

HOUSEHOLD SIZE AND STRUCTURE IN A SCOTTISH BURGH : OLD ABERDEEN IN 1636

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Despite the considerable discussion in recent years about household size and structure during the pre-industrial period, very little has been written about Scotland. To a large extent this can be explained by the small number of listings of inhabitants that have survived and their generally poor quality; the majority are of particular groups (e.g. head of households, owners of property, tax payers, men capable of bearing arms, examinables) rather than of whole populations, and there are remarkably few before the eighteenth century.¹ One exception, however, is the little known list for Old Aberdeen in 1636 which was published by the Spalding Club in 1899 in volume one of the **Records of Old Aberdeen**.²

Until their amalgamation in 1891, Old Aberdeen was quite separate from Aberdeen which lay little more than a mile to the south. Although the latter was always the larger and more important of the two, Old Aberdeen has a history going back to the establishment there c.1130 of the bishopric of Aberdeen. Its municipal life, however, really began in 1489 when, at Bishop Elphinstone's instigation, it became a burgh of barony. This gave its inhabitants the right to buy and sell goods, to be craftsmen and bakers, brewers, fleshers, sellers of fish etc., to erect a market cross and have weekly markets and annual fairs. The bishop was also given the power to choose baillies and other officers necessary for the government of the burgh. Unlike the royal burgh of Aberdeen, however, Old Aberdeen had no monopoly of trade outside its boundaries and was not allowed to take part in the import and export of goods. Six years later Elphinstone secured a papal bull which established Scotland's third university there, the College of St Mary in her Nativity (soon to be known as King's College, after its patron, protector and benefactor, James the fourth).³

The Reformation of 1560 led to the great cathedral becoming the parish church of Old Machar while the numerous canons' houses clustered around it fell into lay hands or became ruinous. The Protestant bishops still had their palace and commissary court in Old Aberdeen but power in the burgh rested much more with the laity, as can be seen from the burgh records which start at the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁴

The Council Minutes for 9 May 1636 record that on that 'day there were taken vp ane role of the haill inhabitantis of the Auld toune chanrie and spittell (the

three divisions of the burgh) thair bairns and servadis.' No explanation was given for compiling the list but a week later an inquest or special jury of thirty of the oldest and most honest inhabitants was chosen to identify 'all infamous persones all ydleris, and those that hes no certaine calling to live be and wer not provided of kail (cabbage) and fewall and other necessaries of good neighbourheid and upon receptoris of begeris ydleris and vagaboundes or strangeris without licence'. The inquest found at least forty such persons; some, including entire families, were expelled and the remainder had to find cautioners for their future good conduct or were set to work as servants.⁵ Ironically, six years later Sir Alexander Gordon, Provost of the burgh during this period, and his wife fled to Durham to escape his creditors; John Spalding, Commissary-Clerk in Old Aberdeen, described her as 'a woman of suspect chastetie, and thocht over familiar with Schir Alexander Gordoun, Laird of Cluny forsaied, thir many yeirs bygone, in his first husbandis tyme, and thocht an evill instriment to the doune-throwing of both there fair and flourishing estaites'.⁶

Such purges of the poor and other undesirables appear to have been a feature of Scottish urban life in the century after 1560. In Aberdeen, for example, fifty-two people were banished in 1570 and a further seventy-two had to find caution for their future conduct; seventeen years later sixty-nine citizens, together with thirty-three vagrants, were expelled and a further sixty-five had to find caution. There were similar expulsions from the nearby royal burgh of Inverurie in 1615 and 1659. The order at the latter date referred to those 'who are not sufficientlie furnished with peits and kail for this yeir'.⁷

The Old Aberdeen expulsions of 1636 were accompanied by tougher measures to deal with the poor, including the appointment of a town scourger, and were probably a response to an increase in poverty as a result of the generally high price level of the period made even higher by bad harvests. There are no fiar prices for Aberdeenshire for the harvest year 1635, apart from a solitary reference in the Sheriff-Court Records to malt at £10 Scots a boll, but the St Nicholas Mett which was levied on shipments of grain for the upkeep of Aberdeen's parish church shows bear (barley) at £8 Scots a boll and wheat £12 Scots, both about 60 per cent higher than the fiar average for 1626-32 (the Scots £ was worth one-twelfth of the £ sterling).⁸ There were also considerable imports of grain into Aberdeen from Danzig, always a sign of a bad harvest, and reports of food shortages further north in the fertile lands along the Moray Firth, normally a grain exporting area, which led to heavy emigration to Ireland.⁹

There is no way of checking how many of the inhabitants of Old Aberdeen were missing from the census. The list itself is divided into those living in the Spital and Old Aberdeen but the latter contains some at least of those residing in the Chanonry, which was separated from the remainder of the burgh by high walls. Sir Alexander Gordon and Bishop Adam Bellenden, however, are both missing as are, at the other end of the social scale, the twelve beadsmen who lived little better than beggars in Bishop Dunbar's hospital. In the remainder of the burgh the list omitted the students of King's College and some of their teachers, including the Principal. Nevertheless, it gives a population of 831 in 202 households and therefore a mean household size (MHS) of 4.11 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Old Aberdeen, 1636: population by sex and marital status

Status	Male	Female	Total	% of population
Married	132	132	264	31.8
Single/widowed	25	73	98	11.8
Children	n.a.	n.a.	310	37.3
Servants	63	96	159	19.1
Total			831	100.0
households			202	(Mean household size = 4.11)

The only other Aberdeenshire list before the end of the eighteenth century is for the parish of Meldrum, fifteen miles to the north-west, in 1741. This is not nearly as useful as the one for Old Aberdeen since it merely gives the numbers in each household, together with the name of the head, but it shows that MHS in Old Meldrum, also a burgh of barony, was 4.33 and in the remainder of the parish 4.46.¹⁰ The most comprehensive source for Scotland, however, is the **Old Statistical Account** which provides information on the household size of 219 communities (mainly rural parishes) in the 1790s which contained a quarter of Scotland's population. Their MHS was exactly 4.50 (compared with 4.73 in ninety-five English communities during the same decade) though at county level they ranged from only 3.80 in Clackmannanshire to 5.82 in Shetland; in Aberdeenshire it was 4.23, the third lowest of the thirty-two Scottish counties. The MHS of the eight small Scottish burghs in the sample, however, was only 3.80 compared with 4.39 for the large burghs of Edinburgh (including Leith), Greenock and Paisley (see Table 2).¹¹ Although there were greater regional variations, household size in Scotland, including Old Aberdeen, does not appear to differ very much from that in England, (or indeed most of western Europe).¹²

Table 2. Mean household size of (a) three large and (b) eight small Scottish burghs abstracted from the Old Statistical Account

	Year	Population	Households	M.H.S.
Edinburgh (inc. Leith)	1791	82,706	18,654	4.43
Greenock (Renfrewshire)	1792	14,299	3,387	4.22
Paisley (Renfrewshire)	1792	19,903	4,617	4.31
(a) Three large burghs	1791-2	116,908	26,658	4.39
Coupar Angus (Perthshire)	1793	1,604	520	3.08
Crieff (Perthshire)	1792	2,640	711	3.71
Elgin (Morayshire)	1791-2	2,920	658	4.44
Forfar (Angus)	1792	3,542	983	3.51
Hamilton (Lanarkshire)	1791	3,601	954	3.77
Kelso (Roxburgh)	1792	3,557	826	4.31
Strathaven (Lanarkshire)	1792	1,610	469	3.43
Wallacetown (Ayrshire)	1792	960	250	3.84
(b) Eight small burghs	1791-3	20,434	5,371	3.80

The relatively low MHS for Old Aberdeen of 4.11, despite some very large families, can be explained by the large number of households headed by single or widowed men and women (34.7 per cent compared with the 29.6 per cent of Peter Laslett's 100 English communities).¹³ Large numbers of widows from the remainder of the parish and beyond have traditionally settled in the burgh, attracted by relatively generous poor relief which in the seventeenth century included quarterly pensions.¹⁴ In all, as Tables 3 and 4 show, nearly half the households contained fewer than four persons each although their small size meant that only 25.6 per cent of the population lived in them. By contrast 46.9 per cent of the population lived in the 25.3 per cent of the households with six or more persons.

Table 3. Old Aberdeen, 1636: distribution of households by size and population

Size	Households	Population
1	15	15
2	57	114
3	28	84
4	27	108
5	24	120
6	23	138
7	8	56
8	6	48
9	6	54
10	4	40
11	1	11
12	0	0
13	0	0
14	2	28
15	1	15
Total	202	831

Table 4. Old Aberdeen, 1636: households by size and persons in households of various sizes

Sizes	Households %	Persons %
1 – 3	49.5	25.6
4 – 5	25.3	27.4
6 +	25.3	46.9
Total	100.1	99.9

If we use the classificatory scheme for household types in **Household and Family in Past Time** (1972), we find that here, as elsewhere, the nuclear family predominated with only 9 per cent of the population living in extended or multiple households (see Table 5).¹⁵ Some of the latter could be quite complex — that of Thomas Little, writer to the Commissary-Clerk, contained his wife, two children, his mother, two brothers and two servants. Nevertheless, this was quite unusual since only ten households contained three generations and seventy-five had only one (Table 6). Even including the eight “oyes” (grand-

children), there were only twenty-four kin other than spouses and children in seventeen households and only twelve adults in nine households who were not kin (Table 7).

The burgh contained 310 children, including the eight grandchildren, who were distributed among 131 households (64.9 per cent of the total compared with 74.6 per cent in 100 English communities); the mean size per group, therefore, was only 2.37, appreciably lower than the 2.77 for England. There were also

Table 5. Old Aberdeen, 1636: households by structure

		with servant	Households without servants	Total	% of all households
1 Solitaries	(a) Widowed	1	0	1	
	(b) Single or of unknown marital status	10	15	25	
Subtotal		11	15	26	12.9
2 No family	(a) Coresident siblings	0	2	2	
	(b) Coresident relatives of other kinds	0	0	0	
	(c) Persons not evidently related	0	6	6	
Subtotal		0	8	8	4.0
3 Single family households	(a) Married couples alone	11	24	35	
	(b) Married couples with child(ren)	51	33	84	
	(c) Widowers with child(ren)	1	2	3	
	(d) Widows with child(ren)	7	20	27	
Subtotal		70	79	149	73.8
4 Extended family households	(a) Extended upwards	2	0	2	
	(b) Extended downwards	1	6	7	
	(c) Extended laterally	1	3	4	
	(d) Combination of 4a-4c	2	0	2	
Subtotal		6	9	15	7.4
5 Multiple family households	(a) Secondary unit(s) up	0	0	0	
	(b) Secondary unit(s) down	0	0	0	
	(c) Units all on one level	0	4	4	2.0
	(d) Frèrèches	0	0	0	
	(e) Other multiple families	0	0	0	
Subtotal		0	4	4	2.0
TOTAL		87	115	202	100.1

Table 6. Old Aberdeen, 1636: generations in household

	Generations			
	1	2	3	
No. of households	75	117	10	202
% of total	37.1	57.9	5.0	100.0

**Table 7. Old Aberdeen, 1636: (a) resident kin other than spouses and children
(b) other adults not related to heads of households or spouses**

(a) Resident	Kin	(b) Other adults	
Mother	4	Male	1
Sister	7	Female	10
Brother	5	Total	11
Grandchild	8		
Total	24		
% of population	2.9	% of population	1.3
% of households with kin	8.4	% of households with other adults	4.5

sixty-three male and ninety-six female servants (19.1 per cent of the population) in eighty-seven households (43.1 per cent), considerably higher proportions than for the 100 English communities (13.4 and 28.5 per cent respectively) and which gives a group size of 1.83. This may be explained by the large numbers of lairds, gentlemen, members of the professions and tradesmen living in Old Aberdeen and by the fact that in a relatively poor region with a large population, servants' wages were low.

Given the doubts about whether the Old Aberdeen list contains every household in the burgh, it is probably most useful for the detailed information which it provides about the six economic and social groups into which the population divides, particularly since the mean figures for the whole population conceal considerable variations (see Table 8). The first of these groups — the elite of Old Aberdeen — consists of five lairds and gentlemen, six lawyers, four professors and regents at King's College, the minister of Old Machar, and the master of the Music School. Some of their households were exceptionally large; that of George Middleton, a regent of King's College, contained fifteen persons, including seven children, while Thomas Davidson, Commissary-Clerk for Aberdeenshire, had fourteen in his. In all, the seventeen households in this group contained no fewer than 114 persons, giving a MHS of 6.71, compared with 6.30 for the next group, which consisted of thirteen husbandmen and gardeners.

Table 8. Old Aberdeen, 1636: household formation and mean household size by status

Heads of households	House holds	Children (grandchildren)	Servants		Relations		Other adults		Total pop.	M.H.S.
			M	F	M	F	M	F		
1 Gentlemen and professions	17	38	15	24	2	3	0	1	114	6.71
2 Husbandmen and gardeners	13	43	3	10	0	0	0	0	82	6.30
3 Tradesmen	72	124	35	27	0	3	0	1	328	4.56
4 Miscellaneous occupations	15	17(1)	0	5	0	2	0	0	51	3.40
5 Occupations not given	34	39(6)	10	13	0	2	0	3	128	3.76
6 Women	51	49(1)	0	17	3	1	1	6	128	2.51
Total	202	310(8)	63	96	5	11	1	11	831	4.11

The dominant group in the burgh, however, were tradesmen whose seventy-two households contained just under 40 per cent of the population and had a MHS of 4.56. The most numerous of these were the twenty-two websters or weavers who formed the largest of the five incorporated trades of the burgh. David Abell, their deacon, had no fewer than fourteen in his household and their MHS of 5.32 was considerably larger than those of any other trade; the fleshers were the next largest with 4.50 while the cordiners or shoemakers had only 4.00.

The heads of the fifteen households in the 'miscellaneous' group were largely unskilled. They included several salmon fishers, servants at King's College, and the town's bellman, together with two merchants and a chapman (by contrast, when the Merchants' Society was incorporated in 1680, it had no fewer than thirty-seven members, which indicates the remarkable expansion of trade there from the middle of the seventeenth century onwards).¹⁶ Their relatively low status is shown by a MHS (3.40) lower than all but one of the six groups. To some extent this is misleading since the majority of those with no occupations given them had even smaller households. This group, in fact, can be subdivided into two; the six householders who were sufficiently prominent to sit on the jury of thirty which judged their fellow-citizens and who had a MHS of 6.00 and the remaining twenty-eight whose MHS was only 3.11. The Sheriff Court Records for Aberdeenshire show that several of the former rented crofts adjacent to the burgh and although this does not necessarily mean that they were primarily farmers since a number of tradesmen and even professional men (including George Middleton) did likewise, it is probable that they had occupations and were men of some substance.¹⁷ By contrast, it is also probable that some of the twenty-eight were either unable or unwilling to work since most of the men judged 'infamous persones' came from this particular subgroup.

The remaining fifty-one households who made up the sixth and final group had women as their heads and in the absence of husbands, it is hardly surprising that their MHS was only 2.51. Even here there were two households with seven members each and three heads were the widows of lairds. The majority of heads, however, were much humbler. Some were specifically described as poor or as having no occupations (which meant that they were liable to expulsion) while of the twenty-six whose occupations were given, fourteen were connected with the sale of food and drink (seven breadsellers, three brewers, two sellers of kail, one of dill, and a 'puddinwricht') and ten with textiles (six spinners, two shankers or stocking-knitters, a tailoress and an embroiderer); the remaining two heads consisted of a candlemaker and a midwife.

The last three groups, even including the six prominent citizens whose occupations are not listed, contained almost half the households of Old Aberdeen but little more than a third of the population. Here, as elsewhere, household size went down with economic and social standing, mainly because the poorer the household, the fewer children and servants it was likely to contain, as can be seen from Tables 9 and 10. Husbandmen and gardeners appear to have kept their children at home to work the land rather than hire servants; the majority had only one servant each but over half of the households in this group had four or more children and William Troup actually had eight, the largest number in any household. The percentage of tradesmen with servants is perhaps

higher than might be expected but many of the latter were probably employed as apprentices and journeymen in workshops; David Abell had no fewer than nine servants and Andrew Henderson, another weaver, seven. Of the sixteen kin other than grandchildren, no fewer than five lived in the seventeen households of lairds, gentlemen and professional men while all eight grandchildren (whose parents may have lived out as servants) were found in the households of the bottom three groups (Table 8). The same three groups contained all but two of the twelve adults who were unrelated to heads of households. Eleven were women, some of whom were probably co-heads who lived with other females for the sake of economy and companionship. The solitary male lodger was a tailor and it is likely that such men found Aberdeen, whose population and trade were growing rapidly, more attractive.¹⁸

Table 9. Old Aberdeen, 1636: distribution of children in groups

Heads of households	Group size							% of households with children	mean group size	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7+			
1 Gentlemen and professions		1	5	3	0	1	1	1	70.6	3.2
2 Husbandmen and gardeners		3	0	2	4	2	0	1	92.3	3.6
3 Tradesmen		12	13	11	12	1	0	0	68.1	2.5
4 Miscellaneous occupations		1	3	2	1	0	0	0	46.7	2.4
5 Occupations not given		10	5	3	1	0	1	0	58.8	2.0
6 Women		19	8	3	0	1	0	0	60.8	1.6
Total		46	34	24	18	5	2	2	64.9	2.4

Table 10. Old Aberdeen, 1636: distribution of servants in groups

Heads of households	Group size							% of households with servants	mean group size	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7+			
1 Gentlemen and professions		5	5	1	1	1	2	0	88.2	2.6
2 Husbandmen and gardeners		8	1	1	0	0	0	0	76.9	1.3
3 Tradesmen		14	11	2	1	0	0	2	42.0	2.1
4 Miscellaneous occupations		5	0	0	0	0	0	0	33.3	1.0
5 Occupations not given		8	3	0	1	1	0	0	38.2	1.8
6 Women		12	1	1	0	0	0	0	27.5	1.2
Total		52	21	5	3	2	2	2	43.1	1.8

Although it would be unwise to generalise on the evidence of one small community, any deviation from the 100 English communities, such as the large numbers of households headed by women, the low mean group size for children and the high one for servants, may be explained by the socio-economic structure of the burgh. This in turn was a reflection of the remarkable variety of functions — economic, social, educational, ec-

clesiastical and legal — which it performed and which were rivalled among the smaller Scottish burghs only by St Andrews. Nevertheless, in both MHS and household structure, it is probably representative of these communities which were such an important part of urban Scotland. Moreover, a recent description of household structure in England during the pre-industrial period applies just as well to Old Aberdeen: 'Households were small. The majority contained fewer than five persons, and membership was customarily confined to parents and their unmarried children. If the family was sufficiently wealthy, or involved in farming or trade, then the household might well contain servants, but there were remarkably few complex households containing grandparents, parents and children.'¹⁹

NOTES

1. M. W. Flinn (ed.), **Scottish population history from the seventeenth century to the 1930s**, Cambridge, 1977, pp.65-73.
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3. L. J. Macfarlane, **William Elphinstone and the kingdom of Scotland, 1431-1514**, Aberdeen, 1985, pp.267, 290-309; F. Wyness, **City by the grey north sea**, Aberdeen, 1966, pp.107-19.
4. G. G. Simpson, 'Old Aberdeen in the early seventeenth century: a community study', **Friends of St. Machar's Cathedral Occasional Papers**, no.3, 1975, pp.1-8.
5. Munro, pp.60-2.
6. John Spalding, **Memorials of the troubles in Scotland and in England, A.D.1624-A.D.1645**, Aberdeen, 1851, vol.ii, pp.122,210.
7. J Stuart (ed.), **Extracts from the council register of the burgh of Aberdeen 1398-1570**, Aberdeen, 1844, pp.367-70; L. B. Taylor (ed.), **Aberdeen council letters**, Oxford, 1942, vol.i, p.16; J. Davidson, **Inverurie and the earldom of Garioch**, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, 1878, pp.196, 361.
8. D. Littlejohn (ed.), **Records of the sheriff court of Aberdeenshire**, Aberdeen, 1906, vol.ii, p.443; D. Littlejohn (ed.), **Aberdeenshire fiars**, Aberdeen, 1906, pp.18-19. Fiars prices were the accepted prices of grain, malt and other arable commodities which were established for each county by committees of landowners, farmers and merchants sometime after the harvest (in the case of Aberdeenshire during this period the following July) for the purpose of settling debts and converting rents from kind to case or **vice-versa**.
9. L. B. Taylor (ed.), **Aberdeen shore work accounts, 1596-1670**, Aberdeen, 1972, pp.204—12; Flinn, p.131.
10. Aberdeen University Archives, Duff of Meldrum Collection, M55.2778/10/18.
11. Sir John Sinclair (ed.), **The statistical account of Scotland**, 22 vols., Edinburgh, 1791-99 *passim*.
12. P. Laslett (ed.), **Household and family in past time**, Cambridge, 1972, p.192.
13. *Ibid*, p.147.
14. Old Machar kirk session accounts, 1675-1698.
15. Laslett, p.31.
16. Munro, p.294.
17. Littlejohn, pp.379, 403, 410, 433, 435, 452.
18. D Macniven, 'Merchants and traders in early seventeenth century Aberdeen' in D Stevenson (ed.), **From lairds to louns: country and burgh life in Aberdeen 1600-1800**, Aberdeen, 1986, p.63.
19. R. Wall (ed.), **Family forms in historic Europe**, Cambridge, 1983, p.493.