Rising from the Waves: The Development of the Historic Burgh of Perth

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Perth emerged from a rather flat, very wet site, at the lowest crossing point of Britain's biggest river. This has had profound effects on the development of its street plan, communications and economy. It has also given it very distinctive archaeological characteristics, preserving a range of evidence not usually found in Scotland.

Introduction

This paper is based on the *Perth Development Study*, a report commissioned by Historic Scotland, and soon to be published as a TAFAC monograph. A summary of the study was also presented and published for the PSNS 50th Anniversary conference in March 1999. I would like to thank Olwyn Owen of Historic Scotland, and many current and former colleagues for their contributions to the project, including David Perry, Dave Munro, Derek Hall and Russel Coleman.

The Natural Setting

Perth's history and development has been fundamentally influenced by its natural setting. Its situation on the Tay, controlling major routes across Scotland, close to the boundary between Highlands and Lowlands, gave Perth a central position in both the history and geography of Scotland.

Topography

The historic core of Perth occupies a low platform, just above river level, surrounded by rising ground, and bounded on the east by the Tay. Its present built-up condition and a long history of artificial reclamation conceal many subtle but significant changes of level. In flood conditions it could become almost an island in the middle of a natural basin, and in earlier times the margins of the platform may have been even wetter than they are today. The North and South Inches both incorporate the old Gaelic word for island in their name, which suggests the prevailing conditions in pre-burghal Perth. A platform on the riverbank, surrounded by waterlogged ground and standing water would have had limitations, but would have been comparatively secure and defensible, a tolerable substitute for the nearly impregnable castle rocks of Edinburgh, Stirling and Dumbarton, or the spectacular but inaccessible hill forts on Moncreiffe Hill.

The Tay and its Tributaries

The Tay presents a formidable barrier to land communication, but a vital waterway into the heart of Scotland. Perth's position at the western end of the Sidlaws, the highest navigable point on the river, and, until Victorian times also the lowest bridging point, was of strategic importance, and made Perth a crucial junction of land, sea and riverborne communication. Three harbour sites are known; the earliest was close beside the bridge, at the end of the High Street, appearing on the earliest plan of the town in 1715 and on Rutherford 1774, and remaining in use into the 19th century. It has not been excavated, but timber structures have been seen up to 5m below street level beneath the City Chambers. The second harbour lay at the mouth of the town lade, originally an open canal, at the junction of what are now Canal Street and Tay Street, and was excavated in 1987/8. This harbour also appears on Petit 1715 and Rutherford 1774.

During the 18th century, the harbour expanded south along the Tay, and in the 19th century the third harbour site developed at Friarton, about a mile down river from Perth. This harbour, like its predecessors, carries on a busy trade with Scandinavia, the Baltic, the Low Countries and the east coast of England. Modern ships rely on an artificial

channel, winding its way between reed beds and sandbanks with ominous names like *Sure As Death*. The difficulties of the river passage ultimately limited the town's development, and contributed to its eclipse by Dundee.

The Impact of the Tay: Floods in Perth, 1210-1993

The Tay discharges more fresh water than any other river in Britain, equal to the Thames and the Severn combined. When the snows melt, enormous flows can be released, up to 7 million tonnes per hour. Perth has suffered 34 recorded floods between 1209/1210 and 1993. The recorded levels for the last two centuries can be divided into four bands, from the worst and rarest, about once every two hundred years, to the mildest, about once every five or ten years. When these are plotted onto a contour plan of the town centre, the results are striking, and define distinct zones in the town. There is a slight error in this method, because the river falls by about 0.5 m as it flows from north to south through the burgh. However, it is easier to plot the floods as if they were level, and correct mentally for gradient effects.

1 **7.0m OD - 6.48mOD**. *Exceptional, Disastrous Flooding, caused by ice under Smeaton's Bridge.*

The floods of 1814 and 1774 are the worst ever recorded, and were aggravated by broken ice jamming below Perth Bridge and forming a high dam. Land above 7.0m OD has probably never been flooded in the town's history. On this plan, dry land is confined to a surprisingly small 'island', comprising St John's Kirk, Watergate, and the central portion of High Street. A second 'island' at the end of Smeaton's Bridge is actually the bridge approach ramp, and did not exist until 1771.

St John's Kirk

St John's Kirk is the earliest surviving building in Perth. It is not yet known if the kirk pre-dates the burgh, but a deep ditch was excavated just to the north of St John's, under 80-86 High Street *PE12* (Virgin Superstore), running east/west some 10m south of the street frontage, and radiocarbon dated to the late 10th or early 11th century. Evidently the dry 'island' had attracted an enclosure of some kind as much as a century before the burgh, perhaps a pre-burghal church precinct.

The earliest historical record of a burgh at Perth comes from the Reign of David I (1124-1153), and in 1126 or 1127 the King granted the parish church to the Benedictine Abbey of Dunfermline (Stavert nd 11). There is documentary evidence of the much earlier royal and ecclesiastical centre at Scone, two miles upriver, but little or no record of Perth itself before the creation of David's burgh.

2 **6.48mOD - 6.11mOD**. *Rare, Very Severe Flooding, 100 year return period.*

If the floods of 1774 and 1814 are discounted, the highest recorded flood level is that of 1993 at 6.48 m OD, with an estimated return period of 100 years. On this plan, Perth appears as a peninsula, accessible only from the west and north. The dry areas include part of South Street, the Blackfriars, and both High Street frontages, almost as far west as Methven Street, the late medieval limit of the town. Historically, High Street / Long Causeway was an important route into the town, and would have been passable even in flood conditions, except where it crossed the town defences at what is now Methven Street. Once we adjust for gradient effects in the south, it would have been passable even here.

Greyfriars and the Charterhouse, now King James VI's Hospital, both lie below the nominal flood level, but once gradient effects are taken into account, neither would actually be at risk. In the north, the limit of dry land approximates quite well to the line of the town defences along what is now Mill Street. The small dry 'peninsula' at

Blackfriars is doubly interesting given the discovery of pre-friary ditches in this area, and raises the possibility of pre-burghal or even Roman activity in this area.

Blackfriars
Perth remained visibly confined within its medieval defences even as late as the 1774 plan, but there were discrete extramural developments in the northern and western suburbs. After the destruction of the castle in the flood of 1209/10, the site was given to the Black Friars (founded 1231). In the late 14th century the friars had begun feuing out their lands, the earliest reference being a charter of 8 September 1327 (Milne 1893, 35f, No. XXI), and the northern suburb began to take the form which eventually appears on Rutherford's map of 1774.

The *Magnum Stagnum*
A charter of 1491 mentions a *magnum stagnum* belonging to the Black Friars (Milne 1893, 93f, No. XXXVIII), perhaps a 'great ditch', translating *stagnum* as Scots 'stank', but perhaps equally a 'great pool or marsh'. Adjacent areas around Kinnoull Street and North William Street were excavated in 1997 and 1998. It is striking how flat and low-lying this area is. The old ground surface is buried 1.4m below the street level. Given that this area was flooded at modern street level in 1993, it must previously have been a very wet and low-lying marsh on the northern edge of the burgh, until it was deliberately infilled in the 19th century.

3 **6.11mOD - 5.68mOD**. *Occasional Severe Flooding, once in every generation (20 - 25 years).*
The dry peninsula at Blackfriars appears even more clearly in this scenario, and a pronounced western limit of South Street lies on the line of Meal Vennel, believed to be an early western boundary of the town (Spearman 1988, 49).

The Castle
By contrast, the traditional site of the castle, now the site of the Museum and Art Gallery, is firmly set in a persistently wet hollow. The earliest reference to a castle in Perth is in a charter of Malcolm IV to Dunfermline Abbey (1157 x 1160, RRS I, 209, No. 157). The castle, presumably of earth and timber, was washed away in the great flood of 1209/1210.

4 **5.68mOD and under**. *Frequent, Moderate Flooding, every five or ten years.*
Land above this flood level was normally dry, but subject to occasional flooding about once in every generation. With a few exceptions, this defines the medieval town. The High Street, the northern, Blackfriars suburb and the western, New Row suburb are all safely on dry land. The exceptions are the backlands of South Street, and the junction of South Street and Methven Street, but once we adjust for gradient effects, the flood line moves down towards the line of the southern defences on what is now Canal Street. Nevertheless the vulnerability of the South Street backlands is real enough, and probably a factor in the apparently late and limited development of this street.

The Charter House, now King James VI's Hospital, lies outwith the town, but on dry ground as befits a prestigious royal foundation, the burial place of James I and Joan of Beaufort. Greyfriars could theoretically be underwater, reflecting its more vulnerable riverside location, but once we adjust for gradient effects this house is also safe. The land below 5.68mOD would be very marginal, subject to frequent flooding, perhaps every five or ten years, and occasional catastrophic damage in major floods. This land would probably lie empty, or be occupied by temporary or expendable structures, and perhaps by the dwellings of the very poor.

Once we adjust for gradient effects, the frequently flooded land is all outwith the medieval town. The North and South Inches are completely submerged, and it is no surprise that they remain open ground even to this day. Similarly the modern Tay Street is extremely vulnerable, being built on reclaimed land in the 1870s.

Defences
Perth's compact and well-defined outline was reinforced by its being one of the few walled towns in Scotland. The defences of medieval Perth appear in a charter of David I. They were destroyed and rebuilt at various times, but Perth emerged from the Wars of Independence with a well-defined defensive circuit, which survived into early modern times. The line of the town defences has been excavated at several points, especially at Skinnergate / Albert Close. This confirmed that a standing wall fragment probably is, as locally claimed, the last upstanding remnant of Perth's city walls, though probably a later rebuild on the historic line, rather than an original survivor from the 14th century. The town's walls have survived in a single fragment at Albert Close, but the accompanying wet ditch has survived in its entirety, thanks to its other role as the tail race of the City Mills. By 1809 it had mostly been culverted.

Street Plan
Perth has preserved the main features of the medieval street plan, based on two parallel main streets, High Street and South Street, with subordinate streets at right-angles to them. Some years ago, Dr R M Spearman published a morphological study of the town plan (Spearman 1988). He suggested an initial development along Watergate, significantly running along the crest of a natural dry ridge parallel to the Tay. The town then expanded westwards along what was to become High Street, encapsulating St John's Kirk and its burial ground in a complex of intersecting properties.

Skinnergate was apparently a late addition (Spearman 1988, 48), inserted into the pre-existing High Street burgage plots to serve the castle, some time after the middle of the 12th century. As the High Street developed westwards, it took on a gentle curve to the north, and widened markedly in the middle, giving it a very distinctive banana shape. The resemblance to a banana was even more marked in medieval times, as the middle part of the street was as much as 4m wider than it is today. The parallel development of South Street seems to have started rather later, perhaps under William the Lion (1165-1214) who issued the burgh with a new charter in 1178x95, and has never caught up with High Street. This may partly be because South Street was lower lying and more vulnerable to floods.

Population and Change: 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries.
Perth at the beginning of the 18th century was in many respects unchanged from the late medieval town. Petit's map of 1715 shows it neatly contained within its medieval defences, except for the late medieval suburb of Blackfriars, and some very sparse development in New Row. Even within the defences, Petit's plan shows development largely confined to the main street frontages, with extensive gardens behind.

The Jacobite Risings
The two Jacobite risings of 1715 and 1745 had a modest direct impact on the burgh. The first rising led to the fortification of the town by the Jacobites. The Second Rising made a great impression at the time, but its real effect arose from the reaction provoked by its near-success and ultimate failure, which with other causes precipitated and accelerated the destruction of the old highland way of life. The enormous influx of population to Perth and other centres which followed was to transform the town.

Population and Housing

A variety of early sources can be combined to estimate population. What is very marked is the stability of the population up to 1755, followed by rapid and nearly constant growth to around 42,000 in the 1960s, doubling the population within a generation, and doubling it again by the middle of the 20th century. Perth's enormous highland catchment area is sometimes forgotten, but was dramatically transforming the town in this period of rapid rural depopulation (Scott 1796, 46). This swelling population was squeezed into the existing built-up area, with consequent overcrowding, and increasing infill development in the backlands. This can be seen on Rutherford's map of 1774. As the population continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century, backlands infill continued to the point of saturation seen on the Ordnance Survey Map of 1863. The population was already over 26,000 in 1871 (Kershaw 1979, *TSA* 25), four times the 1562 figure, and yet virtually all these people must have been packed into the medieval town.

Since World War II, the population of the town centre has fallen dramatically to around 3,000 or 3,500 (*PKDC* 1984, 2, 1995, 4). The backlands infill of the 19th century has largely been reversed, with extensive clearance for car parking and retail development. The past three centuries have produced and then strangely effaced a series of dramatic changes in the character of Perth. The historic core has been populated, built up, industrialised, and then abruptly returned to something like its medieval levels of population and open space.

Discussion

The flood of 1993 may well be the last in a recorded series going back almost 800 years, as a very extensive flood protection scheme is now in place around Perth. But that last flood gave a remarkable insight into the topography and development of the burgh. The correspondence between the expanding boundaries of the growing burgh and areas of progressively greater flood risk suggests that the early shape and development of the burgh must have been profoundly influenced by the moods and movements of its restless neighbour the Tay.

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