

Old Aberdeen Trail

A guide to Old Aberdeen



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Welcome to Aberdeen, our beautiful and historic city by the sea! The area known as Old Aberdeen is a hidden wee gem – uniquely in Scotland, you can visit a medieval cathedral, a late medieval bridge, a 15th century college, and the fifth oldest university in the world, all in this one spot!

Old Aberdeen is one of the oldest parts of the city and was originally an independent town from Aberdeen from 1499 to 1891, and it retains a wonderful sense of history and place. There is an intriguing mix of architecture and street planning, ranging from medieval to fine examples of Georgian and Victorian buildings.

Old Aberdeen can be divided into three distinct areas – the oldest is the area around St Machar Cathedral known as the Chanonry which developed in the 12th and 13th centuries, the next is the merchant area around the Town House developed from 1489 when it became a Burgh of Barony by grant of a charter from King James IV, and the third area is the academic part which was developed after the foundation of King's College.

Have fun roaming around our beautiful city, discovering the plaques, and finding out a bit about its history through the Old Aberdeen Trail!



Key to Symbols

Uneven or steep slope



Wheelchair accessible



Not wheelchair accessible



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Front Cover Brig o' Balgownie © Aberdeen City Council

Introduction King's College and High Street
J Henderson, © Aberdeen University Historic Collections

No 2 Powis Gates © Aberdeen Library and Information Service

No 3 Snow Kirk from Sleser's *Theatrum Scotiae*, 1693
© Aberdeen Library and Information Service

No 4 Portrait of Bishop William Elphinstone
© Aberdeen University Historic Collections

No 8 Drawing of fragment of mercat cross
from *The Selected Writings of John Ramsay*, 1871

No 13 St Machar's Cathedral from *Destruction of Churches and Religious Houses in Aberdeen*, 1899

No 16 Benholm's Lodge from *Aberdeen in Bygone Days*, 1910



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1 St Margaret's Chapel and Convent, 17 Spital



When Dr John Mason Neale (the founder of The Society of St Margaret at East Grinstead in Sussex) became Rector of St John's Episcopal Church in Aberdeen, he and the Episcopalian Reverend John Comper felt there was a need in Aberdeen for a community like that in East Grinstead that would tend to the poor and sick. Through their efforts a convent was established and property on Spital purchased. The chapel of the convent (consecrated in 1892) was designed by Sir John Ninian Comper, son of the Reverend Comper. Sir Ninian Comper's original plan for the buildings was only realised as far as one bay to the north of the chapel. Other buildings on this site are a mixture of pre-existing buildings and some built for the convent. The tall tower of St Martha's (completed 1887) was built as a home for 'Working Class Girls' whilst St Margaret's Brae (No. 39 King's Crescent) was built (1879) as a family home for the Reverend Comper and is now the headquarters of the Episcopalian Diocese of Aberdeen and Orkney.



St Margaret's Convent Chapel

2 Powis Gates



These gates, topped off by Turkish style minarets, were erected by John Leslie of Powis, 1833-4. Powis House was built by John's father, Hugh Leslie of Powis, in 1802. The gates are topped by a crescent, which is the emblem of the Fraser family, who owned Powis estate prior to the Leslie family.

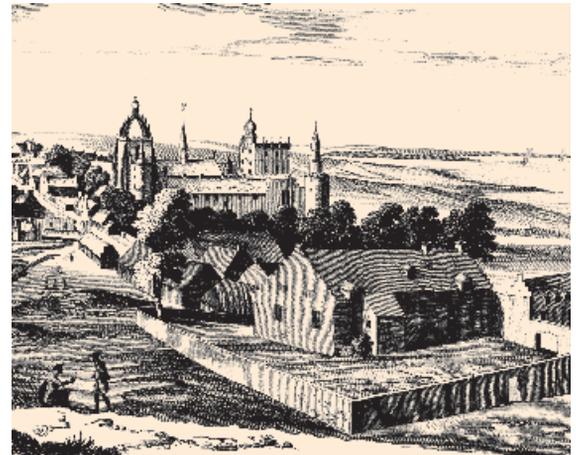


Powis Gates

3 Snow Kirk



Properly called St Mary Ad Nives (of the Snows), this was founded as the parish church when Old Aberdeen became a Burgh of Barony. The parish boundaries for this church date from 1498 and specifically excluded the canons of St Machar's who were to continue to attend service in St Machar's Cathedral. The church went out of use at the time of the Protestant Reformation in 1560, although the building survived for the next hundred years or so. Burials continued however; this was a problem for the Protestant authorities at the time as the burials here were of those who had a strong adherence to the old Catholic faith. One of the flat grave markers is of Gilbert Menzies, a 17th-century member of a very powerful local Catholic family.



Snow Kirk in 1693

4 Bishop Elphinstone



Elphinstone was the key force in the creation of King's College and the erection of Old Aberdeen into a Burgh of Barony, i.e. becoming an independent town. He was born, probably in Glasgow, in 1431, the illegitimate son of a canon of Glasgow. Brought up in his father's household near Glasgow Cathedral, he was ordained in 1455, graduated from the University of Glasgow in 1457 and later studied civil law at the University of Orléans. He entered the political arena when James III included him in an embassy to the French king in 1479. He was appointed Bishop of Aberdeen on 19 March 1483.



Bishop Elphinstone

He was active during the reign of James III as a senior appeal judge, auditor of the exchequer, a member of the King's council and from 1488 Chancellor. He was a staunch supporter of peace with England who strove to improve the judicial and ecclesiastical system in Scotland. Despite a brief period when he was out of favour at the start of the reign of James IV, Elphinstone again rose to high office, being appointed Keeper of the Privy Seal in 1492. In early 1514 he was nominated as Archbishop of St Andrews, but died shortly afterwards in Edinburgh on 25 October 1514. During his career he was also responsible for organising (and partly funding) the building of the Bridge of Dee and a series of building works at St Machar's Cathedral.

A splendid monument to him sits between King's College Chapel and the High Street. This bronze and marble sculpture was created by Harry Wilson in the early 20th century. Having proved to be too large for its original site within King's Chapel, it was moved to its current position in 1946.



Elphinstone's memorial

5 King's College



When founded this was Scotland's third University. With the exception of the chapel, little remains of the very first buildings on this site, which were grouped together as a quadrangle, the court of which remains. Exceptions to this are the 1525 Round Tower, located behind the Conference Centre and the so-called Cromwell Tower of 1661, which was built to contain 24 bedrooms, a cloakroom and a billiard room to accommodate the growing student numbers. Much of the remainder of the original buildings in the quad were replaced in the 1870s, whilst New King's, completed in 1913, complements the style of the older buildings.

The college contains the chapel with its splendid crown tower. Detailed guiding-boards are available just inside the entrance doorway. The closed crown at the top is an indication used by some renaissance princes to show that their authority in their lands was complete and not subject to a higher political power, namely the Holy Roman Emperor. This is distinct from an open crown, which admits of a higher authority. The present crown is a replacement, as the original was blown down in a storm in 1633. The chapel went out of use at the time of the Reformation (but is in use today) and incorporates a number of unique pre-Reformation features such as its choir stalls. Both colleges in Aberdeen, King's and Marischal, amalgamated in 1861 to form the University of Aberdeen. Today most teaching and research occurs here in Old Aberdeen.

The University of Aberdeen has produced a series of leaflets exploring its campus, its history and wildlife in greater depth. These are available in the Townhouse and other venues.



King's College

6 No 81 High Street

This building is the townhouse of the family of McLean of Coll. The foundation stone of the house was laid in 1771. The McLean family were prominent in local affairs, with Hugh McLean being chief magistrate in Old Aberdeen in the late 18th century. One of the actions taken under him was the construction of the fine Townhouse that we see today in Old Aberdeen. The wall in front of this building is made from Seaton bricks. These, used extensively in Old Aberdeen, were produced locally at the Seaton Brick and Tile works, which was located a little to the south of the mouth of the river Don.



No 81 High Street

7 Wrights' and Coopers' Place, Grant's Place & MacRobert Memorial Garden

Wrights' and Coopers' Place is named after one of the six incorporated trades of Old Aberdeen – woodworkers and barrel-makers. The Wrights and Coopers owned land here, which was feued (or leased out) and led to the building of this row of houses in the 19th century. The houses in Grant's Place date from the 18th century and are completed with curved, overlapping roof tiles known as pantiles. The area was restored in 1965 for the University and financed by the MacRobert Trust. In the same year Robert Hurd and Partners, the architects who restored Grant's Place, also created the MacRobert Memorial Garden at the end of Wrights' and Coopers' Place.

This commemorates Lady MacRobert, widow of Sir Alexander MacRobert Baronet, who had three sons. The first, Sir Alasdair, was accidentally killed flying his own aeroplane in 1938. His brother, Flight Lieutenant Sir Roderick MacRobert RAF, died over Mosul,



Wrights' & Coopers' Place

RAF, in May 1941. Younger brother Pilot Officer Sir Iain MacRobert RAF died over the North Sea on 30th June 1941. On 10th October 1941, Lady MacRobert made a gift of a Short Stirling four-engined bomber to the RAF, named *MacRobert's Reply*.

8 Mercat Cross

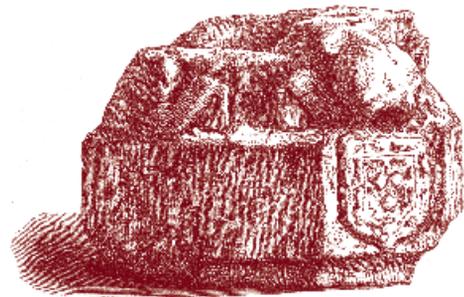
When Old Aberdeen became a Burgh of Barony in the late 15th century, it was required that a mercat cross should be erected. It would seem from the fragment that survives that this cross dates from some time about 1540. It was described in 1724 as having an image of the Virgin engraved on the north and south sides of the top of the cross as well as having coats of arms of the kings of Scotland and bishops Dunbar,



Mercat Cross and Townhouse

Stewart and Gordon. The image of the Virgin had been defaced at the time of the Reformation in 1560 whilst a crucifix from the cross was destroyed at the time of the Civil Wars in 1640. The Council of Old Aberdeen sold the cross in 1788-9, but a fragment of the remains resurfaced in 1841 in a smithy in Old Aberdeen. In 1951 this fragment was erected on top of a shaft in front of St Mary's Church, High Street, by the University of Aberdeen. It was transferred back to its current and original location in 1993.

In many ways the medieval mercat cross in Scotland was the centre of the burgh. Not only did it demarcate the area of the market but it was also the place from where proclamations and news were announced and where people were punished in a variety of different ways.



Fragment of Mercat Cross

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9 Townhouse



This Georgian building was designed by George Jaffray in 1788. At first it incorporated a Grammar School, an English School and a hall for the use of different societies and the Incorporated Trades of Old Aberdeen. It was in part funded by the Masons, who until recently retained the use of the attic to themselves. This replaced an earlier Townhouse completed in 1703 at a cost of £712/3/6. In turn that replaced an earlier complex of buildings dating to the later 1660s. Previously the council and trades had met in the School House. The panel above the door comes from another building, possibly an earlier version of the townhouse: it incorporates Old Aberdeen's arms under the burgh's motto 'By harmony small things increase'.

Behind the large timber doors was kept the handcart used for picking up drunks from the streets and transporting them back to the cells to sleep it off. You can see a vent at the side of the building, which was a source of light and air into the two police cells at the rear. The coat of arms on the east side of the building are those of the kings of Scotland with an imperial crown and are of unknown origin and date. The image of the building is used as the logo of The Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland.

The Townhouse has recently undergone restoration work, carried out by the University of Aberdeen, with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Aberdeen City Council. Today it is the visitor gateway to the University and its campus.



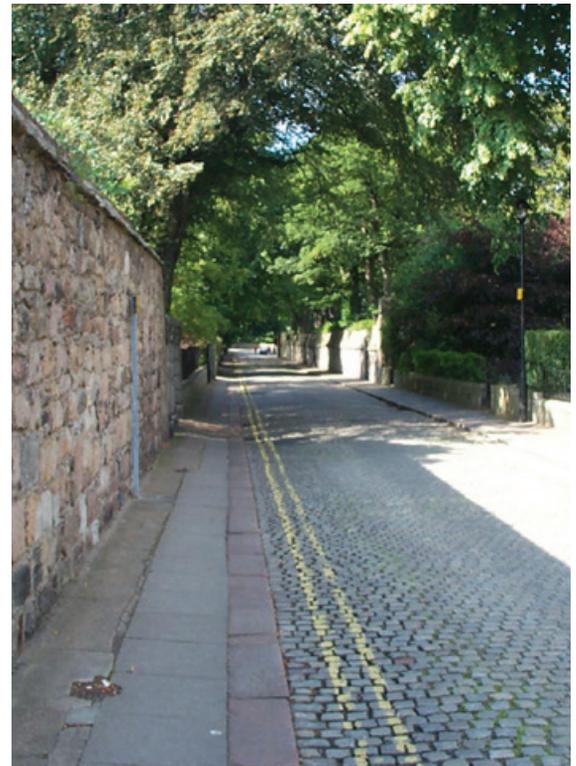
Townhouse and Mercat Cross

10 Chanonry



This historic street derives its name from the fact that it was once home to the canons (clergy) of St Machar's Cathedral. The college of canons was incorporated as early as 1240 although canons may have lived here for longer than that. Their manses were named for various areas in the diocese of Aberdeen which provided the stipend, or payment, for the canons: hence one named after Old Rayne and one after Clatt. Following the Reformation, most of these manses were demolished. However, some of the large plots of land upon which they sat have remained largely intact to this day. In the 17th century the Marquis of Huntly acquired Belhelvie and Daviot manses and enclosed their lands to create one large garden. Today the site accommodates Chanonry Lodge, home to the University of Aberdeen's Principal.

No.20 Chanonry incorporates elements older than the house itself. It sits on the site of what was the Chaplain's Court. Built in the 16th century, this provided lodging and schooling space for around 20 of the Chaplains of St Machar's Cathedral. The current 18th-century building incorporates elements of the old Court: part of an archway and a coat of arms of Bishop Dunbar are still painted to this day.



Chanonry



Cruickshank Botanical Garden

11 Cruickshank Botanical Garden



The Chanorly incorporates the Department of Plant and Soil Science, which includes the Cruickshank Botanical Gardens. These in part stand on what was Cluny's garden, formed in the early 17th century by the amalgamation of two Chanorly manse's gardens. The buildings here incorporate the old Chanorly House (Gymnasium) School. The Botanical Garden was established by Deed of Trust of 26 April 1898 on land bequeathed by Miss Anne Cruickshank to commemorate her brother Dr. Alexander Cruickshank. It was established for 'teaching and study of Botany as pure science, and as applied to the Arts and Industries, and for the furtherance of University interests and the public good.' Today the gardens include over 2500 plant varieties.

Opening Times (weekend entry via The Chanorly entrance)
October to March 9.00-16.30 April to September 9.00-19.00

12 Mitchell Hospital



Built in 1801, the founder and endower was David Mitchell LLD of Holloway Downe in the county of Essex, England. It was used for lodging, clothing, and maintaining five widows and five unmarried daughters of the Burgesses of Old Aberdeen.

The south west wing of the building was a later addition and in 1924 the building was converted into individual cottages.



Mitchell Hospital

13 St Machar's Cathedral



The Cathedral was named after a legendary disciple of Columba. Legend has it that Columba instructed his pupil to build a church near to where the river crooks like a bishop's staff. However the church here did not become a Cathedral until the 1100's when the seat of the Bishop was transferred from Mortlach (near Dufftown)



Artist's impression of St Machar's Cathedral in the 17th century

The Cathedral we see today is the result of a long period of building. Bishop Cheyne (1282-1328) began the rebuilding which was interrupted by the Wars of Independence. Bishop Kinnimund (1355-80) restarted work, which was continued by several bishops. The heraldic ceiling was installed by Bishop Dunbar (1518-32). After the Reformation of 1560 many of the treasures from the Cathedral were dispersed. St. Machar's then lost its position as a Cathedral, becoming a parish church, with most of its lands sold off. Cromwell's conquest of Scotland after 1650 had a great impact on the Cathedral. English troops took stones from the now abandoned choir to build a bastion, or stronghold, on Castlehill, Aberdeen. This weakened the tower and in 1688 it collapsed, taking much of the transepts with it.

In the 17th century a common loft was built in the Cathedral. This resulted in exclusive lofts being built for the Earl of Huntly, King's College and the merchants to display their place in society. The Cathedral features many fine examples of stained glass including Douglas Strachan's First World War Memorial and those by Cottier in the late 1800s. The north aisle organ is by Henry Willis, installed in 1891, whilst the font dates from 1954. The gatehouses were designed by John Smith and completed in 1832.

To the east of the Cathedral was the site of the palace of the Bishops of Aberdeen, built after 1328 and re-built in the 1600s. It survived until the Civil Wars when it was destroyed and the stone reused in other buildings, such as new work at King's College.

Opening Times

Sunday–Saturday: 09.30-16.30 (April–October)

Sunday–Saturday: 10.00-16.00 (November–March)



Seaton Park

14 Seaton Park

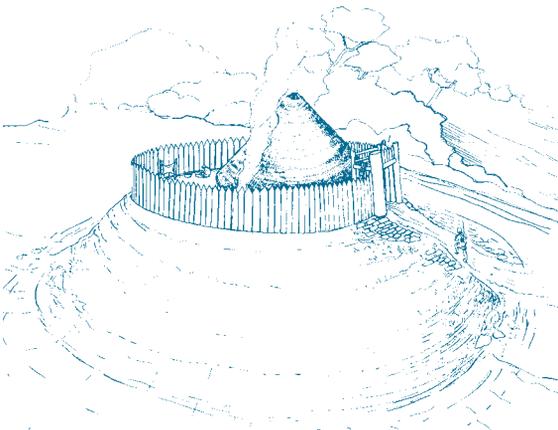


This park is formed on the central part of what was once Seaton estate. In the 17th century the estate was held by the Gordon family, and passed into the hands of the Forbes family in the 18th century. It was under this family that Seaton House was built, designed by James Gibbs. It was built of brick, not stone and more closely resembled a French or Belgian chateau than a north east estate house. By marriage the estate passed to the Hay family who were lairds of Seaton until the last laird, Malcolm Vivian Hay, in the early 20th century. The house burnt to the ground in 1963 and today a fountain marks its approximate location. The park includes a number of different features including a World War II pillbox hidden away in the trees at the slope below St Machar's Cathedral.

15 Tillydrone Motte



For many years this was thought to be a motte, a type of castle mound introduced to Scotland in the 12th century and often topped by a wooden fortification. Archaeological investigation revealed it to be far older. It appears to have been a defensive site in the 2nd century AD and may even have earlier origins as a prehistoric burial cairn.



Artist's Impression of Tillydrone Motte in the 2nd Century AD

16 Benholm's Lodge



Benholm's Lodge at its original location

Benholm's Lodge was built by Sir Robert Keith of Benholm, a younger brother of the Earl Marischal, who had founded Marischal College. Keith bought the land upon which the house once sat in 1588 and the house was built shortly afterwards. In 1965 its original site in Netherkirkgate was developed. The building was moved and reconstructed in its present location. A plaque marks its original location in the city centre whilst a second plaque on the building tells the story of the building and its travels.

The house is a fortified townhouse, with two round towers at the south-west and north east corners of the building. The building features a number of carved heraldic stones of interest. It also features a carved stone figure of a man holding a sword. In the 18th century the building acquired the name of the Wallace Tower and it has been suggested that the figure represents William Wallace. This is unlikely, as the figure is probably a representation of Robert Keith and the name Wallace Tower probably derives from Well-House Tower.

Over the centuries the house has had many different and varied occupants and uses. In 1768 it was owned by one John Niven, a snuff and tobacco merchant. Niven extended the front of the building and added a south wing. In 1895 one James Pirie, a spirit dealer, bought the house and it became the Wallace Tower Pub.

17 Brig o' Balgownie



Local legend suggests that this bridge was started by Bishop Henry Cheyne in the late 13th or early 14th century and completed by Robert the Bruce. Whilst this may or may not be true, historical documents show that the bridge we see today was the result of rebuilding work in three phases in the early 17th century. This was the main crossing on the Don leading to the north from Aberdeen and vice versa prior to the construction of the adjacent Bridge of Don in 1831. Today the Brig o' Balgownie is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. It is situated over a deep pool known as the Black Neuk. It has attracted much interest from various sources and features in Byron's poem, Don Juan.

"As 'Auld Lang Syne' brings Scotland, one and all,
Scotch plaids, Scotch snoods, the blue hills,
and clear streams,

The Dee, the Don, Balgownie's brig's black wall,

All my boy feelings, all my gentler dreams

Of what I then dreamt, clothed in their own pall,

Like Banquo's offspring; – floating past me seems

My childhood in this childishness of mine:

I care not – 'tis a glimpse of 'Auld Lang Syne.'"

Don Juan

Lord Byron

1788-1824



Brig o' Balgownie

Right: Old Aberdeen from Parson Gordon's map of 1661.
Reproduction courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.



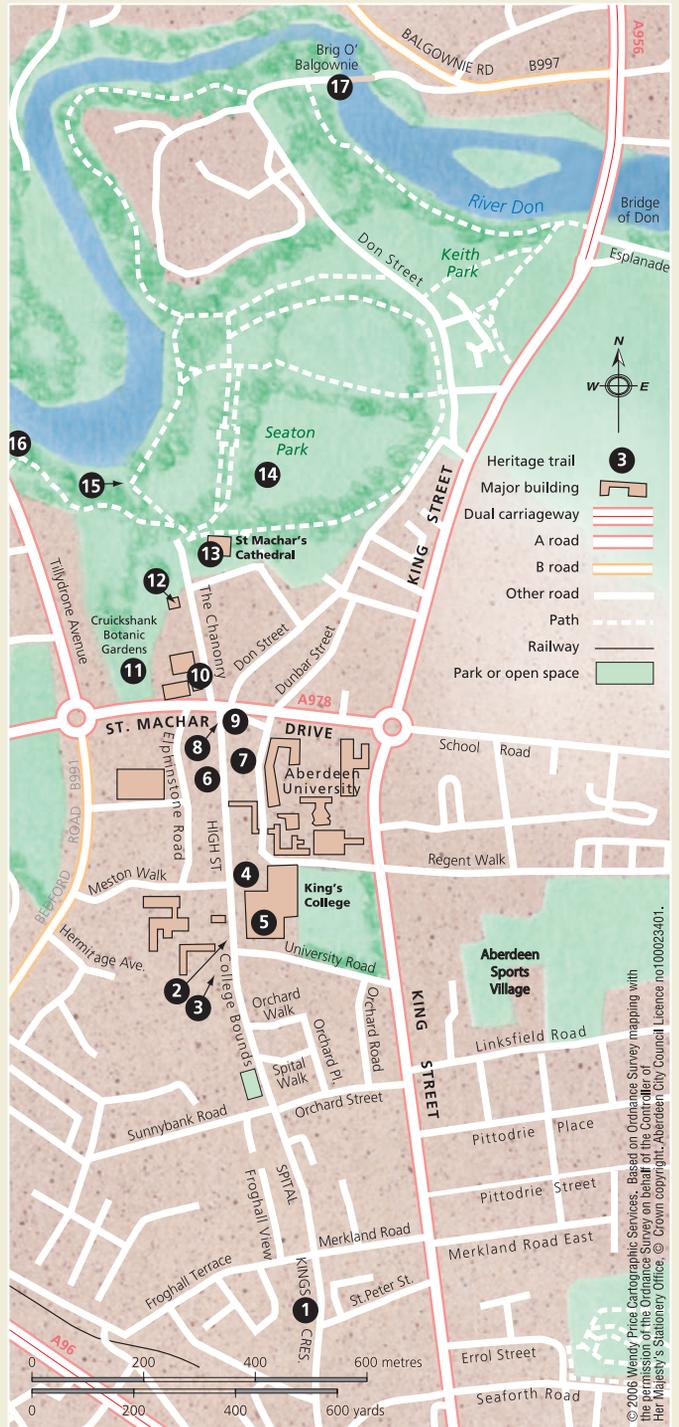


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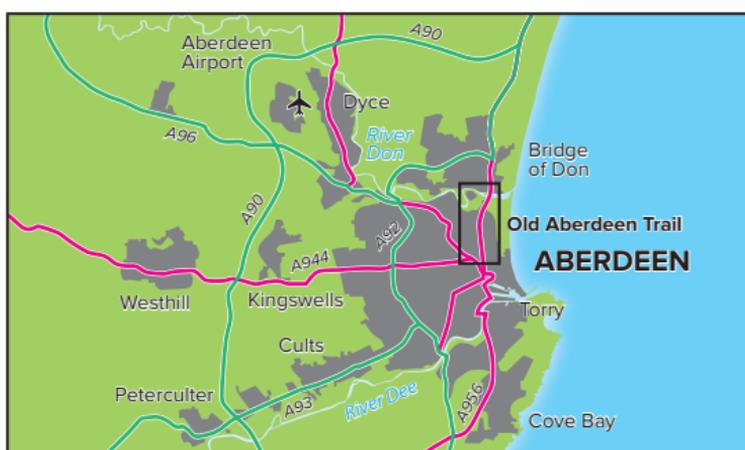
Please respect the privacy of the residents if you visit the area

The full trail is approximately 2.5 kilometres, or 1.3 miles, in length



Old Aberdeen

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03000 200 293



This is one in a series of themed trails in Aberdeen City, visit the website to see more: www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/trails

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