

# Bloody Aberdeen Trail

The darker history of the city



[#aberdeentrails](#)

# #aberdeentrails

This trail guide tells some of the darkest aspects of Aberdeen's history and depicts the stories that can become buried and hidden in our relatively peaceable time. Aberdeen is no different to anywhere in satisfying human's fascination with the macabre.

## Picture Credits

All images © Aberdeen City Council unless otherwise stated

**Opposite and 2, 11 & 15:** Details from Parson Gordon's map of 1661. Entry 1: Regno di Scotia, 1558-1566, the oldest printed map of Scotland. Reproduction of above maps courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.

**Over page (top right) and 3:** G. & W. Paterson's *A Survey of Old and New Aberdeen with the Adjacent Country Between the Rivers Dee and Don*, 1746  
**13, 14, 17, 18 & 22:** Newspaper archives courtesy of Aberdeen Journals Ltd.

**3, 4, 8 & 12:** Courtesy of Aberdeen City Libraries/Silver City Vault [www.silvercityvault.org.uk](http://www.silvercityvault.org.uk)

**6:** Janette Douglas, Aberdeen Women's Alliance

**20:** By Colin Smith from Wikimedia Commons

## Accessibility

 All of the locations in this booklet are accessible.

## Transport

This trail is intended to be walked or cycled. However various buses serve the city centre via Union Street. Please consult First Bus / Stagecoach for specific route details if required. The following buses serve the outlying locations:

**14) Jackson Terrace & 15) Gallows Hill** First Bus 13 – or as **16)** below)

**16) St Peters Cemetery** First Bus 1, 2 & 20, Stagecoach buses for Ellon, Peterhead & Fraserburgh

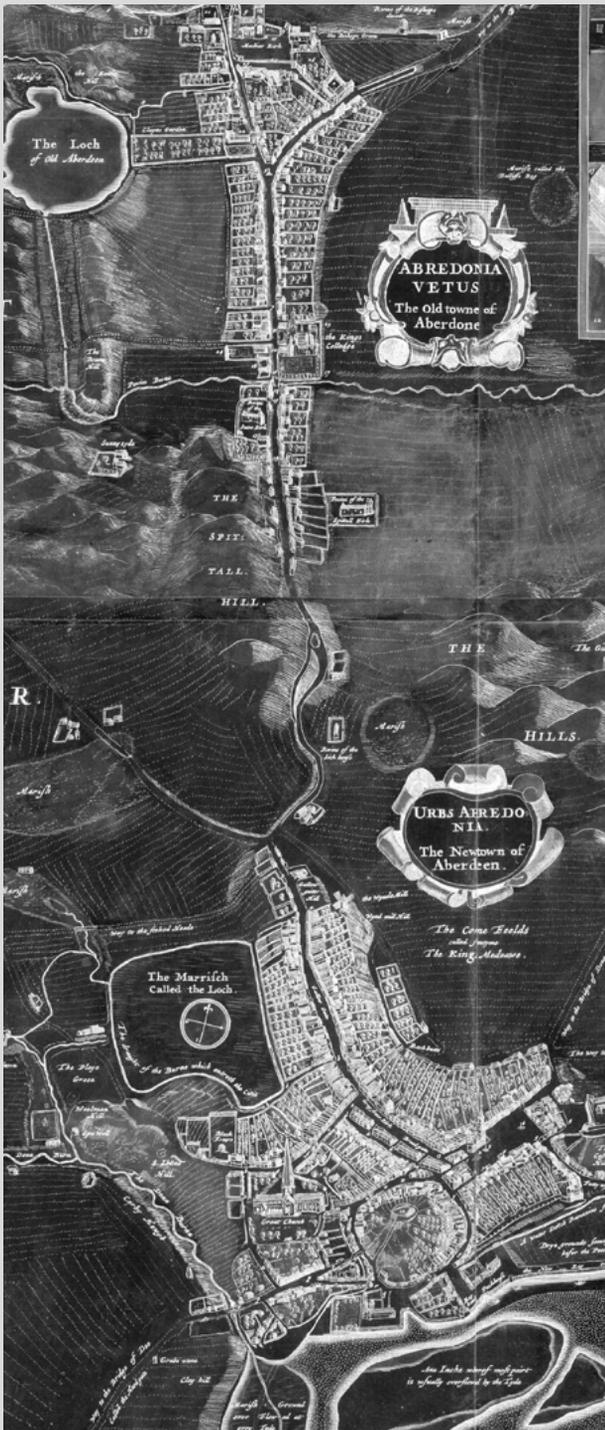
**17) Great Northern Road** First Bus 8a, 17, 23, 172, X27 Stagecoach 727 Airport Bus

**22) Great Western Road** First Bus 1, 2 & 19, Stagecoach buses for Banchory, Ballater & Braemar



Show off your photos on  
Instagram @aberdeen\_cc

#beautifulABDN





## Crime & Punishment

- 1563 4 June** Scottish Witchcraft Act passed, repealed 1735

---

- 1817** Whipping abolished for women

---

- 1830 8 October** Last woman hanged in Aberdeen

---

- 1832** Anatomy Act passed – ending bodysnatching

---

- 1948** Whipping abolished for men. Public whipping moved indoors in 1830s

---

- 1963 15 August** Last man hanged in Scotland at Craiginches, Aberdeen

---

- 1964 13 August** Last man executed in UK, last woman in 1955

---

- 1969** Capital punishment abolished for most offences in mainland UK. Northern Ireland abolished in 1973. Retained for treason, piracy, arson in royal dockyards & espionage.

---

- 1973** Abolition of beheading for treason

---

- 1982** Two Scottish mothers win case at European Court of Human Rights, that parents had the right to refuse corporal punishment of a child. This indirectly led to it being banned by law in UK state schools

---

- 1998** Human Rights Act fully abolishes death penalty

---

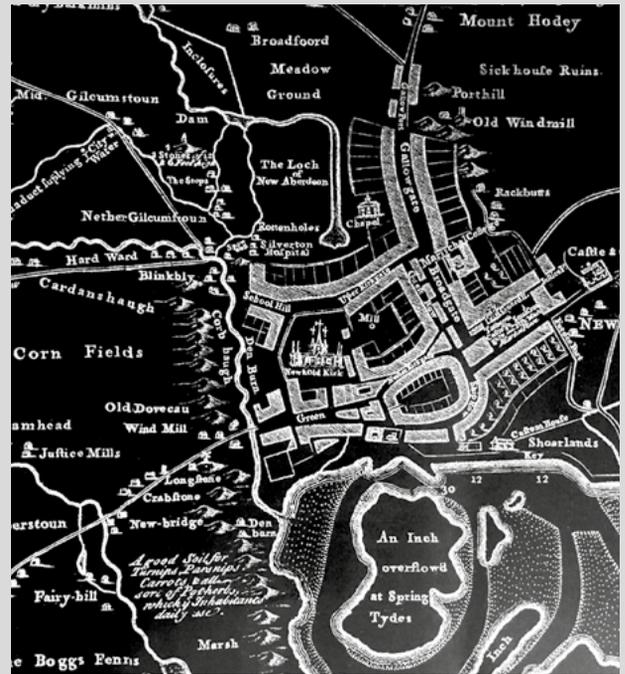
- 2019** Scotland first in UK to ban smacking children

## Bloody Aberdeen

Like most cities, Aberdeen has an infamous history of real life crimes, and some of the murders that are highlighted in this trail may well have influenced the work of modern crime fiction writers celebrated at the annual crime writing festival, Granite Noir. The theme of blood splattered granite goes beyond isolated incidents of murder and delves into Aberdeen's rich history of battles, bodysnatching, and official punishments such as drawings, torturing, witch-burning and beheading.

Aberdeen's history of crime and punishment is well represented in sources such as the UNESCO recognised Burgh Records, the best and most complete burgh records in Scotland. The council minutes run almost complete since 1398 giving historians excellent opportunities to study the political, social, and economic life of the burgh and transcriptions are now available to view online.

From these records, the administrative nature of the texts diminishes the emotion of what to modern eyes is the brutal realities of medieval and early modern crime and punishment. For example, the accounts of the Dean of Guild list the items used for the burning of witches in 1596 and 1597 and their costs. Interspersed are the names of



the condemned, reminding us of the human suffering during a witch hunt that is hard for us to comprehend.

It is also difficult for us to imagine military invasions encroaching on the safety of Aberdeen and its citizens, or what now would be termed war crimes taking place in the streets. This is what happened in Aberdeen in 1644. Social unrest was also stirred up in the early 1800s by the bloody business of bodysnatching supplying the demand for fresh corpses from anatomy lecturers and students. Aberdeen was an important centre for medical teaching in Scotland at the time.

The trail covers 800 years of Aberdeen's history, and although it is mostly based around the city centre and Union Street, it also spans north towards Old Aberdeen and Kittybrewster. It should take approximately two hours. Although this trail can be walked all year round, for optimum atmosphere you should pick a cold, crisp, autumnal day...





### 1 Viking Raid Aberdeen Harbour

King Eystein of Norway is recorded as having attacked Aberdeen, probably in 1151. The 'Heimskringla' Saga of the kings of Norway refers to King Eystein with three small longboats 'attacked in Scotland the market town of Aparidion, and slew there many men and plundered the town.' With no further evidence of this Viking attack it is hard to be sure, but they may have entered the town through the harbour. The raid was an extension of the King's campaign to force Earl Harald of Orkney, then part of the Viking world, to swear fealty to him. The exact reasons for the raid are unclear, but Aberdeen was possibly associated with the Earl politically.

### 2 Drownings at the Quayhead Shore Brae

During the 1500s, drowning was one of a few methods of execution in Aberdeen and this would often take place at the Quayhead of the harbour, which would have been at the foot of present-day Shore Brae. On the 8 February 1584, Alexander Blyndcele was drowned for the murder of Alexander Anderson, one of the poor in St. Thomas's Hospital. Blyndcele was a member of a rich and influential north-east family which included Robert Blinseile of Pitmuckston, Provost of Aberdeen in 1482. Another example is Elspeth Mychall, wife of the Burgess Patrick Mavor, who was convicted of child murder and publicly drowned at the Quayhead on 27 March 1587. This feature is spelled "Key head" in the above map.



### 3 Anatomy Riot 1829 Guestrow

In the late 1820s, using corpses for anatomical research was a hot topic, not least because of the infamous murderers Burke and Hare's crimes in Edinburgh. Despite being legal in Aberdeen, the dissection of bodies by anatomists and students created a demand that graverobbers exploited. In 1829, when the Aberdeen public heard of an anatomist giving lectures in a building in Guestrow, it aroused suspicion and the sight of a dissected corpse inside provoked a crowd to break the windows. It took the Town Sergeants to restore order, who duly removed the body, but on leaving, the crowd continued to ransack the building. This anatomy room never reopened.

**Guestrow:** A name unique to Aberdeen, but its origin is obscure. Some suggest 'Ghaistraw' means street of spirits or ghosts.



### 4 Butcher Cumberland's Lodging 1746 Provost Skene's House, Guestrow

The oldest building in the city centre, a portion of Provost Skene's House dates to 1545 and is named after George Skene, provost of Aberdeen from 1676 to 1685. It is also associated with Prince William, Duke of Cumberland, one of the most controversial historical figures in Scotland who lodged here during the 1745-46 Jacobite Rebellion. He arrived in Aberdeen with his government army in late February 1746, just days after the rebel Jacobites had vacated the town. The two armies eventually met at Culloden, near Inverness on 16 April 1746. Following the Jacobite defeat, the Duke gained the nickname 'Butcher Cumberland' for the killings of fleeing and suspected Jacobites following the battle. The aftermath of Culloden is also described at the Jacobite Cell in the Tolbooth Museum (see entry 6) and the historical period in the **Aberdeen Jacobite Trail**.





### 5 Whipping Stone Broad Street

This small square of stones on the corner of Broad Street and Union Street is reputedly the site where criminals were publicly whipped. Whipping, or scourging, was one of the many punishments that the town's hangman was responsible for. Following his appointment as hangman on 18 February 1596, John Justice's duties included 'executions, banishment, scourging, burning and tormenting.' Often people were whipped through the streets of the burgh, sometimes as a prelude to banishment. In Britain, public whipping was abolished for women in 1817 and moved indoors for men in the 1830s. It was only finally abolished in 1948.



### 6 The Tolbooth and Hanging Stone Castle Street

There is evidence of a prison existing on this site since the early 1400s.

What we see today as the Tolbooth is the warehouse, which was completed in 1629. It was a place of great suffering and misery for its prisoners. Accused witches were kept here whilst awaiting trial in the 1630s and 1640s. In 1650, following the execution of the Marquis of Montrose in Edinburgh, one of his limbs was suspended outside the Tolbooth. From 1776, all town hangings were conducted immediately outside the Tolbooth and the site is marked by a square set of cassie (cobble) stones. In 1857, the last public hanging in Aberdeen took place here when John Booth was convicted of murdering his mother in law.



### 7 Military Riot 1802 Castlegate

The birthday of King George III on 4 May 1802, saw a customary celebration at the Town House. The Ross and Cromarty Rangers, a Highland regiment who were stationed nearby at the barracks on Castlehill had been invited, and the soldiers had indulged in drink during the celebration. On their return to the barracks, a group of boys and young men who had been throwing dirt and dung at each other in the Castlegate turned their attention to the soldiers and tensions escalated. This resulted in the shooting dead of four civilians and many were wounded. In the ensuing trial in Edinburgh, two officers were found not guilty to the charges, and two sergeants 'not proven'.



### 8 Justice Port Justice Street

Justice Street is named after Justice Port, one of the town's lockable gates that existed from the Middle Ages until it was removed in the late 1700s. It was here that criminals condemned to execution were led from the Tolbooth, through the Justice Port to Gallows Hill (see entry 15). The heads of executed criminals were often impaled on the top of the gate. In 1588, James Paterson, the hangman of Aberdeen, was hanged for the murder of John Wischart, and his head was ordered to be placed on the Justice Port.





Locations shown on 1868 Ordnance Survey map

Reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Scotland



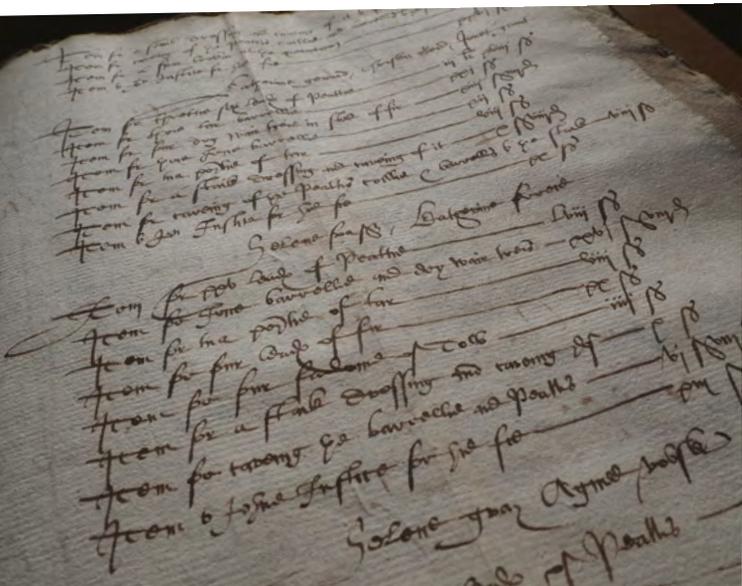
## 9 The Legend of 'Bon Accord' Castlehill

A castle existed on this site in the medieval period until 1308, when it was attacked by Aberdonians in support of King Robert the Bruce. When the castle was taken, the English garrison was put to the sword and the castle was destroyed. A detachment of English troops was sent to

the town in response and were soon slaughtered by Bruce's followers, with many prisoners put to death. The secret password used by the people of the town in the attack on the castle was 'Bon Accord' ... or so the legend goes. This mostly comes from the writings of historian Hector Boece 200 years later, with the 'Bon Accord' legend appearing from the late 1600s. However, it is not supported by contemporary evidence. It is likely that Bruce's forces would have conducted the attack on the castle instead of the townspeople, and 'Bon Accord' first appeared on the town's seal in 1430.

## 10 The Execution of Witches 1597 Castlehill

In the late 1590s, Scotland saw a nation-wide witch hunt, influenced by James VI's fear of witchcraft. A recent storm thought to have been raised by witches had threatened James and his wife's return voyage by ship from Denmark. In 1597, there were 31 cases of witchcraft in Aberdeen. Of the accused who were mainly women, 27 people were executed by burning. These were great public spectacles and in the case of the burning of Margaret Clerk, four 'spars' were used to withstand the press of the watching crowd, two of which were broken. There are two possible sites for these burnings, referred to as 'The Hill' in the Burgh Records. Traditionally thought to be Castlehill, it could also refer to a nearby site of execution called Heading Hill (entry 11). The page below from the Dean of Guild Accounts shows an itemised account for the execution of witches in 1597.



## 11 Heading Hill Castlehill, East of Commerce Street

Heading Hill was a place of executions, its name referring to the beheadings that took place here. In 1574, John Ewyne, a burghess of Aberdeen, was hanged and beheaded for the crime of coining, and in 1579 Thomas Wright, a servant to Lord Forbes, was beheaded for the murder of a servant of the Laird of Garty. During the late 1500s and early 1600s, beheading in Aberdeen was carried out by a machine known as The Maiden, which was like a guillotine. Its blade can be seen today in the Tolbooth Museum (entry 6).



## 12 The Last Woman to be Hanged in Aberdeen Albion Street, 'Bool Road'

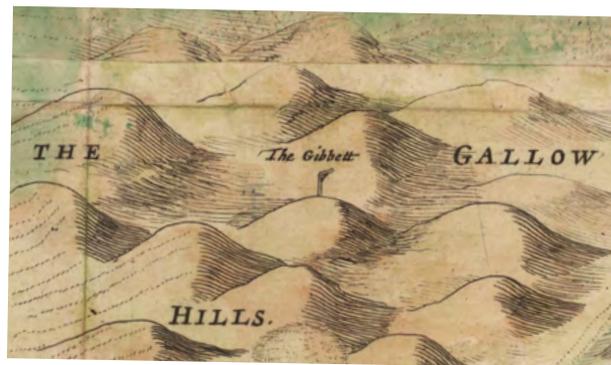
What is now the Beach Boulevard used to be a street known as the Bool Road. It was a place with a notorious reputation for debauchery, not least because of the 'Penny Rattler' theatre (on the right in the picture above) offering cheap comedy and melodrama until the 1840s. It was here that the married couple Kate and James Humphrey owned a pub. They became heavy drinkers themselves and continually argued leading Kate to poison her husband with a phial of vitriol which led to his death. On Friday 8th October 1830, she was hanged at the Castlegate, the last woman to be executed in Aberdeen.



### 13 **Murder at the Saltoun Arms Frederick Street**

The Saltoun Arms pub was the site of a grisly murder on the night of 9 January 1901 which involved butcher colleagues from the nearby Wales Street slaughterhouse.

James Harrow had been harbouring a grudge at being continually overlooked for promotion. He was joined in the pub by the foreman butcher William Tastard and John 'Jeek' Rae, who were trying to placate him. Harrow brutally stabbed Tastard with a butcher knife, and then stabbed another colleague David Ewing, who was in the pub and became involved. An attempt was made to attack 'Jeek' Rae but was thwarted and Rae managed to escape. With evidence of Harrow suffering from mental illness, he was found 'insane' in court and eventually jailed in Perth Prison.



### 15 **Gallows Hill Erroll Street**

Prior to hangings taking place outside the Tolbooth on the Castlegate, they took place here at the Gallows Hill. The gibbet can be seen on Parson Gordon's map of 1661 above. A common sentence was for the body to be removed and re-hung in chains, and left until it fell to pieces. The remains would then be buried at the foot of the gallows. The last person to hang here was Alexander Morrison in 1776. He had attacked his wife with an axe following an argument. She survived the blow but died several days later in the Royal Infirmary without regaining consciousness.



**'I don't think he  
should hang'—  
Guyan's mother**

### 14 **Last Man to be Hanged in Scotland 14 Jackson Terrace**

The last person to be hanged in Scotland was Henry John Burnett, which took place at Craiginches Prison, Aberdeen's former prison on the south side of the River Dee, on 15 August 1963. Burnett met, and fell in love with Margaret Guyan, a colleague at John R Stephen Fish Curers. Margaret was married to a merchant seaman Thomas Guyan, who was at sea when she started her relationship with Burnett. On her husband's return, Margaret returned to stay with her husband at their home at 14 Jackson Terrace. It was here that a jealous Burnett took a shotgun belonging to his brother, and shot Thomas at close range in the face.

### 16 **Bodysnatching at the Spital Burial Ground St Peter's Cemetery**

The Aberdeen Medico-Chirurgical Society was founded by medical students in 1789. In 1801, Charles Jameson, a student of medicine, and unnamed accomplices were accused of taking the body of James Marr from the burial ground of the Spital Churchyard, where St Peter's Cemetery exists today. Unsurprisingly this incident was not recorded in the Society minutes as the accused was the secretary at the time! However, the incident is recorded in the minutes of 1806 and records that on the body being discovered it was returned to the grave the same night. The judge imposed a fine of one guinea, but this was never obtained.

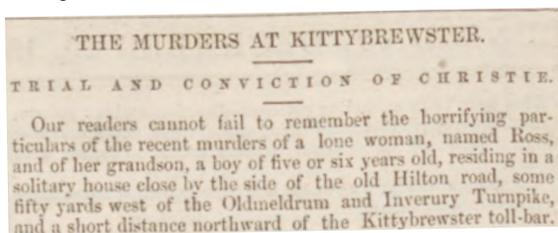




### 17 Kitybrewster Axe Murderer Great Northern Road

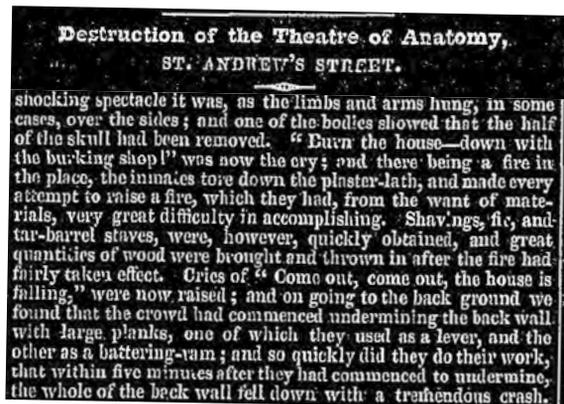
On Monday 4 October 1852, a farmer named Peter McRobbie became suspicious of activity from one of his tenant's cottages just north of the Kitybrewster Toll. The area existed outside the town at the time. Instead of finding his tenant

Barbara Ross at home, McRobbie discovered a farm labourer named George Christie inside the cottage who claimed Mrs Ross was not in. Later, when McRobbie returned with a policeman and a fellow farmer, the bodies of Barbara and her son John were found inside with horrific axe wounds. Christie was hanged for the crime which was motivated by a disagreement between him and Mrs Ross over the payment for milk. He had recently been denied his wages and was under financial strain at the time.



### 18 Anatomy Riot 1831 St Andrew Street

The renowned Aberdeen anatomist Dr. Andrew Moir opened an anatomy theatre in St Andrew Street in 1831. Shortly after opening, the tense atmosphere between anatomists and the public was stoked when a group of boys noticed a dog digging in wasteland at the back of the building and discovered human remains. This aroused a crowd which forced Dr Moir to flee his theatre. The discovery of corpses in the building led to looting and ransacking, and eventually the building was burnt down. The next year the 1832 Anatomy Act was passed, which allowed anatomists easier legal access to corpses and put an end to the trade in bodysnatching.



### 19 Child Kidnapping The Green

One of the darkest episodes in Aberdeen's history is the kidnapping of children during the 1740s to be sold as indentured servants in the American colonies. Hundreds of children from Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire were tricked or forcibly taken from their families. Leading Aberdeen merchants and magistrates were complicit in the trade, and it took the efforts of Peter Williamson, known as Indian Peter, to incriminate them 20 years after leaving Aberdeen as a child in the early 1740s. He wrote a book about his experiences and returned to Aberdeen, but was arrested, found guilty of libel, and his book was burned. He took his case to the Court of Session in Edinburgh and finally won in 1762. A house at the foot of the steps linking the Green to Union Street, since demolished in the late 1800s, is reputedly one of the locations where merchants incarcerated the children. It is said that a piper was employed to drown out their cries.

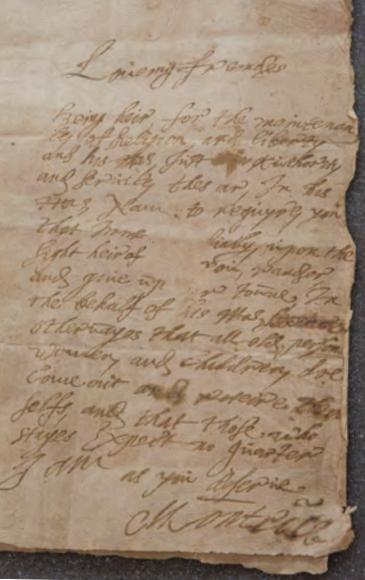


### 20 The Battle of Craibstone – The Craibstone Boundary Stone Justice Mill Lane

The battle of Craibstone in 1571 was fought between two rival North-east families, the Forbes and the Gordons. The Craibstone, a medieval boundary marker for lands granted to the Crab family, was an important landmark on the Hardgate leading to the Bow Brig, the only entrance to the town from the south. The Master of Forbes army approached the Craibstone early in the morning



and engaged with Adam Gordon's forces who had occupied the town. The Master of Forbes was defeated in a bloody battle with significant casualties and deaths on both sides. The following day, £10 Scots was donated to the provost of Aberdeen to bury the dead. It's unclear if this is the original stone, but it has certainly moved from its original position and is now incorporated into a wall.



## 21 The Battle of Justice Mills – The Hardgate Well Hardgate

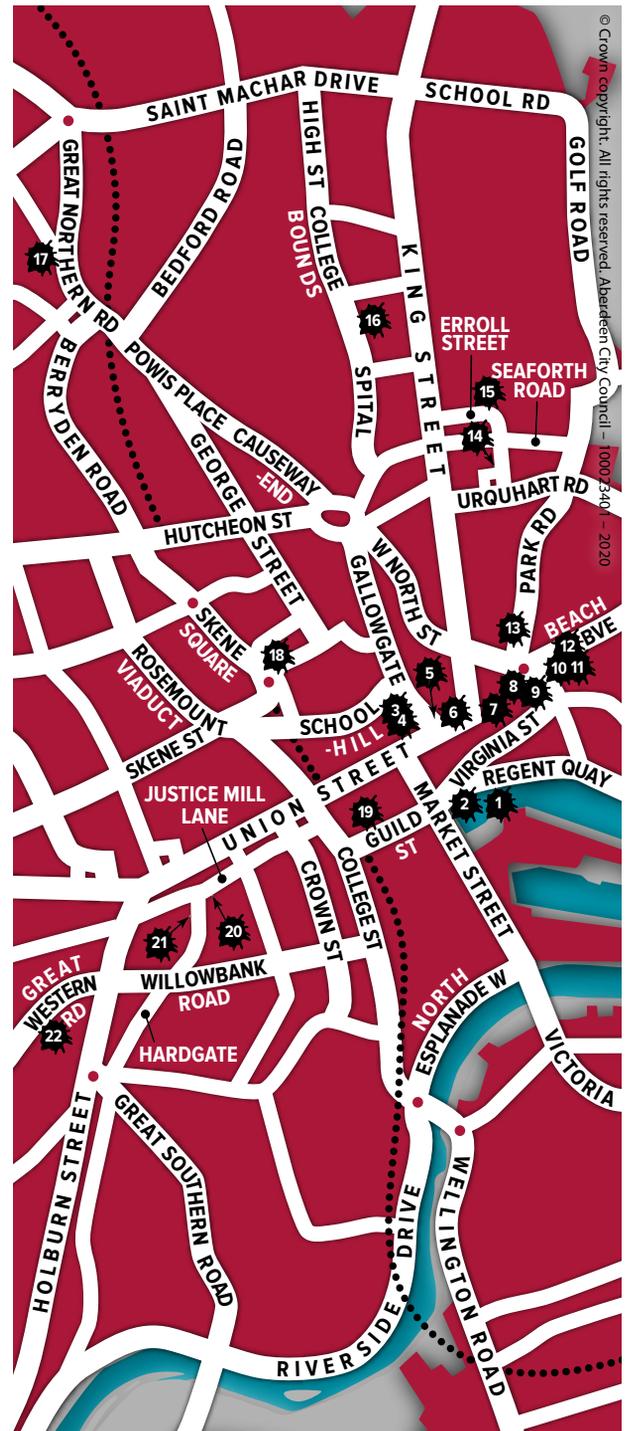
Following the Battle of Justice Mills in 1644, the Hardgate Well supposedly “ran red” with blood, from the injured and dying. The Marquis of Montrose’s royalist army of largely Irish mercenaries defeated a Covenanting army, including a militia of Aberdeen men, defending the town. The killing of the Royalist drummer boy following delivery of Montrose’s terms ensured that following the Royalist victory there would be no mercy shown. The Irish troops entered the town killing any man, young and old,

raping women, and pillaging for several days. During the massacre nothing was heard “bot pitifull howling, crying, weiping, murning, throw all the streittis”. Montrose himself was shocked at the carnage on entering the town, and ordered the bailies to begin cleaning the streets and burying the dead. The letter above, signed by the Marquis of Montrose on the eve of the Battle of Justice Mills, exhorts all women and children to come out of the town, and anyone who remains should “expect no quarter”.

## 22 Nellfield Cemetery Great Western Road

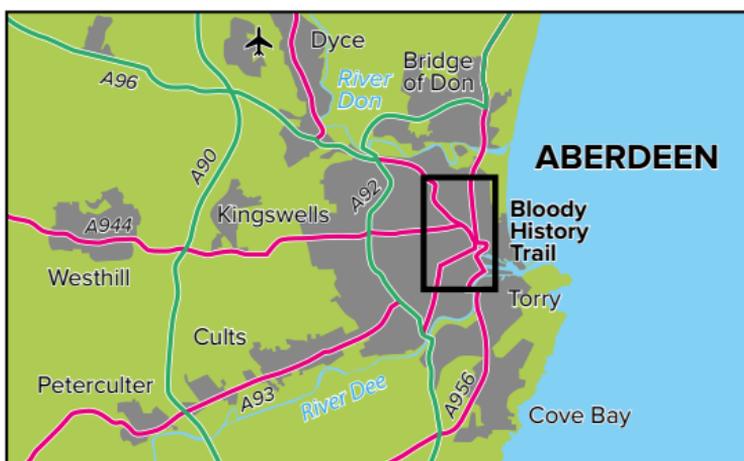
A case in Aberdeen in 1899 harked back to the days of bodysnatching, and reinforced the strong feelings that existed on the sanctity of the dead. William Coutts, the superintendent of Nellfield Cemetery appeared at the High Court in Aberdeen accused of moving and breaking up of coffins, and the dumping of the remains of deceased in other graves. Although he was freeing up space and therefore profits, the owners of the cemetery, The Bakers Corporation, didn’t appreciate the actions as it damaged its reputation. Coutts was sentenced to six months in jail, a sentence that many viewed as too lenient.

THE NELLFIELD CEMETERY SCANDALS.	
—	RESUMPTION OF OFFICIAL INVESTIGATION,
—	FIFTEEN HOURS’ DIGGING.
—	MORE SHOCKING DISCLOSURES.
—	NUMEROUS BODIES MISSING.
—	THE TOOLHOUSE PIT.
—	COMPLETE CORPSE DUG UP.



# Bloody Aberdeen

The darker history of the city



© Crown copyright. All rights reserved. Aberdeen City Council – 100023401 – 2020



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

## #aberdeentrails

### For further information contact

Visit Scotland Aberdeen iCentre  
**01224 269180**  
[www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com)

Visit Aberdeenshire  
[www.visitabdn.com](http://www.visitabdn.com)  
follow on Instagram  
**@visitabdn**

For public transport information contact Travel Line  
[www.travelinescotland.com](http://www.travelinescotland.com)

For a large text version contact  
**03000 200 293**

