

## The Historic Harbours Trail: A Guide to 12 of Aberdeenshire's Historic Harbours

### Aberdeenshire's Historic Harbours

With its coastline running along the Moray Firth to the north and the North Sea to the east, it's no surprise that Aberdeenshire's history and heritage are intrinsically linked to the sea. From Sandend in the west to Johnshaven in the south, today Aberdeenshire is home to 21 harbours. The earliest of these have their origins in the 16th Century, but without doubt the sea has played an important role for the region's communities from the earliest times.

In their earliest form, Aberdeenshire's harbours developed from natural safe havens or coastal inlets, with boats being hauled ashore on landing. Many were subsequently developed into more formal harbours, with the construction of stone piers. Often local landowners led the way in commissioning and funding these harbours, but as demand increased government grants were made available for the creation and expansion of harbours.

The fortunes of coastal settlements, and, by association, the demands on their harbours, were dictated by the fluctuating industries of fishing and trade. As boats increased in size, the harbours by necessity had to expand or be left behind. Many of Britain's best-known engineers of the 19th century had a hand in redesigning and expanding Aberdeenshire's harbours, including John Smeaton, Thomas Telford, John Rennie, and the Stevenson dynasty.

Fishing has been a major part of life in Aberdeenshire for millennia. The scale of the fishing fleet, and the species fished for, has varied over the years. Probably the best known was the herring trade in the 18th, 19th and early 20th Centuries. By the 1880s, 7,000 boats were fishing out of Scotland for herring rising to around 10,000 boats by the 1910s. Peterhead was part of another infamous industry, being the biggest whaling port in northeast Scotland from 1788 - 1893.

Alongside the rapidly developing fishing industries, necessary ancillary trades developed in harbour-side locations, including sailmakers, netmakers, ropemakers, coopers, fish curers and processors, and shipbuilders. Maritime trade also increased in the 19th Century, maximising opportunities to export local resources, including Aberdeenshire granite, across the world.

Aberdeenshire's harbours offer a fascinating insight into the social and economic history of the region, documenting the highs and lows coastal communities have faced over the centuries. Many of Aberdeenshire's harbours are no longer in active commercial use, instead used primarily for pleasure craft. Macduff, Fraserburgh and Peterhead are the exceptions, with shipbuilding and fishing continuing to thrive, and new offshore energy technologies bringing new industry to the region's ports.

## Harbourside Wildlife

Aberdeenshire's historic harbours are also a great place to see wildlife, from sea birds and waterfowl to seals, dolphins and even, occasionally, whales! Some of the more common species that you might see are included below. We would encourage you to enjoy Aberdeenshire's marine wildlife in a responsible manner, and to follow the Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code.

You can find out more about the region's wildlife through the North East Scotland Biological Records Centre's (NESBReC) website, including a species distribution map for the area. You can also contribute to the ongoing work of NESBReC by reporting your wildlife observations through their website: [www.nesbrec.org.uk](http://www.nesbrec.org.uk)

Types of birds and animals you might see:

- Common Eider
- Oystercatcher
- Grey Heron
- Mute Swan
- Redshank
- Great Black-Backed Gull
- Turnstones
- Herring Gull
- Grey Seal

When exploring Aberdeenshire, please follow the [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#):

- Respect the interests of Others: Respect the needs of other people enjoying or working in the outdoors and follow any reasonable advice from land managers.
- Care for the environment: Take your rubbish home and consider picking up other litter as well. Don't disturb or damage wildlife or historic places. Keep your dog on a short lead or under close control where needed. Please follow the [Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code](#)
- Take responsibility for your own actions: The outdoors is a great place to enjoy but it's also a working environment and natural hazards exist. Make sure you are aware of this.

Please take care when visiting Aberdeenshire's historic harbours. Note that harbour-side car parking can be limited. If travelling by car, please park responsibly and be aware of your surroundings.

### Historic Harbours to visit

Portsoy: HER Ref No: NJ56NE0010, NGR: NJ 5898 6635, Post Code: AB45 2PB

The original harbour at Portsoy was completed in 1693, built by Sir Patrick Ogilvie, 8th Earl of Boyndie. Two piers and an L-plan quay form a roughly rectangular basin, constructed of vertically set masonry. Lining the quays are houses and former warehouses and grain stores dating from the late 17th and early 18th centuries, reflecting the mixed use of the harbour for fishing and for trade. The New Harbour was built to the northeast in 1825-28 by Colonel Francis Grant, younger brother of the 5th Earl of Seafield, to meet increasing demand from the herring fishing fleet. It was damaged by storms in 1839 and refurbished in 1882-3. The west pier was rebuilt and a new north pier added, built in stone and concrete to withstand exposure to heavy seas.

Banff: HER Ref No: NJ66SE0037, NGR: NJ 6887 6465, Post Code: AB45 1HQ

Regarded at one time as the safest harbour on the Moray Firth, Banff Harbour has a long and eventful history. Construction began in 1625 but was not completed until 1775, after the appointment in 1770 of engineer John Smeaton. A problem first noted in 1698 was the silting up of the basins, which is still an issue today. Originally comprising an inner and outer basin, formed by a north quay and east pier, within which were a west pier and two jetties.

The piers are rubble-built, with much of the masonry vertically set. In 1806 an attempt was made to enlarge the harbour by the enclosure of an inlet on the north. In 1818, Thomas Telford designed an outer north pier to enclose a basin. Damaged before completion, it remained unfinished for many years but was eventually repaired.

Macduff: HER Ref No: NJ76SW0013, NGR: NJ 7036 6461, Post Code: AB44 1TL

Still an active fishing port and shipyard, the harbour at Macduff dates from the mid 1770s when James Duff, 2nd Earl Fife, initiated the building of a harbour to replace an earlier landing pier (Rob Laing's Pier). It had two basins, of which the west basin remains in use. Between 1820 and 1830, a new breakwater was added to the northwest. Before completion, the seaward section was torn away in a storm and deposited at right angles to the remaining landward section. A pier was built on the blocks lying on the seabed, forming a basin enclosed on three sides. Enclosure of this basin was completed in 1878. In 1903 the basins were deepened and an entrance breakwater added. Another basin was added 1914-1921. By redepositing the material excavated an area of land was formed on which a 7-berth slipway was built in 1922.

Rosehearty: HER Ref No: NJ96NW0017, NGR: NJ 9312 6775, Post Code: AB43 7HQ

Said to be one of the oldest seaports in Scotland, Rosehearty at one time had a fishing fleet which supported 600 people. The harbour was built in the 1790s, replacing and incorporating an earlier structure, and was added to in the 19th Century to cope with the increased demand for mooring space. It is a tidal harbour, roughly triangular in plan. The east pier, which may date to the 16th-17th Centuries, features vertically set masonry, similar to Portsoy harbour. In the 1680s Alexander Forbes, 3rd Lord Forbes of Pitsligo, made improvements to the pier. He also provided boats to the villagers in exchange for a share of their catch and encouraged trade with Europe, leading to great prosperity in the village. The harbour's fortune turned with the sudden decline in the herring trade in the 1880s and competition from nearby deep-water harbours.

Fraserburgh: HER Ref No: NK06NW0008, NGR: NK 0003 6704, Post Code: AB43 9BR

Now comprising four harbour basins, the busy fishing harbour at Fraserburgh was first established around 1576. It was expanded in 1738 and again in the 19th Century, with a larger North Pier added in 1808 and the South Pier in 1820. In 1851 work began on the Balaclava Harbour, to the north. The harbour was further expanded in 1873 to meet the needs of the expanding herring fishing fleet. The Faithlie Basin was added in 1909, while the herring fishing was at its peak, but this industry was disrupted by World War I and, with herring stocks declining, never fully recovered. In response, a white fish, pelagic and shellfish fishing fleet developed. Recent developments include deepening of the basins, the addition of storm gates, a new 6-berth slipway facility and new fish markets.

Peterhead: HER Ref No: NK14NW0029, NGR: NK 1372 4622, Post Code: AB42 1JP

A harbour existed at Peterhead by 1593, documented in a contract between Earl Marischal and feuars of the burgh to 'build and erect a bulwark in the mouth of ye haven, called Port Henry'. Works then focused on the Keith Inch channel, where a basin (now South Harbour) appears to have existed by 1700. This basin had fallen into disrepair by 1771. Work on a new South Harbour began in 1773, to designs by John Smeaton. A new North Harbour was built 1818-22 with a middle harbour added in 1872-6. The harbours are linked by a junction canal spanned by a rolling lift-bridge built in 1953. From 1778 the port specialised in whaling, becoming Britain's largest whaling port. The 19th Century expansion of the harbour supported a herring fleet which at its peak numbered 580 vessels.

Boddam: HER Ref No: NK14SW0011, NGR: NK 1337 4274, Post Code: AB42 3NU

As with many ports in Aberdeenshire, the development of Boddam harbour is linked to the herring boom of the 18th-19th Centuries. The first harbour was not built until 1831 prior to which boats were landed on the shore. In the 1840s, George Hamilton-Gordon, 4th Earl of Aberdeen (later Prime Minister of the UK) funded the construction of a second harbour. Situated next to the first, it increased the capacity of the local fishing fleet. In the 1870s further improvements were required to keep up with demand. By 1881, 200 drifters fished out of Boddam. The harbour was also used for the export of granite from nearby Stirling Hill quarries, the stone arriving by tramway. By the early 1900s, enticed by better facilities, much of the fishing fleet had relocated to Peterhead, and Boddam harbour fell into decline.

Port Erroll: HER Ref No: NK03NE0036, NGR: NK 0938 3567, Post Code: AB42 ONB

Port Erroll harbour comprises two L-plan piers enclosing a basin which is subdivided by two straight piers to form a main and a stilling basin. It was built 1875-80 by William Hay, 18th Earl of Erroll, to expand the fishing community he had founded at Cruden Bay in the 1840s. All works are in concrete, and it is an early example of the use of this construction material. Unfortunately, the harbour was built too late to benefit fully from the boom in the herring industry. That it was a tidal harbour also limited the size of craft which could use it, and the focus of fishing instead became white fish and shellfish. The harbour is still in use, on a small scale, for fishing and pleasure craft. Nearby are net-drying poles, a remnant of busier times.

Collieston: HER Ref No: NK02NW0017, NGR: NK 0405 2861, Post Code: AB41 8RQ

The first safe haven north of Aberdeen, Collieston was established as a settlement by the 1500s, developing into a flourishing fishing village in the 17th and 18th Centuries. In 1696, 36 fishermen lived in Collestowne, then one of the largest fishing communities north of the River Tay. It was the home of the Collieston Speldings (salted, sun-dried haddock and whiting) eaten as far afield as London. By the 1880s there were over 100 boats fishing for haddock and whiting. The coast around Collieston was also known for smuggling of spirits in the later 18th Century. The present harbour dates from 1894 and is formed by an angled granite breakwater pier with a quay along the shore of the bay. The pier incorporates tunnel piercing foundations designed to help flush out silt from the harbour.

Stonehaven: HER Ref No: NO88NE0029, NGR: NO 8785 8549, Post Code: AB39 2JY

Formerly a major fishing harbour, Stonehaven is now the largest recreational harbour in Aberdeenshire. A harbour was in existence here by the early 17th Century, built by George, 5th Earl Marischal, on the open shore, and there are references to grants for its repair in 1698. By 1794 it comprised only an open ended basin, sheltered on the southeast by a high rock and on the northeast by a quay. Improvements were made in 1825 to plans by Robert Stevenson, including the removal of rocks at the harbour entrance and the building of piers. In 1877 the Old Pier was extended, and a new breakwater added to form the inner harbour. The harbour is lined with attractive buildings dating from the 17th, 18th and 19th Centuries.

Gourdon: HER Ref No: NO87SW0033, NGR: NO 8253 7076, Post Code: DD10 0LW

First documented in 1315, Gourdon had an active port by the 1500s. It continued to develop, and by the 19th Century had attracted most of the maritime trade from Inverbervie. The first engineered harbour was built in 1819, when a masonry central pier quay was built, by Thomas Telford, with room for up to 9 small vessels. This was later used to form the West Harbour with the construction of an enclosing pier in 1842. A smaller harbour, the Gutty Harbour, was added to the east in 1859. By the mid-19th Century the port supported 27 fishing vessels and was used for the export of local grain. With the arrival of the railway in the 1860s, seaborne trade declined. The herring fishing industry continued to expand into the late 19th century before this too declined in the early 1900s.

Johnshaven: HER Ref No: NO76NE0009, NGR: NO 7953 6698, Post Code: DD10 0ES

Johnshaven, originally served by a natural harbour, typifies the highs and lows of the fishing industry. By the early 18th Century it was a well-established fishing port, recorded in 1722 as the 5th largest in Scotland with 26 boats employing 130 fishermen. Although there was a decline in the industry in the mid-1700s, a small wharf was built in the later 18th century. The wharf was not considered a safe anchorage and was replaced by a harbour with breakwater in 1871 comprising two rubble-built piers. A new inner harbour was formed in 1884, to a design by J. Willet, funded by Laird Scott of Brotherton. This coincided with the herring boom, which saw up to 59 boats fishing from the harbour.

### Useful links

Visit the Archaeology Service's online Historic Environment Record (HER) and use the "HER Ref" numbers included in the harbour descriptions to find out more about each site.

For more information on these and other sites to visit in the area:

- Aberdeenshire Council Archaeology Service:  
[www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/archaeology](http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/archaeology)
- Aberdeenshire Council Harbours: [www.aberdeenshireharbours.co.uk](http://www.aberdeenshireharbours.co.uk)
- Visit Aberdeenshire: <http://www.visitabdn.com>

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Produced by Aberdeenshire Council February 2023