

## Excavations in Vicar Street in 1985

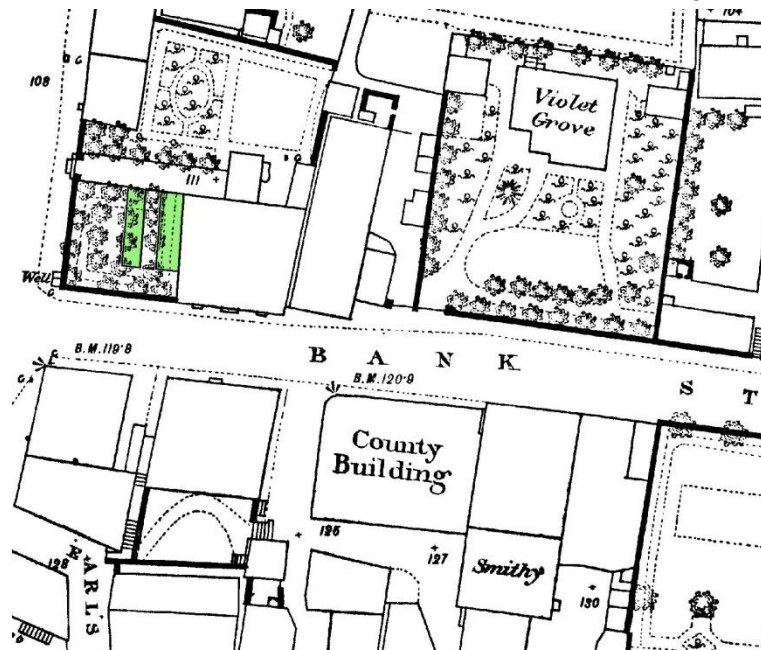
Geoff B Bailey

### Introduction

Whilst carrying out routine monitoring of the District's planning applications in the third week of November 1984 the Keeper of Archaeology & Local History noted the proposed development of the north corner plot at the junction of Vicar Street and Bank Street. This area of the town was considered to be of particular historical and archaeological interest due to its proximity to the parish church which is assumed to have been the focal point of the early settlement at Falkirk. It had also been postulated by John Reid that the line of the northern defences of the old burgh lay in the vicinity. As a thoroughfare of some antiquity Vicar's Loan would also have been important providing the point of penetration of this defensive circuit by means of a port.

Within the central area of the town the site was unusual in that documentary evidence showed it to have been devoid of structures since at least 1832. It was therefore considered that without the interference of the last 150 or so years the archaeological evidence at the site would be significantly clearer than elsewhere. Early in December it was found that the contractor for the site, Alan Jollie Associates, intended to commence construction at the beginning of February and so permission was

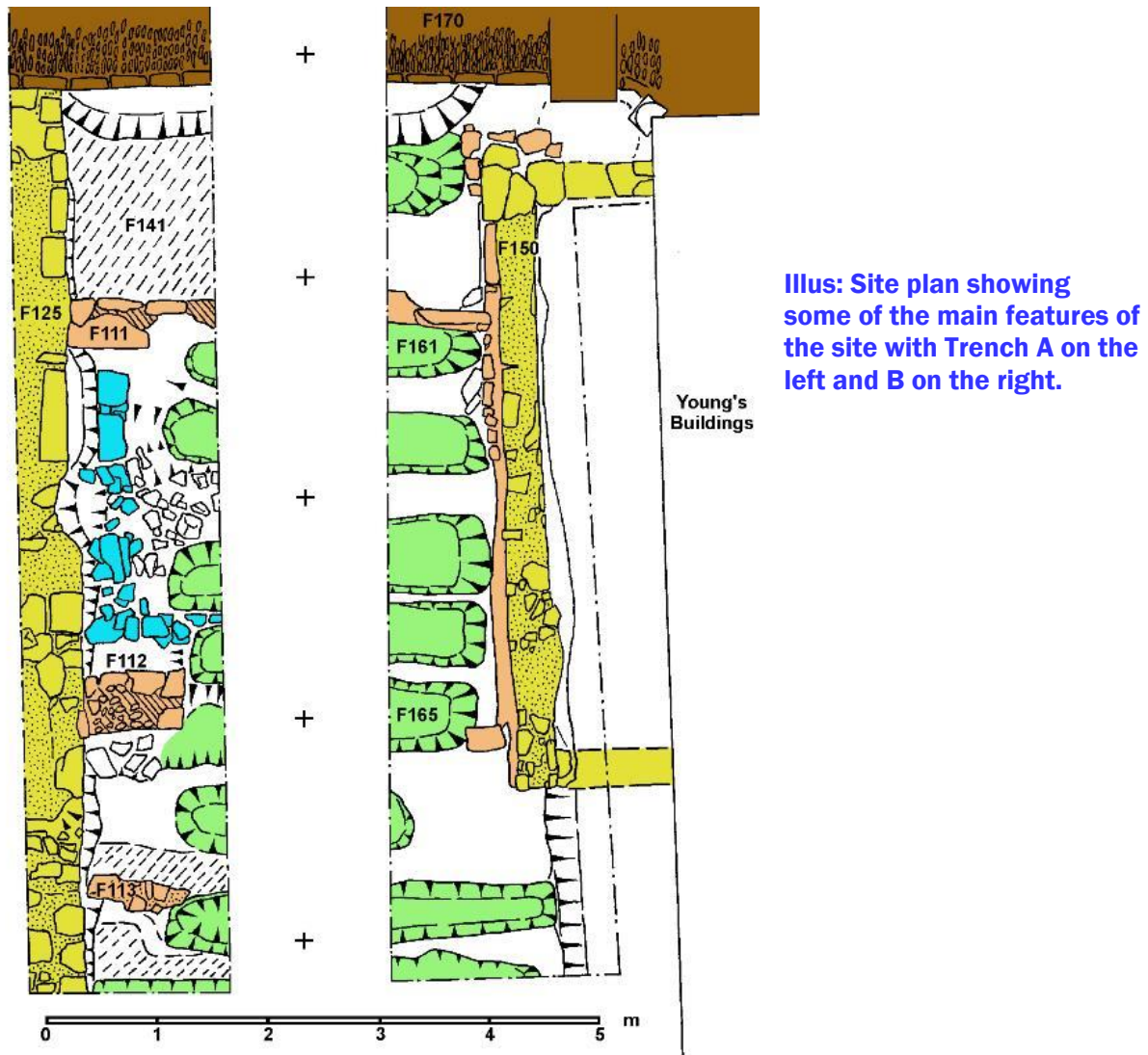
sought and obtained from the owner, Mr Young of Young's Stores, for a small-scale excavation. This began on 7 January and extended for three weeks. The presence of trees along the west boundary of the site meant that it was not available for exploration and so a north/south trench, Trench A, was placed down the centre of the plot. This was followed by a parallel trench to the east - Trench B. Spoil was stored on site and this left little opportunity for further work.



**Illus: The 1862 Ordnance Survey map with Trenches A and B highlighted in green.**

### Excavation

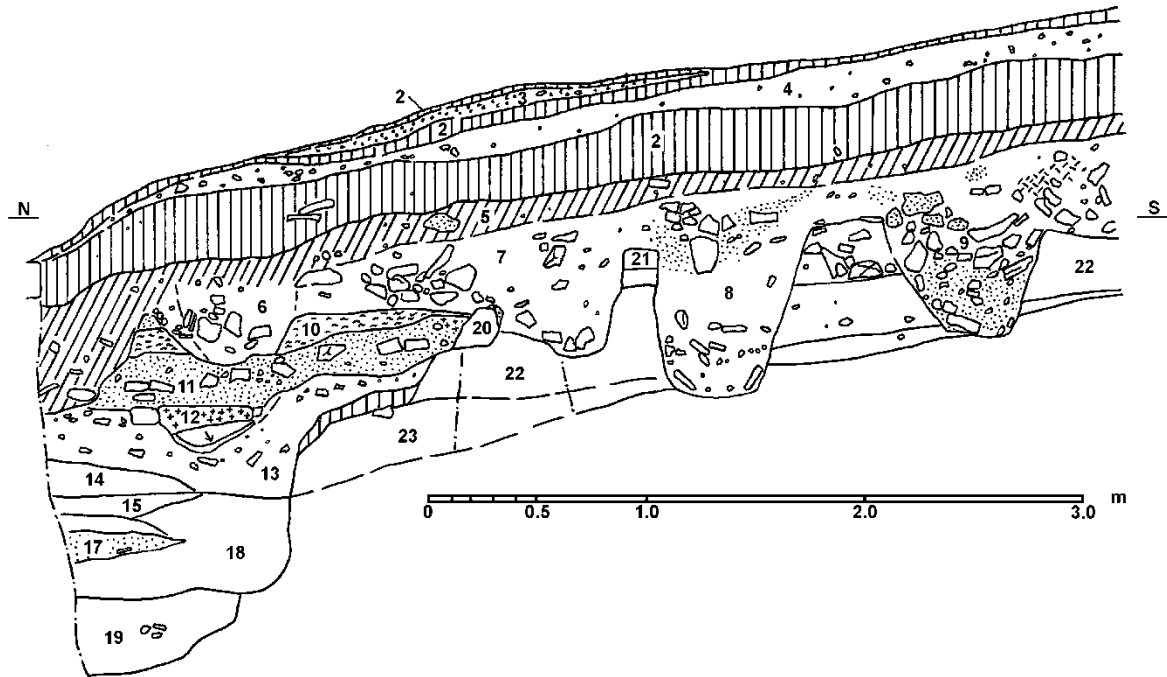
The average depth of the deposits in Trench A proved to be 1.2m, increasing to 2.2m at the north end. The depth in Trench B was also 1.2m but reduced to 0.25m adjacent to the gable of the existing building (then Young's store) due to recent activity to alleviate damp in that shop. Further observations were made during the construction period of the new business premises. Several structures were identified with a number of phases of occupation and so these will be described in chronological order.



### Phase I – cultivation

Immediately over the natural deposits of orange sand was a thin layer of orange-brown sand (F88 - Section 1, layer 23) which increased in depth from 0.03m at the south end of Trench A to 0.25m at the north end. This appears to represent an impoverished cultivation soil which was subjected to soil creep on the hill slope. That slope was around 12 degrees from the horizontal. No finds were made in this layer though only a small part was removed.

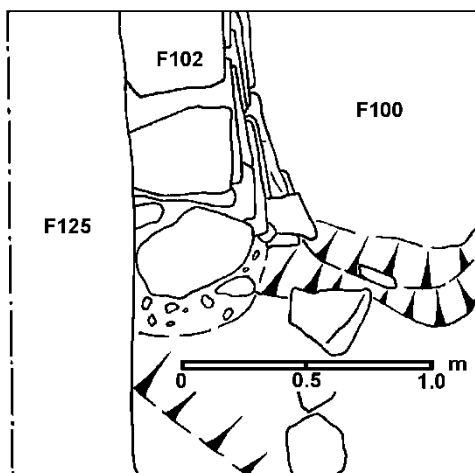
Subsequently, a much thicker layer of light brown sand (F35) accumulated (Section 1, layer 22). It had a maximum surviving depth of 0.4m and indicates the continual re-working of the upper levels of the cultivation soil with the addition of extra humic material and sand. Although much leached, the depth of this soil suggests intensive cultivation. There were no finds in the lower part of this layer but the upper levels produced 1 rim sherd of white gritty ware (12-14<sup>th</sup> century), 4 body sherds of reduced green-glazed ware (16-18<sup>th</sup> century), 23 glass bottle sherds, a cow horn, and 1 piece of oxidised green-glazed ware (16-17<sup>th</sup> century).



**Illus: Section 1 along the north end of Trench A. 2 – topsoil; 3 – grey-brown stony loam; 4 – orange-brown clay loam; 5 – mid-brown clay loam with building debris; 6 – orange-brown sandy loam with some stone; 7 – brown sandy loam with some stone; 8 – orange-brown sandy loam with some stone; 9 – brown sandy loam with much stone, brick & mortar; 10 – yellow & red clay loam; 11 – red-brown sand with mortar and brick; 12 – charcoal; 13 – buff clay loam with grit; 14 – red-brown sandy loam with some large stone; 15 – orange sand; 16 – dark brown sand with some mortar; 17 – brown sand with much lime mortar; 18 – orange-brown sand; 19 – orange sand with stone chips; 20 – wall; 21 – yellow sand; 22 – light brown sand; 23 – orange-brown sand.**

## Phase II – town defences?

A number of features cut into the cultivation layers. The earliest appears to have been a large pit or trench (F100) at the north end of Trench A (Section 1, layers 13-19). A distinct shelf on the south side showed that the pit continued in use after the deposition of layer 19. That layer contained some angular sandstone chippings suggesting the dressing of building stone in the vicinity. The stonework

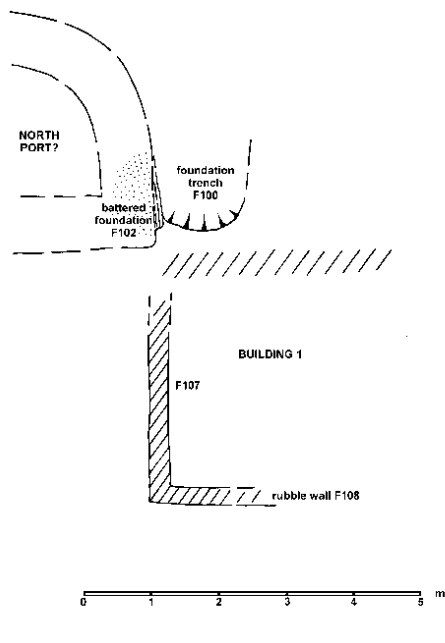


in question was preserved in situ at the western end of the pit and consisted of ten courses of thin sandstone slabs 1.3m in total height. The outer (east) face of this wall (F102) had a noticeable batter as it was only the foundation for a substantial building. A rough cobble had been used to fill in a space between it and the side of the foundation trench. The upper course was bonded with a pale white mortar, but the lower levels appeared to be of drystone construction.

**Illus: Plan of the north end of Trench A showing the early stone wall F102.**

**Illus: Foundation wall F102 looking west.**

The upper fills of the construction trench (layers 14-17) contained some stone and mortar indicative of work on the upper part of the superstructure associated with F102. Layer 18, a layer of orange-brown sand, produced most of a distorted bowl with internal green-glaze which is attributed to the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century.



**Illus: Plan of Phase II.**

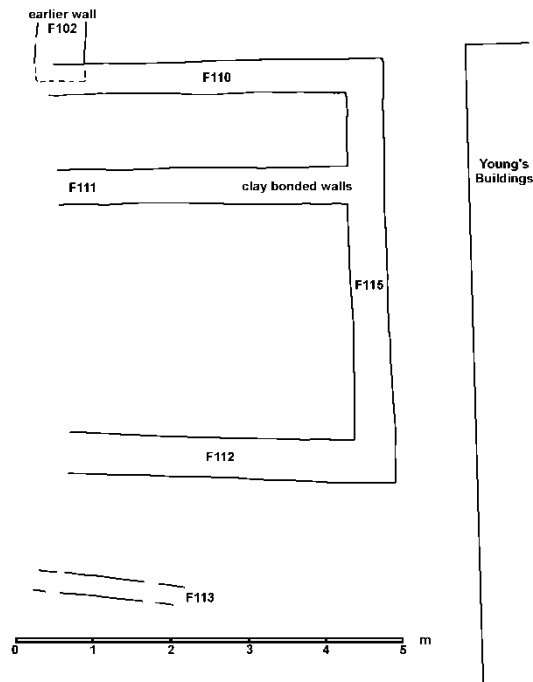
The foundation for a light rubble wall (F107) aligned north/south was found to the south of F102, displaced slightly to the east. At the south end it returned to the east (F108) but was badly cut up and disturbed by later features. No bonding material was observed and it is probable that this was little more than a dwarf drystone wall to support a timber superstructure – Building 1. Only two courses could be confirmed in the excavation. It could not be stratigraphically related to the more substantial foundation F102 but is the earliest feature to its south.

**Illus: Trench A looking north. Foundation 107/108 can be seen running along the centre of the trench to the right of the much later wall foundation F125.**





## Phase III – clay-bonded building



In the next phase of occupation three west/east clay bonded walls crossed Trench A and their stumps were observed in Trench B against a north/south wall (F115) which had been rebuilt at a later date. Each had been cut on the west by the later wall F125. The northernmost of these clay-bonded sandstone walls was F111 whose west end rested on the rubble foundation of the earlier wall F107. It was 0.45m wide and three courses survived which incorporated some large face stones packed around with smaller ones. Like its neighbour to the south it had been badly cut up by later pits. That southern neighbour was F112 which also had three remaining courses. It was 0.56m wide with a core of small stones packed into the clay.

### Illus: Phase III plan.

F113 to the south was far slighter, only 0.3m wide, and lay at a slight angle to the other two. However here some

six courses survived showing that it was more than a mere dwarf wall.

The vestiges of walls F111 and F112 lay against F115. This wall was not examined in detail as its upper levels had been rebuilt as a lime mortared wall (F150) slightly to the east leaving a small offset. At its northern end the earlier wall extended 0.35m beyond F150 and here there was a hint of another return (F110) to the west - destroyed by later pits. Together all of these walls make up Building 2.

### Illus: Wall foundation 125 runs along the right side of Trench A with the clay-bonded walls F113 and F112 at right angles.

There was no direct dating evidence for the walls of this phase which were dug into the top of the cultivation layers of Phase I. These contained material up to the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

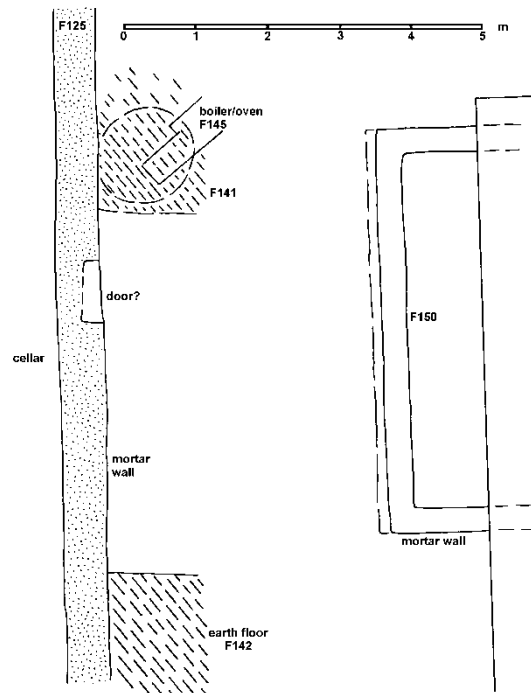


## Phase IV – urban growth

The walls of Building 2 of Phase III were demolished and replaced by substantial sandstone walls bonded with lime mortar making far better quality buildings. The most prominent of these was represented by a north/south wall which ran along the western edge of Trench A (F125) and which is estimated at 0.55m wide. It incorporated part of the earliest stone wall F102. Near the centre of the trench some large slab-like stones (F126) may represent a doorway. After the end of the archaeological excavation, during the construction work on the site, it was observed that the area to the west of this wall had been filled in with stone rubble to a much greater depth showing the presence

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of a cellar. This is not surprising as F125 was evidently the back wall of a building, Building 3, fronting Vicar Street and the slope of the land would have required terracing – incidentally removing any levels of archaeological interest. F125 is more or less on line with the back wall of the existing buildings to the north and would have been part of the urban growth of the town in the Georgian period.



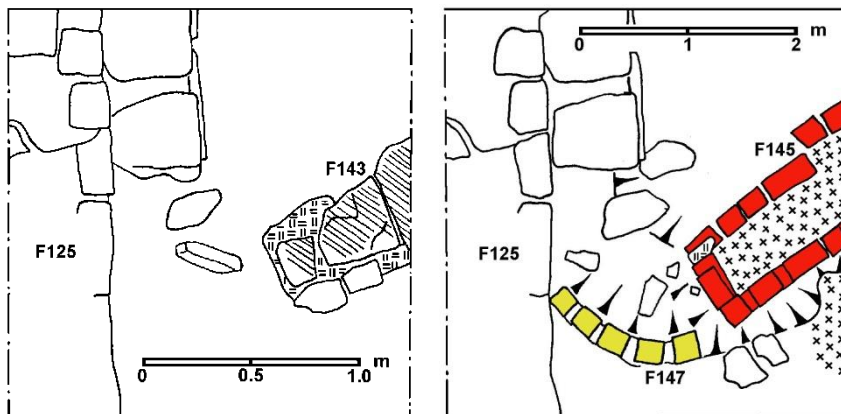
**Illus: Phase IV plan.**

Two patches of beaten earth which incorporated small stones and clay occurred to the east of wall F125. The northern of these (F141) provided the setting for a series of ovens/furnaces. The first of these was a simple hearth consisting of burnt flat sandstone slabs in oxidised clay placed in a slight pit 0.5m wide and over 0.85m long (F143). It was aligned SW/NE and extended beyond Trench A. It was replaced by a similar shaped hearth on the same alignment edged with ordinary hand-made bricks (F145). This contained a brick's depth (0.14m) of charcoal when excavated. Finally an outer curving kerb of refractory

bricks (F147) had been set between F145 and the back wall of the building (F125) at a slightly higher level. All of these hearths probably served as boilers and comparison may be made with the figure-of-eight structure attached to the east side of the northern extension of the bank building (the building to the east of the excavation site) and shown on the 1858 and 1862 Ordnance Survey plans of the town. On the 1858 building it is captioned "boiler". No covered roof is shown for it making it directly comparable with F143/145/147.



**Illus: The north end of Trench A showing the furnace F145 below F147.**



**Illus: Left – hearth F143. Right – Furnace F145/147 at the north end of Trench A.**

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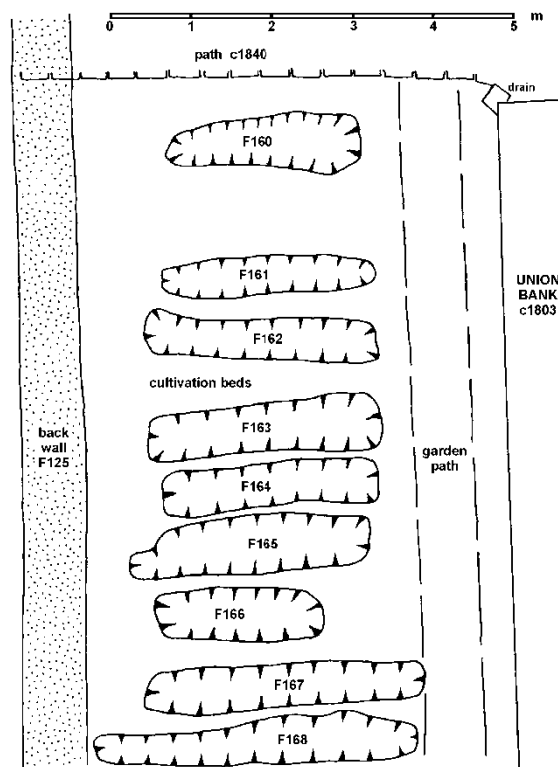


To the east of the Vicar Street building and its associated back yards another building, Building 4, was erected. Wall F150 was constructed on the foundation of F115 but now it returned to the east. The 0.4m thick wall was bonded with mortar and only its foundation survived.

**Illus: Wall 150 in Trench B looking north.**

### Phase V – the Bank and garden

Building 4 was demolished and a larger building, Building 5, erected over its eastern portion. The new building extended south to front Bank Street and is still standing. It was built c1803 as the



offices for the Falkirk Union Bank, though many will remember it as Young's China Store. For a while Building 3 fronting Vicar Street remained and the area between them was used as a garden. A series of large west/east pits F160-168 were dug as cultivation beds (Section 1 layers 6-9). These churned up the ground and broke up the earlier walls which had been obstacles to horticulture. The pits terminate close to Building 3 as might be expected. However, they end well short of Building 5 suggesting that there was probably a path along the west side of the Bank leading to the back door.

**Illus: Phase V plan.**

After the demolition of Building 3 that path was replaced by a more substantial one (F170) leading directly to Vicar Street and it is this which is shown on the 1858 OS plan. From the square gate piers at the entrance the path led to the back

door with a formal garden to the south. The path was composed of whinstone kerbs set parallel with it and packed with whinstone chippings set perpendicularly.

**Illus: The Vicar Street entrance in 1985.**





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## Phase VI – dereliction and renewal

The first Ordnance Survey maps indicate that the garden was planted with trees and some of these remained in 1985 forming a prominent feature of the street-scape. Young's China Store became connected to a toy store on Princes Street through the north extension of the old Bank. However, the building on Bank Street suffered from damp and so in the late 1970s some of the earth against its west gable was dug away and dumped over the garden area (layers 3 and 4 on Section 1).

In 1984 the Young family decided to give up its long-established business and the plot of land on the corner of Vicar Street and Bank Street was sold for redevelopment. Before it changed hands Mr Young gave permission for Falkirk Museum to undertake the work described above for which we are grateful. In the spring of 1985 the new offices of the Provincial Building Society were constructed.

## Finds



1. Bowl. Almost complete bowl made up of 13 sherds. There is a groove just inside the rim, then a shallow band before two more grooves. The sides slope gently to a small flat base which has two more grooves on the interior. The bowl has a green-glazed interior with impressed stamp decoration. Each stamp consists of a square grid of 25 small squares and the rolling motion of the die can readily be seen (1985-1-4).

There are eleven of these stamps around the band on the rim, one on the inside centre of the base, and five in between. The exterior is not glazed but some of the glaze has run over it from the rim. The distorted – wobbly – form of the body evidently occurred during firing but the bowl would still have been usable. The resulting dimensions were 332mm long by 293mm wide and 93mm tall. (F100).





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2. Bowl. The rim of a similar bowl but with a more angular lip. There are two grooves near the top of the rim and a different stamp (1985-1-5). The surviving piece is 56mm long and has three closely-spaced stamps. These are square and made up of four petals each with a mid-rub – the outer edges defined by two slots along each side. (F100).

A plain rim sherd from such a bowl was found in 2000 at Booth Place (2003-79-54)

These are high status items and the nearest parallel comes from Linlithgow Palace (Laing 1967, 136-137. No 68) which has

the chequer-pattern stamp and comes from a group dated between 1500 and 1800 but with residual items. It is not unreasonable to assume that the vessels from Vicar Street came from the Earl of Callendar's Lodging and it is probable that that from Booth Place was from the Westquarter Lodging.



3. Tobacco pipe. Approximately one third of a clay tobacco pipe bowl with part of the stem attached. The decoration on the bowl consists of a flower on either side, with narrow ribbing emanating from the stem. The pointed spur has broken off. (1985-1-7).

4. Tobacco pipe stems. Three stamped stem fragments:

1. "-URE GLASGO-/ ARUNDIN-"

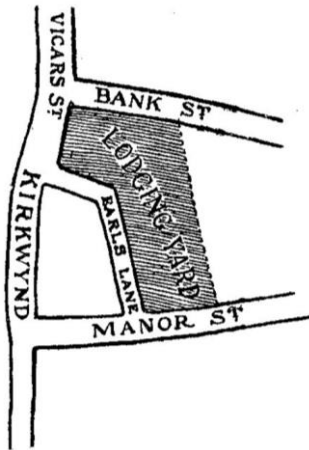
2. "GLASGOW/ -ACHLIN"

3. A moulded piece with scroll decoration. (1985-1-10).

4. Belamarine. 1 base and 15 body sherds of a 17<sup>th</sup> century salt-glazed bellarmine jug with a rosette stamp design (1985-1-31). (Residual - Layer 11, Section 1).

## Discussion

The town of Falkirk has evolved over the centuries, starting with a hill fort at Wormit Hill, a Roman fort at the Pleasance and Dark Age occupation around the Howgate and Rosehall areas (Bailey 2016). At this time the area of Vicar Street where the dig took place would have been open ground and this is probably represented by the first cultivation soil F88. By the medieval period the establishment of a church on the site of the old parish church (currently called Falkirk Trinity Church) had resulted in a drift of settlement to the proximity of Manse Place, Vicar Street and the old Manor Street/High Street line. By the early 17<sup>th</sup> century the Livingstons of Callendar had a town house called the Lodging in the appropriately named Earls Lane. This lane ran in a dog-leg from Manor Street to Kirk Wynd and



the general area of the Lodging Yard is shown on a plan produced by James Love (1898, 28). The ground of the Lodging appears to have extended along Vicar Street down the hill to around the north side of Bank Street. The substantial Lodging included rooms used by the baron court and Falkirk's first tolbooth (Bailey 2014). The buildings were located at the south end of the plot with a market place between them and Manse Place. The bulk of the other dwellings of the town lay along Manor Street and the High Street south of the church with a few southwards along Vicar Street and on to the Pleasance. To the north of the Lodging there would have been a garden and vegetable plot with fields beyond.

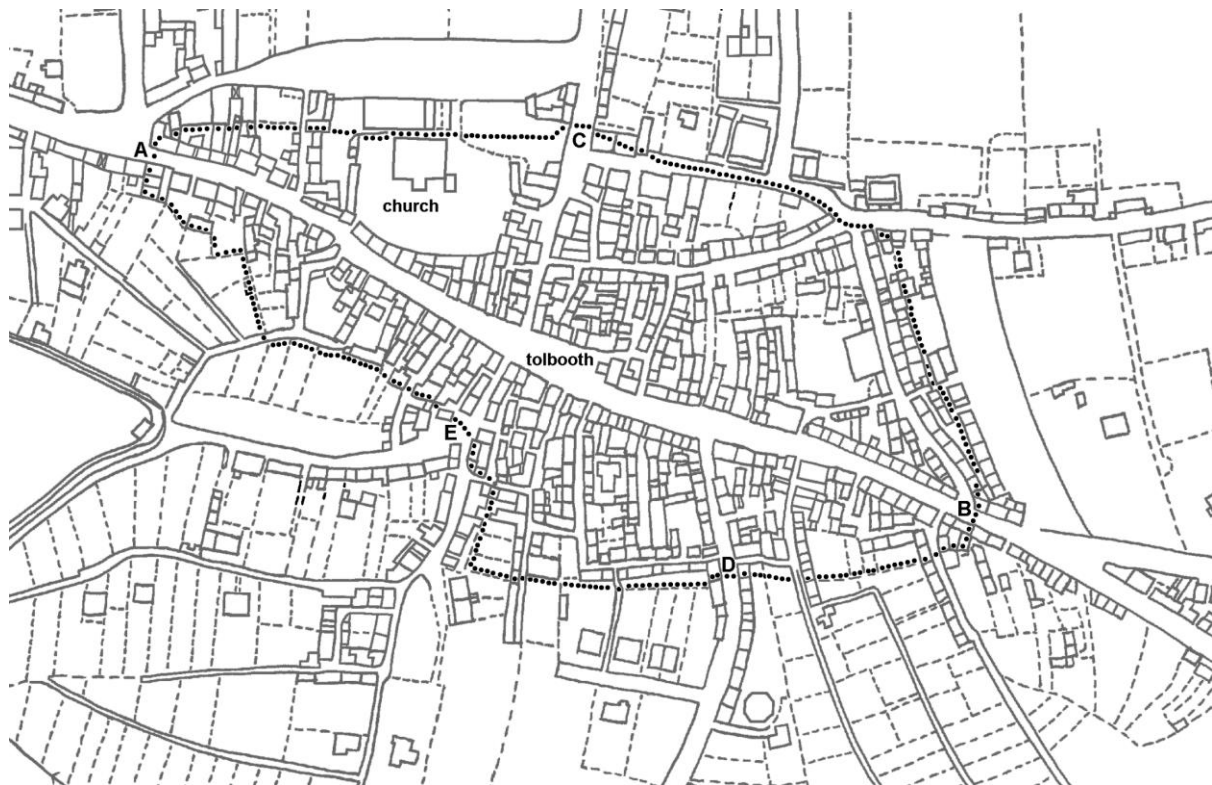
**Illus: Love's plan of the Lodging Yard.**

The Lodging Yard may originally have belonged to the Barony of Abbotskerse and would have come into the possession of the Livingstons in 1600. That it was an older holding is shown by its exclusion from the town's fifteen feus (Meek 2022, 12). Around 1585 the town's five gates or ports were constructed. This was undoubtedly a response to the turbulent times that befell the nation following the Ruthven Raid in August 1582. The Livingston family was very much caught up in these politics and so their property and supporters were under a perceived threat. We know that one of these ports was on Vicar Street and Kier, writing in 1827, says that "*one time-blackened arch is still remaining opposite 'the Lodging Yard'*" (Kier 1827, 151). This would place it in the vicinity of Bank Street.

The exact location of the port has been debated. On topographical grounds the town wall to the west of Vicar Street should have been placed at the top of the steep slope that now descends to Newmarket Street, thus including the church within the circuit – and this again points to the vicinity of Bank Street. Waldie makes the point that Kirk Wynd used to descend this hill through a hollow way: "*The road from Falkirk to the north lies through the Kirk wynd, and at its lower part it has been carried through a sort of trench, there being considerable slopes both up to Earl's lane and to the churchyard; and on the churchyard side the trench has been cut as closely as could be through what appears as the foundation of the Old Manse*" (Waldie 1913, 29). The excavations at the corner of Bank Street show that whilst the ground levels were lower there than on the south side of Bank Street it was level with that road. Further east the ground slopes steeply down to the north from Bank Street. It is also noteworthy that it is somewhere in the vicinity of Manse Place and Bank Street that Kirk Wynd becomes Vicar Street.

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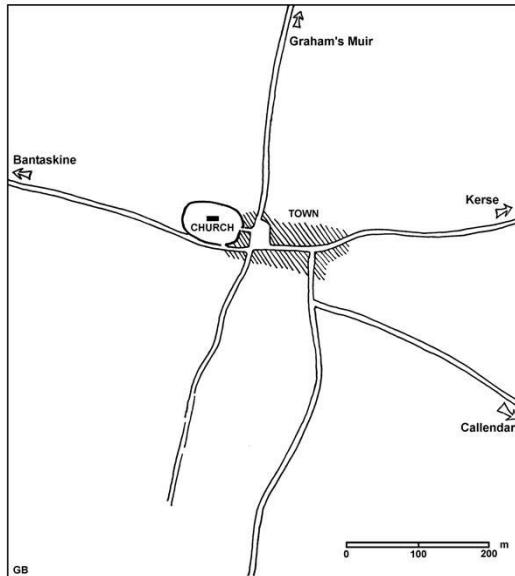
**Illus: Plan showing the probable line of the town wall and five gates. C – north gate.**

These considerations place the north gate of the town where the early foundation F102 was found. Its early place in the stratigraphic sequence and the pottery from the foundation trench F100 indicate a date for F102 in the 16<sup>th</sup> century which agrees well with the date of construction of the town gates. Unfortunately, only the south-east corner of the structure was found in the excavation and everything to its west had already been removed by the terracing for Building 3. Given the hill slope and the size of F100 it appears that terracing was also deemed necessary for the construction of F102 which is assumed to have been the town gate. The sand dug out for this purpose was conveniently dumped on top of the cultivation soil F88 to form F35, the deeper soil of that period.

One piece of information that has led researchers astray (including the current author) in their search for the north gate has been the discovery of arches in 1899 at the Market Tavern (Falkirk Herald 3 June 1899). These were inspected by some of the leading antiquarians of the period - Dr Christison, secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland; Mr Cunningham, C.E; Thomas Ross, architect; and the local men John Reddoch MacLuckie and Mungo Buchanan. They pronounced the remains to be medieval in date and concluded that it was either the entrance to some old fortified place which stood on the spot or was one of the ports or gateways into the town. Knowing that the Market Tavern occupied the corner of Vicar Street and Newmarket Street was one of my problems. In fact, that building was demolished in 1862 and the name was transferred to the other side of Vicar Street, changing in 1900 to become the Argyll Bar. The other main problem was the misleading description of the remains, but an entry in the Falkirk Herald of the previous week makes it clear that the “arches” were in fact vaults and that they were underground. They were discovered when a beer cellar was being inserted under the existing building. It was generally agreed that the medieval remains had been cut through for the construction of a malt kiln which was also observed. The title deeds of the property showed that that kiln dated to 1689 at the latest when Alexander Kidston, maltster and brewer in Falkirk, feued from the Earl of Callendar the ground on the east side of the Vicar’s Loan, Falkirk, on which were the ruins of a previous “kiln and coble” belonging to John Knox of Falkirk. The vault seems to have been aligned north/south and was only 3ft wide but 6ft tall. The same vault had actually been found in 1892 a little further up the street when the Parochial Buildings had been constructed. All of this suggests that the vaulted channel was a large sewer located on the east side of



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the main road north out of the town and the only building that it could have issued from was the early Lodging belonging to the Abbots of Abbotskerse.

**Illus: Conjectural plan of Falkirk c1320 showing the probable context of the great sewer. The abbot's lodging would have been on the east side of the market place in front of the church.**

The sewer may have passed under the town wall, or it may already have been redundant when that wall was built. Around the time that the gate was erected Building 1 was put up. The town wall which formed the protective crust of the urban centre was merely a series of property boundary walls joined end to end and so Building 1 would have been within the grounds of the Lodging. The poor quality of its drystone walls suggests that it was an outbuilding rather than a

dwelling. Such a structure at the northern end of the grounds of the Lodging could have been anything from a utilitarian tool shed or byre to a garden feature such as a summerhouse or doocot. The 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century stamped bowls found in foundation trench F102 are likely to have come from the Lodging and are of high status; not surprisingly the closest parallel comes from Linlithgow Palace.

Building 1 was replaced by a more substantial building with clay-bonded walls. Unfortunately, no floor levels associated with Building 2 survived making it difficult to date. As it was in turn displaced by Building 3 which had been demolished before 1832 it is reasonable to assign Building 2 to the 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> century. The town walls were patched up in 1647 (Bailey 2016). Callendar's Lodging was no longer used as a residence and in 1697 a new tolbooth was constructed in the High Street. A few years later, in 1703, the Kirk Session, finding that My Lord Callendar's Lodging in town was to be let, and that it would be very suitable as a schoolhouse, the Session for the "incouradgmt" of the schoolmaster, allowed 36 lb. Scots for accommodating him and "ye scholars in ye sd lodging" (Love 1898, 29). As the rent charged was very much in excess of what was formerly paid for the school we may take it that "My Lord's Lodging" was still commodious.

Bank Street seems to have been created from scratch in 1784 (Love 1928, 22). Much of it appears to have lain on the line of the town wall and this would not have been coincidental. It is unlikely that any dwellings would have required demolition to make way for the road as the town wall would have stood at the end of the burgage plots that stretched northwards from Back Row (ie Manor Street) and Earls Lane. Silver Row was constructed at much the same time (also close to the line of the town wall) making the two an early example of a bypass road!

Building 3 which fronted Vicar Street was a substantial building with thick lime mortared walls and a cellar. It may have been constructed in anticipation of the formation of Bank Street in the 1770s. The boiler furnaces at the back of the building provide an idea of the date of its last occupation as these levels incorporated sherds of blue transfer ware of the 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century. Boilers in similar locations throughout the town are shown as common features on the 1858 Ordnance Survey maps. They would have been used for washing clothes and the adjacent garden would have been used for drying. The garden beds (F160-168) caused some confusion when excavated in 1985 as they contained a fair amount of building rubble and at first looked like foundation trenches. That material had, of course, been disturbed from the earlier walls. However, the map produced by Alexander Black for the Parliamentary Burgh in 1832 demonstrates that Building 3 had already been dismantled by then. The reason for this is not known and it does seem odd that such a substantial building should not have endured for longer and that given its prime location it was not replaced. A small amount of oxidised

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stonework in wall F125 is not sufficient to show that it was struck by a devastating fire, but it is tantalising.

Behind Building 3 was Building 4 which also had mortared walls. Although set back from Bank Street it must have used it for access. It was there when the garden beds were dug indicating a date similar to that of Building 3 – around 1784. Building 4 did not last long. In 1803 or thereabouts a new banking office was erected on its site by James Brown, one of the partners of the Falkirk Union Bank. It was larger than Building 4 and fronted onto Bank Street which owes its name to it. The land to the west of the bank also belonged to the Union Bank and remained a garden until the 1985 excavation. After the Union Bank closed the property was purchased by the Commercial Banking Company of Scotland who used it until 1832. The following year Dr George Hamilton moved in and here many of his famous children were born. The family moved across the road to the Old Manse in 1853 and the building in Bank Street was taken over by Mrs Ingleton and her daughter as a boarding and day school. Latterly, of course, it was the back door to Young's Store.

We therefore have a long and complex stratigraphic sequence at Vicar Street representing much of the town's history from the medieval period to the present day. Unfortunately such an opportunity is very rare.

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