

East Kirk of St Nicholas Excavation - Week 8, 20-24 March 24 March 2006

Judith Stones, Keeper of Archaeology, writes:

This week the work to put in extra supports for the gallery has been underway. Concrete has been poured into the 'engineering' pits and holes have been made in the walls of the church to take the cross beams. Already it's becoming possible to open up new areas of the dig.

A lot more excavation work has been taking place. Large numbers of burials are being exposed, recorded and removed. Particularly poignant this week have been the skeletons of two very small children, one of which must be more or less newborn. Both have been inserted into tiny graves above one of the big stone rafts that we think formed the foundation for the pillars holding up the roof of the 15th-century choir.

It seems a strange place to dig graves, but perhaps they knew in the 17th-century that there was only very limited space below the floor there - and so used it for infants. Digging the graves must have been very difficult, but in one case there had been some attempt to place some stones to form a sort of stone 'coffin' for the child, whose body was probably just buried in a simple shroud. In a building where burial has taken place for many hundreds of years, it is inevitable that 'capacity issues' should arise.

In medieval and early modern periods there wasn't the modern concern over hygiene and seamliness, so many graves inter-cut each other, with gravediggers simply re-burying parts of previous bodies which they encountered during their work. Families would have wished to maintain continuity of burial within the same place, where in many cases they had endowed altars to ensure perpetual prayer for their souls and those of their descendants. And the church and the Town Council would also be glad of the financial returns.

So often the archaeologists only find part of a skeleton, as is the case with the one seen in the photo below, being dug by Dave Harding, which has either been damaged while digging other graves or by later building works. Dave has many years of experience on archaeological sites in Scotland, particularly in Aberdeen, where he also worked on the excavation of the Carmelite Friary in the Green in 1994.



You will see when you visit that several of the archaeologists are working in masks and respirators to combat the dust, which is one disadvantage of working inside a building. There are advantages too, of course! Sometimes the powerful spotlights can help, as they did late this week when a beautifully preserved but absolutely tiny bone gaming die emerged from the soil within a grave. We hope to be able to display it briefly within the church, if its condition allows.

Our visitors from local schools continue to be fascinated by the dig and keep us on our toes with their challenging questions.

The last photos this week show pupils from Kirkhill Primary, discussing objects with Abeer, the site with Ross and the superb 17th-century embroidered hangings in the West Kirk with Arthur Winfield, Leader of the Mither Kirk Project.





