

Latest news from excavation at St Nicholas Kirk

Read the latest news from the archaeological dig at the East Kirk of St Nicholas as Judith Stones, Keeper of Archaeology, updates her weekly diary.

East Kirk of St Nicholas dig – 22nd to 26th May –Week 16

Judith Stones writes...

We had a very successful open day last Saturday, with about 250 visitors to the dig, many of whom went on tours of the church and the excavations. We'd like to thank those who took the trouble to come. Details of opening times and tours are below, just as a reminder, if you haven't been yet and would like to go.

I had a wonderful day on Saturday, because I had the chance to do some digging myself, which I don't often do nowadays. I was enjoying myself so much that I really wanted to stay all week. I had a couple of very sore knees on Sunday, though.

More engineering holes are being dug by the archaeologists this week, to take the final lot of steelwork for supporting the gallery. Once the new beams are in position, the remaining 19th-century pillars can be removed from the top of the 15th-century 'sleeper' walls, and those walls themselves can be carefully dismantled to reveal evidence of earlier church walls, we hope.

The sleeper walls, which supported the load-bearing pillars of the 15th century east end, are massive in every dimension and each side of them has to be drawn before demolition – that must amount to about 80 metres of drawing altogether.

Grant and Doreen are busy at that in the photo – obviously it's much easier and quicker if measuring and drawing are done by separate people.



One reason for such detailed and careful recording of these walls is that they are so complicated. The 15th century 'sleeper' walls certainly include parts of earlier walls, possibly as early as the 12th century, in fact.

The next photo illustrates some of that complexity. You're looking at the side elevation of the more northerly of the two sleeper walls. In the middle you can see the internal plastered face of a pre-15th century church wall which has been re-used as part of the sleeper wall. To right of the mortared part is an area of soil and clay, with stones above, which seems to be the base of one of the 15th century pillars, inserted into the earlier wall.



Of course photography is another form of visual recording which is essential to archaeological excavation. After four months of looking at their pictures on these pages, you now have a chance to see the photographers themselves, Helen McPherson (left) and Sandra McKay, both permanent staff members of the Archaeological Unit.



One of them has been 'on call' to the site each week throughout the dig and they find themselves spending a lot of time there - although they also work throughout the Museums and Galleries Service. Most of the pictures shown here in the 'Diary' have been taken

using a digital camera, but the 'serious' recording work is done on 35mm slide and black and white film – so far Helen and Sandra have used about 400 films at the dig.

One skeleton found this week was unusual in having its legs crossed at the ankle. None of the experts on site have ever encountered that before and so far we have no explanation for burial in that position.

In the photo below it's being excavated by Maria along with Joe Lowit, who's been working on the site all week, having chosen archaeology for his work experience project. Joe's a student at Harlaw Academy in Aberdeen.

