A History of Thief’s Row

The few documents consulted so far relating to the earlier periods of the Burgh of Cromarty indicates that the core of the settlement was located in the east end of the current town between the Crook Burn and the Chapel Burn. Charters and Sasines generally deal with the major transactions taking place in the burgh, such as land and property deals. However, the geographical descriptions within these documents can also provide valuable information relating to the lay-out of the town, including the names of roads and other landmarks, as well as field and boundary names.

Timothy Pont’s map of c.1580-1590 of Cromarty suggests there was a street running along the line of the road at the east of Cromarty now called the Causeway. From a variety of sources, we can firmly locate the position of the town’s tollbooth on the east side of this street. It is likely that the Mercat cross of the earlier burgh also stood there: a transaction in 1467 describes a Cromarty property as ‘lying between the cross of the town and the sea’. Could this be the house pre-dating Clunes House on later maps, where the road (formerly Castle Street or High Street) widened at the northeast end?

The remains of St. Regulus’s Chapel are located at the top of the Chapel Brae, on a prominent knoll to the northeast of Cromarty House. In Hugh Miller’s time the vault of St. Regulus was partially filled with bones and, a few yards from the chapel, there are worn remnants of a carved, recumbent figure with hands folded on the breast. William Mackay MacKenzie, a Cromarty native and eminent twentieth-century historian, believed that the slab dated from the later 1300s. It seems that it was the tomb of the Urquharts. A badly worn grave slab recovered from the floor of the parish church (East Church), carved with a cross on a stepped base, long swords and an open book, may be of the same period. Is it possible that this grave marker was originally from the chapel of St. Regulus?

There must have been a castle present on the Motte Hill from at least the 13th century, the original structure comprising a motte and bailey with a wooden superstructure. However, documents tell us that around 1470, King James III made over to Sir William Urquhart and his heirs the Motte and Mansion Mound of Cromarty with license to build a tower or fortalice on the Motte Hill of Cromarty and to equip it with suitable defences. The new castle would have replaced the old, probably wooden structure with a new stone tower. The castle was no longer counted to be Royal, but had been made private property.

Running off the old High Street, or Castle Street, was East Street (currently named Millers Road) and Thief’s Row, also referred to in the old documents as the Common Highway. It is thought that the main route into Cromarty at this time came along the spine of the ridge leading towards the South Sutor, turned down towards the Meadou field and passed by the Coalheugh Well and Chapel Burn into Thief’s Row. And so, on to the junction with Castle Street (currently known as The Causeway). Old documents suggest that this main thoroughfare into Cromarty was
called the *Carriesgait*. The route of this ancient hollow-way can still be seen rising up the hill from the well towards the Meadou field, while an additional road may also have continued across the base of the slope leading up to the Chapel Brae and on to the prominent bend in the road at the top end of Castle Street.

Prior to David Aitken’s Estate map of 1763, we have few details regarding the layout of houses on Castle Street (High Street), or along Thief’s Row and East Street. Our earliest record so far relating to Thief’s Row is a grant by Thomas Oustie (Burgess), indweller in Cromarty, dating to the early 16th century and referring to a tenement and yard bounded at the west by the lands of Thomas Urquhart of Craigfintray, at the east the lands of Alexander Clunes (formerly of Andrew Denoon), at the north the King’s Highway and at the south Alexander Clunes lands. This puts the property on the south side of Thief’s Row (then called the King’s Highway) and may relate to some of the structures we have uncovered in our excavations in the Reeds Park field or in the adjacent allotments. Hopefully, additional research will help us to fill in some of the detail relating to these earlier phases of settlement in the old burgh, but in the meantime, we have a series of documents dated to the later stages of the 17th century that provide evidence for the layout of some of the burgage plots along Thief’s Row and of the people who lived in them.

In 1653 Thomas Hood, a weaver and Burgess of the burgh, held property including a tenement, yard and three roods of land on the north of the Common Highway (Thief’s Row). Donald Simpson (Burgess) held land to the west of Thomas Hood, while Alexander Mathews (Weaver) held property to the east. Our main excavations carried out in 2013-14 most likely recovered some of the buildings belonging to these people - large houses built with their gable-end on the road. Further study of this important series of documents is required to property holdings on Thief’s Row at this time, as they relate to a period of significant change in the history of the burgh.

Shortly after 1600, with additional acquisitions of church lands, the Urquharts exercised authority as hereditary sheriffs over most of what came to be known as the old shire of Cromarty. In 1664, Sir John Urquhart was responsible for the construction of the orchard to the west of the Causeway (High Street/Castle Street) and also seized the burgh’s common pasture along the adjoining Crook Burn, known as the Castleden, which was the site of the burgh fairs. Alexander Clunes was one of the leading burgesses in Cromarty, who protested at the taking of the burgh lands (other protesters included Thomas Lindsay, Thomas Clunes and Alexander Urquhart). However, this was to no avail and by 1670 the whole property of the burgh was transferred to the laird John Urquhart on the grounds that the burgh’s poverty prevented it from meeting its obligations. The town lost not only its common land and other property but, subsequently, its status as a royal burgh. But whatever benefit it brought Urquhart over the next eight years, it was not enough to prevent his descent into depression and suicide.

By this time, the focus of the town had shifted to the west, onto the Ness - with its more favourable harbour and access to deep water. In 1678, the estate passed out
of Urquhart’s hands and one of the last acts of him was to ‘slight’ the castle, removing anything of value and destroying as much as possible of what could not be taken. After this, much of the burgh of Cromarty and the adjoining lands were acquired by McKenzie, Viscount of Tarbet, who became Earl of Cromarty in 1703.

The uncertainty in land ownership and fluctuations in trade must have resulted in some marked periods of decline and recovery in the burgh through time, and with the transfer of the Estate to the Viscount of Tarbet some marked changes are evident in the settlement history of Thief’s Row. From the results of the archaeological excavations so far it is obvious that the large merchant houses built gable-end onto Thief’s Row were abandoned and demolished. They were eventually replaced by houses lying parallel to the street. These appear to be much smaller and less impressive structures, possibly similar in style to the buildings occupying the Fishertown to the west. How these changes relate to the wider settlement of Cromarty to the west is as yet uncertain, but the East End of town was by this stage becoming something of a backwater.

Hugh Miller writing of Cromarty in decline in the 1720s stated that ‘There, mingled with the other domiciles, a due proportion of roofless tenements, with their red weather-wasted gables, and melancholy-looking unframed windows and doors; and, as trade decayed, even the more entire began to fall to pieces, and to show, like so many mouldering carcasses, their bare ribs through the thatch’. He then goes on to talk about the old tolbooth on Castle Street describing it as ‘an antique ruinous structure, with stone floors and a roof of ponderous grey slate’. Miller was conveying these views as late as 1835, but it is a known fact that by 1765 there had been no prison or public meeting place in Cromarty for 60 years (c.1700).

The new style of building constructed along Thief’s Row during the 18th century would change little over the next century or so, although the number of houses spread along Thief’s Row would reduce considerably by the early stages of the 19th century. The following sections provide some detail as to what was a widely fluctuating settlement phase in the history of this part of the burgh of Cromarty.
David Aitken’s estate map published in 1763 is our earliest detailed map of the burgh of Cromarty. As such, it is a useful document in helping us to understand the layout of the remaining buildings in the core of the old medieval burgh at a time when the focus of settlement and commerce had shifted to the west, and before George Ross’ redevelopment of this part of the burgh in 1772. The map appears to have been drawn with some accuracy, while additional detail such as ownership of plots of land is also shown.

Aitken’s map shows at least twelve tenements/burgage plots and seventeen buildings along Castle Street (the Causeway), with another building set in slightly on the north side of East Street (now Millers Street) and additional structures to each side of the road at the west end. Thief’s Row is also shown, with at least eight buildings along its length; two small buildings, one to each side of a prominent bend around a third of the way along the lane; two buildings around half the distance along the lane (to northeast and southwest); and four buildings adjacent to the Chapel Burn - three located on the northeast side of the lane and one on the southwest side.

The map shows two plots marked in yellow with ‘No.7’ to the north of Thief’s Row, belonging to Alexander Mitchell. In church records he is referred to as Alexander Mitchell of Chapelburn and was one of the minor heritors of the parish. He was one of the masons who built the new north aisle of the East Church in 1739/1740, and
then rented a seat in the front of the new gallery. In the 1744 list of inhabitants in Cromarty, two houses shown on Aitken's map around half way along Thief's Row, are shown as belonging to Mrs Forrester of Culnauld (to the southwest of the road) and Alexander Williamson in the Laird’s washing house (most likely the building to the northeast of the road).

The map also shows a complex of buildings at the east end of Thief’s Row, adjacent to the Chapel Burn. George Urquhart of Greenhill bought the ‘eastmost’ house in Cromarty from James Hepburn, a customs officer, in 1715. Hugh Miller reports that ‘about thirty years ago’ (that is, around 1805) ‘some masons digging a foundation in the eastern extremity of the town discovered the site of a packing yard of this period (early 1700s)’. Nearby, twenty years before (c.1680), had stood ‘the cellar and counting room of Urquhart of Greenhill’. It had been a small, square, two-storey building, with a single room on each floor - a storeroom below and a room above which was lit on three sides, with panelled walls, a plaster cornice decorated with herring and bunches of grapes, and a ceiling with a shoal of herrings in relief in the centre. This must have comprised quite an impressive merchant’s house within the east end of town, vying for position with the new and quite large houses being constructed in the west end.

**Castle Street - 1744 List of Householders**

The closest detailed records we can consult with relation to the houses and tenements occupied along Castle Street (the Causeway), are from a List of Householders of 1744.

The following list provides details of names of occupants in Castle Street* and where known, there occupations:

John McCullagh, shoemaker
Hugh McLeod, former gardener
David Watson
William Watson, shoemaker
Widow Lindsay's tenement (assignation in 1765 from Thomas Lindsay to his sister Helen Lindsay

Old Burgh House (the tolbooth) and tenement of Thomas Clunes

Mrs Hay (tenant to Urquhart of Greenhill); in 1725 Greenhill held a yard and tenement at the back of the tolbooth. It is also possible that the two buildings shown on the prominent bend in Thief’s Row also belonged to Greenhill

Clunes House, John Clunes of Neilston
Lewis Gordon’s tenement (heirs Ludovic Gordon)
Sir Kenneth Mackenzie’s tenement
Captain Reid
Jeremiah Joyner’s house set to Donald Taylor
Alexander Taylor
Charles Hossack
James Marcus’s widow

*We cannot be certain what the layout of buildings was in 1744 on Castle Street.

_Thief’s Row - 1744 List of Householders_

Although our records from the list of householders of 1744 is difficult to tie down to individual properties along Thief’s Row, as shown on the Aitken map of 1763, it does provide some indication as to the trades with which these people were connected.

The list provides the following details:

Mrs. Forrester of Culnauld - possible widow
Charles Hood - Butcher (unemployed)
Alexander Hood - Weaver
Alexander Mathews - Weaver
Alexander Williamson - Weaver (in the Laird’s washing house)
Alexander McAllan - Mason
Neil Urquhart - Wright
Mary Watson - possible widow
Mrs. Ross - Widow
John Douglas’ town plan of 1823 shows the remaining houses along the course of the Causeway (formerly the High Street / Castle Street), after the old tenements had been demolished or older structures had been consumed within later builds. This includes Clunes House (A), The Old Manse (formerly Laing’s House – D), the Kennels (C) and a building to the northeast of the Kennels now called Clunes Cottage (B).

A total of five buildings are shown along Thief’s Row/Lane: three buildings and associated plots running down to the shore on the northeast side of the lane and two buildings just before the Chapel Burn, one to each side of the lane end. The Register of Sasines at this time shows the property of a Jeremiah Juynor including two small gardens in the northeast of the town (marked ‘X’ on the map) separated by the house and garden of Hugh Mackenzie, weaver (No. 3); the house and garden of Thomas Ross, mason (No. 2). It appears that Peggy Ross was living in the house marked No.1. There is also an area marked ‘Bleach Green’, which is shown in the eastern-most field to the northeast of Thief’s Row. It is possible that this name is associated with the Laird’s washing house - a laundry that existed in this area. This may be the house marked No.4 on Douglas’s map as it lies conveniently close to the Chapel Burn.
Most of the buildings shown on Douglas’s map of 1823, along the course of Thief’s Row, must have been built after Aitken had carried out the survey for his estate map in 1763. Indeed, many changes had taken place between the surveys of Aitken and Douglas, much of which was due to a new owner of the Cromarty Estate.

George Ross, gained title to Cromarty Estate in 1772. He demolished the partially ruined castle and built Cromarty House in its place between 1772-4. Ross also began to remodel the town itself. He acquired all of the properties on the burgh’s original High Street at the eastern extremity of the burgh (the Causeway). As the town had expanded to the west towards the harbour it left its early centre, with the Mercat cross and tollbooth, isolated from the main commercial and residential streets. The owners were given new feus in better locations and the buildings of the ‘old town’ were mainly used for estate employees. The Mercat cross was moved from the Causeway to the front of Ross’ imposing new court house, built on Church Street. Ross’ grants of new feus and the injection of new money into the economy led to the building of new houses and the rebuilding of old ones. In the words of Andrew Wight, writing of his visit in 1781, ‘houses are every day a-building and neatness and cleanness are studied’. Other ventures by Ross included construction of the hemp factory, a new brewery and a Hoggery (the latter in the east end of town).
This map shows the last of the buildings on Thief’s Row just before they were demolished around 1890 and the remaining houses along the course of the Causeway (formerly the High Street / Castle Street). This Ordnance Survey six inch map sheet shows Clunes House (A), The Old Manse, which stands on the site of the former Laing’s House (D) and the Kennels (C); plus a building to the northeast of the Kennels now called Clunes Cottage (B); all with their associated gardens and plots of land. Five buildings are shown along Thief’s Row/Lane: three buildings located around half way along the lane with plots running down to the shore (on the northeast side), a larger building called Grove Cottage built on the northeast side of the lane just before its end at the Chapel Burn and a smaller structure running down the southwest side of the Chapel Burn to the southeast of Grove Cottage. These buildings are also shown with their associated plots and gardens.

A housing report by George MacKenzie in 1913 provides a list of houses which appeared on the Ordnance Survey map sheet of 1880 and which have since disappeared:

19 Grove Cottage (belonging to Cromarty Estate) - No.4
20 House (Hugh MacKenzie, Weaver) - No.3
Grove Cottage: In 1851, a daughter was born to Mrs Donald Mackay; and again in 1853. In the post office directory of 1857, the occupant of Grove Cottage is given as Reverend W R Munro. Munro was already the tenant in 1855. In 1874, the tenant was Mrs John Thomson. Grove Cottage and the terrace of three buildings on the northeast side of Thief’s Row must have been built sometime around 1805. After the deaths of the owners of the houses on Thief’s Row, the estate demolished the houses and closed off the public road; enclosed the area with a wall and encroached upon half of the Causeway road which is now included in the garden of the estate factor (this would have been the north end of the Causeway where it had originally adjoined Clunes Houses - A). The map also shows the location of **Cromarty House**, the former site of the castle and **St. Regulus’s Grave Yard**.

During this period of upheaval along Thief’s Row, Ross was also partially responsible for the creation of a rifle range in the Reeds Park field. Shooting stances are shown on the 1880 Ordnance Survey map sheet, while the target was located to the east. The range would be used by the Cromarty Military Volunteers.

In early May 2015 we are holding a small seminar in Cromarty in the West Church Hall. We will be discussing we know about Cromarty so far from the documentary sources and archaeological evidence and what we would like to find out during the next couple of years. In particular, we want to find out more about the earlier periods of the burgh’s history including searching the archives for new documentary sources. Results from such a programme of research would enhance the archaeological evidence, especially with regards to our areas of excavation in the Reeds Park field.