

East Kirk of St Nicholas update

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

East Kirk of St Nicholas dig – 29th May to 2nd June – Week 17

Judith Stones, Keeper of Archaeology, writes...

Among the skeletons revealed this week has been that of a middle aged woman who suffered from rickets, or osteomalacia, a softening or weakening of the bones caused by lack of vitamin D.

The next two photos show the effects of the disease in the bowing of the upper and lower leg bones as well as those of the arms.



People with this disease often appear short in stature, because of their mis-shapen limb bones.



Osteomalacia is often historically associated with inadequate exposure to sunlight of people who worked long hours indoors in polluted 19th-century industrial cities, although this person was almost certainly buried at a much earlier period than that, probably in the 15th or 16th-century. Lack of dairy products in the diet can also lead to vitamin D deficiency.

Last week I mentioned that we think the 15th-century internal 'sleeper' walls - which supported the entire weight of the roof of the east end of the church at that date - in fact included portions of earlier walls – possibly even the external walls of the 12th-century building.

This week I can show you a floor level inside that earlier church building. It's a mortar floor, which covers the entire area between the walls that you're looking down on to. In the foreground is what may be the northern outside wall of the church, with the possible east end wall to left.



The mortar floor (or more likely several successive layers of mortar floors) occupies the area in between the walls.

It all looks a dirty brown colour in the picture, because there's a lot more cleaning to do, but patches of mortar can be seen at the left, next to the east end wall.

Mortar surfaces were quite often laid in medieval churches as a base for floors of colourful ceramic tiles, but there are none of the characteristic marks which the tiles leave in the mortar, and we've found almost no broken floor tiles on the dig.

Careful removal of the floors may provide objects which will tell us when each floor was laid – and that in turn will help us date the various walls.

We're praying for coins – as they are the very best kind of dating evidence. We've found over 50 coins in the excavation so far – more than have been found on all previous excavations in medieval Aberdeen over 25 years – so we're quite hopeful!

The collection of moulded and decorated stones found during the dig continues to increase and no doubt will do so more once the removal of the 15th-century sleeper walls gets underway.

A couple of weeks ago we were delighted to have a visit from Dr Richard Fawcett, Principal Inspector of Ancient Monuments at Historic Scotland (Head of North-East Team) and the author of many books and articles on Scottish church architecture.

Richard was able to have a brief look at the worked stones (pictured below) and will return to study them more closely and contribute a report to the eventual site publication.



He said: "The excavations have proved to be even more informative than might have been hoped, and have cast much light on the 12th and 15th-century chancels of the medieval church.

"A particularly fascinating discovery has been the amount of worked masonry from the 15th-century chancel (or east end) that has either been discarded below the floor levels of the 19th-century East Kirk or rebuilt in its walls.

"It is expected that analysis of this masonry will greatly enhance our understanding of the medieval building."