

Site Elgin Cathedral

N.G.R NJ 2218 6305

Project Description

Excavation of a drainage soak-away.

Report

Kirkdale Archaeology was required by Historic Scotland to investigate the possibility of excavating a soak-away to the S of the S tower of the W doorway to accommodate roof-shed water from the newly re-roofed structure. Because of the presence of hoarding to screen the excavation, and the need for an area on which to dump spoil, it was not possible to clear an area 6 x 6m, as indicated in the brief, the available space being approximately 5 x 4m (Trench 1).

After removal of topsoil and cleaning of the exposed surface, it was clear that the whole area represented disturbed ground with 7 individual graves being identifiable (including the fragment of a base for a probable table tomb), and that it would not be possible to excavate further without disturbing burials. Subsequent on-site discussion with the District Architect, Michael Pendery, indicated that there may have been an existing soak-away area at the foot of the steps to the W door below the present gavel pathway, and with the permission of the Principal Inspector, Denys Pringle, it was decided to open a narrow trench (Trench 2) against the SW angle and W face of the tower.

It was discovered that an existing, modern drainage channel had been cut against the base of the tower and did indeed run into a rubble-filled soak-away area against the bottom step. The channel was emptied to provide an open trench within which a pipe could be carried from the existing down-pipe to the soak-away.

THE EXCAVATION

TRENCH 1

The area in question had until recently been below scaffolding around the tower, and comprised a grass-free trampled surface. Protruding through this, two concrete markers, inscribed 'D McD' and 'J McLean' indicated the positions of headstones removed c.1978, and apparently visible on an aerial photograph in the official guidebook (Fawcett 1995; 2). A third, also inscribed 'D McD' was visible just to the W of the excavation area.

Generally 0.12m of soil was removed from the underlying horizons which were then cleaned by trowel. Finds from context 001 derived from this cleaning process, and related more to the sealed horizons than to the removed overburden. A number of coffin nails were recovered, together with some 60 fragments of human bone, a few sherds of medieval pottery, bottle glass

and, most interestingly a fragment of decorative window glass from the area above contexts 015 and 016.

Within the surface thus exposed, a number of discrete features were identified and recorded, although not excavated, with the exception of a narrow trench (002) which had been cut recently to earth a lightning conductor from the roof of the tower. This had cut a linear feature infilled with a mix of crushed sandstone, mortar and pebbles in a sandy loam (003) which extended c.1m from the S face of the tower for the full width of the trench, proving to be associated with drainage feature 005 located in Trench 2 (below). The base of cut 002 had exposed the footings of the SW angle buttress (023) at a depth of some 0.20m from the cleared surface.

Of the other identified features, two (007 & 008) were not graves *per se*, each comprising a small sub-rectangular area of compact, clay-rich sandy silt. Compressed into the surface of 007, a collapsed grave marker, similar to those described above, was inscribed 'H M'. The similarity of contexts 007 and 008 suggested that both represented the positions of removed headstones. Both appeared to have cut a discontinuous horizon of firm, stone-free sandy loam (009) which had the appearance of a buried turf level. This overlay the other contexts where there was a direct relationship, and seemed likely to be indicative of 18th or 19th-century graveyard levels. Generally the surface of 009 was concave, indicating slumping into disturbances below.

A sub-circular area of compact coarse sandy loam (010) remained consistently dry throughout the excavation period, even during times of rain, and was characterised by fragments of human long bone, rib and teeth within the surface. The shape of this feature made it unlikely that it comprised a grave, and it was interpreted as a charnel pit.

To the N of this feature, a generally rectangular disturbance of silty sand with pitched stone and bone protruding from the surface (011) was identified as a grave fill. Two apparently articulated phalanges, and a fibula noted at the E end of the grave probably indicated a largely undisturbed inhumation, lying only slightly below the present topsoil level. This had cut a further grave (012) represented by a single dressed sandstone slab with mortar and slate pinnars on its surface, representing the base of a former table-tomb, now removed. The remaining slab indicated the E end of the grave. To the E of this, a further possible grave (013) indicated by an area of pitched stone and human bone fragments ran out of the trench to the E.

Probably disturbed by the pit 010, a rectangular area of silty sand (014) with pitched stone fragments and human bone fragments within its surface ran out of the W trench edge, and this is also likely to represent a grave site. A more amorphous area of similar material (014/015) in the SE corner was identified as 2 discrete burials with 2 cranial caps visible at the W extremities. The remaining surface (017) comprised a mixed deposit of loose and rooted stony loam, with occasional human bone fragments. Although variations in colour and texture were

discernible within this, no individual features were identified. The material appeared to represent made-up ground, rising as it did some 0.2m above the base of the lowest dressed course of masonry in the S tower.

It was clear that the stratigraphy was complex, and that a number of intercutting features, probably graves, were indicated. Further intrusive work would be likely to disturb inhumations and excavation was suspended at this stage.

TRENCH 2

A trench was opened around the NW angle and along the W face of the S tower to the S side of the path approaching the W door. This was generally 1m - 0.8m in width from the face of the structure. The area had been recently re-turfed after the removal of scaffolding, but this had not yet rooted, and was lifted and stored for relaying. It was found that the ground level adjacent to the wall faces had been raised prior to re-turfing, with the original turf sloping down toward the building some 15-20cm below the reconstituted surface.

Below the previous turf and topsoil level (001) which produced some 35 fragments of human bone together with a few sherds of medieval pottery and a possible knife blade, a linear deposit of pebbles in loose rooted sandy loam (004) formed a band 0.3 - 0.4m wide against the face of the tower. This contained several fragments of human bone, presumably deriving from disturbed contexts, and two fragments of tin-glazed earthenware, indicating a relatively modern date for the deposit. Around the base of the SW angle buttress the material was found to be in association with repointing of the fabric. The mortar was unlike that typically associated with the Office of Works, and may indicate improvements instigated during the 19th century. At the N end of the trench the deposit ran up to and against the lowest step leading to the W door. A recent disturbance (006) had cut 004 and proved to be the fill of a trench to receive electricity cables into the basement of the S tower. This produced 26 fragments of human bone.

004 filled a cut (005) which had exposed the foundation pads for the SW and NW angle buttresses 021, 022 and 023. While 004 itself clearly provided drainage, it seemed likely that 005 was originally a clearance trench around the cathedral perimeter. On the basis of the level of the foundations, it seemed that the medieval ground surface was generally 0.3 - 0.35m below the present ground level.

At the N end of the trench, 005 ran into a voided rubble-filled cut (018) which appeared to have been a trench associated with the insertion of the bottom step, which does not appear to be original, now acting as a soak-away for ground water carried through 004. The whole length of 005 was excavated to provide a trench for the insertion of a new drainage pipe.

Three possible graves were identified within the excavated area, all of which had been disturbed by cut 005. 019, an area of pitched sandstone, had also been cut by 018, and had the cranial cap of an infant's skull partly exposed at its W extremity. 025 and 026 were both E-W

aligned disturbances with pitched stone and human bone protruding from their surfaces. 025 may be associated with a fragmentary area of possible paving, 024, abutting the S edge of 023.

A possible indication of original ground level may be represented by a spread of crushed sandstone (020) cut by 005 and 018 and abutting foundation pad 021. This is tentatively identified as constructional debris. No further excavation was undertaken once the drainage track had been established.

DISCUSSION

The excavation may be seen as a success in so far as an archaeologically sterile area to accommodate present drainage requirements was identified and excavated. It is clear, however, that previous activity had disturbed human remains, most recently in the supply of mains electricity to the S tower. The evidence from this small scale exercise suggests that graves are likely to be encountered immediately adjacent to the cathedral perimeter on all sides. Moreover, skeletal remains may lie no deeper than c0.10m from present ground level. It would also appear that the working level of the cathedral precinct is probably no more than 0.30m deep, so that any intrusive work below this level is likely to damage archaeological deposits.

No undisturbed natural horizons were identified within the excavated areas, indicating that the whole area has been massively disturbed, probably entirely by graveyard activity.

It is suggested that the soak-away feature 018 probably extends to full width of the steps to the W door, and that this should be utilised for drainage from the N tower once roofed. It is probable that a feature similar to 005 exists on this side and this should be treated in the same way as in the recently completed work.

NB : During the course of excavation it was noticed that areas below a number of the table tombs consisted of bare earth within which large pieces of human bone were frequently visible. In one instance, the cap of what was obviously a complete skull was exposed. It is suggested that these areas should be sealed with a weed-deterrent membrane and gravelled over.