

Latest news from the East Kirk of St Nicholas excavation – Week 16, 15th to 19th May 2006

Read the latest news and see photographs from the ongoing archaeological excavation at the East Kirk of St Nicholas in Judith Stones' diary.

Judith Stones, Keeper of Archaeology, writes...

No-one came back to me with any bright ideas about the function of the little gold object that we thought might be an earring (or might be something else?) – that I showed a couple of weeks ago.

But now I have another puzzle! Last week, in one area of the site something very strange was found – a patch of mussel shells covering a small area about 30 x 30 cm in size.



I thought they might have been the remains of a builder's or gravedigger's lunch, but they looked as if they had been deliberately placed in the soil and pressed into it. I wonder if anyone has any ideas? It is possible that all will become clear when we've dug down a bit further.

At the very end of last week some more steelwork was put into pits specially dug by the archaeologists – the purpose being to create more support for the gallery, so that yet more of the cast iron 19th-century pillars can be safely taken away, allowing more of the 15th-century sleeper walls that the pillars stand on to be explored.

You can see the steel beams and the sleeper walls in the next photo. The walls are running across the photo from front to back.

The one on the left is at the very edge of the picture, has a piece of blue rope on it and a ladder and two steel uprights to its right. The sleeper wall on the right (north) is immediately behind the person wearing the pinkish purple t-shirt (who I think is Assistant Archaeologist and Site Director Alison Cameron, but she's moving too fast for me to be sure!)



These walls supported massive stone pillars which in turn took the entire weight of the 15th-century roof.

We had a very useful and interesting visit from members of the National Trust Conservation Team this week. As we were showing them round, they asked us some thought-provoking questions, wondering why, for example, we were planning to take away all of the 15th-century walling, when it itself is part of the history of the structure.

From an archaeological point of view, of course, you have to take later features away in order to understand and record the earlier ones below –which makes archaeological work a form of destruction in itself, not always appropriate from a conservation viewpoint.

The entire excavation area has now reached 14th and 15th-century levels, although a few later burials are still being carefully removed.

Gemma is working on one of those in the photo. The burial is that of an elderly woman, dating probably from the 18th-century. You can see very clearly the elaborate headgear that she was wearing. It was made of strips of silk ribbon sewn on to a material which may have been velvet or felt – it's quite thick and matted in appearance. The particular soil conditions in this area of the site must have allowed the entire 'hat' to survive. In other cases only the silk has remained.

Dr Paul Duffy, our human bone specialist from Glasgow University Archaeological Research Division, visited the site yesterday and confirmed that this woman had suffered a broken leg at some point in her life. It had healed, but she had ended up with one leg shorter than the other, and twisted, so she would have been quite lame.



Ken is brushing over a small portion of mortar floor which has survived within the church, despite the multitude of burials.



This fragmentary surface is important because it has clearly been cut through by one of the 15th-century sleeper walls, so must be earlier in date than the construction of the wall. Making sure we understand the inter-relationships between all the various medieval walls and floors is essential to our final interpretation of the site.