

## East Kirk of St Nicholas dig - 17th to 21st April 2006 - Week 12

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Judith Stones, Keeper of Archaeology, writes...

The excavation team had a well-deserved break over Easter and are now back digging with renewed energy!

The site was not quiet and peaceful over the long weekend, however. The building contractors were hard at work fitting massive steel beams into two deep pits, previously dug by the archaeologists, to provide extra support for the gallery.

Some of the exceptionally heavy iron pillars, which had held the gallery up since the 19th-century, were then removed, allowing access to the interesting archaeological layers below.

I've included 'before and after' photos here. Although it took 10 men to raise the new beams, they must have been very light-footed, because they did very little damage to the site in the process.





And some very interesting archaeological stories are unfolding. We're now pretty sure that two huge parallel stone walls or rafts running east-west across the site are part of the internal foundations of the 15th-century choir of the church.

They seem to incorporate the bases of large stone pillars which held up the roof and are visible in the few surviving 19th-century drawing and plans.

The photo (below) clearly shows one of these 'rafts', with a slightly rounded pillar base in the centre of the image, marked by the longer red and white scale.

To the right, you can see one of the steel beams and at the top, at right-angles to the 'raft', is the west wall of the 15th-century St Mary's Chapel (which lies at a lower level and is currently the Third World Shop).



We're also pondering whether or not the 15th-century stone 'rafts' may also incorporate some earlier, perhaps 12th-century walling. It's possible that that earlier building was smaller and narrower, so that parts of its outer walls helped form internal foundations of the wider 15th-century choir.

In the photo below, Gemma Mutch, a University of Aberdeen archaeology student, is standing above the squared blocks of the 12th-century walling as she cleans part of the wall built in the 15th-century.

Gemma comes from Fraserburgh and is in her final year of Scottish Cultural Studies at Aberdeen University. She's been trying to fit in as much time as she can on the dig, as she really enjoys 'field' archaeology and hopes to make a career in it.



Because there were so many burials within the choir between the 12th-century and the 18th-century, it's quite difficult to detect floor surfaces. Only small patches tend to survive.

Grant McMillan is seen below carefully cleaning a very thin patch of floor, no more than two skims of mortar over beaten earth.



Grant owes his life-long interest in archaeology to his father, who was head of Bervie School. Local farmers recognised his knowledge and brought objects they found in their fields to him for identification.

Among the objects found, my recent favourites include some 11th-century fragments of cooking vessels, some of the oldest pottery yet found in Aberdeen, and imported from East Anglia, and a mussel shell which has been used to contain a bright red pigment: for painting what - a manuscript, an image behind an altar, a decorative scheme within one of the

chapels?

Oyster shells were quite often used as paint pots by medieval craftsmen (and women) but this may be the first discovery of a fragile mussel shell used for that purpose in Scotland. The shell is about to go on display within the church, so you can examine it when you come on one of our tours.

Details of tours and opening hours from now on are as follows:

### **Tours**

Tours of East and West Kirk and the graveyard, with a guided visit to the dig from the East Kirk gallery, led by Chris Croly, Assistant Keeper, Research, Aberdeen City Council Archaeology Unit, Mondays at 1.30pm (except May 1 and July 10), lasting about an hour.

Visit the dig from the East Kirk gallery, led by a member of staff from the City Council Archaeology Unit, Fridays at 1.30pm.

There will be excavation open days on Saturdays, May 20 and June 10 and tours of the excavation on Saturday, August 5.

### **Opening Times**

Until the end of April, the Kirk of St Nicholas will be open to visitors every Monday and Friday between 12 noon and 3pm. From May 2, the opening hours will be 12noon to 4pm Mondays to Fridays, and 1pm to 3pm on Saturdays.