

Aberdeen History Trail

The city through its historical times



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Aberdeen is bursting full of history! From its ancient origins to medieval burghs and King Robert The Bruce, from the Jacobite connections to the expansion in the Edwardian and Victorian times, the 'Silver City by the Golden Sands' has a long, important, and interesting history with many of its people contributing to the wider world. The city started out as three separate royal burghs – Old Aberdeen, New Aberdeen and Torry plus the parish of Woodside – which expanded and merged together to form the city as a whole. There was a major expansion in the Georgian, Edwardian and Victorian eras as the city made its first fortunes based on fishing, granite quarrying and shipbuilding and many of the grand buildings were built during these times. It also included the main thoroughfare, Union Street, which was raised up away from the mud and dirt and built on a series of bridges – it was such a major project it almost bankrupted the city!

Enjoy exploring our beautiful city and finding out about its history!

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Left, New & Old Aberdeen: Details from Parson Gordon's map of 1661. Reproduction courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.

Locations map: 1868 Ordnance Survey. Reproduction courtesy of the National Library of Scotland.

Accessibility

 All of the locations in this booklet are accessible.

Transport

This is a circular city-centre trail intended to be walked or cycled. However various buses serve Union Street and many of the locations. Please consult First Bus and Stagecoach for specific route details if required.



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Today's city was formed from four separate areas in 1891. **New Aberdeen**, now the city centre, is covered by this trail. The others were **Old Aberdeen**, **Torry** and **Woodside** each with their own trails.



Historical timeline

- 1136** Charter granting the bishop of Aberdeen tithes (tenths) of the goods on all ships
- 1157** First documentary evidence of Kirk of St Nicholas
- 1264** First documentary evidence of Aberdeen Castle
- 1305** Execution of William Wallace
- 1308** Siege of Aberdeen Castle by Robert the Bruce's army
- 1495** King's College established
- 1593** Second university, Marischal College established
- 1644** The Battle of Justice Mills
- 1660** Draining of The Loch (see plan overleaf) and expansion of cramped medieval town with new, wide streets and large granite buildings
- 1746** The Duke of Cumberland and his army arrive in Aberdeen during the Jacobite Rebellion
- 1805** Construction of Union Street completed
- 1831** Anatomical theatre burned down by cheering crowd during time of body snatchers (see **Bloody Aberdeen Trail**)
- 1850** Railway arrives in Aberdeen
- 1891** The burghs of Old Aberdeen and Torry incorporated into the City of Aberdeen
- 1969** North Sea oil discovered, starting Aberdeen's relationship with offshore oil and gas

Historical Background

Aberdeen sits on the estuaries of the Dee and the Don rivers, with ancient settlements developed on their banks thousands of years ago. These gradually developed into two important medieval burghs – New Aberdeen on the northside of the Dee estuary with its natural harbour, and Old Aberdeen further north on the Don developed around sites of religion and education, St Machar's Cathedral and King's College. The two burghs would not meet until the late 19th century with what was New Aberdeen expanding outwards from its centre.

New Aberdeen was granted royal burgh status by King David I in the 12th century, and by this time there is clear evidence that Aberdeen was a thriving port involved in overseas trade to the Baltic, France and the Low Countries. Indeed, salted cod was known as *aberdan* in 13th century Flanders. A merchant class developed and based themselves around the market at the Castlegate, exporting local goods including salmon and hides.

Visitors weren't always as peaceable as visiting traders, with Vikings reputed to have plundered the town in 1153, and in 1308, the castle (of which the Castlegate

gets its name) was supposedly destroyed by Aberdonians to prevent further occupation by Edward II's forces during the Scottish Wars of Independence.

Over the years Aberdeen has contributed both people and skills to the world. Alexander Chalmers was born in Dyce and migrated to Poland in 1679. As Aleksander Czamer he was elected mayor of Warsaw for four terms from 1691.



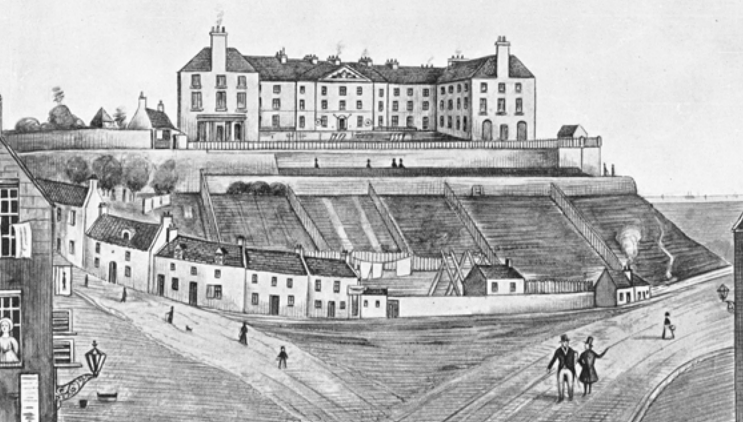
New Aberdeen only began expanding beyond the limits of the medieval burgh from the second half of the 18th century, and the city centre that is visible today began to take shape in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It is dominated by Union Street which extends westwards from the Castlegate, and is essentially a bridge over passing the lie of the land of the burgh – the building of the structure nearly bankrupt the city at the time!

The expansion of the town coincided with and facilitated the growth of the granite industry, which gave Aberdeen its unique visual identity, and the harbour too, saw major developments. Shipbuilding became a proud Aberdeen industry, and fishing, which was always important to the town, became a major industry with the onset of trawling from the late 19th century and made the city Scotland's leading white fish port.

The oil boom which started in the early 1970s somewhat offset the decline of shipbuilding and fishing, with many companies basing their headquarters in Aberdeen to oversee exploration and drilling on offshore platforms.

Above: Charter issued by King Robert the Bruce feuing the Stocket Forest to Aberdeen, 1319. **Below:** The Old Grammar School which gave Schoolhill its name.





1 A Castle Besieged by Robert the Bruce Castlehill

The first evidence of a castle here dates to 1264, and it played an important role during the medieval Wars of Independence. It is likely Robert the Bruce's army successfully expelled the English garrison during a siege of 1308, and it appears to have been destroyed. From the 16th to 18th century, St Ninian's Chapel occupied the site, and another occupation saw Oliver Cromwell's army build a bastion on the hill in the early 1650s. Stones to construct this were taken from St. Machar Cathedral (see [Old Aberdeen Trail](#)) and a corner section remains today. In 1794, an army barracks was built (above), housing what became 92nd Regiment, The Gordon Highlanders. In 1969 it was demolished to make way for the current flats. The castle is long gone but its name remains in Castlegate, Castlehill and surrounding streets.



2 The Medieval Marketplace Castlegate

The Castlegate, by the 14th century, had become the focal point of the medieval Royal Burgh of New Aberdeen. This is where the market was held and where merchants owned property to take advantage of the burgeoning trade with continental Europe. It is centred by the hexagonal, mercat cross ('mercat' means market in the Scots language), erected in 1686, bearing the carved medallions of 10 Scottish monarchs, from James I to James VII. There is also a sculpture marking Aberdeen's former regiment, The Gordon Highlanders. It features two soldiers, one in historic dress with kilt and one in modern military uniform.

3 The Granite Mile Union Street and Castle Street

From here you can enjoy the view affectionately known by this name. Castle Street was the original way to the castle (1) and Union Street was named after the 1801 Act of Union between Great Britain and Ireland, it is an amazing feat of early 19th century engineering following the plans developed by Charles Abercrombie. It cut through St Katherine's Hill which existed to the east end, and bridged the Denburn valley with the completion of Union Bridge in 1805. However this magnificent street was very expensive to build and nearly bankrupted the city. It is a viaduct and the arches under the street can be still be seen at Carnegie's Brae, accessed from Netherkirkgate and the Green (23).



4 Civic Glory, Crime & Punishment Townhouse and Tolbooth

The New Town House was built 1868-1874 and its grand turreted clock tower and vaulted-ceiling of its splendid civic reception rooms stand proudly at the start of Union Street. The façade partially hides the sandstone Tolbooth building, dating to 1616. The name 'Tolbooth' refers to a building where tolls were collected, alluding to the original administrative function of the site, but the tower itself functioned as the town's jail until 1808. Today it is The Tolbooth Museum, where local history and the development of crime and punishment can be discovered in one of the best preserved 17th century jails in Scotland.

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5 The Warrior King Robert the Bruce Statue

For a man of the sword, Bruce is unusually associated with the pen. The famous Declaration of Arbroath was written to Pope John XXII in 1320 on his behalf. Surprisingly for the time it proposes a contract between King – and his people – rather than God. ‘It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom – for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself’. It is a possible prototype for the USA’s own Declaration of Independence. The Treaty of

Edinburgh-Northampton (formerly home to England’s parliament) in 1328 recognised The Kingdom of Scotland and Bruce as ruler. More locally, in gratitude for support, Bruce granted his hunting forest, the Freedom Lands, to Aberdeen. This is the charter depicted in the statue (see introduction page) and income from this still forms the city’s Common Good Fund. The Freedom Lands are ringed by stones marking out this territory and feature in the **Boundary Stones Trail**.



6 A Tale of Two Universities Marischal College

Aberdeen was almost unique in having two universities at a time England itself had only two – Oxford and Cambridge. For a short time Fraserburgh University was the third in the North-east. Marischal College was founded here in 1593, by George Keith, 4th Earl Marischal, to rival King’s College, established in Old Aberdeen in 1495, (see **Old Aberdeen Trail**) and the two merged to form the modern University of Aberdeen in 1860. Today it forms the headquarters of Aberdeen City Council. Said to be the second largest granite structure in the world (after the Escorial in Spain), Marischal College shows off the skills developed by Aberdeen’s world renowned 19th century granite industry. Rubislaw Quarry in the west of the city is Europe’s largest man-made hole and around half of Aberdeen’s buildings came from this quarry along with many others including bridges and structures throughout the UK and worldwide.

7 Provosts Lodging & Poorhouse Provost Skene’s House

Named after merchant George Skene, Provost of Aberdeen 1676-1685, this is the oldest building in the city centre. Part of the west section dates to 1545. It is a unique example of the early use of granite at a time when sandstone was much more common. One of its most famous (or infamous) guests was the Duke of Cumberland, see also entry 9, who stayed here before defeating the Jacobite Army at the Battle of Culloden in 1746. The building, like its later residents, fell on hard times and it became a public lodging house for the city’s poor. The rest of its neighbours were demolished but a campaign led by the Queen Mother saved it. In 1953, it was opened by her as a period house and museum of local history, and it is open again following renovation, celebrating notable people born in the city.



8 The ‘Mither Kirk’ & St Nicholas St Nicholas Church

The Mither Kirk’s (mother church) origins date to at least 1157 but, a church is likely to have existed here before this. It was the largest burgh church in Scotland and in 1596, split into the East and West Kirk following the Scottish Reformation. This was part of a wider European Protestant movement which split from the Catholic Church. Despite vandalism of church property it also brought widespread change to society including improvements in education. The church is named after Aberdeen’s patron saint, Saint Nicholas. Better known today in his role of Santa Claus, from the Dutch Sinter Klaas – Saint Nick.





9 Fort Cumberland and the Romantic Poet Robert Gordon's College and the Old Grammar School

Aberdeen-born Robert Gordon made his fortune as a trader in Danzig, now Gdansk. He founded what became Robert Gordon's College and University (RGU). The Jacobite Rising (see [Aberdeen Jacobite Trail](#)), delayed the original opening as its 'Auld Hoose' (old house) was occupied by the Duke of Cumberland's troops in 1746 and renamed Fort Cumberland. Another school, The Old Grammar School (see photo in introduction), dating to the Medieval period, had one of its many buildings there from 1757-1881. It was here that Lord Byron (inset), the famous Romantic poet, was schooled as a boy during the 1790s. He lived in Queen Street and Broad Street in houses both since demolished. He fought and died in the Greek War of Independence, and is revered in Greece as a national hero and throughout the world for his poetry.



10 Art and Remembrance Aberdeen Art Gallery

The Art Gallery including the Cowdray Hall concert venue and the city's Remembrance Hall, showcases the city's impressive art collection boasting important artworks from some of the world's most famous artists, and in its exhibition space, displays regular, vibrant travelling exhibitions. The War Memorial Lion and Cowdray Hall, completed 1925, remember the sacrifice of former generations. Inside, the modern granite sculpture, *Forget Them Not*, takes the shape of a Spitfire wing.



11 All The World's A Stage His Majesty's Theatre

Designed by Frank Matcham, and opened in 1906, His Majesty's Theatre stages performances of musicals, operas, plays, comedies and concerts throughout the year. The auditorium is a fantastic example of Edwardian opulence and was described by the comedian Billy Connolly as "like playing a gig inside a wedding cake!". William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, although fictionalised, is based on the real life Macbeth, King of Scotland who died in battle just 25 miles from Aberdeen at Lumphanan in Deeside. Superstition dictates that to this day and worldwide his name is never mentioned backstage where *Macbeth* is known as *The Scottish Play*.

12 Guardian of Scotland Wallace Statue

William Wallace, who held this official title, has played a considerable part in Scottish history and folklore. He fought guerilla style using terrain to his advantage to defeat superior armies, most notably at the Battle of Stirling Bridge. He also captured the seemingly impregnable Dunnotar Castle at Stonehaven, to the south of Aberdeen. However he suffered later defeat at the Battle of Falkirk and resigned in favour of Robert the Bruce (5). He continued fighting as a knight but was captured by Edward I's English troops near Glasgow. Tried for treason in London, his response is quoted on this impressive sculpture, "To Edward, King of England, I cannot be a traitor, for I owe him no allegiance. He is not my Sovereign; he has never received my homage; and whilst life is in this persecuted body, he shall never receive it". Wallace was gruesomely executed at West Spitalfield in 1305, the location of his death now marked by a commemorative plaque declaring 'His memory remains for all time a source of pride, honour and inspiration to his countrymen'.





13 Aberdeen's Urban Valley Union Terrace Gardens

Previously, this area had been used as a bleaching green. Forming a natural amphitheatre in the heart of the city centre, the gardens were designed by the architect James Matthews, and opened to the public in 1879. The area forms part of the Denburn valley (see **Aberdeen Denburn Trail**), one of a few streams that ran through the early burgh but since hidden beneath the developments of the 19th century. From the gardens can be seen the impressive vista of Central Library, St Mark's Church and His Majesty's Theatre, known locally as Education, Salvation and Damnation! The gardens have recently been refurbished.



14 Merchants & Craftsmen Trinity Hall

The Seven Incorporated Trades of Aberdeen was founded in 1587, incorporating the Hammermen, Bakers, Wrights and Coopers, Tailors, Shoemakers, Weavers and Fleshers. It represented a union of common interests for the trades at a time of conflict between the merchant and craft burgesses. The original Trinity Hall on Union Street is seen above in the centre of the picture on the far side of Union Bridge and is now the main entrance to the Trinity Centre. The organisation still exists today, and has been based at Trinity Hall at Trinity Corner, Holburn Street since its official opening in 1967.

#aberdeenhstory



15 Freedom of the City The Music Hall

With its six Ionic pillars it opened in 1820 as the Assembly Rooms to serve as a meeting place for the gentry. In 1858, the James Matthews designed Music Hall behind was added and the building renamed. It has since hosted orchestras, rock shows, operas, comedy, conferences and exhibitions. Stars include David Bowie, Led Zeppelin, Blondie and locally raised Emile Sandé. Other big names are associated through the Freedom of the City of Aberdeen ceremonies held there. The award dates from the 1100s and originally granted rights to trade but is today a symbolic honour. Sir Alex Fergusson received his award in 1999 (see **26**) and footballer Dennis Law in 2017. Mikhail Gorbachev (inset), the history-making final leader of the Soviet Union visited the city to receive his in 1993. Gorbachev's late 1980s political reforms helped end the Cold War, led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and ultimately the liberation of much of eastern Europe.



16 Gold, Silver, Diamonds & Rubies Golden Square

These precious metals and stones are also the street names that surround the square. Dating to the second decade of the nineteenth century, Golden Square is a fine example of Georgian town planning, and was built based on the plans developed by Charles Abercrombie to expand the town beyond the Denburn valley. Originally it was the land of the Hammermen, one of the Seven Incorporated Trades of Aberdeen (**14**), and the trade is alluded to in the name of the square and the surrounding streets such as North and South Silver Street.



17 Aberdeen Typhoid Outbreak Holburn Junction

The city was in virtual lockdown during a major health crisis in the summer of 1964. People were urged not to enter or leave without good reason and all schools were closed. The epicentre was the former William Low's supermarket at Holburn Junction with the cause an infected catering-sized can of Argentine Fray Bentos corned beef. The improperly sealed can had been cooled in river water polluted by sewage and infection was quickly passed on by the shop's slicing machine to other meats. Typhoid, a fever caused by Salmonella bacteria, had been eradicated in the UK so this was a major test for local NHS services. There were over 400 cases, three related deaths and patients were quarantined in many hospitals. Visitors could only view patients through windows. When the outbreak ended the Queen came to Aberdeen (inset) to reassure that it was now a safe place to visit and the outbreak led to improvements in food handling practice.



18 City Centre Battlefield Bon Accord Gardens

A tranquil green space in the city centre, the sight of the gardens belies its history as part of the site of the Battle of Justice Mills in 1644. The Marquis of Montrose, a seasoned commander during the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, approached Aberdeen from the south with his Royalist army, despatching a messenger with an ultimatum for the Covenanting army defending the town to surrender. The literal shooting of this messenger provoked a bloody assault on the town by Montrose's army, who likely stormed up the slopes of the current gardens into battle (see **Bloody Aberdeen Trail**).



19 The Royal Railway Aberdeen Station

Transport links south were greatly improved with the opening of the Aberdeen Railway in 1850, originally terminating at Ferryhill Station, and later Guild Street Station. This was replaced with Aberdeen Joint Station in 1867, aptly named, connecting the line south to the north via the Denburn valley. It was also the terminus of the Royal Deeside Line, closed 1966, and now a long distance footpath (see **Lower Deeside Trail**). The Royal Train previously took Queen Victoria (inset) and later royals to Ballater for their home at Balmoral Castle. A short stretch from Crathes to Banchory is now a heritage railway. Today's Aberdeen Station dates to its 1912-1915 rebuilding and part of the original façade remains in the main foyer of Union Square shopping centre.



20 Aberdeen's Third Burgh Torry & Victoria Bridge

In 1495, Torry was granted Burgh of Barony status by King James IV and only became part of the City of Aberdeen in 1891 (along with Old and New Aberdeen plus Woodside). Fishing has played an important role in its development from two medieval villages, Upper and Lower Torry, and it grew from the 1890s with the developments of the harbour and better access to the south of the River Dee. Wellington Suspension Bridge connected Torry to Aberdeen in 1830 along with a more direct ferry across the harbour. However the Dee Ferry Boat Disaster in 1857 claimed the lives of 32 people and was the impetus for a new bridge which further linked Torry to the city in the 1880s. This town within a city has its own **Torry Local Area Trail**.



21 Our Nautical Links to Europe Aberdeen Harbour

The earliest written harbour record dates to 1136 with the granting of a charter by King David I, making it the oldest business in the UK. Trade would have existed before this date, with the Dee Estuary – an open basin with low sand islands called inches – providing a natural harbour. Over time the River Dee was rerouted, land reclaimed, piers and quays built, to form today's harbour and trade with Europe continued through the centuries. The developments also facilitated important former industries such as fishing and shipbuilding. The *Cutty Sark* beating *Thermopylae* and *Sir William Hardy*, renamed *Rainbow Warrior* were built here. Today it is a bustling port, serving the offshore oil and gas industry, welcoming freight vessels from around the world, and links the city to Orkney and Shetland. A major development at Nigg Bay, south of the harbour entrance will allow larger cruise ships to berth. See also **Aberdeen Maritime Trail**.



22 Madame Butterfly & Hollywood The Tivoli

This opened as Her Majesty's Theatre and Opera House, 1872 and became the Tivoli from 1910. North-east born Thomas Blake Glover (inset) lived in Japan and has been associated with Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*. Puccini's memorial stands in Glover Garden in the port city of Nagasaki where the opera is set. Glover was co-founder of Mitsubishi and Kirin Beer and his fascinating story is told in the **Scottish Samurai Trail**. Hollywood stars Charlie Chaplin and Stan Laurel, of Laurel & Hardy, were world famous in cinema's early days. They previously mastered their craft on stage, performing in several touring plays here, Charlie Chaplin, retired and on holiday, privately revisited in 1970, arranged by *Press and Journal* reporter Jack Webster and the story can be read online. It continues to showcase all forms of entertainment and **Aberdeen Green Trail** details its full history.



23 Monks & Street Art The Green

Archaeological excavation has uncovered evidence of Mesolithic activity in this area, which is one of the oldest in the city. It derives its name both from the original street, and the wider area which was one of four principal administrative quarters in the medieval town (the others called, the Crookit, the Even, and the Fittie quarters). It was a craft and trade centre, and a religious centre, with the Carmelite Friary based here since 1273, of which a nearby hotel takes its name. The modern Green is a cobbled open space with restaurants, shops, a cafe, pub and the stunning murals of Nuart and the Painted Doors Project.

24 From Silver Darlings to Black Gold Shiprow & Aberdeen Maritime Museum

One of the most important streets in the medieval burgh, Shiprow linked the harbour and the Castlegate, curving its way around the base of St Katherine's Hill – later built over with the development of Union Street. Provost Ross' House, which dates to 1593, became Aberdeen Maritime Museum in 1984 to



showcase the city's impressive maritime history collection. In 1997 the museum reopened following expansion and refurbishment linking it to the old Trinity Congregational Church with a modern glass and steel central structure. It tells the story of Aberdeen's maritime past from earliest times, through herring fishing (silver darlings), oil exploration (black gold) to the modern offshore energy industries.



25 Aberdeen's Waterway The Aberdeenshire Canal

This passenger and freight canal ran from Aberdeen Harbour to Inverurie from 1805-1845 linking the rivers Dee and Don. However it was eclipsed by the days of steam and is now mostly railway tracks although fragments and names remain. Mounthooly has a Canal Street and Place, Woodside a former canal bridge and partially filled dry section. It is also in the name of the Inverurie terminus, Port Elphinstone, which has a bridge and stretch of canal with water. The period drawing above shows a towed canal boat passing St Machar's Cathedral.



26 Champions of Europe Pittodrie Stadium

Aberdeen FC formed in 1903 and is known as 'The Dons', most likely a nod to the city's universities, don meaning teacher. Undoubtedly their finest moment is the 1983 European Cup Winners' Cup Final in Gothenburg, Sweden against Spain's formidable Real Madrid. Under manager Alex Ferguson and captain Willie Miller, Aberdeen won 2-1 and their first European trophy. Real's coach Alfredo Di Stéfano gallantly conceded, "Aberdeen have what money can't buy; a soul, a team spirit built in a family tradition". Aberdeen went on to win the follow-on European Super Cup against European Cup Winners Hamburger SV. They drew 0-0 at Hamburg's Volkparkstadion and 2-0 at Pittodrie. Aberdeen are the only Scottish team to win two European trophies – the two stars in their emblem. Ferguson later became the longest serving Manchester United manager and was knighted for services to the game. He has a statue outside the Sir Alex Ferguson Stand at Old Trafford, Manchester. Sir Alex was awarded the Freedom of the City of Aberdeen in 1999 (inset & 15). In 2022, Aberdeen FC unveiled their own statue, *Fergie* outside the stadium. The bronze is by Andy Edwards, and is the first of a series planned to honour club legends.



27 Wish You Were Here! Aberdeen Beach

The development of the beach front from the late 1920s transformed Aberdeen into a first class resort before package holidays opened up the travel of today to ordinary people. Aberdeen was a popular destination in the 1950s and 60s to visitors and locals alike. Particularly during the July Glasgow Fair and Edinburgh Trades holiday. The buildings from left are: The Bathing Station with its indoor pool, known as 'The Pond', The Beach Shelter for cover on rainy days and sole survivor, The Beach Ballroom of 1926, which played host to dances and dance bands. The early Beatles played a concert there as did Van Morrison (in Them) and The Who. Many generations will have fond memories of these venues along with the exciting rides of the Amusement Park behind.



28 Village by the Sea Footdee

Aberdeen's only fully surviving fishing village, Footdee is better known locally by its Scots name Fittie. Despite the location it doesn't mean foot of the Dee but is a corruption of St Fitticks. In fact the original fishing village was near where St Clement's Church stands today and known as the 'Fish Town'. Its current location dates to 1809 and the Town Council's development of squares of houses facing inwards to shelter from the harsh North Sea. Over time the houses have developed erratically to various heights and together with the sheds inside the squares, themselves an eccentric village of quirky shapes and bright colours, give Fittie a unique character of its own.

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