

EXCAVATIONS

IN FRIARS STREET INVERNESS, 1985



INVERNESS MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

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INTRODUCTION

The proposed demolition and redevelopment of buildings on the west side of Friars Street, Inverness (illus 1) gave an opportunity to investigate an area within the Dominican Friary complex. Trial trenches, approximately 10m², were excavated in the back gardens of two of the properties to assess the archaeological potential prior to demolition of the houses. Further, large scale, work could then be organised in association with the programme of development if the site proved to be of medieval importance.

THE DOMINICAN FRIARY

The Dominican Friary in Inverness was apparently founded by Alexander II (1198-1249) and dedicated to St. Bartholomew. However, the first reference to the foundation is in a charter of Alexander III which, in 1275, confirmed a donation to the friars. By 1436 it was "almost ruinous in its structure and buildings" (Cowan 1976 119) although in 1559, when certain moveable items belonging to the friary were placed in the safe keeping of the magistrates of Inverness, there was still a community of five Dominicans in the burgh. The friary was disbanded in 1556/7 and tradition states that the buildings were demolished and the stone used for the construction of Cromwell's Fort between 1652 and 1657 (Meldrum 1982 24). But it is evident that removal of the fabric of the friary properties had already begun almost a century earlier. The Burgh Court had to issue orders that no one should destroy the friars buildings and dykes in 1568 (Mackay 1911 169), although these were not adhered to (ibid 201). Just three years later, in 1571, the magistrates themselves suggested that the roof of the Friars Kirk could be used to repair the other church - the Parish Church.

The only extant part of the Dominican Friary is an octagonal column with the remains of the springing of an arch, standing approximately 3.5m high. It is sited within an area used as a burial ground, sandwiched between large, modern buildings which have presumably destroyed the majority of the east side of the friary.

TRIAL TRENCH 1 (illus 2)

An 'L' shaped trench with maximum dimensions 5m by 3m was excavated in the back gardens of 17-19 Friars Street.

After removal of the garden soil (about 0.8m thick), a mixed grey-brown clayey silt and grey-yellow silty clay (002) was revealed, into which a subrectangular pit (006) (1.2m by 1m and 0.9m deep) had been cut. It is possible that the surface from which the pit was originally cut was within the soil horizon, but this was not observed during removal of the garden deposits. The original function of this pit was not established although it appeared to have the remains of a clay lining against at least the east and south sides. It had been backfilled with a number of small boulders, architectural stone fragments, an incomplete ? 15th century jug and the lower part of an early medieval pot-quern. This is ornamented with a human mask with a hole from the basin through the mouth of the face through which the ground meal could pass. The associated fill, a grey-brown clayey silt with charcoal flecks (009) contained bone, medieval potsherds and a ? coin.

Two other shallow subcircular features were excavated (004 & 005) both about 0.5m in diameter and 0.1m deep. They were filled with a dark brown clayey silt, but contained nothing dissimilar to the material found in the lower part of the garden soil.

Removal of 002, (about 0.25m thick), which included a fine orange lensed gravel deposit (007), grey-green clay areas (008), and a yellow-green clay lens (010), revealed the undulating natural yellow sand surface. Within one of the 'depressions' was a deposit of manganese-stained damp gravel (015). None of these layers produced any artefacts.

TRIAL TRENCH 2 (illus 3)

A 'Z' shaped trench with maximum dimensions 4.5m by 2.5m was excavated in the back garden of 25 Friars Street.

After removal of garden soil (about 0.5m deep), a mixed sub-soil was revealed similar to 002-007-008-010, which had been cut by numerous features, all of which contained 19th/20th century fragments of china.

Although the mixed sub-soil horizon was not removed, the excavated cuts indicated that this layer was directly over the natural sand similar to that revealed in Trial Trench 1.

CONCLUSIONS

No stratified medieval deposits were recovered in either trial trench, although pit 006 contained medieval material presumably associated with the destruction of the nearby friary buildings during the 16th century. The southern end of this area may have been part of the friary gardens, particularly as there was a considerable depth of soil development in trench 1 in comparison to that in trench 2. However the dumping of midden material to act as fertiliser to the soil does not appear to have been a frequent occurrence, (for there were few fragments of bone and medieval potsherds in the soil) and it may be that even gardening was of a minimal nature.

Further work on the west side of Friars Street during redevelopment will therefore be restricted to an occasional watching brief only.

THE FINDS

The finds from trial trench 2 were all of a 19th or 20th century date and only a sample was kept.

A short report on the medieval potsherds (c 50 small pieces) as well as the incomplete jug from trial trench 1 will be produced by Norman MacAskill.

The bone, few pieces of metalwork and the architectural stone fragments will be detailed in archive only, but it is intended to produce a short note on the pot-quern for a forthcoming volume of PSAS.

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