



UNIVERSITY  
OF ABERDEEN

# WALKING ON THE WILD SIDE

A SELF-GUIDED  
NATURAL HISTORY  
TOUR OF KING'S  
COLLEGE





# W E L C O M E T O T H E W I L D S I D E O F T H E U N I V E R S I T Y O F A B E R D E E N

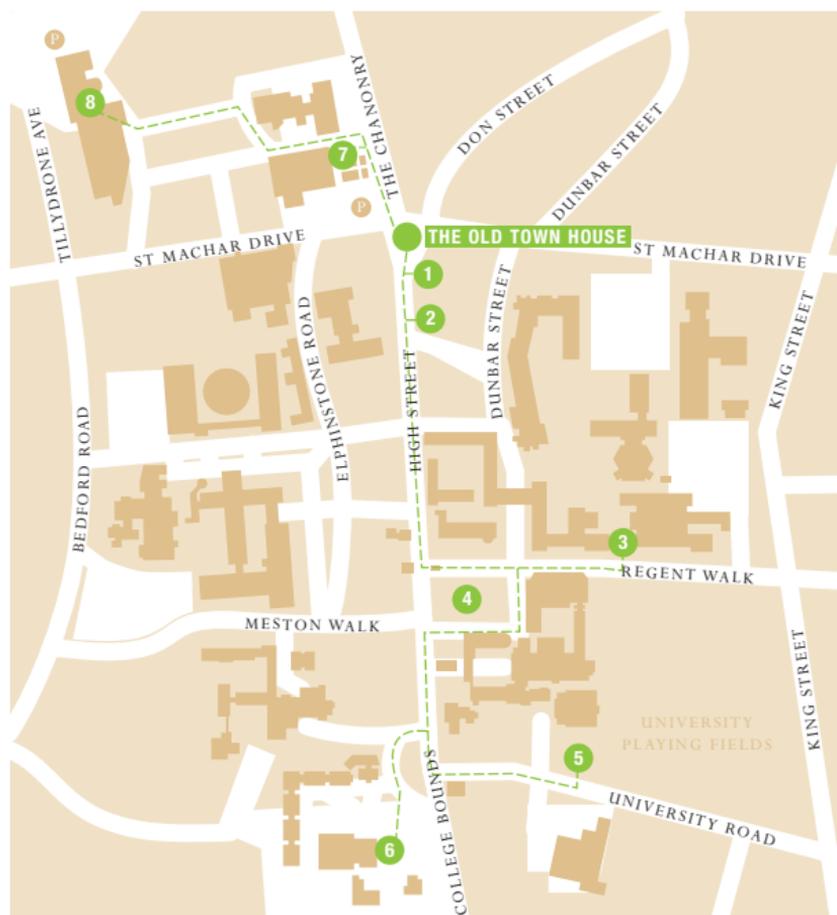
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Over 500 years ago Old Aberdeen was a wetland. Storks and cranes may have flown overhead with beavers and bears inhabiting the nearby Loch of Old Aberdeen (now St Machar School playing fields). Bishop Elphinstone, being a canny man, bought the land, drained it and founded one of Scotland's major learning institutions.

Natural history has always played an important part in the University of Aberdeen. From the days when medics studied plants as remedies to more modern times where the emphasis is on promoting our environment for future generations.

This tour begins at The Old Town House and lasts approximately an hour. Heading south down the High Street you will pass the houses of two of the University's eminent biologists, find out about several bird species, and visit a secret graveyard. The second part of the tour takes place to the north of The Old Town House, where you can explore the intriguing Cruickshank Botanic Garden and Natural History Centre. Please note that the Cruickshank Botanic Garden and the Natural History Centre have restricted opening times, which are noted at the back of this booklet.

# KING'S COLLEGE CAMPUS



1 No.110 HIGH STREET

2 No.70 HIGH STREET

3 UNIVERSITY OFFICE

4 KING'S LAWN

5 TENNIS COURTS

6 SNOW KIRK

7 CRUICKSHANK BOTANIC GARDEN

8 THE NATURAL HISTORY CENTRE  
AND ZOOLOGY MUSEUM

P PARKING



## 1 THE UNKNOWN SCIENTIST

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As you leave The Old Town House, turn left to see the first stop on this trail and the birth-place of one of Britain's most eminent naturalists – William MacGillivray (1796-1852).

MacGillivray was born at 110 High Street, 25 January 1796. After a childhood on the Isle of Harris, he completed courses in the arts, medicine and zoology at the University of Aberdeen and was appointed Professor of Natural History in 1841. He is regarded as one of the first British ecologists who encouraged his students to learn in the natural environment rather than becoming 'cabinet scientists'. He was a prolific author who published books on British plants, molluscs, quadrupeds and the natural history of the River Dee. His most accomplished work the *History of British Birds* (1837) remains unrivalled in the depth and range of its content.



## 2 DARWIN'S DILEMMA

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Next stop is number 70 – home to another influential biologist who lived on the High Street, Vero Wynne-Edwards (1906-1997). Up until the 1960s most biologists agreed with Darwin's theory of natural selection. Things however were about to change due to the inhabitant of this house!

Vero Wynne-Edwards held the Regius Chair in Zoology at the University of Aberdeen between 1946 and 1974. He was a talented naturalist and ornithologist who in 1962 published his foremost work – *Animal Dispersion in Relation to Social Behaviour*. Contrary to Darwin's theory, Wynne-Edwards proposed the new idea of group selection: that an individual acted not for themselves but for the good of the group regardless of whether it should bring them benefit or harm. Most biologists now disagree with Wynne-Edward's theory but he significantly raised the level of debate for all working within the fields of ecology and evolutionary biology.

### 3 URBAN CHICK



Walk down the High Street and turn left through the University's 400th Anniversary Arch to see a phenomenon rarely seen in any other city in the world! Continue along the cobbles, past Elphinstone Lawn, New King's, the Taylor Building, the Regent Building and take the next left, stopping outside the University Office.

Between February and July, staff working in this building are noisily serenaded from the rooftops by several pairs of black and white birds with orange bills. Oystercatchers naturally nest on shingle banks, but ten pairs have chosen an urban lifestyle and made a home out of these flat-roofed buildings due to the gravel layer that protects the underlying bitumen. Recently four roofs were replaced with a rubber coating, potentially threatening the oystercatchers' new habitat. Alistair Duncan, a local ornithologist working with the University's Estates Department, provided alternative nesting sites for the birds in the form of plastic seed trays filled with pebbles. The birds took to these instantly and have bred successfully ever since.

You can often see the birds foraging for worms on the playing fields nearby or 'piping' their assertive call from the corner of a building. Oystercatchers mate for life and can live for over 20 years. Aberdeen has the highest concentration of roof-nesting oystercatchers in Europe – no-one is quite sure why!



### 4 GUTSY GULLS

Retrace your steps back to the King's lawn flanked by Elphinstone Hall and King's College Chapel. It won't be long before you come across everyone's least favourite of birds – gulls.

The most common species you will see is the pale grey herring gull. Although loathed by many, these birds have a statuesque presence and an impressive intelligence. Originally coastal birds, thousands have moved inland to towns – to them buildings are simply undisturbed cliffs with few predators and an abundance of food.

Their behaviour is intriguing. Rain simulating, grass paddling is a technique used to catch worms. 'This is my patch' calls start with one bird throwing its head back and 'crying' – others usually join in. But watch out during Summer – gulls take parenthood seriously. Your first warning will be a ka-ka-ka call. Stay around and you will experience the 'go-away' head swoop, followed by the not-so-lucky guano attack. Be warned!



## 5 EXOTIC FOREIGNERS

Go back onto the High Street and turn left, passing King's College and Luthuli House. Turn left onto University Road and walk down the left side of the street. Stop at the first five trees in-between the high fencing of the tennis court.

Native to Scotland, these rowan trees are visited by some exotic looking foreigners during the Winter months – beautiful birds called waxwings. Between October and March, flocks of sometimes several hundred arrive from Scandinavia and Siberia in search of berries. Showing little fear of people, you can walk under the trees as the birds feed and enjoy a wonderful view of their rosy and charcoal smudged plumage. Waxwings are related to starlings and look very much like them in flight. Listen carefully for the difference – waxwings have a lovely trilling bell-like call. You can also see them on the tops of nearby trees and TV aerials.



## 6 THE TREE OF LIFE

Return to the High Street and cross over and through the archway. Turn left and walk along the shrubbery until the next gateway. You should see a small sign on the wall, at knee-height, indicating the Snow Kirk. Follow the path up into this intriguing cemetery.

Although now a graveyard, the Snow Kirk was built by Bishop Elphinstone in 1498 for the parish of Old Aberdeen. Beyond the gravestones that date between 1776 and 1902, the Kirk contains an impressive ash tree in its right hand corner, nearest the entrance.

The ash is native to Scotland and in Autumn produces seeds called keys or samaras. The wood is excellent for making drums, bows, tools and even baseball bats. Culturally, ash was considered to offer protection from harmful influences and even helped in curing earache, ringworm and snakebites. Yggdrasil, the World Tree that connected the nine worlds of Norse cosmology, is thought to have been an ash tree.

## 7 THE SECRET GARDEN



Leave the Kirk and head back towards the archway and the Rocking Horse Nursery. Turn left onto the High Street and walk towards The Old Town House. Take the left fork and cross over onto the cobbled Chanonry. The entrance to the jewel in the University's natural history crown – the Cruickshank Botanic Garden – is 20 metres along the left-hand side of the street. The Cruickshank Botanic Garden is open throughout the year from Monday to Friday, 9am to 4.30pm, and also on Saturdays and Sundays from May-September, 2pm to 5pm. Admission is free.

The 11-acre grounds were bequeathed in 1898 by Anne Cruickshank in commemoration of her brother Dr Alexander Cruickshank. Originally a private boys school, the garden was turned over to a vegetable allotment during the First World War and also houses what used to be Aberdeen Football Club's first pitch!



### A HEDGE FOR HOGS

Walk past the greenhouses and Cruickshank Building, taking the first left into a lawn of trees. Turn left again onto the lawn and walk over to the hedge that separates this from the next area of lawn.

This is what hedges used to look like. Planted in 1980 with several British species including blackthorn, field maple, hawthorn and honeysuckle. Hedges like this improve the biodiversity of the area and are excellent habitats for wildlife – from prickly mammals to buzzing beasties.

With your back to the wall on St Machar Drive, turn left at the weeping elm. Take the first right, down to the Sunken Garden.



### PASTURELAND

Also planted in 1980 this grassy area aims to recreate a meadowland of days gone by. At its best in late Spring, when it teems with fritillaries, dogtooth violets and dwarf narcissus, many insects visit to sip some of the first nectar of the year. The plants disperse their seed and the meadow is then cut in July or August. A further splash of colour appears in Autumn as meadow colchicum crocuses burst through the grass with their leafless pink petals.

Naturally occurring meadows are important habitats for barn owls, corncrake, skylark, hares, bats and many insects including lovely orange tip butterflies.



## THE NECTAR FILLING STATION

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Take one of the paths up the other side (towards the Zoology Building) and stop at the long border. This herbaceous border, originally created in the 1920s by Professor Craib contains perennials from around the world. Shoots appear in December with many of the plants reaching over 2 metres by August. Left standing long enough to disperse their seeds for next year, all stems are cut down in November and the whole cycle starts again. Species include phlox, Japanese anemones, hellebores, geraniums and cultivars of the annual tobacco plant nicotiana.

From April to October the border is Old Aberdeen's best restaurant in town for many six-legged creatures. From white-tailed bumblebees to marmalade hoverflies, thousands of insects visit daily to fuel up on nectar and pollen. Visit in August and September and you may be lucky enough to see some rarer Summer diners – red admirals, painted ladies and beautiful peacock butterflies – feeding on the tallest pink hemp agrimony.



## DUCKS-A-DABBLING

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Walk towards the Zoology Building but turn right through the beautiful wrought iron gateway, which was made in 1916. Turn right again and into the Rock and Water Garden, stopping when you get to the pond.

The Rock and Water Garden has six ponds – this being the largest. Built in the late 1960s to encourage aquatic life, the ponds are visited by herons, mallards, frogs and several bird species. The water itself is home to over twenty-five freshwater animals, including mayfly larvae, pond skaters, giant diving beetles, common frogs and palmate newts. Stand still for a few minutes and let your eyes adjust to the life buzzing in front of you. Plant life emerges in early Spring with purple orchids around the edge of the pond. By mid-Summer the pond is burgeoning with tall pink flowering rush, water forget-me-not, water lilies and the spear-shape leaved water soldier plant.

Walk around the large pond, past the silver birch tree and up the garden to a green map board. Turn left up the hill and through the gate – please close it behind you.



## THE SECRET WOOD

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Welcome to the University's Secret Wood! Originally a market garden this three-acre site was converted into an arboretum in 1966. Planted with over 100 species of tree, the Arboretum aims to show a diversity of trees found around the world – from alders to birches, beeches to firs. Paths are cut during the growing season but the rest of the area is left to encourage wildlife. Consequently the Arboretum is home to species including roe deer, fox, over fifteen species of garden bird, a resident pair of sparrowhawks and also tawny owls.



## 8 GO WILD AT THE NATURAL HISTORY CENTRE

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Open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

Last stop! Head back out of the Arboretum, down past the ponds and through the wrought iron gateway. This time turn right and head into the Zoology Building. Take the stairs beside the elephant skeleton down to the basement and to the Natural History Centre.

From elephant teeth to live insects, smelly plants and big skulls, the Natural History Centre allows everyone to explore our amazing living world. Over 7,000 children visit each year with their teachers, classmates and families. Individuals and their families are welcome to visit outside school session times – no need to book. Organised visits are available for school and community groups. Please call to discuss further on 01224 493 288.

Whilst in the Zoology Building, why not visit the Zoology Museum as well? The main gallery is in the basement, outside the Natural History Centre. The Bird Gallery is back up on the ground floor. Enjoy!





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More information on The Old Town House,  
The University and Old Aberdeen can be found at:

The Old Town House  
University of Aberdeen  
High Street  
Aberdeen  
AB24 3HE

t: 01224 273650

e: [oldtownhouse@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:oldtownhouse@abdn.ac.uk)

w: [www.abdn.ac.uk/oldtownhouse](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/oldtownhouse)

Open Monday to Saturday 9am to 5pm

You can visit or enquire about The Natural  
History Centre and Zoology Museum at:

University of Aberdeen  
Tillydrone Avenue  
Aberdeen  
AB24 2TZ

t: 01224 493288

w: [www.abdn.ac.uk/nhc](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/nhc)

w: [www.abdn.ac.uk/zoologymuseum](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/zoologymuseum)

Open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm

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Research:

Mandy Tulloch

University of Aberdeen Natural History Centre



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