

525 Years in the *Pursuit of Truth*:  
A New History of The University of Aberdeen  
Episode 1

**Voiceover** [00:00:02] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.

**Professor Michael Brown** [00:00:21] Hello, my name is Professor Michael Brown and I'm a co-director of the Research Institute of Irish and Scottish Studies, which is sponsoring this new series of podcasts: Five hundred and twenty five Years in the Pursuit of Truth, a new history of the University of Aberdeen. Over the course of this series, my colleagues and I will be retelling the story of how Aberdeen rose from a small medieval foundation to a significant hub of intellectual life in the region, nationally and indeed globally, bringing Aberdeen out to the world and just as significantly, bringing the world to Aberdeen, currently marking the five hundred and twenty fifth anniversary of the Foundation of King's College. The university is one of Scotland's four ancients and the fifth largest institution of higher learning in Britain. The brainchild of Bishop Elphinstone, King's College and its sister institution, Marischal, itself founded in fifteen ninety three, merged in 1860's, further adding Christ's college in nineteen twenty nine. Together, the university has experienced the external forces, the civil wars of the 1640s, the Union of Crowns of 1707, the disruption of the Church of Scotland and in the nineteenth century and the world wars of the twentieth century. It is a long tradition of academic achievement, but has contributed to the Reformation, the Enlightenment and has been associated with five Nobel laureates. It has proven itself to be adaptable and innovative, committed throughout its existence to the founding intention to be open to all and dedicated to the pursuit of truth in the service of others. How that founding purpose came to be realised is the subject of our first call to be given by Dr Jackson Armstrong, a senior lecturer in the history department. Dr Armstrong specialises in the study of 15th century Anglo Scottish relations. He is also the principal investigator of the Aberdeen Burgh Records Project, which is opened up to study the extraordinary early records of Aberdeen City Corporation. His talk today situates the decision by Elphinstone to create a new institution of higher learning in the light of the wider cultural context of the city's engagement in the Scottish Renaissance. It is entitled Before and After Bishop Elphinstone: Creativity and Learning in the Medieval and Renaissance Aberdeen. I hope you enjoy it and the other talks in this series. Thanks very much.

**Dr Jackson Armstrong** [00:02:42] My name is Jackson Armstrong and I'm a senior lecturer in history at the University of Aberdeen. I'd like to explore the very earliest history of the university. And one of the ideas that's often associated with the foundation of King's College in the 1490s by Bishop William Elphinstone, and the patronage of King James IV, is that King's College represented a new innovation for the Northeast, connecting a somehow isolated and remote region of the kingdom to the world of learning; that King's College represented a new beacon of light for Aberdeen. But I'd like to explore the ways in which that idea isn't very helpful for us in understanding the reasons why Bishop Elphinstone chose Aberdeen as the place for his new foundation. And I'd like to look at the deep medieval legacy of learning, scholarship and creativity that can be found in the burgh.

The story of Aberdeen is, of course, the story of two burghs, that of the Royal Burgh on the Dee, and that of Old Aberdeen on the River Don, and that's where I'm sitting now on the banks of the Don in Seaton Park, just below St Machar's Cathedral. And I'm sitting with a modern edition of a book known as The Aberdeen Breviary. It was a book that was finally printed in 1510, Scotland's first full-scale printed book. But it was very much a project of Bishop William Elphinstone to compile the comprehensive collection of the

legends of Scottish Saints. The Aberdeen Breviary is set up much as a calendar listing the prayers and lectures that are to be observed on each saint's feast day, and it includes details for the feast of St. Machar, the 12th of November. Machar, as we know him, is the early medieval founder of the church at Aberdeen, the Breviary records that he chose to make his dwelling where a river enters the sea in the shape of a bishop's staff. And that describes the bend of the River Don, which encloses the site of St Machar's Cathedral and the burgh of Old Aberdeen as it exists today.

**Dr Jackson Armstrong** [00:05:21] The medieval cathedral was very much a working hub, a place of administration as much as worship. The bishop might often be away on other business, but the cathedral was run by the bishop's principal officials and some twenty-nine canons, some of the stone effigies surviving within the cathedral today are memorials to these men. One such leading dignitary was the archdeacon, in charge of disciplinary matters for the clergy in the diocese. The cathedral maintained its own library, a catalogue from the mid-15th century lists some, one hundred and thirty eight books of divinity, history and law, for the church dealt with a wide array of legal affairs, what we might think of today as family law. The cathedral was also a place of learning, and it had its own 'sang scule' and grammar school for boys from the diocese who showed an aptitude for music and for book learning. Aberdeen today should really do more to remember John Barbour. Barbour is called the father of Scots poetry. In the later 14<sup>th</sup> century, he wrote *The Brus*, the book-length epic poem which immortalised Robert I as the quintessential Scottish monarch. John Barbour wrote *The Brus* while he was archdeacon of Aberdeen. It was a great novelty to write at such length in the vernacular language of lowland, east-coast Scotland at that time, a language known as 'Inglis'; today, what we'd call Older or Middle Scots. In some eighty-thousand words, Barbour created a new literary style. But he also conducted a historical and a textual research effort, weaving together the story of Robert Bruce's life from other written sources, most of which are now lost.

**Dr Jackson Armstrong** [00:07:06] Barbour was a man of erudition who had many different roles. He was already a senior cleric, probably in his thirties when he was promoted to the post of Archdeacon in 1356. At the time of his promotion, he was overseas at the papal court in Avignon. During the rest of his career, he frequently served as a Scottish diplomat abroad, travelling to England and France. One such mission is known from a document called a safe conduct, which is like a visa. It allowed Barbour to travel to St. Denis near Paris, which was the hub of the European book trade. The safe conduct specified that protection for his travel extended to books, as well as to people, indicating that he was on a book-buying mission, perhaps for the cathedral library or for other contacts at home. John Barbour died in 1395, and it's likely that he is buried in the South Aisle of St. Machar's Cathedral, which anyway is known as the Barbour Aisle. If old Aberdeen with its cathedral was connected to the international world of the church, the royal burgh of Aberdeen with its port, was connected to the wider world of trade. From the 12th century, it held the status of royal burgh, which meant financial and administrative oversight by the crown. Still, by the time of John Barbour, Aberdeen had no more than a few thousand inhabitants. But it was counted in Bruges as amongst the four principal towns of Scotland. And we know a great deal about medieval Scottish towns *because* of Aberdeen's civic record keeping tradition; its surviving council registers are the most complete and continuous of all Scottish towns before 1500, and for this they hold UNESCO recognition. The Aberdeen council registers survive from 1398 onwards, written in Latin and Middle Scots, they tell us about life in Aberdeen and its international connections. They record elections of local officers, correspondence with external authorities, town legislation to regulate trade and public health, and cases heard in the various courts convened by the burgh officials. It's the latter that takes up the most space

in some 1.5 million words between 1398 and 1511. The vast majority of entries tell us about commercial transactions and disputes over those transactions between the inhabitants of Aberdeen men and women, and often the foreign merchants and sailors with whom they did business. The 15<sup>th</sup>-century registers tell a story about the expanding use of written records, especially in the Scots vernacular. They also tell us about the European stage on which Aberdeen's affairs were conducted. One entry, a rare one in Dutch from 1446, sets out a contract made in the Low Countries between Wouter Michaelis and John Vaus, the provost of Aberdeen. Wouter, who was in debt to the provost, undertook to make payment to the provost's children, who were in school in Paris. A contract made in the low countries, written down in Dutch in Scotland, for a debt to be repaid to children studying in Paris: this in a nutshell describes Aberdeen, the well-connected hub of trade and administration, with a thriving literate culture in the later middle ages. Within the royal burgh, too, learning, teaching and even experimental research can be detected in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The burgh church of St. Nicholas, sometimes called the Mither Kirk, was a focal point of much of this activity.

Chantry chaplains based in the burgh church were often called upon to take charge of the town's sang scule, and its grammar scule. Musical talents were in high demand by churches across the land, and choristers whose names are recorded can be seen to have gone on to flourishing careers. The grammar school of the burgh enabled training in Latin and logic, and from 1419 its master was always a university degree-holding graduate.

At this time, Scots who sought a university education needed to travel abroad to study. One image accompanying this podcast is the characterful illustration of a lecture at Louvain in 1467, and this is drawn among lecture notes on Aristotle, made by a student from Moray called George Lichton. Only in the fifteenth century with the new university foundations of St Andrews, Glasgow, and King's College did it become possible to undertake degree-level study at home in Scotland. Such an expansion in the demand for, and provision of, higher education across Europe at this time is of course one aspect of the age of the Renaissance, and specifically of the 'new learning' called humanism which drew its inspiration from the ancient Greeks and Romans.

Aberdeen's burgh records also contain another sign of the Renaissance. In 1505 an inquest into the inheritance arising from the death of a chantry chaplain called Andrew Gray mentions that his property included a still for aquavite and rose water. This is the earliest record of a still for aquavite in Scotland. Aquavite was the term for distilled alcohol that in time would come to be known in Scotland, from the Gaelic vernacular, as Whisky. Gray, who was associated with the master of the burgh's grammar school in 1499, died in December 1504 and it is probable that he made use of his still during his lifetime. The record shows that the aquavite still came into the hands of one George Barbour. Elsewhere in the registers we can see George Barbour active in early medicine in Aberdeen. This is a fascinating, if oblique, snapshot of the way in which a prominent churchman could be closely involved with what we would understand as early science, using the experimental apparatus of a still to create a substance, aquavite, which was closely associated with early chemistry and the pursuit of medicinal substances. As exciting as this recent find is, it is entirely in keeping with what we would expect from a prominent burgh in Renaissance Scotland.

So, by the time we come to Bishop Elphinstone in the 1490s, Aberdeen already had a long legacy of creativity and learning, and its two rivers were very confidently flowing into the world of European trade, and the European Renaissance. William Elphinstone was born in Glasgow in 1431. He was one of the first students at the new University of Glasgow in the

1450s. He later studied canon law in Paris and civil law in Orleans. From the 1470s until his death in 1514 he would serve as an officer and advisor at the highest levels of government in the kingdom. He first came to Aberdeen in 1488 to be consecrated as bishop, and in his episcopal career he displayed an extraordinary energy. He fostered a number of projects, but the greatest and most complex of these was undoubtedly the foundation of King's College.

Although he secured papal approval for his new foundation in 1495, the creation of a new university was a process rather than a moment. Bishop Elphinstone spent the next decade ensuring the proper patronage that would give the new university a sound financial footing. And for this he had started at the top, with King James IV, who had given his name to the endeavour when it went before the pope, and who offered other patronage, for instance, to endow a chair of medicine in 1497. It is no surprise that this post was first taken up by James Cumming, who was in 1503 also appointed as the first 'mediciner' or physician, for the royal burgh of Aberdeen.

William Elphinstone turned to the Dundonian Hector Boece to come to Aberdeen to teach liberal arts, inviting him back to Scotland from Paris where he was based as a university regent, and where he had developed a friendship with Desiderius Erasmus, the greatest humanist of the age. In 1505 Elphinstone asked Hector Boece to become the first principal of the university. By the same year Bishop Elphinstone was in a position to grant his foundation charter, which set out the constitution and structure of the new university. At this time, King's College comprised some 36 members, and by 1514, the year of Elphinstone's death, this had risen to 42. But however modest in numbers, Elphinstone's project meant the growth of the burgh of Old Aberdeen. The burgh itself was founded in 1489 as a burgh of barony and ground was broken for the initial building of the new chapel for King's College in 1497. And work continued on this phase until the chapel's dedication in 1509. But there were other projects, too.

**Dr Jackson Armstrong** [00:16:24] I'm walking up the little path from Powis Gate, past the car park, around the corner, to a brick-lined wall with an iron gate, a little bit rusted, to find one of Old Aberdeen's hideaway treasures, which is from the time of Elphinstone and his foundation. This is the site of the Snow Kirk, the parish church for Elphinstone's new burgh of Old Aberdeen, which was first dedicated in 1503. All that survives today is a walled cemetery, which is still in service as a Roman Catholic graveyard. But within this site was the parish church for the new burgh of old Aberdeen. And the first priest who provided services here was Walter Boece, the brother of Hector who, at the same time, was the first principal of King's College.

**Dr Jackson Armstrong** [00:17:32] The story of the early decades of King's College is well known. The college was to survive the upheavals of the Reformation in the decades following mid-century, and Aberdeen was in time even able to support a second collegiate foundation in the royal burgh itself, made in the 1590s by the Earl Marischal. It's striking that this was the same decade in which it has recently been discovered that we can find the first record of a Scottish ship, called *The William*, sailing for the New World, setting out from Aberdeen in 1596 to venture to the New-Found-Land.

To me, the early history of the university and the context out of which it was created, is about how Bishop Elphinstone's foundation was as a result of an outward looking, creative and internationally connected Aberdeen. That was a medieval legacy which would continue for centuries to come.

**Voiceover** [00:18:44] This podcast is brought to you by the University of Aberdeen.