Some of Cumming's papers have allowed us to fill in more details concerning these farms, for example a rental of farms in Peterculter, dating from the late 1690s or early 1700s.[\[23\]](#) The next step was to conduct field walking exercises in order to find out more about these farms and how long they have been in use for.

This is not a discussion of all the farms which we field walked.[\[24\]](#) Generally, it must be said that the field walking turned up some very nice flints on all of the farms. The first ploughed field that we walked was the glebe field of St Peter's church. The church is by reputation founded in the thirteenth century, although this requires further analysis. The glebe disgorged 11 sherds of medieval pottery, all probably of local origin.

Next was Milltimber farm. MacDonald, in *Place Names of West Aberdeenshire*, notes that the name is confusing as there is no record of a mill in the vicinity, and offers the alternative derivation for the name that it comes from the Gaelic for 'hill of the well' (meall tobair).[\[25\]](#) It is situated in the southern part of the parish close by Maryculter bridge and the Dee, next to Kincardineshire. It features in the 1696 Poll Tax returns as being part of the estate of Culter, with one tenant farmer, with two servants, two subtenants and one weaver and his wife. The 1798 maps gives one name for Milltimber farm itself but does show one or two other farm buildings in the area. Indeed these maps are extremely useful for showing that the names given in the Poll Tax returns for farms are indeed often really referring to a hamlet, where there were several tenant farmers and several sub tenants, and often some families plying trades. The farm turned up some of the nicest flints, and 4 jug handles of medieval period and a handle from a Yorkshire type ware jug. As well as 1 sherd of Siegburg stoneware possibly dating to the late fourteenth or fifteenth century, some lumps of slag and a number of nineteenth century clay pipes. Whilst fields 2 and 3 that we walked still produced good finds but of a lesser number.

The next farm was Milton of Drum. This farm has proved to be much more problematic in placing it in historical context. It does not occur in the 1696 Poll Tax returns, nor does it appear on any of the maps from the Mac Donald collection. However when working through the papers of Sir Alexander Cumming I found that his chamberlain, Arthur Irvine, signed all receipts at Milton of Drum. However he then added 'here in Tarland', placing it well outside of the parish of Peterculter.[\[26\]](#) The *Place Names of West Aberdeenshire* provides no information on the area. However the farmer himself, Mr Morrison, does have the conditions of lease from 1877, signed by Richard Forbes Irvine, thus placing it within, at that time, the estate of Drum.[\[27\]](#) Thus I will need to look into the records of the Irvine family further to trace it. The field walking, however, did produce evidence of early modern settlement. The first field produced amongst 4 sherds of local medieval pottery and possibly a seventeenth century fragment of Westerwald stoneware. The second and third fields produced sherds of medieval pottery both local and possibly some of Yorkshire type.

To conclude this has been a profitable pilot study. We have located several large collections of historical material which will require much, much more work as well as

identifying some very profitable fields. Thus Nether Anguston field one, St Peter's Glebe and Milltimber field one should be walked again to plot the position of the medieval and early post medieval finds. Whilst a fuller project would undoubtedly reveal further evidence of early post medieval settlement. All this aside, a preliminary look at other areas of Aberdeen's hinterland, namely Dyce and Skene, shows that a similar study of those areas would be equally profitable. This pilot project was started with the simple aim of seeing what there is in terms of historical and archaeological remains: both forms of enquiry taken together have allowed us to build up a much fuller picture and profile of the area. It seems quite clear that more work in the area of Peterculter really will be rewarding and very useful. What can be said after this work is that Peterculter and Aberdeen demonstrated an interdependent relationship; one characterised by symbiosis. The burgh needed Peterculter's produce whilst Peterculter needed the skills, specialisations and variety of goods and services that could only grow up in a Royal Burgh. The relationship was thus one of interdependence. However as Peterculter is close to Aberdeen and on the river, the next step would be to select an area at some distance from Aberdeen.

[1] One of the interesting issues to emerge during this research is: what is a hinterland? For this paper the hinterland is being defined as principally the 'liberty' of the burgh, where in theory only Burgh merchants had the right to trade, i.e. the sheriffdom. However it can be interpreted as the north-east of Scotland, or the area over which Aberdeen sought to exert its control. Although this last point would need careful definition as Aberdeen sought to exert its control as widely as Dundee.

[2] Withrington, D.J. and Grant, I.R. (eds), *The Statistical Account of Scotland, Volume XIV Kincardineshire & South and West Aberdeenshire*, (Wakefield, 1982) p.638. See also, MacDonald, J., (ed.) *The Place Names of West Aberdeenshire*, (Aberdeen, New Spalding Club, 1899) p.272. Alexander, W.M., (ed.) *The Place-Names of Aberdeenshire*, (Aberdeen, Third Spalding Club, 1952) p.248, adds another element: 'It has referred to as *cuil tir*, back land. But the form of the word especially the -ter ending, suggests either a stream, or something to do with a stream.'

[3] See Aberdeen Sites and Monuments Record, available for consultation in Archaeology Unit.

[4] Innes, C. (ed.) *Registrum Episcopatus Aberdonensis, Ecclesie Cathedralis Aberdonensis, Regesta Que Extant in Unum Collecta*, Volume I, (Edinburgh, Spalding Club, 1845) p.8. See also, Robertson, J. (ed.) *Collections for a History of the Shires of Aberdeen and Banff*, Aberdeen, Spalding Club 1843, pp 291-300.

[5] See Jonathon Forbes Leslie, *The Irvines of Drum and Collateral Branches*, (Aberdeen, 1909) *passim*.

[6] See, inter alia, Taylor, H & A, (eds) *The Valuation of the County of Aberdeen for the Year 1667*, (Aberdeen, Third Spalding Club, 1933) pp 319-320, c.f., *Collections...*, p.291 and *Places Names of West Aberdeenshire...*, p.149 for the Cummings' taking possession of the barony of Culter in the early 1300s.

[7] *Old Stat Acc...*, p.365.

[8] *ibid.*, p.375.

[9] Smith, A., *A New History of Aberdeenshire*, Volumes 1 & 2 (Edinburgh, 1875), p.62 and p.546. These volumes are a parish by parish account of the state of Aberdeenshire.

[10] Watt, W., *A History of Aberdeen and Banff*, (Edinburgh, 1900) p.309.

[11] Smout, T.C., *A History of the Scottish People*, (Glasgow, 1990), p.162.

[12] *ibid.*, p.159. This does seem to be the case in Aberdeen, but more than just being land owners and merchants these sort of people also came to dominate the municipal government of the burgh.

[13] Booton, H.W., 'Inland Trade: A Study of Aberdeen in the Later Middle Ages.' In Lynch, M., Spearman, M. and Stell, G., (eds) *The Scottish Medieval Town*, (Edinburgh, 1988) pp 148-60.

[14] *ibid.*, p.148.

[15] For example, Stuart, J (ed.), *Extracts from the Burgh Records of Aberdeen, 1398-1570*, (Aberdeen, Spalding Club, 1844) pp 82-3.

[16] Taylor, L. (ed.), *Aberdeen Council Letters, 1532-1631*, Volume I, (Oxford, 1942) pp 166-8, the memorandum is dated 24 June 1619.

[17] As with all parish records the originals are now held in the National Archives of Scotland,

a microfilm copy is lodged in Aberdeen Central Library, Local Studies Department.

[18] University of Aberdeen, Geography Department, there are eight folios for Peterculter. The first is known as: Aberdeenshire, Peterculter 1, 19751-19772.

[19] Aberdeenshire, Peterculter 1, 19751-19772, the map has been broken into eleven pieces labelled 19751, a-k. By this time the Cumming Lairds of Culter were bankrupt and had lost the estate.

[20] Stuart, J., *List of Pollable Persons within the Shire of Aberdeen, 1696*, Volume II (Aberdeen, Spalding Club, 1844), pp 472-80.

[21] Tyson, R. 'The Population of Aberdeenshire, 1695-1755: A New Approach', *Northern Scotland*, Vol. 6, No.2, 1985, pp 113-132, see especially p. 116 and p.130.

[22] University of Aberdeen, Special Collections, Personal and Estate Papers, Ms 3175.

[23] University of Aberdeen, Special Collections, Personal and Estate Papers, Ms 3175 box 2372. The rental was compiled by Arthur Irvine, but is not dated. However Irvine was Cumming's Chamberlain in the 1690s and early 1700s.

[24] A full report of all finds is in Aberdeen City Council, Archaeological Unit archive, No. 3060.

[25] *Place Names of West Aberdeenshire*, p.257.

[26] There are several instances of this in University of Aberdeen, Special Collections, Duff Papers, MS 3175 box 2372.

[27] University of Aberdeen, Geography Department, Aberdeenshire, Peterculter 1, 19751-19772, map No., 19758 is entitled 'Section of the Gormack Burn from Milton of Drum to Milton of Cullerlie. Referred to in a report by James Beattie 9 June 1837'. It thus provides the earliest reference yet to this 'farm'. The Gormack burn flows down from Cullerlie past Milton of Drum, joins with another burn, becomes known as the burn of Culter and then flows into the Dee next to St Peter's Glebe field. For further information on this burn see *Old Stat Acc...*, pp 367-40. This burn obviously seems to have been an important source of water power for at least these two mills in the area (Milton of Drum farm still has some remains of mill buildings in situ), and possibly also for the waulk (or fulling) mills in the area. The author of the *Old Stat Acc...*, p.639 notes: 'I have been the more particular in tracing the course of the burn of Culter and Leuchar, because in that tract a canal might be formed between the river Dee and Lock Skene.'