

# Aberdeen Denburn Trail

The small stream that shaped a city



#aberdeentrails



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16 1st edition Ordnance Survey, courtesy of the National Library of Scotland

## Accessibility

 Mostly accessible but covers uneven ground and some steep slopes

## Transport

The following buses link between the locations and central Aberdeen.  
A day ticket allows unlimited travel by the same bus operator

**First Bus 11:** Woodend and various points along the Denburn

**First Bus 23:** Sheddocksley. The terminus for buses **11 & 23** is within easy walking distance of Maidencraig Local Nature Reserve

**Stagecoach 14 & X17:** Kingswells. Buses for Westhill, Alford and other destinations also stop at Kingswells

## Cycling

**Cycle routes:** [www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/cycle-maps](http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/cycle-maps)

**Kingswells to Maidencraig:** The Westhill road, Skene Road and Lang Stracht are busy but have good off-road shared pedestrian/cycleways

**Maidencraig to Anderson Drive:** Lang Stracht is a busy route but has cycle provision and alternatives such as Eday Road. Queen's Road can be busy but has cycle provision and alternative routes

**Anderson Drive to Esslemont Avenue:** Mostly suburban in nature other than Queen's Road which can be busy but has alternatives

**Esslemont Avenue to Union Terrace:** Can be busy on Skene Street and Rosemount Viaduct. Alternative low level route via Denburn Centre.

**Union Terrace to Harbour:** This is an urban city centre area with busy roads and best explored on foot. Union Terrace Gardens is pedestrian

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This is the story of Aberdeen's largely hidden third watercourse – the Denburn. Geographically a tributary of the Dee which it joins at Aberdeen Harbour, it rises just inside the city boundaries, flowing past Aberdeen's grandest mansions at Rubislaw and historically its most humble homes in the former mill village of Gilcomston (opposite). Much of the route is rural or suburban where it runs as a continuous stream. However there are urban sections too and even underground it leaves traces and legacy.

Denburn is a hybrid Scots word, 'den' here meaning a valley and 'burn', a small stream. Likewise the 'aber' in Aberdeen means 'mouth of' (a river or sea). There's less agreement on 'deen' but it could come from Den rather than Dee. Either way, this modest waterway plays a big part in our history and shaped one of the city centre's main natural features, the urban valley which now forms Union Terrace Gardens.



**Above:** Despite appearances, not rural Tennessee but urban Rubislaw's Glenburnie Distillery (see **13**). Later, from 1857-1875, the workplace of famous Aberdeen photographer George Washington Wilson, it was demolished to build Forest Road. Seen here in the 1860s, with his staff in full Sunday best.

**Opposite top:** The former village of Gilcomston (**21**) serviced a flourishing water-powered weaving industry. Resembling a small 'ferm toon' (farm town) it latterly became one of the city's worst slums and was cleared in the early 1930s. Gilcomston School's playground now covers part of this site.



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## 1 Kingswells

The Denburn rises around here, making its first notable appearance in a landscaped area at the Prime Four Business Park near the main Westhill road. Kingswells is a modern village based around an earlier small settlement with inn and church. The old village is on part of the former Skene Turnpike road. Its original history is tied up with Aberdeen's freedom lands (see the **Boundary Stones Trail**), dating to King Robert the Bruce in 1319. The Council initially leased these lands but from 1551 feued them off – a perpetual form of leasing. It was from this time that estates such as Kingswells, Countesswells and Hazlehead came into existence. Kingswells is covered in detail in the **Kingswells & the Four Hills Trail**.



## 2 Kingswells to Maidencraig

The Denburn has very much shaped the natural landscape around it but this section of the burn is an example of nature shaped by people. Here it runs in straight geometric lines, channelled between field boundaries on current and past agricultural land. It is largely inaccessible but its course can easily be seen. There are some very busy roads but a good network of shared cycle and pedestrian ways. The much quieter old Skene Turnpike road leads out of the village with another loop just before the Den of Maidencraig.



## 3 Maidencraig Local Nature Reserve

The name Maidencraig comes from the Gaelic words 'meadhon' meaning middle and 'craig' meaning crag. This refers to the large rock buttress in the middle of the Den, deposited by a glacier that covered the area over 10,000 years ago. The reserve is made up of grasslands, young woodland, ancient woodland, the Denburn and a pond, all within a short distance of each other creating a wonderful mosaic of places for different kinds of wildlife. The ruined Mill of Maidencraig, 1616, with its weir on the Denburn, is just outside the reserve at the western end. The corn mill burned down late 1800s.



## 4 Maidencraig Flood Alleviation Project

Areas of the reserve and to the north of the burn are now intended to flood at times of high rainfall to protect properties downstream from flooding, as does the area at Fernielea Park (7) a little further on. The Denburn and pond here provide a home for many wetland and water living animals and plants. Grey herons fish along the banks, moorhens and mallard ducks nest in the swampy vegetation, and sometimes an otter or kingfisher will pass by. In the summer, water lilies add colour to the pond. The pond has a dipping platform which is a popular place to have a look for all kinds of aquatic life which live there.



## 5 Woodend Hospital

This is the site of Oldmill Reformatory, an early young offenders' institution for males. It opened in March 1857, closed in 1898, and was demolished in 1902 to make way for a poorhouse, also known as Oldmill Hospital. This eventually became Woodend Hospital, linked to Queens Road by the huge viaduct spanning the Denburn's valley. The former lodge houses at that entranceway are now a pre-school nursery and Thai Buddharam Temple & Cultural Centre. Before the viaduct was built, Oldmill had a pond with island and sluice and there is still a rusty sluice wheel by the northern turn of the burn west of the viaduct. This was a means to control water flow, often relating to mills or other forms of water management.



## 6 Woodend to Eday Road

Oldmill Farm was on Eday Road where the upper part of the Denwood development now stands. The track and bridge enabled access to fields south of the burn. What is now parkland was previously agricultural. The burn in places was channelled, most likely to make better use of the land and/or water and help prevent flooding. There are also possible mill artefacts along this stretch as is suggested by the name Oldmill itself, however the series of concrete piers is the line of a former waste pipe. The neighbouring slopes above are known locally as 'Sledging Hill'.



## 7 Fernielea Park

Like Maidencraig (4), this area is part of a flood prevention scheme. The park can hold more than 30,000m<sup>3</sup> of water, the equivalent of 80 swimming pools, helping to prevent flooding downstream. Stronsay Drive also has a swale, which is a grassy drainage ditch to channel occasional heavy rainwater, and leads to a miniature wetlands by the northern side of the burn. The natural form of the valley largely hides the surrounding houses and roads from view, effectively bringing the feel of the countryside into Aberdeen's western suburbs, both for its citizens and the wildlife which benefit from the natural corridor. The long straight part of Fernielea Road was originally the boundary of the Burgh of Aberdeen.



## 8 Kings Gate to Anderson Drive

This stretch of the Denburn winds picturesquely through quiet suburban streets. The part between Westholme Avenue and Anderson Drive has been designated an area for city wildlife. Owned by Aberdeen City Council and managed jointly with The Friends of the Denburn, a local community group. There is a rustic bridge (see cover) and information panels showing some of the wildlife attracted by the water course. The burn and its margins form a linear corridor which leads into the built up area of the city. Several types of birds breed along it including mallard and dipper, and the varied undergrowth provides a habitat for small mammals.





## 9 Walker Dam

This Local Nature Conservation Site is looked after by the Friends of Walker Dam and Aberdeen City Council. The waters come from the Den Wood, near Countesswells Road, and attract ducks, a visiting heron, and kingfisher. Walker Dam was built in the 1830s, and originally stretched to Springfield Road where a sluice gate fed water via a man-made channel to Richards & Co's Rubislaw Works. These dyed and bleached fabrics on what are now playing fields at Cromwell Road/Forest Avenue. It joins the West Burn of Rubislaw (10) before the works site and at the eastern end of Union Grove Lane becomes the Holburn which (as the Hol Burn) once powered industries at Justice Mills and Ferryhill.



## 10 Johnston Gardens

These are a hidden gem and a small scale equivalent of Rubislaw Den (13). The gardens contain a large ornamental pond attracting visiting mallard ducks and breeding moorhens, rockeries with streams, and winding paths. The gardens are on the West Burn of Rubislaw, associated with the area's first estate houses. Craigiebuckler House, now James Hutton Institute, has a large pond with boathouse and island. This fed the former pond at Viewfield House, later the Treetops Hotel, then the ornamental gardens of Johnston House. This stood at the western end, outside the present park. The park has a memorial to the 16 men who lost their lives in the tragic North Sea Super Puma helicopter crash on 1 April 2009, 11 nautical miles north east of Peterhead, while returning to Aberdeen Airport.



## 11 The Gordon Highlander's Museum

This museum, Aberdeen's five star Visit Scotland attraction, tells the 200 year history of the Aberdeen regiment from the Napoleonic Wars to Cold War. Raised in 1794, the regiment was amalgamated with the Queen's Own Highlanders in 1994. There are memorial gardens and the Moffat Trench, a recreation of a WWI era military entrenchment. The original building, St Lukes, was home and studio to Aberdeen-born portrait painter Sir George Reid (1841-1913). He studied in France and the Netherlands and is credited with bringing still life painting to Scotland. Later, living in Edinburgh, he was president of the Royal Scottish Academy, 1891-1902. His works, from Aberdeen Art Gallery's collection, are on display here. The West Burn of Rubislaw flows past the southern outer wall.



## 12 Rubislaw Quarry

At Hill of Rubislaw is one of the largest man-made holes in Europe, and was quarried from 1740 to 1971. An estimated six million tonnes of rock was excavated, giving Aberdeen its name 'The Granite City'. It also supplied buildings and structures around the world and pulverised granite formed the basis of composite paving slabs. In an early form of branding, some stones featured the company name 'Aberdeen Adamant' in brass letters and these can still be seen on pavements throughout the UK. Including one in Aberdeen city centre in George Street's pedestrianised zone. Previously the quarry had dramatic cliffs but today resembles a small loch. Adventure Aberdeen runs canoe sessions here, see [www.sportaberdeen.co.uk](http://www.sportaberdeen.co.uk) and the quarry's story is told at [www.rubislawquarry.co.uk](http://www.rubislawquarry.co.uk)



### 13 Rubislaw Den

The Denburn here is accessible only to residents and is known as North Burn of Rubislaw which flows through a gorge called Rubislaw Den. By whatever name, the burn is bounded by Rubislaw Den North and South. 72 Rubislaw Den South at the western end was the original West Lodge to Duthie Park and was moved here stone by stone when Great Southern Road was widened in 1938. There are two other nearby buildings of interest, a mini castle called Rubislaw House at 50 Queen's Road and close by, the former Rubislaw Toll House at the Queen's Road-Spademill Road junction. Waters from the eastern end of Rubislaw Den fed the former Glenburnie Distillery (picture at [intro](#)) at today's corner of Beaconsfield Place and Forest Road, becoming one of Scotland's most famous products – whisky, also known as the water of life – uisge beatha (in Gaelic) or aqua vitae (in Latin).



### 14 Forest Road to Albert Street

From here on, the Denburn runs along a walled channel but is still very recognisably a burn. It flows between houses and businesses on Queen's Lane North and Beaconsfield Place and can be seen along the lane on the south side of Beaconsfield Place. The Fountainhall Road end was the site of a former Corporation Tramway Depot. It continues over the road until Blenheim Place then largely runs underground in a culvert between Osbourne Place and Desswood Place/Whitehall Place, hidden from view until Albert Street ([16](#)).



### 15 Gilcomston Dam (site of)

These waters lay between Whitehall Place and Osbourne Place, fed by the Denburn at Whitehall Road and ending parallel with the Westfield Terrace, Whitehall Place junction. The dam originally diverted part of the Denburn into an open mill lead (aka lade or leet) which ran along Leadside Road to supply industry at Gilcomston ([21](#)). It was here as early as 1673, and noted in a land sale to Aberdeen Corporation, the disposition mentioning Gilcomston meal mill. The dam was drained and filled by the later Town Council in 1907.



### 16 Albert Street to Esslemont Avenue

The burn is visible both sides of Albert Street, near the Whitehall Place junction and at the far corner of Albert Place. It crosses Aberdeen Grammar School grounds in a relatively wild and untamed section. The valley it follows is seen from the grassy area on Skene Street by the school's lodge house. The 1869 map above shows its route, largely unchanged but now culverted or inaccessible in parts. This bridge (right) pre-dates Esslemont Avenue and it, or a successor, can be seen from Esslemont Avenue and just before Mackie Place on the map.







## 17 Mackie Place

This is near the city centre but feels entirely rural and is both a survivor and reminder of a time before the industrialisation of Gilcomston and the urban tenements of its workers. The area includes a former weaver's cottage, a last trace of a once-common industry here. The tiny building with rustic walls and red pantiles adjoins the burn. A little further is a culvert the Denburn enters and continues underground to the harbour. By contrast with this quiet scene, there was a tannery next door on Jack's Brae. Half way up the brae is a CR stone (City Royalty/Regality). Part of Aberdeen's inner marches marking the edge of the old Royal Burgh, where the Medieval town of Aberdeen ended, and countryside began.



## 18 Upper Denburn

This street still runs from the foreground to the left to today's Denburn Centre and Denburn Court multi-storey but originally led to the old Royal Infirmary building and Lower Denburn (22). Directly ahead is the Hardweird, now approximately the back road into Gilcomston School and the Denburn once flowed in an open channel through this scene. The new taller tenements of Rosemount Viaduct can just be seen above through the smoke.

## 19 Denburn Steps & Church

This granite staircase is testament to the number of people who lived and worked in Gilcomston (21), one of the oldest parts of Aberdeen. Old towns were naturally organic and followed physical features such as hills and the valley the Denburn itself created. New towns used viaducts, bridges and steps to overcome natural features, forming a much more man-made landscape.

St John's Well (see the **Sculpture & Curios Trail**) was near the bottom. Built 1852, rebuilt beside the new stairs in 1885, and later relocated in front of St John Nursing Home, Albyn Place (now Albyn Hospital) in 1955. It was originally at the junction of Skene Row, which ran downhill in front of Gilcomston School, and the Hardweird, (see 18). The church on Summer Street, diagonally opposite the top, was built as Gilcomston Parish Church but renamed Denburn Church (now Hebron Evangelical Church).



## 20 Rosemount Viaduct Street Art

This sweeping curved structure leads from central Aberdeen up to the Rosemount area (see **Rosemount Area Trail**) and the Denburn crosses under it twice. The dramatic setting here is perfect for the gravity-defying characters in the mural on the tenements above. By Norway's Anders Giennestad, aka Strøk, whose stenciled figures' shadows are cast on buildings all over the globe, this was part of Nuart Aberdeen's 2019 programme, as is another work at the corner of the Viaduct and Skene Street. This is at the doorway of the Noose & Monkey and is a paradoxically small high-rise by Germany's Tore Rinkveld, aka Evol. He has stenciled many such telephone junction boxes in Aberdeen and further afield. However this is a limited edition, inspired by Aberdeen's own distinctive multi-storey blocks. There are only two like it, with the other at the Beach Boulevard.



## 21 Gilcomston & Gilcomston Burn

This historic neighbourhood was a suburban village, largely displaced into history by later developments including Rosemount Viaduct, which was superimposed over it, the Denburn Centre, and the dual carriageway at Skene Square, Gilcomston Steps and Denburn Road. The area's industrial nature can be seen in the above picture, viewed from Skene Street with Rosemount Place on the horizon. The former Mill of Gilcomston is on Parson Gordon's 1661 map but may date from before 1400. This corn mill is shown on the 1869 map as part of a brewery behind the Gilcomston Bar, on the Baker Street-Gilcomston Park-Spa Street triangle. Gilcomston Burn starts just north of today's Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, flowing in parts through the grounds. Previously called the West Burn of Gilcomston, it named Westburn Park where it features and also appears by Fraser Place, off George Street. It joins the Denburn below ground near Lower Denburn (22). The nearby Spa Well is included in the **Sculpture & Curios Trail**.



## 22 Lower Denburn & Denburn Viaduct

Lower Denburn runs down past His Majesty's Theatre and under Rosemount Viaduct into the lower level of Union Terrace Gardens. However this section, bridging the Denburn, was originally named Denburn Viaduct. The gardens would today be behind the photographer who took the picture above and the buildings seen were demolished when Denburn Viaduct was built. The small bridge (left) is also on the far side of the photo opposite, top right.

## 23 The Denburn Valley Railway

Like Glasgow, Aberdeen had two main stations. Guild Street for the line south (or west to Deeside), the line north was from Kittybrewster Station. Despite later extending south to Waterloo Station (now goods only), at the harbour, the two weren't directly connected until the 1867 Denburn Valley Line. This also added two stations, Hutcheon Street, now a private house, and Schoolhill, accessed via aerial walkway next to His Majesty's Theatre. The old entrance can still be made out along with the station remains below it. At this time the Denburn was open up to where it met the new railway, by the back of Belmont Filmhouse. The top picture shows Triple Kirks, Denburn and Denburn Road before the railway came.



## 24 Denburn Footbridge (site of)

This was a forerunner of Denburn/Rosemount Viaduct, crossing at roughly the same point. It can be seen behind the bandstand above and linked Denburn Road near the Triple Kirks with Union Terrace (see plan at 25). Part of this footbridge was rebuilt in Duthie Park (see the **Duthie Park Trail & Guide**), where it spans the middle and lower lakes. The railway with its exciting steam trains gave the park its original children's nickname of the 'Trainie Park'.





## 25 Union Terrace Gardens

This is a £25.7 million regeneration under Aberdeen City Council's City Centre Masterplan. Key features include elevated walkways, new pavilions (see lower image), events space, play facilities, and extensive planting to increase biodiversity within the Victorian park. The first stage of construction work involves foundation piling and a permanent safety barrier for Union Bridge (27). The programme will focus on strengthening of the balustrades, the renovation and refurbishment of the arches, and the widening of

the pavement along Union Terrace. The pavilions are expected to be completed first, followed by the lighting and landscaping.



## Denburn Gardens

This was the original name for the proposed gardens, here stretching as far as the old Royal Infirmary building. Clearly plans were scaled back but in doing so gaining the sweeping viaduct and its much-loved buildings plus the dramatic amphitheatre at the north end created to bring them up to viaduct level, using the demolished Denburn Terrace. This was on the eastern side of Union Terrace and can be seen above. The gardens have been the subject of much debate over the years. However the recent refurbishment together with possible redevelopment of the Denburn Centre site could see a full circle to something similar to this grand scheme.





## 26 The Denburn Valley

This is a natural feature formed over many years by the Denburn itself. Long before they were gardens, people living here used them for rough grazing of animals and as a bleach field. Seen above, bleaching was a process of treating linen cloth with various solutions and exposing to sunlight over time to whiten it, which gave its name to today's chemical bleach. As well as sheets, there are washing lines with clothes on the right and left. Trees have always grown along the banks and in the past attracted a large rookery. Crows are corbies in Scots language and the area was known as Corbie Heugh or Haugh, meaning steep or heights (see map at 31). Corbie Well (see [Sculpture & Curios Trail](#)) at the north end predates the gardens and was rebuilt in them in 1877.



## 27 Union Bridge

This impressive 40 metre wide granite arch spans the Denburn valley and was built from 1800 to 1805. It was necessary to allow Union Street to be on one level. This street and others of the time are built on a series of arches, mostly now underground chambers. However they can be seen at the Green, Carnegie's Brae and in the arcade below Union Terrace. Originally, the bridge was much narrower, and today's pavements are on steel side spans added in 1908. In 1962, shops were built on the south side, the side seen above. However the parapets, decorative panel and leopard finials are now displayed in the Duthie Park (see the [Duthie Park Trail & Guide](#)).

## 28 Bow Brig / The Puffing Briggie

Aberdeen's Green is the oldest part of the city (see [Aberdeen Green Trail](#)). The main route south was by the Bridge of Dee and Hardgate, including today's Langstane Place and Windmill Brae. The Bow Brig (meaning arched bridge) was once the sole crossing point of the Denburn, first recorded 1453, but likely much older. There were several versions of the bridge, the last in the 1800s, shown above from *Aberdeen in Bygone Days* by Robert Anderson. It can also be seen below Union Bridge in the picture on the left. Its successor was the Puffing Briggie (bridge), referring to the smoke from passing steam trains. It was approximately the same location as Bow Brig and of today's walkway through the Trinity Centre car park which still links the Green and Windmill Brae.



## 29 Aberdeen Station

This is built on reclaimed land at the end of the Denburn Valley. The Denburn originally entered a tidal basin (31) around the south-east end of today's main station concourse. The first temporary station was at Ferryhill Junction in 1850 (see [Duthie Park Trail & Guide](#)), followed in 1854 by the small two-platform Guild Street Station, nearer the docks, both with services south and to Deeside. This was replaced in 1867 by the Joint Station (joining services north and south) with Guild Street Bridge built over the new line north. The photograph shows the old suburban platforms, for local services, north of Guild Street. Their main entrance was at the Bridge Street corner, now Tiffany Hair & Beauty, and its platform door can still be seen below in the station. The 'Puffin' Briggie' (28) and Union Bridge (27) are behind as is the direct footbridge to the former Palace Hotel (left). The station was substantially restructured from 1913 to 1916.





### 30 Denburn & Denburn South Junctions (sites of)

The Denburn Valley Railway (23) branch line to Kittybrewster opened in 1867 and joined the main network at Denburn Junction just north of the station. The signal box of the same name was in use until 1914, replaced by Denburn South Junction (centre above), just south of the station. In those days, signalmen controlled the manual lever-operated signals seen on the overhead gantries. Although south of the Denburn's course itself it was the last place named after it, Denburn South was replaced by Aberdeen South Signal Box in 1947.



### 31 Aberdeen Harbour (no access)

The Denburn originally flowed into a very different setting. G & W Paterson's map of 1746, above, has a shoreline around Guild Street. Waters cover today's station and Union Square shopping centre but Milne's later map of 1789 shows reclaimed land at the site of those. In these days, the harbour was a tidal basin, with marshes and sand islands called inches, which were affected by the tides. The River Dee took various courses through this, the landscape itself reformed by the waters. The Upper Dock was in place by the first modern map of 1869 and the culverted Denburn enters it at the lower south western corner. The railway lines south of the station exactly follow the then course of the river. The Aberdeen Harbour Act of 1868 diverted the Dee directly to the harbour mouth by 1873, forming the Albert Basin.



### The Denburn Valley

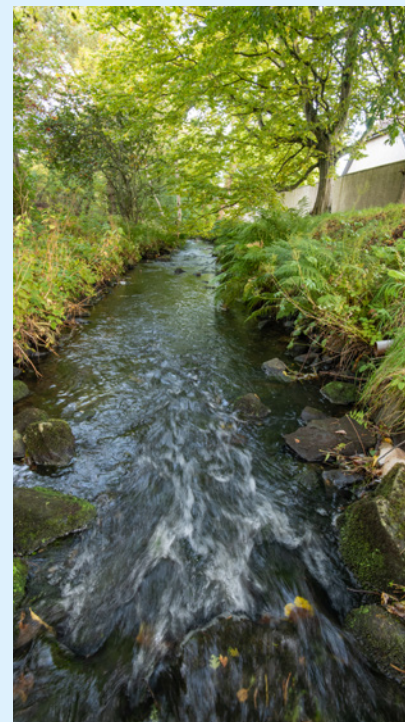
This is a great wildlife corridor connecting the west end of the city with rural areas of Aberdeenshire. Although surrounded by development for much of its length, it feels like you could be many miles from anywhere.

In spring and summer, listen for the song of the warblers that migrate from Africa to breed. Chiffchaffs say their name and Blackcaps have a very musical call with males often sitting at the top of a bush to sing. In wetter areas, the rasping call of the sedge warbler or if you are lucky a grass-hopper warbler that sounds like a fishing reel being wound in.

In wetland areas, herons patrol for fish, frogs and toads to eat while moor-hens and mallard swim around open water areas. In the winter, you might be lucky and spot a snipe or woodcock in the boggy areas where they probe for insects. Buzzards, kestrels and sparrowhawks are regularly spotted. The buzzards' 1.25m wingspan make them difficult to miss.

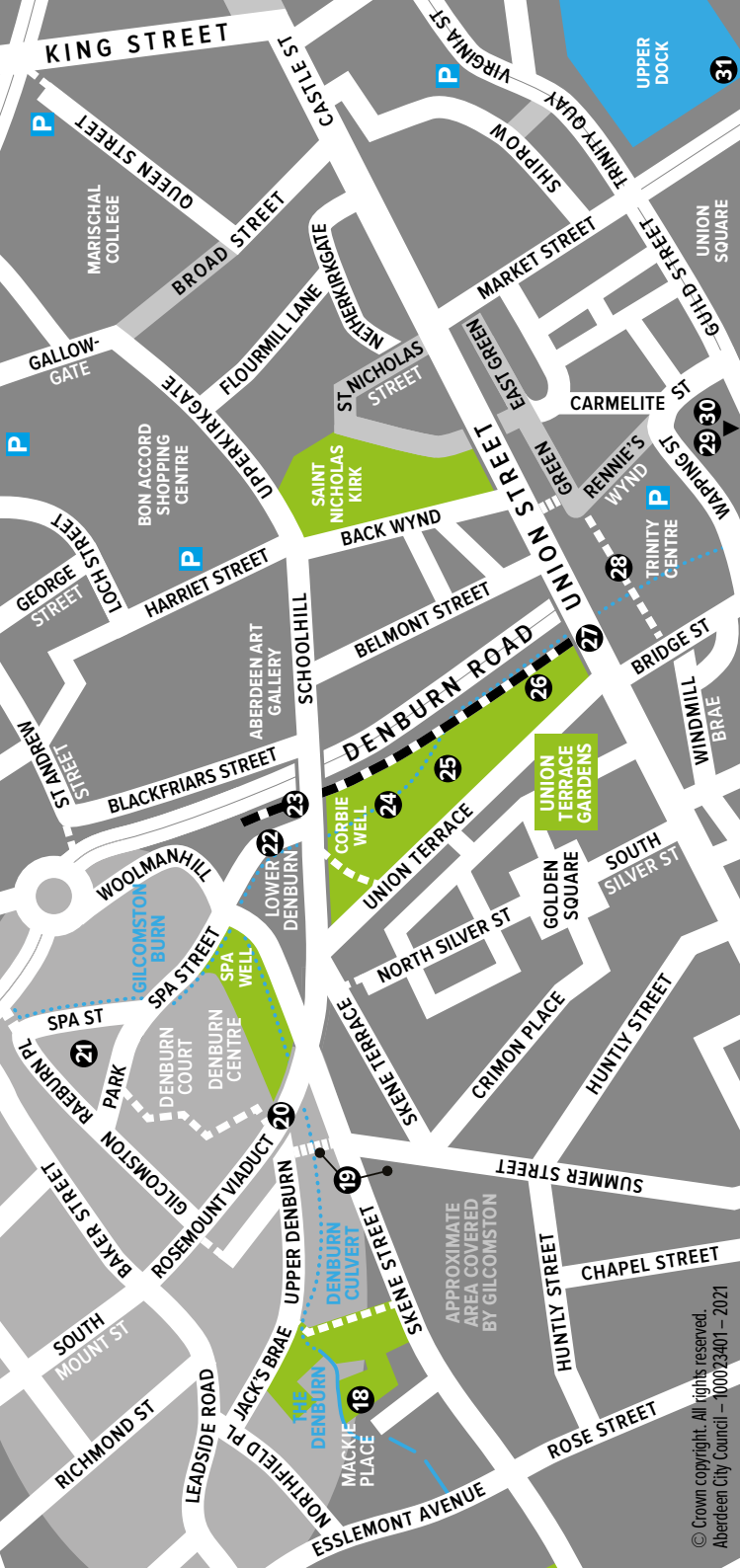
The valley is home to mammals too with a resident roe deer population, best seen at dawn or dusk. Otters have been seen around the burn and foxes 'sunbathe' in clearings in the gorse bushes on warm sunny days. Several species of bats including Daubentons and Pipistrelle fly around after dark.

In summer time, the colourful wild-flower meadows attract butterflies, hoverflies, bees and beetles with dragonflies and damselflies near the water. In spring, yellow flowers of cowslips provide an early source of nectar with other species flowering throughout summer including tufted vetch, knapweed, red campion, yellow rattle and northern marsh orchids.



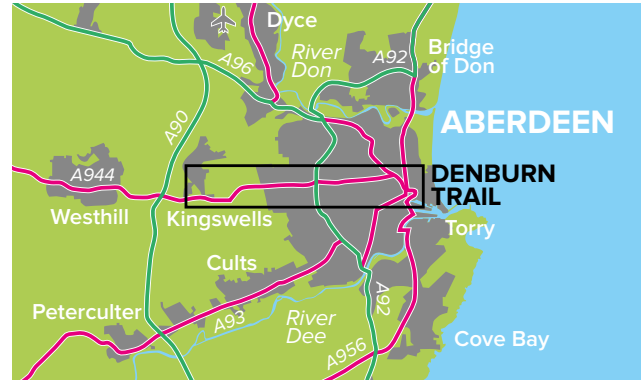






# Aberdeen Denburn Trail

The small stream that shaped a city



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