

A Guide to the  
History, Archaeology  
and Natural History of

# Tullos Hill



## Introduction

Tullos Hill represents a fantastic resource for the people of Aberdeen. Aside from being an excellent venue for walking and other healthy exercise, it comprises some of the most startling archaeology, history and natural history in the City. The landscape of Tullos Hill bears imprints of diverse periods of human activity, from the Mesolithic period to the Medieval era and up to the Second World War. This leaflet seeks to introduce the varied natural history and archaeology of the Hill.

*Above: Aerial view of Tullos Hill*

*Right: Open Day at community archaeological excavation*

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The name Tullos probably derives from the Gaelic word for hill, as do many other place names in what are today known as the Grampian Hills. Torry, Tullos and Tollohill probably all mean hill, whilst nearby Kincorth derives from Gaelic words meaning high place.



## Archaeology

Tullos Hill, along with adjacent Kincorth Hill, together form part of the very lowest coastal fringe of the Grampian Mountains – hence the cherished local name ‘the Gramps’. Not only are the two hills alike in character, being higher, wilder, more ‘natural’ landscapes in the midst of conurbation, but they also share a great deal in terms of archaeology and early history. Their more recent histories diverge, however, with Kincorth Hill being heavily exploited by quarrying and encroached upon by housing developments, while Tullos Hill, having first supported a Second World War Anti-Aircraft Battery and Prisoner of War Camp, was then affected by industrial sprawl and landfill operations. Despite and because of some of that, Tullos Hill, like Kincorth Hill, is rich in evidence of the past.

It is evident that human beings have been active in this general area for at least 10000 years. The earliest and nearest tangible traces date from the Mesolithic period, around 8000 to 6000 BC and are in the form of a collection of sea-shells found in a midden of food remains and other organic rubbish left on the shore by hunters and gatherers, who probably had a seasonal camp nearby. The midden was identified on the Bay of Nigg shoreline some years ago. Flint tools, hearths, buildings and other vestiges of human activity have been found in many areas along the banks of the River Dee, indicating that this fertile valley was richly exploited by our prehistoric ancestors.

The importance of Tullos Hill as a place of burial in the Bronze Age has long been known and is marked by the continued existence there of substantial stone cairns.



*Excavation at Bronze Age ring cairn, 2010  
© CFA Archaeology Ltd*

Cat Cairn, Baron’s Cairn, Crab’s Cairn and Tullos Cairn have only borne those particular names for some 200 years, but have in essence survived for around 4 millennia, despite changes of the surrounding land from rough ground to cultivated fields to wartime strongpoint and most recently to industrial zone. Very striking are the results of a survey of Tullos Hill commissioned by Aberdeen City Council and undertaken by CFA Archaeology Ltd in 2004, in which around 120 previously unrecognised archaeological features, were identified on the part of the hill which had not been affected by landfill. Further survey work associated with vegetation clearance prior to tree planting in 2012 revealed even more features, reaching a current total of 201. The features recorded in 2004 and 2012 range from probable prehistoric field boundaries and dwellings to additional prehistoric and later cairns to hut bases associated with the Second World War Anti-Aircraft Battery and Prisoner of War



Above: Excavation of gun emplacement site Below: Aerial photograph of gun emplacements from south, 1946

Camp. Some of the cairns are certainly likely to be burial cairns, part of the same Bronze Age cemetery as the more well-known cairns mentioned above, while others relate to clearance of ground for cultivation in prehistoric or later periods.

Two short seasons of excavation directed by CFA Archaeology, in 2010 and 2012, and involving large numbers of local volunteers, focused on two of the recently discovered features, both of which were found to be of prehistoric, probably Bronze Age date. One was a hut circle, the foundation of a substantial stone and wooden building or roundhouse in which the first residents of Tullos Hill would have



lived while farming the surrounding land. The other was a further burial cairn, which may have contained cremated bone from a funeral pyre at that spot.

At present there is little evidence of human activity in the area under discussion between later prehistory and the 12th century AD. There is one exception in the

form of part of a solid silver chain, often described as 'Pictish' and dating from about the 7th century, which was found in the 18th century by a farmer in the nearby Bay of Nigg. Containing 95% silver this was obviously a high status object and hints at a continuity of human activity in the wider area.

## History

The historical evidence for Tullos Hill begins in the later 12th century. In the closing years of that century the church in the Bay of Nigg (the now ruined St Fittick's) and the lands from the mouth of the River Dee down to Cove, so including Tullos Hill, were given by King William the Lion to the Abbot of the Abbey of Arbroath. The Abbot remained the feudal superior of these lands until the Reformation in 1560.

From the 12th century onwards we can trace the development of life in this area. The main settlements developed closer to the mouth of the Dee in the form of the villages of Upper and Lower Torry. Tullos Hill does not seem to have been settled during the Medieval period. Although some limited farming was undertaken on parts of the Hill, much of the land was not amenable to agricultural development. A document dated 1281 mentions the

extensive moor, marsh and rocky barren soils of the lands.

Following the Reformation of 1560, control of Tullos Hill passed out of the hands of the church. Eventually, following a number of changes, all of the lands from the mouth of the Dee down to Cove became split between the town of Aberdeen and the Menzies family, the Lairds of Pitfodels. A number of disputes arose between these two parties due to the archaic system of land holding that was in operation at the time: run rig. This meant that each of the two main land owners did not hold their lands in anything like one or two large and fairly self contained parcels of land, but rather one owned one field and the other the next, resulting in a large amount of litigation between the two parties.

Bay of Nigg from Tullos Hill with St Fittick's Church right of centre





Survey of area by George Brown, 1777



Above: Detail of Tullos Hill from George Brown's Survey of 1777

Right: Ness Farm prior to demolition, courtesy of Ethel Stewart

The 20th century brought further considerable changes to Tullos Hill. An industrial estate on the seaward side of the Hill was developed in the last decades of the 20th century whilst earlier on the Second World War had changed the landscape of the Hill. Some of the land of one of the 19th century farms, Peterseat, was adapted to become an Anti-Aircraft Battery, and subsequently a Prisoner of War Camp. In the middle decades of the 20th century the Hill became home to a landfill site.



At any rate it was clear that this system was untenable and could not continue indefinitely. Ultimately an Act of Parliament was necessary to solve the conundrum. By the terms of the Act the proprietors could appeal to a third party who, by arbitration and independent consultation, would more logically divide the lands. This resulted in a number of highly detailed plans and maps of the area being drawn up. One of the best of those is still preserved in the City Archives and is by George Brown, dated 1777. It is thoroughly invaluable for any history of the area which might be undertaken. Then in 1785, after due deliberation, the lands were divided. The town got all the lands to the east with Menzies getting what was on the west.

In 1786 the town council feued out their share of these lands in nine lots. Three of these feus were secured by David Morrice, an advocate in Aberdeen. Two plots were called Middleton and Altens and the last

being Tullos. In total Morrice paid a feu duty of £42 8s and 46 bolls of oatmeal for all three plots. This feu contained what was estimated to be only 100 acres of arable land compared to some 250 acres of hill and moor land, which in itself bears out the suggestions that the land was largely uninhabitable in the Medieval period.

Morrice was, however, a seminal figure in the development of Tullos Hill as we see it today. He planted trees and employed modern farming techniques to create farmed fields on the Hill. The consumption dykes relate to this process whilst the descendants of his trees are still to be seen today. Whilst there had been a modest amount of farming on the hill in Medieval times, the agricultural revolution allowed more land to be cultivated and so farming began on a wider scale on the Hill. Peterseat and Ness Farms, which survived into the 20th century, owe their origins to this process.



**Around 200 historic and archaeological features have been identified on Tullos Hill. Listed here and shown on Map 1 is a selection of more visible features and groups.**

### Crab's Cairn

**1**

This is the least visible and robust of the long-identified group of Bronze Age burial cairns on Tullos Hill, which also includes Tullos Cairn, Cat Cairn and Baron's Cairn. It is said to have been damaged during the Second World War and again through some of the landfill work in the area. What it does retain to some extent is its striking position, with clear visibility between it and both Cat Cairn and Baron's Cairn – a placing in the landscape which was obviously important to its original builders some 3500 or so years ago.

### Tullos Hill Field Clearance Cairns

**2, 4, 5, 7, 17, 23**

The field survey of Tullos Hill in 2004 revealed several areas where small heaps of stone, sometimes turf-covered, may be evidence of early attempts at clearing rough ground to make it suitable for cultivation. Without archaeological

*Bronze Age ring cairn cleared for excavation, 2010  
© CFA Archaeology Ltd*

excavation, it is not possible to determine the period when this activity took place, but it may date from prehistoric to Medieval times. Fire damage on the Hill during 2005 made many of these features more visible, and also demonstrated just how stone-laden this ground is, without its covering of vegetation.

### Tullos Hill Burial Cairns

**3, 8, 14, 18**

In addition to the well-known and relatively obvious cairns on Tullos Hill, a number of other possible prehistoric burial cairns have been noticed on the Hill over the years, most recently during the archaeological survey in 2004. Among the more striking and visible of these is **8**. Measuring about 13 x 11 metres and some 2 metres in height, it is distinguishable from other natural mounds nearby because of the stones which protrude from its cover of vegetation.

### Tullos Cairn

**6**

In some ways the most impressive of the prehistoric burial cairns on Tullos Hill, being 20 metres in diameter and 2.5 metres high, it is unusual in being not on the skyline, but in a slightly terraced area on the north-west facing slope of the hill. There are a number of small field clearance cairns nearby, which may relate to prehistoric or later attempts at agriculture on this relatively protected side of the hill, where it is likely that the cairn builders may also have farmed and lived. The shape of the cairn has been altered at various times in the recent and more distant past.

### Baron's Cairn

**9**

This is one of the most noticeable of the Bronze age burial cairns on Tullos Hill: its elevated position demonstrates the importance of these features as landmarks throughout the ages. It is part of a readily visible surviving group, which also includes Crab's Cairn, Cat Cairn and Tullos



*Tullos Cairn © George Wilson*

Cairn, all of which probably date from around the 2nd millennium BC. There has never been any archaeological excavation of this cairn, but it may originally have covered the burial place of a prominent member of society. Its shape has been altered over the ages, most recently when it was used as a look-out post during the Second World War – remnants of brick and concrete structures can be seen on and near the cairn.

*Baron's Cairn*





**Peterseat Anti-Aircraft Battery and Prisoner of War Camp 10, 11, 12**

This World War II Anti-Aircraft Battery was converted and used as a German Prisoner of War Camp from 1945-48. Concrete hut bases adjacent to the main path on the summit of Tullos Hill (10) are the only remains of the camp now visible above ground. Three had been visible for some years, but archaeological work associated with installation of a gas venting trench in 2009 revealed several others, which had been buried during landfill operations. It was possible to record them in some detail, including the little paths that had been laid out between the huts. An excavation in the lower ground to east, towards the industrial development (11,12), uncovered the remains of some of the eight gun emplacements, and the concrete floors of two buildings, one of which was a command post. Following the excavation, archaeologists contacted Karl Roth, a former Prisoner of War who resided at the camp from 4 September 1945 until January 10th 1948. He shared his memories of the camp and of the people of Torry.



**This page:**  
 Top: Photograph of Prisoner of War Camp taken by a prisoner, Karl Roth  
 Right: Postcard sent home by prisoner  
 Below right: Group of prisoners working on construction of pre-fabricated houses  
 Below left: Karl Roth visiting Hazlehead Park



**Opposite page:**  
 Top: Map showing Prisoner of War Camp, 1940s  
 Middle: Karl Roth's kitbag  
 Opposite lower: Karl Roth



# Map 1



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## Consumption Dykes

**13, 15, 19, 20, 21, 22**

These distinctive drystone field boundaries are very characteristic of the landscape of North-East Scotland, although similar features are known from other areas, including New England. There are over 100 recorded in Aberdeen alone, of which several fine examples survive on Tullos Hill. They are in essence simply walls which have been built excessively large in height or width, to 'consume' stones which have been cleared out of the fields to make the ground suitable for agriculture. In many cases, great care has been taken to make them aesthetically pleasing as well as practical. The examples on Tullos Hill are related to land improvements by David Morrice, owner of Tullos House in the early 19th century. The dyke marked **13** on Map 1 also contains part of what has been identified as another Bronze Age burial cairn, which is a scheduled ancient monument.

*Consumption dyke*



## Cairn excavated 2010 and 2012

**14**

This was recorded during the 2004 survey as a broadly circular patch of stones largely concealed by bracken and other vegetation and it was excavated in 2010 and 2012, to confirm the initial identification as a burial place or ring cairn. It was found to contain some cremated human bone, for which radiocarbon analysis suggests a date within the 2nd millennium BC. An interesting discovery within the upper levels of stone was a German 5 Pfennig piece of the 1930s, which may derive from the Prisoner of War Camp period.

## Cat Cairn

**16**

Like several of the other well-preserved burial cairns on Tullos Hill this example boasts a wide-ranging view over the Vale of Tullos and maintains the intervisibility with Baron's Cairn and Crab's Cairn which would have been important to



*Cat Cairn*

its prehistoric builders. It has probably become rather flatter in shape over time, as is hardly surprising considering its proximity to a highly populated area. A possible platform survives on its north and south sides. Construction of round cairns such as these probably dates to around the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. They marked the location of burials, sometimes in elaborately made stone-lined graves or 'cists'.

## Field Boundaries

**24**

The archaeological surveys of this area west of the landfill revealed an extremely intense and sometimes intercutting pattern of historic features, ranging in date from prehistory to more recent times. They include boundaries and banks of various types, trackways and field clearance cairns, the earliest of which may relate to the periods of Bronze Age farming represented by the burial cairns and hut circles.

## Hut Circles

**25, 26**

These two sub-circular 'shapes' were first recorded during the archaeological survey in 2004 as possible remnants of foundations of timber dwellings, or roundhouses of prehistoric date. The opportunity to check that identification came with the excavations of 2010 and 2012, in which number **26** was one of the sites targeted. Excavation revealed that it was indeed a hut circle, with the stoney bank on which the walls would have been founded quite well preserved, along with some internal features. A quite large quantity of associated pottery, as well as radiocarbon analysis, dated the feature to the Bronze Age. A structure such as this could have had more than one floor and accommodated an extended family around 3000-4000 years ago. Number **25**, which has not been subject to excavation, measures about 13x12 metres in diameter. Numerous stones are embedded in the bank, which is less obvious towards the south east, where it is possible that the entrance lay.





## Tullos House 27

*Tullos House, courtesy of Mrs Manson*

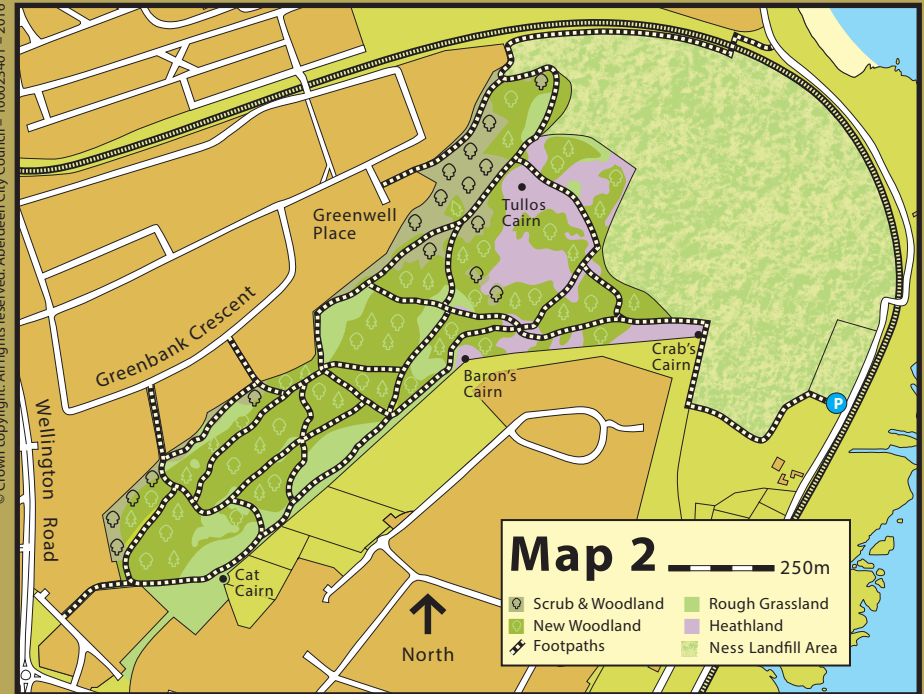
David Morrice, successful advocate of Aberdeen, who had built up a large fortune, in part by representing bodies such as the town council, acquired several lots of Tullos Hill and the surrounding area in 1786. He had Tullos House built for himself, probably completing it before 1810. It was demolished in the period following the Second World War, to make way for industrial development

There were no trees on the feu when Morrice took possession of it: however he embarked on a policy of planting on Tullos Hill. He planted Scots pine, larch, oak, alder, birch, mountain ash and elm. The plantation failed on the seaward side as well as on the summit. In an article written for the *Aberdeen Journal* in 1896 it was said that this plantation was largely still there, and was described as 'luxuriant'. However as to the extent of the growth and the paths, it was also written that they



were 'somewhat tortuous and scarcely perceptible footpaths – faint trails they might be called, which one would almost require to have the training of an Indian tracker to follow...'

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## Wildlife of Tullos Hill

There is a variety of habitats on Tullos Hill. This means there is a rich and varied wildlife living on the site. These habitats include rough grassland, heathland, scrub and woodland.

### Rough Grassland

The rough grassland areas of Tullos Hill have a limited range of plant species growing in them. The rough grassland is dominated by vigorous, tall growing grasses, which outcompete other species for water, light and nutrients. A few butterflies do feed on these grasses; on a sunny summer day

look out for meadow brown butterflies. In some areas, dame's violet, the pinky/white flowered garden escape manages to grow. Mice and voles create networks



Above: Thistle

of tunnels at the base of the grasses. This in turn attracts birds of prey such as kestrels and tawny owls. Kestrels are easy to spot as they hover over the site looking for their food. Tawny owls are occasionally seen. The best time to see them is early evening and around dawn. Buzzards are also common flying over the site looking for insects and small animals to feed on.



Hover Fly



Red Admiral



Toad



Common Blue Damselfly



Common Blue

### Heathland

Heathland is a relatively species rich habitat dominated by heather. Historically much more of the site would probably have been heathland but changes in land use for agriculture over the centuries and more recent landfilling operations have destroyed much of this habitat. Heathland thrives in areas where the soil is naturally slightly acidic and the nutrient levels are low. Three kinds of heather are found on Tullis Hill, common heather (*Calluna vulgaris*), cross-leaved heath (*Erica tetralix*) and bell heather (*Erica cinerea*).

These all flower in late summer creating a purple haze across parts of the Hill. Many insects depend on the heathland habitat. In the wetter areas where there can be pools of water look out for dragonflies and damselflies in the summer. The pools are also home to frogs, toads and newts, which feed on small insects in the water. In the drier areas a range of bees, hoverflies and moths are found. Skylarks and meadow pipits perform amazing aerial displays overhead as they sing overhead on warm sunny summer days.



Bumble Bee



Rough grassland



Heathland



Scrub and woodland

### Scrub and woodland

In the springtime, the scrub and woodland come alive with small birds singing as they claim their nesting territories. Look out for chiffchaffs, blackcaps and willow warblers. The chiffchaff says its own name when it calls and the male blackcap has a black cap to its head. These nest in the bushes and in long grass. These birds visit the UK to breed; they spend the winter in Africa. Resident birds such as robins, blackbirds song thrushes, great tits and blue tits nest

in the woodland areas. If you are lucky, you may hear a great spotted woodpecker drumming on one of the mature beech trees.

Gorse is widespread across Tullos Hill and is unusual in that it flowers in almost every month of the year. It flowers most in the springtime, when the scent of coconut from the flowers can fill the air.



Willow Warbler



Hawthorn flower



Above: Guided walk on Tullos Hill  
Right: Northern Marsh Orchid

### New woodland

In 2012 about 30 hectares of Tullos Hill was planted with a mix of broad-leaved and coniferous woodland. The trees were planted in areas that were either rough grass or gorse scrub. As this new woodland develops, it will become a haven for wildlife as most of the trees planted are native to Scotland or are good for our native wildlife. The mix of trees includes



Scots pine, Norway spruce, larch, sycamore, wild cherry, hazel, wych elm, ash, oak, blackthorn and hawthorn. The mix of trees will make a good feeding and breeding habitat for red squirrels, bats, many woodland birds and larger animals such as roe deer.

This new woodland is one of the 60 Diamond Woodlands planted across the UK in Her Majesty The Queen's Diamond Jubilee year and promoted by the Woodland Trust.



Aberdeen from Tullos Hill

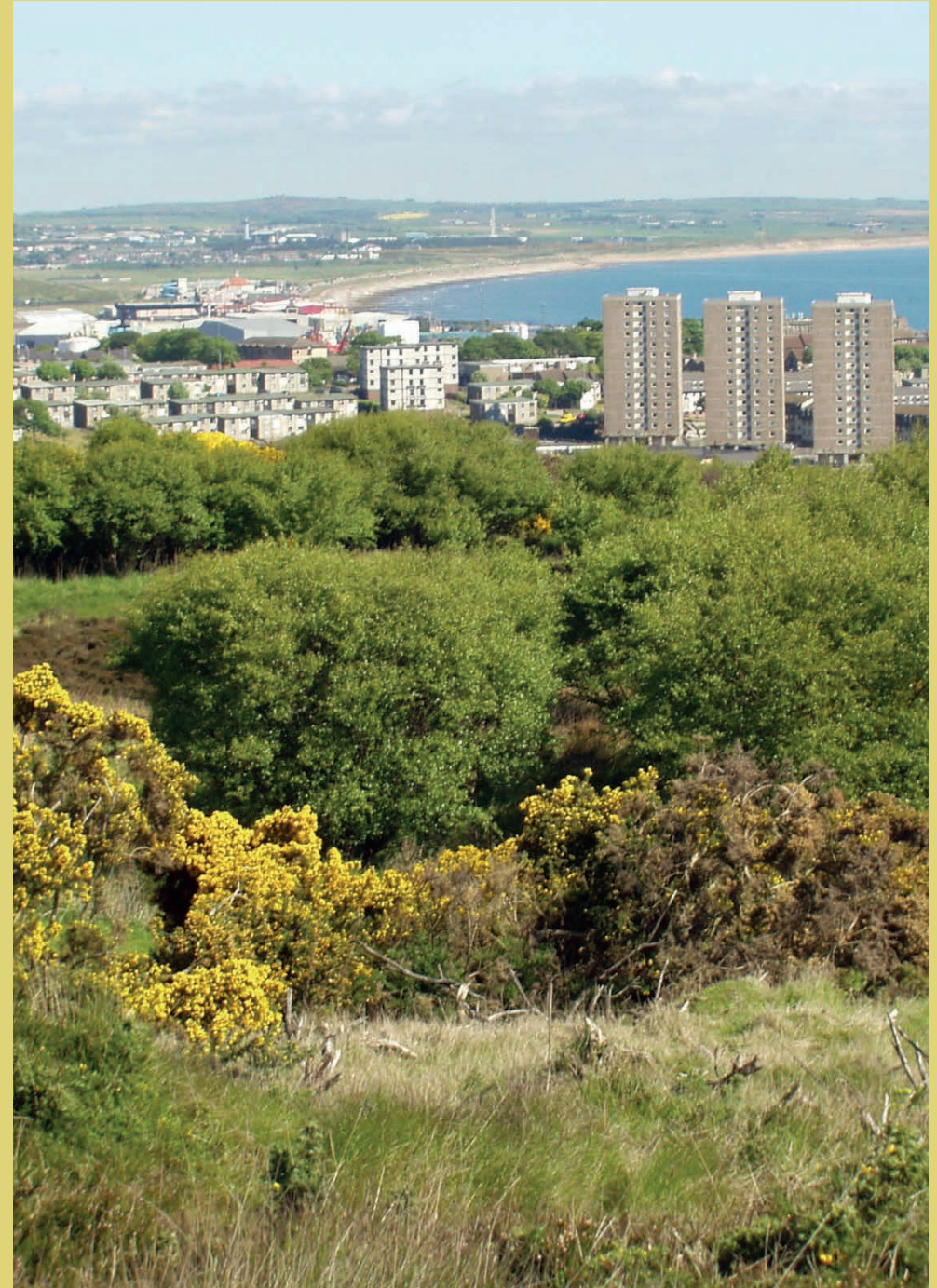


## The Legacy of Landfill

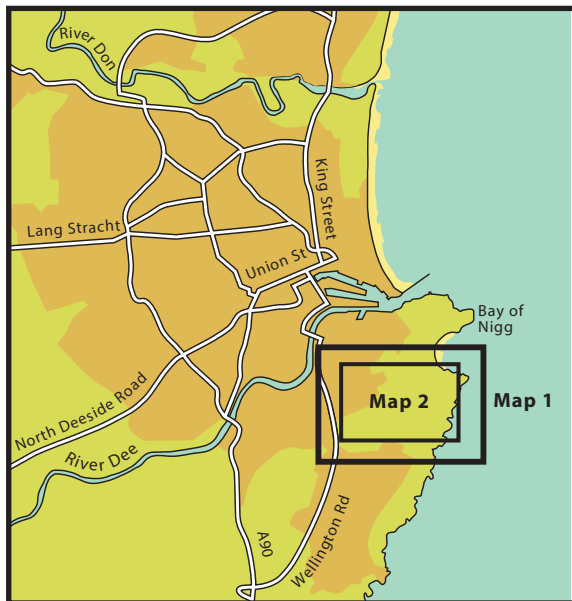
Waste management has long been an activity in the area in the form of landfill sites at Tullos Hill and Ness Farm; encompassing 15 and 49 hectares respectively and accommodating an estimated 3 million tonnes of waste over a 40 year period. The site stopped accepting waste in 2001 and over the last 12 years activity has been focused on restoration, comprising capping of the site using a geosynthetic composite cap to prevent water getting into the waste, new drainage, tree planting and path

*Above and below: views of the fully restored Ness Farm Landfill site.*

improvements. Aberdeen City Council has invested £17 million into this work. This expenditure has taught us an important lesson about the need for more sustainable waste management practices. Disposing of waste in landfill both prevents valuable materials from being used again and leaves behind pollution for future generations. Problems such as contaminated water and methane gas production mean that such sites require ongoing monitoring and pollution prevention measures for decades to come.



*Aberdeen from Tullos Hill*



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## **A Guide to the History, Archaeology and Natural History of Tullos Hill** is one of a series of themed trails being developed around the City.

Further details about these trails can be found at:

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& at **[www.aagm.co.uk](http://www.aagm.co.uk)**

### **For further information contact**

**03000 200 293**

**[info@aagm.co.uk](mailto:info@aagm.co.uk)**

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Ranger Service

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