ABERDEEN’S HUNGRY HISTORIES TRAIL

Food, science and archaeology
Front and Inside Cover image: The burgh in 1661, by Parson Gordon of Rothiemay. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.
In recent years there has been a revolution in our understanding of diet, health and food consumption in medieval Aberdeen. This is the result of new chemical analysis, undertaken at the University of Aberdeen, of bones excavated from across Aberdeen, combined with the rich museums and archives collections here. These factors come together to allow us to tell this story in vivid detail. This leaflet will introduce you to the location of these excavations as well as the major collections in Aberdeen which inform this story. The excavations will be presented as a trail of sites that you can visit in the city. The collections section will introduce the history and extent of the various holdings in Aberdeen.

This leaflet is part of a project to bring together different aspects of this research. The project was sponsored by the Heritage Lottery Fund and was part of the 2017 Scottish Government’s sponsored Year of History, Heritage and Archaeology.
The Archaeology

In Aberdeen the soil in the city centre is water logged, partly this is the result of a number of burns still flowing (albeit culverted) through and under the city centre. This means that there is good preservation of rich organic remains. Development in the centre of Aberdeen over the last few decades has resulted in a series of key archaeological excavations at sites which have proven rich in organic medieval material and human skeletal remains. In Aberdeen this is combined with some of the best civic records in Scotland. The rich museum collections of the University of Aberdeen and Aberdeen City Council contain a wealth of material excavated in Aberdeen as well as stray finds accumulated over decades and indeed centuries.

All of this, however, would mean nothing if there had not been professional archaeologists working in Aberdeen. In the late 1970s the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland together with what was then Grampian Regional Council appointed two archaeologists to work in Aberdeen City. The posts were initially based in the Planning Department of the local authority, however as the authority was reorganised into Aberdeen City Council and the archaeologists oversaw an increasing number of excavations, which produced large numbers of finds, the Archaeology Unit was moved into Museums and Galleries. The collections remain in the care of Aberdeen City Council.

In 2008 the University of Aberdeen appointed academic archaeologists to the School of Geosciences and a new department was formed. The department undertakes teaching as well as world class research in a number of areas. Drawing on the wealth of excavated material in the city’s collections the archaeological scientists use cutting edge techniques to further our understanding of the past of the Silver City. Using stable isotope analytical techniques researchers at the department have been focusing on the study of dietary change in Aberdeen through time, identifying social stratification and detecting trends of breastfeeding and weaning; while comparing their results to other contemporary populations in the British Isles.
The historical importance of diet

Diet and nutrition are prominent topics in our society today but they were no less important in the past as well. Food is both a biological necessity and is culturally important. Dietary shifts through time are associated with major social, religious, economic and cultural transformations. The first major change in Scotland occurred at the onset of the Neolithic period, around 6000 years ago, with the introduction of farming. This shifted people’s focus away from the sea and terrestrial wild resources. Numerous socio-political transformations have occurred since then which affected people’s diet in turn: from the Christianisation of ‘pagan’ Pictish groups, through the influence of Viking raiders and settlers.

Medieval Aberdeen is particularly interesting from this perspective. We have access to a vast amount of archaeological, and historical evidence relating to this time period. In the first half of the second millennium until the onset of the reformation the Silver City was home to four prominent friaries as well as St Nicholas Kirk. These institutions were centrally located in the flourishing town and had a prominent place in the lives of Aberdonians. It has been observed in other areas of the UK and Europe that the strong focus on Christian doctrine in the Middle Ages influenced not only the daily lives but even the diet of its people. Fasting days are a prominent part of Christianity during which people must abstain from meat consumption. However, fish is a well-documented substitute used during these times. Ongoing research at the University of Aberdeen is currently studying the dietary customs and social stratification of the medieval Aberdonian population. Preliminary results suggest that the diet of the medieval inhabitants of the city was dominated by marine fish. This could attest to the strong influence of religious fervour as well as the importance of the developing sea fishing industry. After the reformation of 1560 there was a shift away from the dominance of marine fish towards terrestrial mammals.
THE
CITY TRAIL
A trail of sites that you can visit in the city
St Nicholas Kirk

The church we see today is a result of building works going back many centuries. There has been a church on this site, dedicated to St Nicholas, since at least the 12th century. Aberdeen was a Royal Burgh which meant it could conduct foreign trade through its Burgesses of Guild. The church was dedicated to St Nicholas as he is the patron saint of merchants and seafarers. Elements of older buildings survive and can be seen inside the church, especially in Drum’s and Collison’s Aisles. As Aberdeen prospered in foreign trade over the centuries so the church was rebuilt to reflect the success of the merchants and burgesses of the town. It was here in the medieval period that the richest and most successful merchants and burgesses sought to be buried. They also left their money to the church in the memory of themselves and their families. After the reformation the church was split into two kirks, the East and the West, although today the congregations have united. In all of these times St Nicholas was at the very heart of Aberdeen and occupied a special place in the hearts of countless generations of Aberdonians.

Considering this long and rich history it is no wonder that during the excavations that took place in the East Kirk from 2006, around one thousand articulated and one thousand disarticulated skeletons were unearthed. The East Kirk was being developed to become a multi-use space, so this provided the archaeologists with a perfect opportunity to investigate this important building. The skeletons date from the 12th to the 18th centuries and reflect (generally) a relatively wealthy strata in Aberdeen’s society. Work on these remains has been ongoing since 2006. Whilst many of the individuals display the usual diseases and ailments of the human condition many also had strong bones showing relatively little physical wear and tear and indicate a good rich and varied diet over their lifetimes. This excavation was the most important excavation in a Scottish urban church to date, and post excavation analysis of the finds will be ongoing for some time.
One of the most prominent buildings in Aberdeen today is Marischal College, which hosts the headquarters of Aberdeen City Council and part of the University’s collections as well as other important cultural groups, such as The Anatomy Rooms artists’ studios. The site, however, has been of importance since the medieval period. Before the founding of the College in 1593, a Franciscan friary was located here from 1469, making this location one of the main ecclesiastical centres of Aberdeen. After the reformation the friary was eventually given over to George Keith the Earl Marischal of Scotland to found a college. The buildings went through various incarnations until the resplendent granite edifice that we know today was built by Alexander Marshall Mackenzie in the early years of the 20th century. The University occupied these buildings until the end of the 20th century when they leased the largest part of the college to Aberdeen City Council.

During the conversion of the building into the City Council headquarters archaeological excavations uncovered earlier buildings which likely belonged to the Franciscan Friary. In addition, seven human remains were also unearthed. As they were found in the close proximity of the medieval Franciscan Friary’s chapel and close to its high alar, and dating to the 15th-16th century, they have been interpreted as being the remains of the friars themselves. Their hands were bound together in prayer at the time of their burial and in the case of one of them the remains of his last meal (of fish) were still in the stomach cavity. These individuals are currently being analysed at the Department of Archaeology, University of Aberdeen.
THE CITY TRAIL

3 Schoolhill –
The Dominican (Black) Friary

This friary stood here from the early 13th century until it was mostly destroyed in the reformation of 1560. Small parts of this site have been excavated during works at Robert Gordon’s School but the recent redevelopment work at Aberdeen Art Gallery has seen more significant archaeological intervention on this site.

Numerous skeletal remains, coffins and textiles were found during this project which have the potential to enhance our knowledge significantly of the bustling medieval city centre. This research is ongoing and numerous publications are expected to inform the public in the coming years about the unfolding story of the people of medieval Aberdeen.

4 The Green –
The Carmelite (White) Friary

The Carmelites occupied this site between 1273 and the reformation. They were, along with the other orders of friars in Aberdeen, very well integrated into the fabric of Aberdeen. Over the centuries the friars built up close relationships with many families in the city and thousands of Aberdonians chose to be buried at this site, along with the friars and their lay brothers.

There have been 2 significant excavations at this site in the 1980s and 1990s. These excavations uncovered a considerable amount of building evidence as well as hundreds of burials. These skeletons, now cared for by Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums, were the first really significant group of medieval Aberdonians unearthed in recent times. The people who chose to be buried here were the regular townspeople of Aberdeen. They had lived lives of hard physical labour and their bones reflected this. Yet the diet for many in medieval Aberdeen remained rich, even for the relatively poor. For example analysis has shown that consumption of shellfish was higher than other areas.
In addition to the importance of the archaeology in Aberdeen are the city’s various collections. The University of Aberdeen has existed for over 500 years and has been collecting material over the course of those centuries. Its archive and museum collections are amongst the most important in Scotland. Yet Aberdeen is truly lucky in not only having these enviable collections but also those of Aberdeen City Council. The City Archives contain the UNESCO recognised Burgh Records which span the 15th and early 16th centuries. However it is the breadth of these collections as a whole spanning from 12th to the 21st centuries that allow us to narrate the history of Aberdeen in a level of detail not matched anywhere else in Scotland. These provide for the purposes of this project an unrivalled insight into the daily lives of medieval Aberdeenians and the food that they ate. It is in the collections of Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums that the majority of medieval excavated material from Aberdeen resides. The bones of the people themselves, their tools to prepare and eat food are all cared for in these collections which are of national importance.

7 University of Aberdeen, Special Collections

The Special Collections Centre is home to the University’s historic collections of books, manuscripts, archives and photographs. Amongst the early records of King’s College there are clues as to what food was being consumed. The volume ‘Accounts and supplies of the College’ covering the years 1579 – 1653, mainly contain accounts of provisions bought and consumed. The record is an important insight into food prices and diet in the 16th century, whilst detailing the daily expenditure of the College. The University has played a significant role in research into food production and consumption, through agricultural education (agricultural education in the University dates back to 1790) and involvement in agricultural research. In addition the history of medical teaching and research represents a major strength in the collections, specifically the allied fields of public health, including nutrition.
The most important collection is that of the Rowett Institute of Nutrition and Health (which also includes papers of Lord John Boyd Orr, former Rowett Director). The Institute played a major role in establishing the link between diet and health in the first half of the 20th century (notably the study of ‘Family Diet and Health in Pre-War Britain: A Dietary and Clinical Survey’). The study was a key element of the drive to apply the new knowledge of nutrition to the improvement of health and physique of the population. The study helped to shape the rationing policy during World War Two and reinforced the finding of previous Rowett studies establishing links between poverty, poor diet and ill health.

www.abdn.ac.uk/special-collections/

**University of Aberdeen Museums**

There are records of museum collections developing during the 18th century in both King’s College and Marischal College. After the fusion of the two colleges to form the University of Aberdeen in 1860, these collections eventually became the nucleus around which grew the Anthropological Museum that was established in Marischal College in 1907.

Alongside the historical treasure of the colleges, the museum collections saw their most rapid growth in the early twentieth century as alumni who had served overseas as missionaries, soldiers and colonial administrators donated their collections to the museum. More locally, the building of railways, roads, towns and ever more intensive farming has seen many archaeological discoveries also being acquired, alongside more recent aspects of local history. The result is an internationally significant collection with material from across the world and a wide range of ages.

Many objects can be seen to relate to food and drink. Some of the more recent material has obvious relevance, such as the museum collection of the former North of Scotland College of Agriculture with its cheese-making equipment, a large collection of Seaton ware pottery including containers for cream bowls and caddies for tea and sugar, and a variety of wooden bowls, silver quaichs, drinking cups and horn spoons. Older items include an unfinished Roman wine strainer from Stoneywood on the outskirts of Aberdeen, Pictish stone cups and some of the earliest pottery in Scotland. The latter has been the subject of recent research, including studies into the traces that survive of the contents which include milk fat and possibly mead. Likewise, the large collections of human remains from prehistoric burials and cemeteries in the medieval burghs of Scotland are now forming the basis for osteological research and teaching in conjunction with the University’s Archaeology Department.

www.abdn.ac.uk/museums
Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums has a rich archaeological collection, ranging from prehistoric flints to leather sandals, Bronze Age swords to Egyptian pottery, and Roman glass to a medieval spindle whorl made from an antler. Many of these artefacts, although not all, were found during local excavations. We know what many of the objects were used for although the functions of some, like the Neolithic carved stone balls, remain an intriguing mystery.

Often these objects can help us understand the diets and food sources of people living in the past. Local excavations, for example, have shed light on the lives of people in Aberdeen, particularly during the medieval period. Currently on display on the top floor of Aberdeen Maritime Museum are medieval objects which show the importance of the harbour to the city. Artefacts on display include a currach paddle, a wooden oar from the 13th - 14th century; objects like this, combined with the vast amounts of fish bones and shells often found in excavations, indicate that the sea and rivers was an important source of food during this time.

We also have domestic objects which show how food was made, cooked, and served. During an excavation on Gallowgate the wooden stave of a cheese press from the 13th - 14th centuries was found in remarkably good condition; the press would have allowed its owner to shape the cheese he or she was making into its desired form. We also have two skillet handles in the collection. Used to cook food, one was discovered on Westburn Road during an excavation. The other, which is made of redware, still has some of the skillet body attached to it. Another wooden item in the collection is a bowl made from birchwood, which would have been used to serve food. These objects demonstrate that, although the people using them lived over 500 years ago, in many ways how we collect, make, and eat our food has stayed remarkably similar.

www.aagm.co.uk/TheCollections/collections-overview.aspx
Aberdeen City's archives contain the Burgh Records, which go back to 1398 and exist in an almost unbroken series. This survival of records is unparalleled in Scotland and it is not just the burgh records themselves but the breadth of medieval material which includes records of St Nicholas Church, Sasine records of land sales and purchases from the 15th century as well as detailed accounts of shipping.

These records provide an excellent view of the food consumed in medieval Aberdeen. The records contain many references to animals. It is clear that the majority of people living in the city had access to sheep, pigs, cows, and that they all lived cheek by jowl. The city fathers were always striving to keep pigs out of St Nicholas graveyard and constrain the butchers (fleshers) who worked in the Castlegate to address the mess and issues around butchering animals in public. The cost of food also regularly vexed the town council who sought to make sure that everything from oat cakes to beer was sold at fair rates. The records show that beer was produced mainly by women (brewsters) and that they worked on a small scale in sites all across the city.

A tax list of brewsters in Aberdeen working in 1509 revealed that there were 153 women producing beer. The Council limited brewsters to the purchase of only one celdra (a historic measurement also known as a chalder) of malt per week. A celdra could yield 160 gallons of ale, so if 153 brewsters efficiently used one celdra per week then this could mean a theoretical yield of 24,480 gallons of ale per week in Aberdeen! The beer that was produced was mostly small beer, which is relatively low in alcohol and was in fact a replacement for the dirty drinking water that was available in the town.


Please note: These archives and collections are not always on display. Use the weblinks to contact each organisation if you wish to visit them and for further information.
Hungry Histories Virtual Exhibition

As part of this project a virtual exhibition was also created with the help of Mercury92 web design. Here, visitors can enter King’s Museum to learn about the history and archaeology of diet, and are also allowed to take a look behind the scenes of the archaeological research done at the Department of Archaeology, at the University of Aberdeen.

In addition, one can virtually wander around the High Street of Old Aberdeen and view the University Campus.

Visit: www.mercury92.com/AU/HungryHistories.html

Hungry Histories Facebook

See our project Facebook page for more information on many of the issues covered here. A series of public talks took place in partnership with Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums and can be watched on this page.

www.facebook.com/hungryhistories/
VIRTUAL COLLECTIONS
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