

FUNDING SUPPORT



At the round-about go straight on and down Donkey Brae to the harbour.



As you might imagine, in his day William Wotherspoon was something of a village hero. Following a significant court victory against the Earl of Morton in 1848 the villagers of Aberdour showed their appreciation by organising a dinner in his honour at Catton's Hotel (now the Aberdour Hotel). It was quite a spectacle. The Lord Provost of Edinburgh came across the Forth to chair the dinner, a band came from Dunfermline to provide the entertainment and Mr Wotherspoon regaled the company with the legal arguments that had won the case. When it was finally time to leave, the party made their way to the harbour where Mr Greig's steam tug was waiting to ferry Mr Wotherspoon and the Provost back to Edinburgh.

Newspapers reported that the ordinary villagers, who were 'anxious to join in the conviviality of the event, turned out in great

numbers and joined the procession to the harbour which was led by the band, whose music re-echoed with fine effect from the cliffs of the Hawkcraig. All returned home highly gratified with the proceedings of the day.'

From here we are going to retrace the route of this extraordinary procession and make our way up Shore Road. We are now in the centre of Wester Aberdour, where places of refreshment are available. On the High Street turn right for the station, where our walk began.

Key References

National Records of Scotland;

GD1/555

GD150/2339

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GD150/2345

GD150/2396

The British Newspaper Archive;

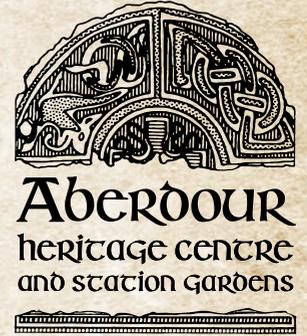
www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk

www.aberdourheritagecentre.uk

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KNOWING YOUR PLACE ABERDOUR

A Walk to the Beach



Aberdour emerged from the 18th century as a quiet, rather unremarkable community of farm workers, hand-loom weavers, sailors and quarrymen. The old harbour was busy exporting quantities of coal, quarried stone and farm produce. However, during the course of the nineteenth century this peaceful village underwent a startling transformation.

Over a period of eighty years Aberdour was to establish itself as a thriving seaside resort enticing increasing numbers of visitors across the Forth from Edinburgh, Leith and beyond. By 1883 it was reported that 10,000 day-trippers and excursionists could arrive in Aberdour over a single weekend!

This remarkable transformation was only accomplished after decades of conflict with the 16th and 17th Earls of Morton. As the feudal superior of Easter Aberdour, George Douglas 16th Earl of Morton (1774-1827) and George Sholto Douglas 17th Earl of Morton (1827-1858) proved to be formidable opponents to Aberdour's development as a seaside resort.

During the first half of the century, just when Aberdour was beginning to attract summer visitors the Earls of Morton became increasingly determined to defend and enhance the privacy of their estate. As a consequence, the right of villagers and visitors to walk to the beach, something we take for granted today, was only secured after years of bitter struggle.

On this walk, which will take about 2 1/2 hours, we are going to follow the story of the fight for access to Aberdour's most popular beach and trace the people, places and events that helped establish the village as a famous 'watering place'.

AN HISTORIC COASTAL VILLAGE

ABERDOUR HERITAGE CENTRE



– Railway Station and Car Park.

The first rail passengers began arriving at Aberdour Station in 1890. A railway link between the proposed Forth Bridge and Burntisland via Aberdour had been planned as early as 1873 but workmen only started carving its path through the village in November 1887. By August 1888 work was carrying on through the night and visitors gathered to watch an illuminated 'steam navy' cutting through the rocks of Easter Aberdour.

The land on which the railway station was being built had appeared largely empty in decades before the construction work began. However, during the eighteenth century this site would have looked very different.

Dour Cottage, the white building behind the recycling point in the carpark, is all that remains of part of the old High Street of Wester Aberdour which, in the eighteenth century, extended past Aberdour House and Castle to Easter Aberdour.

In 1800 the 16th Earl of Morton closed this ancient route and established a new road between the two villages. He then went on to purchase and demolish a number of buildings along the old road.

This was not an isolated episode but part of a wider programme aimed at improving the Mortons' Aberdour estate by pushing the community further away from their property.

Cross over the rail bridge, exit the station onto the main road and turn right.



The modern road linking Easter and Wester Aberdour still follows the line of the Earl's 'new road', completed in the summer of 1800. The Earl of Morton's activities in rerouting the main road through Aberdour gave rise to a bitter feud with a neighbouring landowner, James Stuart of Dunearn, which continued for nearly twenty years. One long running battle within a vast catalogue of incidents concerned Stuart's right to access the beach.

Hillside House, the Stuart family residence, which overlooks the new road, had been advertised to let in 1796 with access to 'excellent sea bathing within a short distance.' This is the earliest reference to Aberdour as a location for what was becoming an extremely fashionable activity in Scotland. For generations the Stuart family had enjoyed access to Whitesands Bay (now better known as Silver Sands) from the Hillside Estate.

When, in around 1804, the Earl of Morton began restricting access to Whitesands Bay it was James Stuart who challenged him in the courts. We are now going to follow the route to the beach that James Stuart fought to preserve.

Pass the main gate of Hillside House on your left and cross over the road to Hawkcraig Road.



At the beginning of the nineteenth century this section of what is now Hawkcraig Road was a narrow passage known as Kirk Wynd.

The Parish kirk of St. Fillan's, however, had already been unroofed and abandoned in the 1790s when the Earl of Morton moved the congregation further away from his property to a new kirk in Wester Aberdour, the building that is today the Church Hall. Entering Kirk Wynd we would have made our way between Mrs Lochty's house to the west and James Anderson's house to the east. Both properties have long since disappeared.

Continue along Hawkcraig Road.



As we make our way further along Hawkcraig Road we come to a small triangle of ground at the gates to St. Fillan's Kirk. At the beginning of the nineteenth century this was the site of a house

occupied by an Aberdour tenant called James Kirkham. Here we would have been confronted by a gate which the 16th Earl of Morton began to lock from around 1803. The gate marked the limits of the village and the beginning of what the Earl considered to be his own private estate.

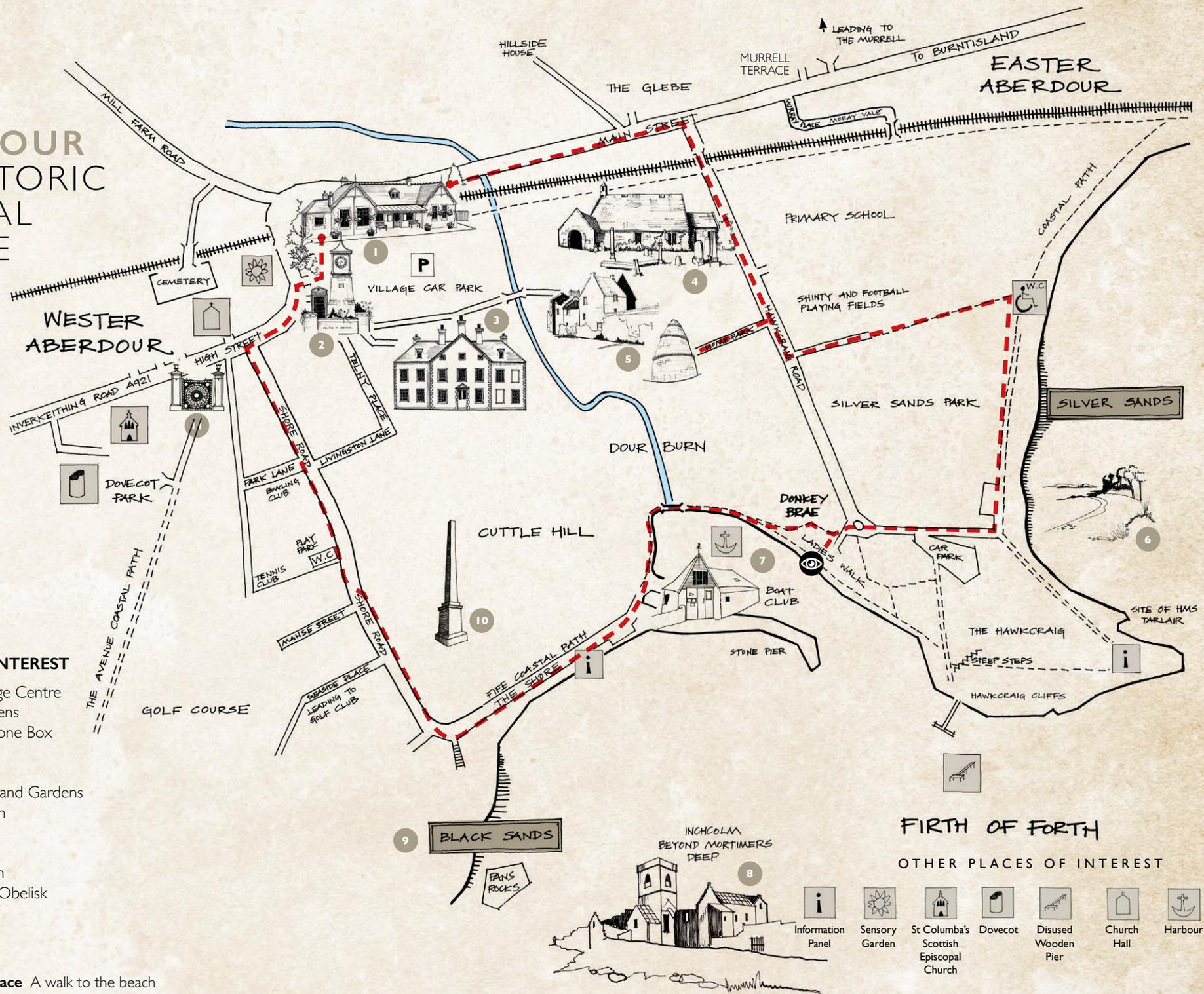
If we managed to pass over this gate we would have found ourselves on a track called the Fishergate, much narrower than the modern road. The kitchen garden for Aberdour House would have been on the right on ground that is now occupied by housing. On our left, we would have found a stone wall enclosing an open field known as Kirk Shotts - where Aberdour Primary School now stands.



Detail of RHP57/2 *Plan of the lands adjacent to Aberdour, Fife*, drawn by Robert Drysdale, 19th June 1811. National Records of Scotland. Extract from one of the plans accompanying the court case Stuart against Morton anent the right of access to Whitesands. Fishergate is not named, but was presumably what is shown as Kirk Wynd + Alley. It was found during the arrangement of the unextracted processes in the basement room of the office of Mr. Cosmo Innes, Principal Clerk of Session, at 12th July, 1865.

Image courtesy of National Records of Scotland.

ABERDOUR AN HISTORIC COASTAL VILLAGE



LOCATIONS OF INTEREST

1. Aberdour Heritage Centre and Station Gardens
2. Clock and Telephone Box
3. Aberdour House
4. St Fillan's Church
5. Aberdour Castle and Gardens
6. Silver Sands Beach
7. The Harbour
8. Inchcolm
9. Black Sands Beach
10. Earl of Morton's Obelisk
11. Dovecot Gates

FIRTH OF FORTH

OTHER PLACES OF INTEREST

							
Information Panel	Sensory Garden	St Columba's Scottish Episcopal Church	Dovecot	Disused Wooden Pier	Church Hall	Harbour	Viewpoint

Turn right into Home Park and then left to the edge of the field. ↓

James Stuart was not only fighting to preserve his access to Whitesands Bay he was also seeking to maintain the right to use the traditional route from Easter Aberdour to the Harbour. This old-established route crossed the field in front of us, known as Mill Park, and emerged at the harbour near the mouth of the Dour Burn. The 16th Earl of Morton walled up the entrance and exit to this path and despite Stuart's best efforts to keep it open the route had fallen out of use by 1813. This is why we still have to take such a circuitous route to the harbour.

Back up Home Park to Hawkcraig Road, then right along Hawkcraig Road as far as the first opening off to the left. ↓

It was here that the 16th Earl of Morton constructed another gate to hinder access. Although the modern gate to the playing fields is close to the site of the original, the Earl's gate would have crossed what is now Hawkcraig Road.

The existing rather patchy line of trees traces an older tree-lined avenue planted by the Earls of Morton during the eighteenth century. It was along this avenue that James Stuart had been accustomed to driving a carriage on his way to enjoy a bracing dip in the sea. However, even if he had negotiated this gate, Stuart would have found his way barred by a further two locked gates before he could reach the beach.

Turn left and follow the track to the beach, passing the shinty and football playing fields on your left. ↓

In 1813, after years of litigation, James Stuart's sea bathing days at this spot were effectively ended at the House of Lords. Earlier court decisions that had gone in Stuart's favour were overturned. He was asked to provide complex legal proof of the rights of access he was claiming and he appears to have abandoned the case. Incidentally, the Earl of Morton had been a member of the House of Lords since 1791.

The issue of beach access at Aberdour was not raised again until 1846. This time it was the 17th Earl of Morton who took out a series of court orders, or interdicts, against individuals in the village explicitly preventing them from crossing his land to access Whitesands Bay.

Adam Black, the Provost of Edinburgh, described the Earl's actions as 'illegal encroachments' on the rights of the public and complained that 'dependent tenants and humble villagers' were afraid to call into question the conduct of 'the grasping and overbearing proprietor'. The *Scotsman* newspaper reported that the Earl's aim was to 'exclude the whole community from obtaining access along the seaside, either to Burntisland, to Aberdour or anywhere inbetween.'

Fortunately, the 'humble villagers' found a champion for their cause in the form of William Wotherspoon - an Edinburgh solicitor who enjoyed spending the summer months in Aberdour.

Wotherspoon pursued the 17th Earl of Morton through the courts for over a decade and in October 1856 finally succeeded in establishing a legal right-of-way through the Earl's land to Whitesands Bay. The following year Wotherspoon purchased James Stuart's old estate of Hillside (from William Fraser, a former slave master who had acquired it in the 1830s) and occupied it as a summer residence until his death in 1883.

The 1856 route not only followed the path that James Stuart had struggled to preserve earlier in the century but also extended it through The Heughs and all the way to Burntisland.

This route between Burntisland and Aberdour had been the source of bitter conflict. Throughout the 1840s increasing numbers of visitors were arriving in Burntisland and making their way through The Heughs to Aberdour. The 17th Earl of Morton and his Grounds Officer, James Barr seem to have been determined to stem the tide by whatever means necessary:

On 13 June 1846 James Barr and his assistant Mr Cavens were found guilty at the Edinburgh Court of Session of having assaulted a surgeon and labourer from Aberdour who had just removed stones blocking the path. Barr and Cavens were fined a total of £55.

In another incident a 'respectable gentleman' called Hugh Forfar received £101 in damages from the Earl of Morton in an out of court settlement. This time James Barr had dismantled a bridge over the Starley Burn in an effort to prevent people travelling through the woods to and from Aberdour. Later that evening Mr Forfar was travelling along the path in the dark and, not knowing that the bridge had been removed, tumbled down the gorge. He was injured so badly that he required surgery.

In both these cases William Wotherspoon acted on behalf of the victims.

At the Silver Sands turn right and walk to the end of the beach. Then turn right and follow the road up the hill. ↓

One route that William Wotherspoon failed to preserve was the walk from Easter Aberdour to the Harbour through Mill Park. Although this historic path was lost, Wotherspoon secured a new route to the harbour from the beach at Whitesands Bay. This new path followed another eighteenth-century tree-lined avenue, part of which became popularly known as Beech Walk during the nineteenth century. This route, now taken up by the road to the Silver Sands, continued to the Harbour down the steep path known today as Donkey Brae. This is the route we will now follow down to the harbour.