

## History of Highland Hospitals

### Dunbar's Hospital Academy Street 1668



Dunbar's Hospital has often been noted as the first recorded 'hospital' in Inverness but the term is used in its medieval sense of an almshouse to accommodate the old and infirm (bedesmen) rather than the sick<sup>i</sup> per se. The photograph on page 6 shows a bedesman carved above one of the dormer windows. The other six dormers can be seen in the photograph above (from c1900). Alexander Dunbar, Provost of Inverness built his 'hospital' in 1668, probably using stone from the demolished Cromwell's Fort. In 1683, he handed it over to the Kirk Session specifying that the ground floor be used as a grammar school and

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<sup>i</sup> However, in 1721, the Kirk Session minutes note that an upper loft was let to the Magistrates as a 'Hospital for the Regiment of Fusiliers' but we have no details.

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Burgh weigh house. The upper floors were for the use of the Burgh's poor but there appear to be no records of the Kirk Session ever using it for this purpose. Instead it was used as a school, library and a variety of other<sup>i</sup> rent yielding uses.<sup>1</sup> On John Wood's map of 1821, it is named the Old Latin School and it was known locally as the Old Academy.

Dunbar's was used during the cholera outbreaks<sup>ii</sup> of 1832 and 1834<sup>2</sup> where a handbill announced that 'the Medical Gentlemen have made an arrangement by which one of their number will be in constant attendance day and night at the hospital (Old Academy, foot of Church St.)'. The building was obviously known as the Old Academy and not as a hospital which suggests it did not have any pre-existing medical function. Moreover, the building was not the obvious choice for cholera victims and the local Board of Health considered the Town Hall, Northern Meeting Rooms and a new build on Castlehill before settling on Dunbar's.<sup>3</sup> The Northern Infirmary also supplied beds to the Inspector of the Poor in the outbreak of 1849 and it seems likely that the Inspector would have used part of Dunbar's given that he already administered it, although definite evidence of this has not been found.

By 1840, the Committee of the Legal Administrators of the Poor which administered Inverness' poor fund was exploring the possibility of opening a poorhouse and approached the Kirk Session which apparently had considerable funds designated for the poor.<sup>iii</sup> However, the Session refused funding, being prepared to go to court over it, and would not allow the use of Dunbar's as a poorhouse. Over the winter of 1844/45, the Committee opened a small 'poor's house' on the Green of Muirtown but, at Whitsunday (15 May) 1845, apparently under pressure and with

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<sup>i</sup> In 1792, a proposal to lease it to the Burgh as a poorhouse came to nothing.

<sup>ii</sup> In 1832, the Infirmary supplied beds to Inspector of the Poor for cholera victims.

<sup>iii</sup> Before 1845 it was the Kirk's duty to support the poor. It collected funds for the purpose including fees for hire of a mort cloth which draped the coffin at burials. The evidence suggests that Inverness Kirk Session could be less than assiduous in supporting the poor either through spending its funds or in its use of Dunbar's. However, by the 1830s, it was apparently over-whelmed by the number of destitute.

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the impending Poor Law, the Kirk allowed the ‘poor’s house’ to be moved to Dunbar’s ‘by way of an experiment’. This new Inverness Poorhouse incorporated the redundant weigh house which had contained the town’s lamp and fire engines. In late 1846, the Parochial Board carried out renovations when the old spire<sup>i</sup> was removed and a house was built in the yard for the Inspector of the Poor. A large expansion of Dunbar’s was planned and generally agreed with the Session but did not go ahead due to the unsuitability of the site.<sup>4</sup>

The 1845 Poor Law had transferred responsibility for looking after the poor from the Kirk Session to the new Parochial Board and disputes over resources continued. The Session believed it owned Dunbar’s and all the poor relief money which it had collected before 1845, and Dunbar’s use as a poorhouse was ‘only during its pleasure’. The Parochial Board considered that it was entitled to Dunbar’s but did not take its case to court.<sup>ii</sup> Accordingly, there was an impasse which probably impeded any appropriate development of the facility.<sup>5</sup>

The new ‘poor’s house’ was initially intended as a refuge for the infirm, aged and friendless to pass their last days in peace and quietness and ‘not so out of humanities reach’ and this continued to be an important function. At first, the Poorhouse held only 4-6 elderly women and there was great reluctance to use it, some stating that they would rather die than enter it. In 1846, it never contained more than 10-12 residents who were ‘bed ridden and friendless paupers’ and a few deserted children.<sup>6</sup> Figures for May 1847 show two male, seven females and three children.

Initially, paupers were merely boarded and a Keeper of the House, Mr Fraser, was paid a levy for each resident but, by 1848, it was thought more cost effective to increase the number of residents and that year Miss Jessie Walker, a Gaelic speaker from Glasgow, was appointed sole

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<sup>i</sup> The spire is shown on Slezor’s ‘Prospect of Inverness’ of 1693.

<sup>ii</sup> The outcomes of court cases elsewhere suggest it would have lost.

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matron at £20 p.a. Residents now were expected to work. Orphaned<sup>i</sup> or abandoned children were kept there until they could be boarded out and this increased - the 1861 census shows that 25 of the 66 residents were children, including five infants who were looked after by the matron, and trained for a job in service - which most gained on leaving. Also kept there under Sheriff's warrant were 'fatuous' people<sup>ii</sup> as a less costly, but also more humane, alternative to sending them to an institution elsewhere and, in 1858, there were six resident.

### Capacity and occupancy

	Capacity	Residents
1850	59	36
1852	60	40
1854	58	43
1856	55	41
1858	63	65
1860	65	57

The capacity of Dunbar's was set at around 60 (table on the left) but this was unrealistic and, as the number of residents steadily grew, it became increasingly overcrowded and difficult to manage and was seen as inadequate by the Board of Supervision.<sup>iii</sup> In 1857, a report on Dunbar's accommodation indicated the difficulties of working

and living there. The building had three storeys. On the ground floor was a female dormitory with its floor below the level of the yard so that the walls were always damp. The toilets were in a boarded off part of the room. Matron had a sitting room and bedroom but her toilet was not partitioned off so 'for her comfort' she slept in her sitting room. The ground floor also held the kitchen with a servant's bedroom opening off it. The first floor had a male and a female dormitory each with a boarded off convenience adjacent to each other. There was a bath accessible to either ward but the area was too confined to be of use and the only portable bath was too cumbersome. The male and female dormitories on the second floor had only one communal toilet and one washing place. Off the passage was a mortuary which also contained the bedding and clothing store.

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<sup>i</sup> The frequent epidemics significantly increased the number of orphans.

<sup>ii</sup> A Scottish legal term for those with learning difficulties.

<sup>iii</sup> The Board of Supervision in Edinburgh oversaw the operation of the Poor Law.

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There was no probationary ward for receiving and cleansing new admissions and no fumigation facility so that lice spread easily from the clothes of new admissions. There was no dining room and meals were taken in the dormitories. Unlike many poorhouses, there was no refractory ward (isolation room) for unruly residents but a room in a thatched cottage in the yard accommodated ‘two undesirable women’. The cottage also contained a lumber store and carpenter’s shop. There were no separate sick wards and no separate accommodation for the children. There was no proper laundry and, on wet days, washing had to be hung up to dry in the kitchen or dormitories. The yard extended from Church Street to Academy Street and was surrounded by a seven foot wall and contained the customary piggery. It was also the airing court for the residents but there was no segregation and all residents mixed together.<sup>7</sup>

### **Inverness registered paupers 16<sup>th</sup> August 1857<sup>8</sup>**

Permanent Roll	468
Occasional	177
Orphans	26
Resident in Poorhouse	49
Lunatics in asylum <sup>i</sup>	26

It was no wonder that, the following year, the Inspector of the Poor again reported that Dunbar’s was overcrowded and noted ‘the impossibility from its old construction of a proper classification of residents’ and stated that ‘the necessity for a new building presses itself more and more on your committee and officials’. In 1856, the Kirk Session planned to erect a school house and teacher’s residence in the Poorhouse yard<sup>ii</sup> which would further constrict space. Also, Dunbar’s accommodated only a small percentage of the parish paupers who were, as in many parishes, mainly supported at home (table above). In contrast to a decade earlier, accommodating paupers in a poorhouse rather than support at home was now generally seen as more efficient. Poorhouses

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<sup>i</sup> They had to be sent elsewhere for example to Morningside in Edinburgh.

<sup>ii</sup> Which appeared not to happen.

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were also increasingly used as a 'test of pauperism'. Applicants for poor relief were offered a place in the Poorhouse and when they refused, as the vast majority did, they lost benefits. All this further encouraged the construction of a larger poorhouse.

The Poor Law had instituted formal state support for paupers and any treated in the Infirmary were charged to the Parochial Board. However, as elsewhere, the parish employed its own medical officers,<sup>i</sup> and used Dunbar's to house bed ridden and chronically ill cases. Dr MacDonald, Inverness MOH, speaking in 1919, had been 'unable to obtain any records of medical work' in Dunbar's although 'there were undoubtedly sick housed there'. Indeed, no records of the treatment of the sick within Dunbar's have been subsequently discovered but this is not unusual for Highland poorhouses.<sup>9</sup>



**Dormer window with  
carved bedesman**

Staffing seems to have been minimal. Miss Walker, matron, seems to have had an onerous role although, by 1851, she had a nurse and servant to help care for the 45 residents. In 1855, she was head hunted by the Infirmary and, although she was not appointed there, her salary was raised to match that of the Infirmary matron (£30). In late 1860, she left to get married and was replaced by widow Mrs Martha Fraser for the short period until the Poorhouse moved to Muirfield. In late 1861, residents were transferred to the new Inverness Poorhouse and, by October 1862, Dunbar's Hospital was advertised to let for residential and commercial use.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Dr Manford was MO in 1946 and Dr Mackintosh was MO when he died in 1850. Dr Manford and Dr Mackay shared the work from 1850 until at least 1859.

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### References

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- <sup>2</sup> Macdonald 1919 *op.cit.*
- <sup>3</sup> Circular 9 September 1832 Inverness Board of Health: Inverness Journal 10 February 1832
- <sup>4</sup> Inverness Journal 8 July 1842, 15 July 1842, 08 August 1845: Inverness Courier 26 October 1846, 13 April 1847, 20 November 1856: Parochial Board Annual Report
- <sup>5</sup> Inverness Parochial Board Minutes: Scottish Archive Network [www.scan.org.uk](http://www.scan.org.uk)
- <sup>6</sup> Inverness Journal 8 August 1845: Inverness Courier 13 April 1847
- <sup>7</sup> Macdonald 1919 *op.cit.*
- <sup>8</sup> Inverness Parochial Board Minutes
- <sup>9</sup> Macdonald 1919 *op.cit.*
- <sup>10</sup> Mackenzie T.C. *Story of a Scottish Voluntary Hospital* Inverness 1946 p97: Decennial census: Inverness Journal 21 April 1848: Inverness Advertiser 28 April 1848, 26 October 1860, 24 November 1860: Inverness Courier 8 August 1848, 9 October 1862