

## East Kirk of St Nicholas dig - 24th to 28th April 2006 - Week 13

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Judith Stones, Keeper of Archaeology, writes...

A few weeks ago, Chris Croly discussed the extent of the damage caused by the 1874 fire in the East Kirk, and it became clear from newspaper reports of that time that despite headlines suggesting complete destruction, the devastation was not as great as that.

That impression is confirmed by evidence found on the dig. In the picture below you can see that the 19th-century wall behind David and Iraia looks blackened in places.



That must have happened during the fire, which shows that the 1837 East Kirk walls, although fire-scarred, were still structurally sound after the fire, and that re-building in that area was restricted to re-roofing and internal repairs.

That's not to say that the fire wasn't very serious. It's known to have destroyed the medieval

spire, built in 1507, and there's plenty of other archaeological evidence of it too, in the form of scorched and cracked stones, such as the one in the picture below.

In the first photo above, Iraia (to the rear) is taking great care to excavate the bones of a very tiny baby which had been buried in this area very near to the wall of the 15th-century church. Many children's skeletons have been found there.

There may have been a deliberate policy of interring babies and children in that place where there was less danger of their being disturbed when later graves were cut.



David Watt, who you also see hard at work in the first photo, is a 16-year-old pupil at Meldrum Academy in Oldmeldrum, and was on his Easter holidays when this picture was taken.

Alongside all the excitement of discovery, the highly detailed recording continues. Several hundred plans and cross-sections have been drawn so far, with the taking of measurements in three dimensions being very important.

Farshid is seen below using a level to record some of the many thousands of spot-heights which will have been taken before the dig is over.





That might help to determine, for example, whether a tiny patch of mortar floor at one side of the church could have been laid at the same time a similar patch at the opposite side.

Maria is seen holding the levelling staff, calibrated in metres, on top of one of one of the wall foundations. In the background, to left of her, you can see some of the little white plastic labels which we use to mark different layers of soil, particularly when we're drawing sections.



We're still finding burials which reveal clear details of how people were laid to rest in the past. At some point in the 17th or 18th-century, one person was buried in St Nicholas with very elaborate head-gear (pictured below), made of strips or ribbons of coarse silk, possibly held together or decorated with threads or laces.





There was also a coin, which we haven't yet identified, lying near their pelvis. In that case, it may originally have been placed or thrown on to the coffin lid, but there have been other similar discoveries on the site, where it seems that coins may have actually been resting in the hands of the deceased.