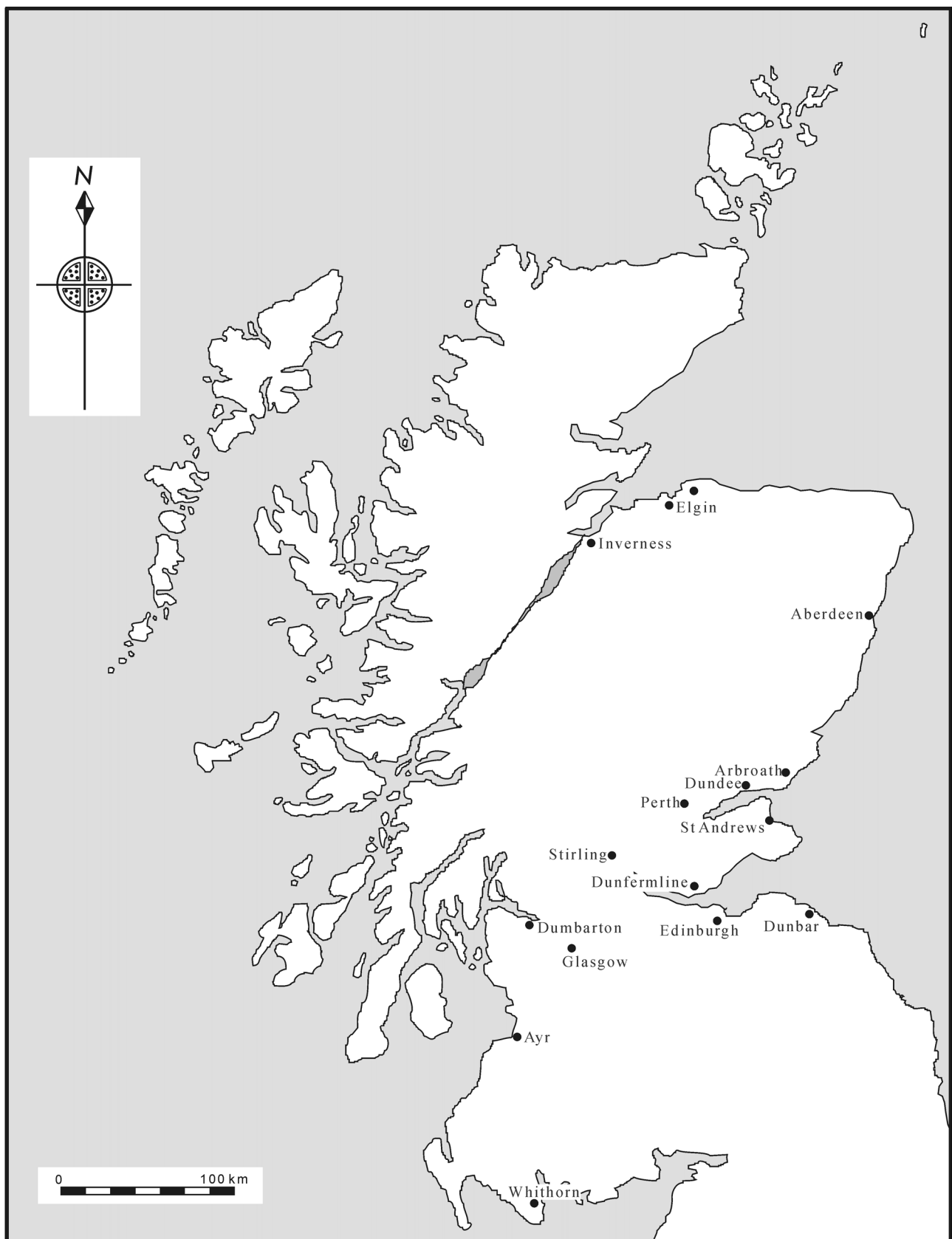


The environmental remains



Illus 1 Location map of Scotland, showing burghs where excavations of medieval sites mentioned in the text have taken place. (Based on the Ordnance Survey map, Crown copyright)

The history of the environmental remains

Catherine Smith

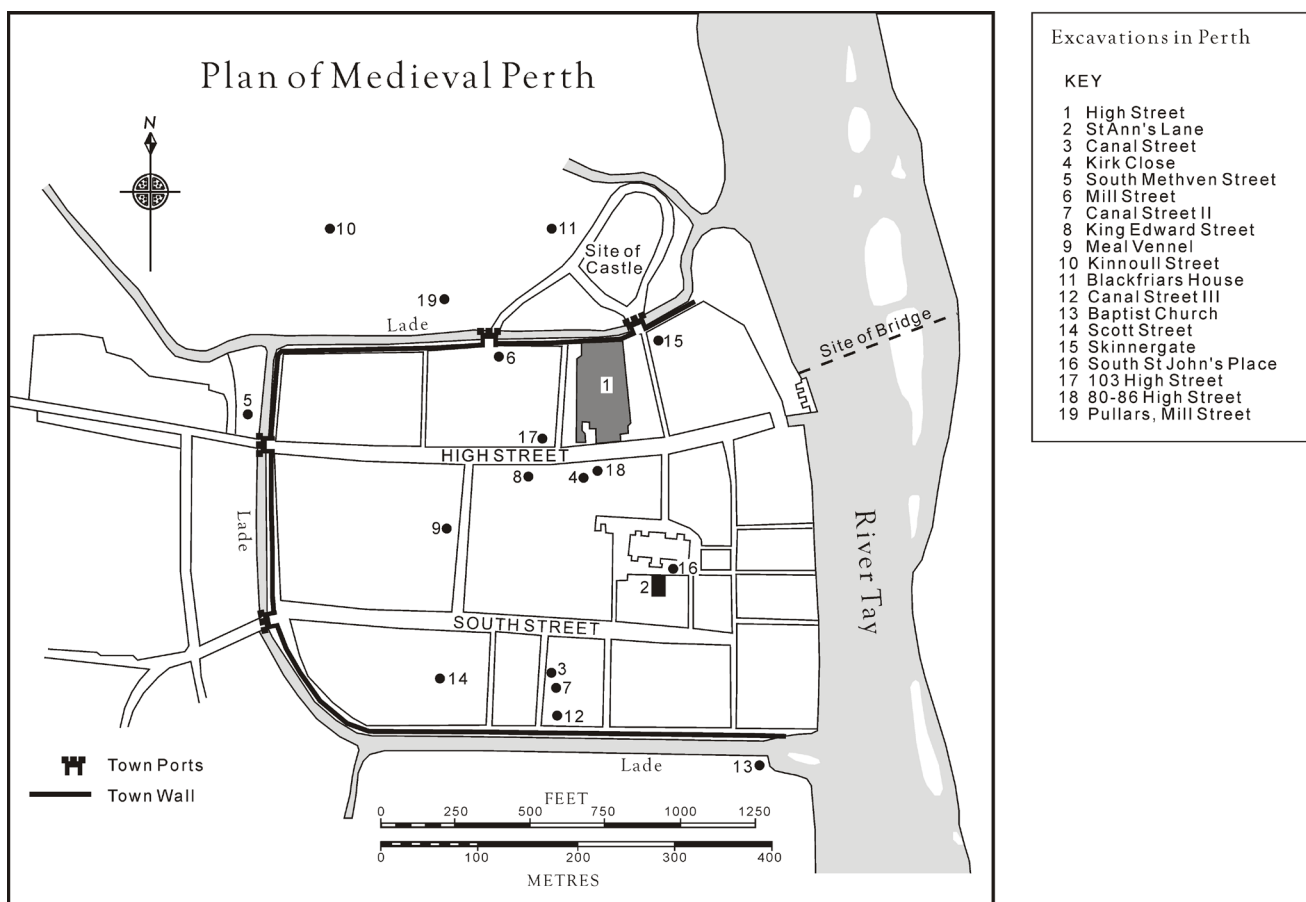
When the excavation took place at the Marks and Spencer site on the High Street in Perth between 1975 and 1977, it could truly be described as ground-breaking. At the time there was an increasing awareness of Perth's potential for survival of significant archaeological deposits, and this excavation led to much future work in the town. The location of Perth and other Scottish sites mentioned in the text is shown in Illus 1. Subsequent major excavations in Perth referred to are shown in Illus 2.

Both during and after the course of the excavation the finds, artefactual and ecofactual, were dispersed to various specialists for detailed examination. At that time, the study of environmental archaeology was a relatively new discipline, and although experts certainly could be found, the subject was not the accepted part of the archaeological curriculum which it is at the present day.

Thus, for each different category of environmental remains from the excavation, each material type was separated and sent to the appropriate specialists

working in the field at that time. The large assemblage of mammal bone, for example, was sent to Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art in Dundee. Fish bones were sent to the Environmental Archaeology Unit at York, bird bones and mollusc shells to the National Museums, Edinburgh, and soil samples to Glasgow University.

On the closure of the Perth High Street Archaeological Excavation Committee's offices, several years after the excavation itself ended, the site records became dispersed. In March 1984, the bulk of the site archive was transferred to the offices of the Ancient Monuments Department, Melville Street, Edinburgh (now Historic Scotland). Subsequently, post-excavation activities were no longer closely co-ordinated and it became difficult to track the whereabouts of the environmental materials and relevant records. In the mid-1990s Historic Scotland agreed to back a renewed plan to publish the results of the excavation. Although much of the environmental material had been reported on, some detective work was required in order to find the most up-to-date records



Illus 2 Plan of medieval Perth showing locations of major excavations mentioned in the text.
(Based on the Ordnance Survey map Crown copyright)

and reports, and in some cases the environmental materials themselves. Due to the bulky nature of some of the environmental remains, particularly the soil samples, it had not proved possible to store all of the material in the intervening years. In the event, many of the soil samples had been collected by site staff inexperienced in working with environmental material. For these reasons, those soil samples which had not been processed by the mid-1980s were discarded. Even if they had been retained, deterioration of the macrofossil component would probably have occurred in the unprocessed material. Thus, the botanical report deals mainly with material recovered from the second season of excavation in 1977. The macrofossils were extracted at York from 1kg subsamples of soil by paraffin flotation, primarily for the purposes of extracting insect remains. Sadly those samples collected for the purposes of recovering entomological remains do not seem to have been kept and this work was subsequently abandoned.

Similarly, although the samples sent to York yielded fish remains, they had not been collected specifically for this purpose. There was however a substantial hand-excavated fish bone assemblage from which some useful conclusions could be drawn. The hand-excavated mammal bone assemblage was reported on at an early stage, and the records kept in good order. It was only necessary to re-examine some of the bone. For the bird bone, only those identification records from the first excavation season had survived, but as the bird bones themselves were still available for inspection, all of the bones were re-examined and a fresh report prepared.

Finally, all the reports were collected together and revised in the light of a further 20 years of excavation in the burgh of Perth, resulting in the completion of the first draft of the Environmental Fascicule in March 1996. Following the discovery of surviving feather and eggshell samples in 1997 a report was commissioned and added to the existing fascicule. A further hiatus

unfortunately occurred on the untimely and sudden death of the site's director, Nicholas Bogdan, in August 2002. Following a meeting of the surviving contributors to the post-excavation of the site in Perth Museum in June 2004, Historic Scotland again declared its support for the project and work resumed on finalising the publication. A decision was taken to merge the nine fascicules originally planned by Nicholas Bogdan into four, thus this fascicule contains the environmental and miscellaneous finds reports (Fascicules 8 and 9 in the old publication scheme).

The first fascicule contains the stratigraphic and building reports and history of the site and the reader is referred to that volume for all information regarding the excavation itself. A further two fascicules containing the reports on the ceramic, metalwork, religious and wooden objects (Fascicule 2) and leather and textiles (Fascicule 3) are currently in progress. As David Bowler has noted in the epilogue to Fascicule 1, had the results of the Perth High Street excavation been published as originally intended in the early 1980s, they would have become a reference point for Scottish urban archaeology. In a curious way they have however always been there in the background, informing all subsequent work in the medieval burghs, and now themselves enlightened by 'the insights gained in more than a generation of work undertaken since' (Epilogue, Fascicule 1). It is with this understanding that the present volume should be read.

The current locations of the surviving environmental material are as follows. The bulk of the animal bone was originally deposited at the National Museum of Scotland (Natural History) by Dr Hodgson, c1980, and is currently located at the NMS Granton site. The dog and cat bones and a sample of the cattle bones are housed in Perth Museum and Art Gallery, George Street, Perth. The fish bones, feathers, bird egg shell fragments, intact eggs, hair samples, flotation residues and a small sample of the mollusc shells are also located at Perth Museum and Art Gallery.