



Aberdour New Town

A Walk through The New Town of Aberdour

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Aberdour Heritage Centre

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At the end of the eighteenth century George Douglas, 16th Earl of Morton (1774-1827), began an extraordinary series of 'improvements' to his Aberdour Estate.

The residence he had inherited certainly was not a secluded country retreat: two busy roads lay within close proximity and the house was overlooked by the homes of villagers.

Within a few short years the 16th Earl had redeveloped areas of the ancient village - the parish church, manse and school were all relocated. Access to the seashore at Silver Sands was blocked and the two roads passing by the Earl's residence were both redirected.

However, the old houses clustered around the gates to Aberdour House and the entrance to the old Castle presented another challenge. The 16th Earl was determined to clear these areas and push the community further away from his property. In an effort to resolve the problem the Earl established a New Town on the lands of Cuttlehill and Seaside, and over a period of twenty years, attempted to persuade villagers to sell up and relocate.

On this walk we are going to trace the foundation of the New Town and follow the phases of its development through its buildings, streets and residents.

The walk begins at the Aberdour Heritage Centre at Aberdour Station. Walk up from the station and turn left at the village clock. Leaving the entrance to Aberdour Castle on your left, take the next opening on the left into Hewitt Place, framed by ornamental gate posts. The large house ahead of you is Aberdour House.

1) Aberdour House

Although now called Aberdour House, this property was commonly known as Cuttlehill House prior to its purchase by Robert Douglas, 12th Earl of Morton in 1725.

Sandwiched between the lands of the Earls of Morton to the East and the Earls of Moray to the West, the lands of Cuttlehill and Seaside existed as a separate estate from 1637 until 1725. Although these lands had passed to the Earls of Moray following the Reformation they formed part of an estate granted to William Stewart of Mains by King Charles I in 1637.

In 1671, burdened by debt, the Stewarts sold Cuttlehill and Seaside to Robert Wemyss, a former minister in Elie. A stone on the eastern side of Aberdour House dated 1672 probably commemorates building work carried out by Robert Wemyss shortly after he took possession of the property. In 1725 the Wemyss family sold the house and the lands to their neighbour, Robert Douglas the 12th Earl of Morton.

The house was subsequently extended and renovated but the 12th Earl's purchase was not just important for the accommodation it provided. The lands themselves had huge significance because of the access they afforded to the harbour.

As early as 1667, an important coal route had been established through the lands of Cuttlehill and Seaside to Aberdour Harbour. Coal from the coal heughs of Fordel would regularly wind its way to the harbour on horse-drawn carts.

The importance of coal to the local economy grew significantly throughout the eighteenth century. By 1830 as many as 125 tons of coal could be seen rumbling their way through the lands of Seaside to the harbour in a single day.

Even as coal shipments began to decline sharply in the 1850s Aberdour Harbour could still ship up to 13,000 tons of coal a year.

2) The Old Coal Road

Leaving the grounds of Aberdour House by Hewitt Place, turn left down Livingston Lane.

Throughout the eighteenth century an increasing number of coal carts would have made their way to and from the harbour along what is now known as Livingston Lane. Until it was renamed in the late nineteenth century this important transport route was still commonly known as the Old Coal Lane or Coal Wynd.

3) The New Road to the Harbour

Walk along Livingston Lane to where it meets Shore Road.

The rumbling coal carts were uncomfortably close to Aberdour House and must have been a real annoyance for the 16th Earl of Morton, so he established a new point of access to the harbour in about 1800: purchasing a feu on the High Street of Wester Aberdour from his neighbour the Earl of Moray, Morton successfully diverted the noisy coal carts away from Aberdour House.

The plot had previously been feued to the Steedman family but was soon cleared to form a new road. The road continues to be used today forming part of Shore Road - from the junction with Livingston Lane to the High Street.

However, it was not only the noise and dirt of the coal carts that the Earl of Morton sought to banish from the vicinity of his residence. He was also eager to relocate large sections of the community.

The 16th Earl of Morton was determined to clear large parts of the ancient village of Easter Aberdour along with the properties clustered around Aberdour House and relocate the villagers to the lands of Seaside. At the beginning of the 1800s this ambitious plan began to take shape.

4) Manse Street

Turning left at the end of Livingston Lane, go down Shore Road past the playpark to Manse Street, the first street on your right.

In 1802, Reverend William Bryce wrote to Lady Morton in an effort to persuade the 16th Earl of Morton to demolish, rather than repair, the seventeenth-century manse in Easter Aberdour. Not only was the manse in a state of disrepair, it also sat "in the heart of a dirty village".

Reverend Bryce offered to contribute towards building a new Manse at an alternative site in the lands Seaside. Aware that the Earl was keen to clear parts of Easter Aberdour, the Minister suggested that demolishing the old Manse would "diminish in the estimation of the villagers the value they at present attach to their houses, and dispose them more readily to build at Sea-Side."

The Earl agreed to relocate the Minister and in 1803 work began on an elegant new Manse at Seaside, designed by the Edinburgh architect Robert Burn. This is the large building at the far end of what is now Manse Street.

The first seeds of the New Town had been planted and villagers in Easter Aberdour soon began to sell up and relocate.

5) Charles Barr's Houses

Perhaps the earliest houses to be built on Manse Street are Numbers 7, 9 and 11. They stand as a wonderful example of the length to which the Earl was prepared to go in order to fulfil his ambitions.

These houses were built at the Earl of Morton's expense between 1805 and 1807 for Charles Barr in exchange for his properties and land in the old village of Easter Aberdour. The Earl's property exchange with Barr might seem unusual but it was just one of a number deals he made with villagers. Some properties were acquired on the understanding that the former residents would receive a cash annuity until their death. Some villagers exchanged their land for undeveloped building plots in the New Town which the Earl granted to them free from the usual feu duties.

Charles Barr's new houses were perfectly placed to take advantage of the early lettings market catering for sea bathing visitors to Aberdour. A decade after their completion Barr was advertising his properties to let over the summer season and continued seasonal lettings into the 1830s.

Following the death of the 16th Earl of Morton in 1827, plans to relocate the residents of Easter Aberdour gradually ran out of momentum. However, increasing numbers of sea bathers and seasonal visitors signalled a new phase in the development of the New Town.

6) Seaside Place

Continuing down Shore Road, the next street on the right is Seaside Place.

The land to the east of Charles Barr's houses in Manse Street remained undeveloped at the time of his death in 1847. By 1857 it had been divided into three building plots each of which extended southward to Seaside Place.

Number 1 Seaside Place

Seaside Place began to develop shortly after Manse Street. Seaside House, now 1 Seaside Place, dates from the 1820s and would have been one of the most fashionable properties in Aberdour. However, it was soon eclipsed by the far grander Seabank House, which lies between it and the shore. Built in 1831 and designed by the renowned architect Thomas Hamilton, it is remarkable for its cluster of chimneys forming a central tower. It was originally a dower house of the Hendersons of Fordel. Interestingly, as mentioned above, it was the Hendersons of Fordel who originally sought permission to transport coal through the lands of Seaside in 1667.

By the late 1850s, the Aberdour New Town had begun to attract wealthy citizens from Edinburgh and Leith looking for elegant summer residences and investment opportunities. During the 1860s the New Town experienced something of a building boom and development of this land reveals just how much things had changed since Charles Barr moved into his houses in 1807.

Number 2 Seaside Place

In this second phase the first plot was acquired by Christian Jockel, a German merchant. Jockel made his fortune importing French and German textiles and selling them from his premises in George Street, Edinburgh. Mr. Jockel's house was completed by the summer of 1865, and he named it *Bellevue*. Grand and fashionable, with its Corinthian columns above and Doric columns below, *Bellevue* represented the kind of wealth that the villagers of Aberdour could only dream of. *Bellevue* is now called *Clachaig* and has been divided into two flats.

Number 4 Seaside Place

The second plot was acquired by Captain Charles Martin, a wealthy ship owner from Aberdeen. The house, originally called *Marine Villa*, was also completed by the summer of 1865. During the 1870s we might have found Captain Martin in Aberdour Harbour where he was busy working on a large herring boat which he had fitted with a new design of propeller that he had invented himself. Although he is said to have conducted

successful sea trials in and around Aberdour Harbour nothing more was heard of the invention.

The change in name from Marine Villa to St Helens happened a little after 1895. The St Helen referred to appears to be Helen Stiell, the wife of Rev. John Brown, minister of Aberdour Free Church. The idea of saints was idolatrous in the Free Church and it seems likely that it was a family nickname for Mrs Brown. Helen's father had been a very successful and wealthy pharmacist in Dunfermline, and when her widowed mother died in 1895, Helen inherited a considerable fortune which she seems to have used to buy the property. The purchase enabled her large family to move out of the Free Church manse on the south side of the High Street in Manse Place. This must have been getting a little cramped. The worn stone stairs of St Helens might be accounted for by the fact that Helen and her husband had seven children and numerous domestic servants!

Numbers 6 & 8 Seaside Place

The third plot was the last of the three to be developed. It was offered for sale in a public rroup held at the Aberdour Hotel in March 1869 and was purchased by a James Aitken, a twenty four year old architect living in Edinburgh.

Aitken developed this large plot into two semi-detached villas. One villa served as a seaside residence for his widowed mother whilst the second villa was built as a rental investment. At the time of their construction Number 6 was named *Oatridge* and Number 8, his mother's seaside retreat, was called *Janefield*.

These two villas probably represent some of James Aitken's earliest work as an architect. Sadly his career was a short one and he died here at *Janefield* in 1880 aged only thirty five.

Despite his early death James Aitken certainly managed to fit a lot into his decade-long architectural career and these two villas were not his only architectural contribution to the New Town, or to Aberdour as a whole.

Numbers 3, 5 & 7 Seaside Place

Less grand than Number 1 Seaside Place, this block of three houses was built in the early 1820s. Number 7 has retained its nineteenth-century lamp-holder. These were common throughout the village, but this is the only one to have survived.

7) Developing the Shore

Leaving Seaside Place turn right down Shore Road towards the sea.

While still in his twenties James Aitken had formed an architectural partnership with William Lambie Moffatt, a prolific Edinburgh-based architect approaching his seventies. Throughout the 1870s the practice of Moffatt & Aitken worked on over twenty-six projects all across Scotland.

However, Aitken's connections in Aberdour helped the firm secure various architectural projects within the village including the modernisation of Aberdour Public School and the construction of a hotel in Easter Aberdour.

More importantly for us, in March 1879 Moffatt & Aitken were employed to develop a plot on the seafront at the very bottom of Shore Road. Miss McGill, the client, spent in excess of £750 building the house still known as *The Elms*.

The firm's work for Miss McGill would have brought them into contact with Sholto John Douglas, 18th Earl of Morton, and the Earl subsequently employed Moffatt & Aitken to mark out further building plots. They staked out the boundary of the neighbouring plot on which *Seabeach Cottage* was constructed.

The 18th Earl of Morton then employed the firm to produce a feu plan to guide the future development of the New Town. They measured and staked out individual building plots which could then be developed by the purchasers. The land proposed for development encompassed the whole of the east side of Shore Road up to the garden wall of *Whitehall*, the large house standing in its own grounds opposite the playground.

Although Aitken conducted the first site visit with the Earl's Factor in 1879, he died the following year and it was left to his elderly partner, William Lambie Moffatt, to complete the project. In May 1880 Moffatt submitted a plan to the Earl of Morton that divided the site into six building plots.

From the seafront go back up Shore Road towards the centre of the village. The following houses are on your right.

Plot Number One was acquired by Mrs Margaret Chaplin, the wife of George Chaplin a farmer from Broomieside, Crossgates. The work began in 1884 and the house is now called *Rockcliffe*. In the 20th century it became a guest house before being turned into two flats.

Plot Number Two was developed as a double villa, now Numbers 34 and 36 Shore Road. One villa was built for George Cruickshanks, a wealthy upholsterer with shops on Leith Walk, while the other belonged to John Mitchell, an Edinburgh builder who may have been involved in the construction of the properties. Note the rough-hewn tree-trunk porches, a distinctive feature borrowed from Victorian Highland architecture.

Plot Number Three was acquired by Robert Addison, a marine engineer who lived in Edinburgh. It lies on Shore Road opposite the entrance to Seaside Place. Work began on this property in February 1883 and the cost of construction was estimated to be around £700, due to the need to cut through and remove large quantities of rock. The property is still known by its original name, *Ivy Bank*.

However, this miniature building boom came to an end in around 1885 leaving plots 4, 5, and 6 undeveloped until the 20th century.

This was not the first proposed development that had not lived up to the hopes and aspirations of those involved.

8) Failed housing developments

In 1871 The Earl of Morton signed a contract with a group of builders from Edinburgh. Peter Bell, Andrew Slater and Robert Henderson put forward a proposal for a large housing development on the east side of Cuttlehill.

The project, had it been successful, would have seen the land between Aberdour House and the Harbour filled with new homes. However, the development failed almost completely. By 1884 only a handful of houses had been built in what is now Home Park. The builders were taken to court for failing to fulfil the original contract and control of the land reverted to the Earl of Morton.

The short section of road off Shore Road opposite the south-east corner of the playpark, which now provides access to a BT Exchange, was the site originally suggested as an entrance to part of the proposed housing development.

Continue up Shore Road and turn left into Park Lane.

9) Thomas Crow's Buildings, 15-20 Park Lane & 77, 79, 81, 83, 85, 87 High Street

As the affluence of the New Town increased some investors saw an opportunity to redevelop sites in the old villages of Easter and Wester Aberdour.

Another, smaller development was started by Thomas Crow in 1871 at the west end of what is now Park Lane, just across from the playpark which, at this time, was still a potato field.

Thomas Crow was a successful Edinburgh builder who had amassed something of a property empire. He was responsible for a series of impressive new housing developments across Edinburgh and Leith but instead of selling the buildings on completion he usually rented them out.

Mr Crow clearly saw an investment opportunity in Aberdour and acquired a traditional plot on the High Street with a yard stretching back to what is now Park Lane. He went on to build two elegant villas (Numbers 15 and 16) with a block of four small flats extending along the yard behind, now Numbers 17 to 20 Park Lane. Crow redeveloped the original property on the High Street forming a series of shops with flats above.

He clearly intended to build further properties along the lane. However, shortly after the City of Glasgow Bank collapse of 1878 his business ran into financial difficulties and he was declared bankrupt.

Retrace your steps along Park Lane, turn left up Shore Road to the High Street then right towards the village clock, the entrance to the station and the Aberdour Heritage Centre, where the walk ends.

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