

Black Bull Close Dunbar: Historical Summary

Project Background

Addyman Archaeology were contracted by The Ridge to provide historical and archaeological background information as part of a feasibility study being undertaken by Simpson and Brown Architects to re-develop a group of derelict historic buildings located to the rear of The Black Bull, High Street Dunbar.

Historical Background

Introduction

In 2006 Historic Scotland (now HES, Historic Environment Scotland) commissioned a new Burgh Survey for Dunbar. This publication drew together historic and archaeological information in order to inform decisions relating to development within the historic core of Dunbar. The following background information is drawn from this publication. A search was also made of the Canmore data base (<https://canmore.org.uk/>) in order to identify any more recent archaeological work in the area. A thorough search was also made of historic maps held at the National Library of Scotland (<http://maps.nls.uk/>) and a selection of these are included below.

Foundation and development of Dunbar

Archaeological evidence shows that the area now occupied by the town of Dunbar has been continuously occupied since the Roman Iron Age (first to fourth century AD). Dunbar is in a strategically important location, both in relation to travel by land or by sea. Before the medieval castle was built a Northumbrian fort occupied the headland. Prior to the formal laying out of the town in the medieval period, the area around the defended headland was the focus of the settlement. There was a second focus of activity was around the monastery in the area now occupied by the Co-op, Factory Shop and Friars Croft flats, directly to the west of the site. A monastery had been founded here between 1240 and 1243.

The town of Dunbar was granted baronial status in 1370 and became a royal burgh in 1445. Due to its location and its strategic importance there are many historical documents relating to Dunbar. A more detailed account of the town's development is presented within the Burgh Survey (*Historic Dunbar, Archaeology and development by Dennison, Stronach and Coleman 2006*) Of particular relevance to our understanding of the origins and development of Black Bull Close is the foundation and expansion of the town during the medieval and later periods.

The Burgh Survey states that it is not clear exactly where the medieval town was located and along which axis it spread. It is likely that the nucleus of the medieval town was beneath the castle in the area around the harbour; therefore it is possible that Church Street/Castle Street was originally the main street, with the current High Street a later addition. However the limited archaeological excavations that have been undertaken within the town indicate that the north end of the High Street has its origins in the medieval period.

Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

The layout of Dunbar based along the current High Street as we know it today was in existence by the late 16th or early 17th century. The Tollbooth and the George Hotel were certainly present by this time with the later documented as being built in 1625. The George Hotel is located on the opposite side of the street from The Black Bull, and assuming a relatively even development along both sides of the High Street, The Black Bull and buildings to the rear may also be early 17th century.

Physical Evidence

The buildings to the rear of the Black Bull occupy both sides of the narrow close. They are in a very derelict and over grown condition, though there has been some recent clearance of vegetation. Very little is understood of the buildings at the moment due to their condition and difficulty of safe access. It is anticipated that as the project progresses detailed recording and analysis of the buildings will lead to much greater understanding of the date and development of the buildings together with their changing uses over time. It is also likely that remains of more structures may survive on the north side of the close at the rear of the upstanding buildings.

The earliest datable feature on site so far is a roll moulding on a blocked doorway on Building 1 on the north side of the close. This type of doorway dates to the 16th century or possibly the early 17th century.

Potential for buried archaeology

The site at Black Bull Close falls within the area identified by the Burgh Survey as having developed during the medieval period. It is therefore possible that the burgage plot to the rear of the upstanding buildings may contain archaeological evidence of earlier medieval occupation. Any potential excavation could provide valuable information further enhancing our understanding of the development and functioning of medieval Dunbar.

Due to the location of the site adjacent to the area occupied by the Monastery it is possible that early medieval fabric survives within the western boundary wall of the site. Other remains relating to the monastic settlement may also survive within the site boundary.

During a site visit excavations carried out for water pipes in the backlands area behind the buildings were inspected and photographed. This revealed that rich dark garden soils exist to a depth of 0.95m below the current ground level. If this depth of garden soil is present across the plot, any earlier archaeological remains present on the site must lie below this level.

Map Regression

There are a number of early maps of Dunbar which show the lay out and extent of the settlement, including Adairs map of 1682. The layout of burghage plots on either side of the High street with buildings on the frontage has been established. The castle and the church mark the limits of the settlement.

The earliest detailed maps that depict individual buildings are from the C19th. John Woods plan of 1830 was the earliest identified and is reproduced below. However due to the scale of the maps it is not possible to be certain whether the buildings still standing on the site at Black Bull Close are the ones depicted on the maps. Therefore whilst they are informative they cannot be used to accurately date the upstanding buildings.



John Adair Plan of East Lothian (extract) 1682



William Forrest Map of Haddingtonshire (extract) 1802



Great Reform Act Plan 1832



John Wood Pien of Duxbury 1830



First Edition Ordnance Survey Handflingomshire Sheet 6 i 853



Second Edition Ordnance Survey Middlesex and revised 1893



Ordinance Survey revised 1906



Current Ordinance: Survey

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