

Little is known of the Dunbar Hospital and the Old Aberdeen Bedesmen. The Bede House in Don Street, however, carries a firm footprint of their history.

Bedesmen of Old Aberdeen



BY
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Right in the heart of Old Aberdeen is a gem of a house that was built over 300 years ago. It stands now very much as it would have been when it was built.

At one time the Bede House, a fine example of an early Scottish town house and a listed building, housed the Old Aberdeen Bedesmen. The house bears a striking similarity to Mary, Queen of Scots' House in Jedburgh. It is adjacent to one that was built with stones removed from the ruins of the St Machar Cathedral tower, that fell in a storm in 1688.

Our story of a Bede House in Old Aberdeen starts in 1531 when Bishop Gavin Dunbar, under the instruction of James V of Scotland, had a hospital built and dedicated to St Mary. The hospital was built for the elderly poor men of Old Aberdeen. The bishop, whose predecessor Bishop William Elphinstone had requested the foundation of Kings College in 1495, was also a reforming cleric who took his community responsibilities seriously.

Gavin Dunbar, the Elder, Bishop of



BEDE HOUSE: Over 300 years old, it housed the Old Aberdeen Bedesmen.

Aberdeen, was uncle to Gavin Dunbar the Younger, the Chancellor of Scotland, a very close advisor to James V. One might suppose that Bishop Dunbar, the Elder, was mindful that doing good for the poor of Old Aberdeen by the foundation of a hospital might smooth his spiritual path to Heaven – and also that of his King, James V.

Hospitals were not uncommon in medieval times, and we know that there were some 120 across Scotland. The Scots word 'Spital' often refers to these buildings. Another hospital in Old Aberdeen, near St Peter's Church on the modern Spital, pre-dated Dunbar's Hospital having been built by Bishop William Kinninmond around 1180. By the 16th century it was derelict.

There was yet another hospital in Foveran, near the Ythan, and one in Kincardine o' Neil, the ruins of which are still visible. These houses were refuges for vulnerable elderly men, although some catered for women. Some were also hospitals for travellers or pilgrims.

In a 19th century print by Andrew Gibb one can see a representation of the structure of the original hospital built to the west of St Machar's Cathedral.

It was an imposing building for its time and together with a wooden bell tower, it stood as one of the three tall buildings in Old Aberdeen; the others being Kings College and St Machar's Cathedral. Twelve Bedesmen lived in separate rooms, each 14ft x 12 ft., in a building some 100ft. x 32ft..

On the north side of the house was a common room and on the south side an oratory. The oratory and the closeness to St Machar's Cathedral ensured that the residents were indeed 'prayerful' men. The Dunbar Hospital building survived for over 200 years until the 18th century. When it was demolished is still a matter of debate.

All of the historic sources of information on the hospital and the Bedesmen suggest that the 16th century hospital building is lost. Recently, however, I believe that I have seen what could be the remains of Dunbar's hospital.

From the Chanonry a steep path leads down into Seaton Park, adjacent to St Machar's Cathedral Church. On the left hand side of a gate, to the west of the church, set into a wall, there are the remains of two windowsills. Are they the sills in the front wall of the hospital? I believe they are.

There is no known building at this site other

than the hospital. What other explanation is there to the occurrence of two medieval windowsills at this locations? Based on supporting evidence from the Royal Commission on Ancient & Historic Monuments of Scotland, it seems very likely that these sills are all that remains of the front of Dunbar's Hospital.

The Gibb drawing of the hospital, the relative position of the sills to the church and contemporary maps suggest strongly that this is evidence of the site of the hospital. However, as the ground behind the wall falls away steeply into the park, there may be some doubt about how the substantial hospital building could have been located here.



PRINT BY ANDREW GIBB: The original hospital is to the west of St Machar's Cathedral.

Assuming that the sills in the wall are at the front of the building, and it is unlikely that they were at the rear, then there must have been a very steep slope at the rear.

The footprint of the original building seems too large for the site as it is at present. Or is it? I have no answer to this conundrum, yet. Further research is needed. There is no further evidence of the internal or external structure of Dunbar's Hospital.

At the age of 63 in 1676, a former Bailie of Old Aberdeen, William Logan, married Jean Moir of Stoneywood. Jean (39) was a member of the influential Stoneywood branch of the even more influential Moirs of Scotstown and Spital.

As respected members of the burgh, she and her husband built a town house on a plot of land on the east side of Don Street, the road that led from Old Aberdeen to the Brig o Balgownie. The plot was based on an existing croft of 40 roods (about 10 acres), which had

been owned by Alexander Lillie – a prime site for a baillie and his new wife.

Perhaps this was a last chance to settle down for William Logan. Perhaps there had been an earlier wife. Little is known about their domestic life. Logan was a wright and had had a fine pew built in St Machar's Cathedral in 1666. On the house, there is a plaque adjacent to the main door that reads:

GULLIELM LOGAN ET EUS CONIX
JANETA MOIR HANC DOM.
AEDIFICARI JUSSERUNT ANNO
DOMINE 1676.

[William Logan and his wife Janet had the house built to their orders in the year 1676]

William Logan's name appears in the old burgh records from time to time, but for someone who built such an imposing house, his foot prints are shallow. The Logans lived in their house for a short and hopefully happy period of four years until he died in 1680. Jean Moir continued to live there until her death in 1700.

They are buried in St Machar's Cathedral, a large blue stone slab near the entrance celebrating their resting place. Her passing was marked on 8 December 1700, when the Minutes of the Kirk Session record that the Cathedral Church of St Machar was given...

"a green cloth of four elms in length seven quarters broad with a fringe of worst conforme ... by the heirs of Jean Moir to allow for the pryce of ringing the church bells at ... Janet Moir's interment..."

Little more is known of these prominent residents of Old Aberdeen. Their house was one of the most striking dwellings on Don Street – on a par with some of the cathedral manses in the Chanonry – yet they have left little for us to know them better. A plaque on the wall of a house, an important burial place, and the tolling of St Machar's bells are all that we know for certain about the Logans. That is, apart from the fact that they provided indirectly for the Bedesmen.

It was some 70 years before their house in Don Street was to take on its modern significance.

During the early days of the 18th century Bishop Dunbar's Hospital was showing its age, and probably in urgent need of repair. At one point the superintendent of the hospital was chastised by the kirk session of St Machar for stealing stones from the churchyard to



BEDE HOUSE: a 19th century photograph

effect repairs. There may also have been pressures exerted by the land owner to tidy up or regularize the land to the west of the Cathedral Church of St Machar.

In 1786 James Forbes of Seaton, the land owner, negotiated a move of the bedesmen to what had been the Logan house. We can only assume that the old hospital was pulled down. With this move, the bedesmen gave their name to the house in Don Street, known to this day as The Bede House.

What did the house look like? The 1676 it

consisted of three stories and an attic. Entry to the house from Don Street is through a pend, which has a gate dating from 1965, leading to two doors. To the left is access to what is now cellars, the second door opens into a spiral stone staircase leading to the upper floors.

The tower at the rear, which is capped with a pyramidal roof, carries the stairs to the second floor; from there to the attic there is a set of stairs with a corbelled turret. These stairs are now closed off, but can be accessed through a bedroom in one of the flats.

The first floor would have been a 'great hall' in Logan's time. No records exist to confirm that there was an out-building attached, although an Ordnance Survey map in 1866 shows a large L-shaped building in Don Street. The still-visible remains of the wooden roof beam confirm a substantial out-building at right angles to Don Street. There is one undated print that gives some idea of the structure towards the end of the 18th century.

There are also some clues inside the house. It is likely that some of the closed off arches, ►

still visible along the internal stairway from the ground floor to the first floor, led into this building. There is further evidence of external structures of late 18th or early 19th century construction.

Support for the existence of this extension also comes from the 1881 census where six families are listed as residents in the house. The total household comprised of 22 individuals. As recently as the 19th century, living space was cramped in comparison with what we expect today; however, the Bede House must have been a busy place.

Evidence of outbuildings can be seen from the rear. To the right of the square tower of the main house was a chimney, which can be seen in an undated print. A George Washington Wilson photograph from the 1890s shows washhouses in place of the more substantial outhouses of earlier days.

The main structure of the original house built by Logan is almost intact and still gives a very good idea of where the bedesmen moved in 1786. Plans of the Don Street Bedehouse exist for the 19th century, but to date they have not been located.

So, who were the bedesmen?

The origin of the word 'bede' lies in its use as a prayer. The Bedes Men were, as Bishop Dunbar and James V expected, men who spent much of their time offering up prayers for the great and good, that is the monarch and their bishop, and saying their *pater noster*. The right to be looked after and in some places to ask for alms had a cost, a prayerful life.

The earliest reliable account of bedesmen outwith Aberdeen comes from the reign of James VI, in 1607. The following account paints a general picture of the Edinburgh Bedesmen.

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The Privy Council refer to "a very ancient and loveable custom" of giving a blue gown, purse and as many Scottish shillings as agreed with the years of the King's age, to men "auld pair men" as likewise agreed with the king's years and seeing it to be "very necessary and expedient that the said custom should continue" they gave orders accordingly.

The "auld pair men" so favoured were called the King's Bedesmen, notwithstanding any general enactments that might exist against mendicacy. Their blue cloak bore a pewter badge which assured them this right. They were expected to requite the king's bounty by their

prayers; and, doubtless as they had such an interest in the increase of his years, their intercessions for his prolonged life must have been sincere. The distribution of the cloaks and purses used to take place on the king's birthday, at the end of the Tollbooth of Edinburgh, till a time not long gone by.

These bedesmen were 'Blue Cloaks' whose pewter badges gave them visible status in the community. There is no evidence of what the Old Aberdeen bedesmen wore in the early days. The foundation charter of Dunbar's Hospital, St Mary, dated 24th February 1531, relates: "...when something is left after supplying the needs of the church and our own life, and remembering the words of Almighty God, ... give of thy bread to the hungry and the poor and the wandering under the shelter of the house and clothe the naked we resolve to make a hospital..."



LAST REMNANTS: Are these blocked windows (highlighted) the possible remains of the hospital?

Given the later Privy Council decree in 1607, there could have been a maximum of 18 bedesmen elected or appointed, one for each year of the sovereign James V's reign. However, Bishop Gavin Dunbar and James V set a limit of 12 in Old Aberdeen. These men were to be maintained out of the revenue of the burgh of Old Aberdeen with a total sum of £100 (Scots) – roughly equal to £8 in modern currency.

Many donations were given to support the bedesmen – some in land, some in kind. The Dunbar Hospital men rose at 7 a.m. on the call of the janitor – one of the bedesmen – and they went to pray in St Machar's Church. They dined at 11 a.m. The day proceeded with prayers, work in gardens and a supper at 6 p.m. The day unfolded with prayers and "good conversation" until 3 a.m. the next day, with a strict instruction from Dunbar that:

"...at all times they should be seemly in conversation and not in any manner whatever receive women into their apartments..."

The original declaration can seem a rather severe existence by modern standards. By the 1860s a sum of eight shillings a month was given to the bedesmen, whose number had increased from 12 to 16 by 1902. The eldest two were also given two salmon from the River Don. Further details of their life are uncertain with some fanciful ideas in popular historical accounts.

Certainly in the late 1960s, there were only eight bedesmen, each receiving 15 shillings or £0.75 from the church officer of St Machar on the last Thursday of each month. The story of these men now begins to disappear. We know that monies received by the managers of the Hospital were insufficient to support a payment to the bedesmen and residual funds for Dunbar's Hospital were amalgamated with other Poor Relief funds in 1988.

The most recent and probably only picture of the bedesmen shows 11 or 12 gentlemen in formal suits greeting Queen Mary on a visit to St Machar's Cathedral Aberdeen in 1922 on the day she opened a new building at Rowett Research Institute. The last Old Aberdeen Bedesman died in 1988. With this in mind, how did the Dunbar Bedesmen fit into the overall social context in Scotland?

We need to remember that until 1845 in Scotland and 1834 in England, the 'poor' were largely the problem for the Church and the wealthy. Poor laws existed in Scotland from 1574, but it is only in middle of the 19th century that the state took an active role in looking after the destitute. While the Old Aberdeen Bedesmen were not necessarily 'the poor', they were vulnerable men who needed care and support.

The aphorism "the poor have always been with us" was much more apposite in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Church was the only refuge for the poor, the elderly and the infirm. Begging was taken as normal. In order to exercise some control over those who had no work, were ill or injured, or even those who were unwilling to work, cities and towns issued badges to identify those allowed to beg.

The question arises as to the relationship of the Old Aberdeen Bedesmen to beggars. Were the Dunbar Bedesmen beggars? Clearly not, as they were housed in a state-of-the-art hospital and had food provided.

While the Reformation may have ended the medieval hospital, most parishes in

Scotland still regulated the poor. By the mid-1660s Old Aberdeen had an organized system for beggars to attend for alms at specific houses on specific days.

There is no evidence that those who lived in Dunbar's Hospital or Don Street had any visible sign to say they were bedesmen. It is very unlikely that they wore a blue cloak. Did they have an identifying badge like the Royal Bedesmen?

Some hundred years before Dunbar's Hospital was founded, the Scottish Parliament, meeting in Perth in 1424, agreed that beggars should be identified by a badge, a beggar's badge. The context for the act, agreed on 12 March, 1424, was a perceived problem with unruly beggars. Local communities may have had a 'not in our back yard' approach. To control beggars, the parliament agreed:

"... Alsua it is ordanyt that na thigar (thig - to beg or ask for charity) be thollyt to thig nor bege nothir in burghs nor to lande betwix xiiij and iij score [and ten] of yheris of age bot that be soyne be the consall of the towne or of the cuntre at thas may nocht vyne thar leyffing othir ways. And that that sa beis fundin sall have a takin to land of the schera and in beuowis off the aldrimen and baytyheis, and that undir the poyn of birnyng on the cheyk and bannyssing of the cuntre..."

Which translates as:

Also it is ordained that no beggar be suffered to thig or beg either in burghs or in the land between fourteen and seventy years of age, unless it is seen by the council of the town that they cannot make their living in other ways. And they that are so found shall have a token from the sheriff in the land, and from the aldermen and bailies in the burghs, and that under pain of burning on the cheek and banishing from the country.

Setting aside the punishment for non-compliance, this act is evidence for the use of badges or tokens to identify those permitted to ask for alms.

Many fine examples of these badges exist for communities across Aberdeenshire, including Old Aberdeen. There is a fine example in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, and similar badges from 1722 are in the University of Aberdeen collection in Marischal Museum.

The question arises, did the Dunbar Bedesmen have any form of identification? In



1773 MAP OF OLD ABERDEEN:

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BEDE HOUSE: an 18th century sketch

Sir Walter Scott's novel *The Antiquary*, the character Eddie Ochiltree is described as a Blue Coat. They wore badges that bore the inscription 'Pass and Re-Pass' signifying their right to come and go from burgh settlements. The absence of any historical references to 'Bedesmen Badges' would suggest that the bedesmen who lived in Dunbar's Hospital and Don Street were not King's Bedesmen and further did not have an identifying badge.

The story of the Dunbar Hospital and the Old Aberdeen Bedesmen is incomplete. Records have been lost and some known records are still unavailable.

However, there is a firm footprint of these developments in the Bede House in Don Street and the history of the original Hospital. Like the Cheshire Cat, all that may be left for us now is the grin.

There is a persistent story of a blocked-off secret passage which leads from the Bede House to the Cathedral, a distance of some 500 metres. One account relates:

"... the Beadle (of St. Machar's) used to buy the minister booze, at the grocer's shop by the Town House and smuggle a 'carry out' into St. Machar's"

Some believe that evidence of this was the bottles found in the secret passage when it could be walked "... in living memory".

Another story is that the adjacent house to the Bedehouse, 18 Don Street, was built from granite stones retrieved from the tower of St Machar's Cathedral that fell in a storm in 1688, which is quite plausible.

Careful examination of 18 Don Street shows dressed stones that almost certainly came from St Machar's Cathedral, but so far I have found no records that sustain this story.

While the Bede House is not a grand house and cannot compete with the elegance of the Archibald Simpson 19th century Aberdeen, it carries the history of the 'old' Aberdeen into our modern city. It is also part of the visible history of a church that goes back to the fifth century and a reminder of social conditions long since forgotten.

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