

Part of Historic Environment Scotland



CANMORE

NATIONAL RECORD OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT



Archaeology InSites



◀ [Return to Archaeology InSites](#)



Newfarm Long Cist Cemetery – Dalkeith, Midlothian





A Gruesome Discovery

In the winter of 1838, a group of labourers excavating a sandpit in the vicinity of Newfarm, near Dalkeith, made a gruesome discovery. As the men dug, human skeletal remains emerged from the sand. The find was of such note that it was recorded in the New Statistical Account by the local minister Reverend Norman Macleod. He describes how at least fifty human skeletons were unearthed from graves 'formed of rough stones loosely placed together in the shape of a coffin'. Although no more digging took place at that time, Reverend Macleod speculated that 'there can be little doubt that many more remain'.

Over one hundred and thirty years later, the Reverend's prediction proved correct. In 1970, Dr Gordon Maxwell of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments was called to investigate after workmen excavating a pipeline trench uncovered two more graves. He concluded that they were most likely part of the cemetery discovered in 1838. The graves, like those described by the Reverend Macleod, were lined with upright stone slabs. However it wasn't until 1996 that the full extent of the cemetery was investigated when the re-routing of a gas main once again threw the area under the archaeological spotlight. This work coincided with the construction of a major new road connecting the Edinburgh City Bypass with Dalkeith. The discovery of yet further human remains indicated that more of the cemetery survived prompting a full excavation, directed by Alastair Rees of CFA Archaeology.



The Cemetery Revealed

Excavation revealed that the graves had been laid out roughly in rows with many of them lined with upright stones in keeping with the earlier accounts. This type of burial is known by archaeologists as a long cist, and once the body is placed in the grave, a slab or capstone is placed over the top, sealing it. They are generally associated with Christian practices of the early medieval period, and the extensive suite of radiocarbon dates obtained from the remains confirmed the cemetery had been in use between the mid-5th century and the mid-6th century AD. The stones used in the cists were mostly of local sandstone though three of the graves incorporated Roman stone, possibly taken from the bathhouse at Elginhaugh fort. The soil conditions meant that bone preservation was poor on the whole but analysis nonetheless revealed a population in relatively good health with few indications of bone trauma or disease. Of particular interest was the skeleton of a young woman who had unusual wear on her lower front teeth. Experts interpreted this as having been caused by repeatedly gripping material in her mouth, possibly a result of textile making.

Long cists were not the only type of grave found in the cemetery and there were also graves visible only as stains in the soil, perhaps reflecting the use of timber coffins rather than stone cists. Three were particularly unusual, with two graves enclosed within square ditches and another with the imprints of postholes at each of its four corners, practices reminiscent of pre-Christian practice. It seems likely that the people who placed their dead in these particular graves wanted to distinguish them from the others in the cemetery. Driving past the area today, there is nothing to suggest that the cemetery was ever there, much like in 1838 when the unsuspecting labourers began excavating the sandy soil. Like so many archaeological sites, our knowledge of their presence is the result of simple chance discoveries. In the case of Newfarm, it was a series of discoveries and rediscoveries over a hundred and fifty years that would eventually piece together its overall extent and significance.

Further Reading:

Rees, A. (2002) A first Millennium AD cemetery, rectangular Bronze Age structure and late prehistoric settlement at Thornybank, Midlothian', Proc Soc Antiq Scot, vol. 132, 2002. Page(s): 313-356

Macleod, N (1848) 'The Parish of Dalkeith', The New Statistical Account of Scotland, vol. 1 Edinburgh. Page(s): 502

Leanne McCafferty - Data Project Manager



<https://canmore.org.uk/site/53479/newton>
http://www.johngraycentre.org/collections/getrecord/MLHER_MEL8391



#ArchInSites

Please be aware that this site may be on private land. For more information regarding access please consult the [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#)



[Accessibility Policy](#)
[Buying Images](#)
[Cookie Policy](#)
[Legals](#)
[Glossary](#)
[Contact](#)
[MyCanmore](#)
[Sitemap](#)
[User Guide](#)



SUPPORTING

year of young people
bliadhna na h-òigridh
2018



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD
EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

© Historic Environment Scotland. Scottish Charity No. SC045925