

Geophysical Study of the Vicinity around Old Deer Parish Church

Some time ago, after discussion and field study with members of an advisory committee from Aberdeen University, the Book of Deer Project resolved to campaign for a Geophysical study to be carried out. Through this means we hoped to find evidence of the former Monastery of Deer where the Book of Deer originated.

Through the goodwill of the Elphinstone Institute at Aberdeen University a conference – ‘After Columba, After Calvin: Community and Identity in the Religious Traditions of North East Scotland’ was held in September 1997. (unfortunately cut short due to the funeral of Princess Diana.) Since then the Project has opened an Information Centre at Aden Country Park. This has attracted many visitors with an interest in the Book itself and the many topics relating to Buchan. The experience of dealing with visitors has shown the most frequent questions to be asked as being:-

1. Where is the Book of Deer now?
2. Where is the Monastery of Deer?
3. Was Gaelic spoken in the North East?
4. What is the significance of the place names mentioned in the Book of Deer?
5. Why is the Book of Deer not kept here?

It is in response to the second question that the Project wrote to the ‘Time Team’ (Channel four?) inviting them to Deer in Aberdeenshire to explore the area around the parish church where the Monastery is said to have been built ‘in a loop of the river Ugie.’ They acknowledged receipt of our letter but have not taken up our invitation. Since then we have tried various sources for funding a study, through our own charitable status, with no success so far! Meanwhile we have collected some local stories about the changes which have occurred in the vicinity. For example:-

‘The Rabbling of Deer’ – A well documented story about the parishioners rioting when the Laird appointed a new Minister against their wishes. The description of the area gives an insight into the narrow lanes and small houses around the church. (Pratt’s Buchan P84 – May 1711)

At the time of building new gate pillars at the front of the church, it was found that burials had taken place outwith the churchyard wall. This raises the question of how far onto the road does the original burial ground extend?

When sheltered housing was built directly across from the church in the post ww 2 period, subsequent landscaping of the area may account for the disappearance of ‘the Minister’s Mound’ This mound was where the Minister stood, in all weathers, after the service, to bless his parishioners as they left the church.

More housing is planned for part of the church glebe between the river and the playing field. It is urgent that this area be properly studied before the excavators move in! Planning and Archaeology departments please note!

Across the Ugie at 'Mavisbank', a private property owned at one time by Dr Dickson there was a small hamlet and Episcopalian chapel between the existing house and the river. Except for one of the houses which was re-roofed, all are now in ruins, with only the outline of the foundations remaining (1997)

About 200yds along the road towards Stuartfield, on the right is St Drostan's well, (part rebuilt in the year 2000) in an area which may hold clues to the habitation if, as the name suggests it was the well used around 700AD.

Within the Aden Country Park, the banks of the river may still have remains of posts or piles used to support primitive dwellings. Timber needs air and moisture to allow wet rot. Have any posts survived the centuries? Only by finding them and subjecting them to carbon dating can we be sure!

When the Russells of Aden decided to build the Mansion House (now preserved ruins within the Country Park) a large area on the bank of the river was heightened and landscaped as their front garden. This is another area where clues may be hidden, due to later developments.

Some 300years after the demise of the Monastery, the Abbey of Deer was built. Assuming that religious artefacts may have been moved to the 'new' centre of religion, it follows that a thorough study would include the Abbey grounds.

The Spalding Club and the Buchan Field Club will both have records of their research regarding the Book of Deer.

No doubt other areas may be suggested for inclusion in a study. If any reader has a comment or suggestion to make please get in touch at www.bookofdeer.co.uk

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