



## GRAVE FINDINGS

Louise Gilbert meets Aberdeen archaeologist Alison Cameron.



archaeologist for 22 years and she first came to work in Aberdeen 17 years ago. "I liked the city so much that I decided to stay," she says.

One of Alison's favourite archaeological sites in Aberdeen is the Carmelite Friary in Martin's Lane, where part of a church and living quarters were discovered. The site dates back to the late 13th century and many Aberdonians were buried within the church. "Not just Friars, everyday people could pay to be buried within the consecrated grounds of the Friary," explains Alison. "I particularly like human skeletal material and with this site also being a church, it was really fascinating."

Early maps of Aberdeen illustrate the vicinity of the Carmelite Friary but the exact position was unclear to archaeologists. "We didn't know quite where it was and so the very first excavation, which produced a lot of the skeletons, was a surprise," she says.

Even more unexpected was the condition of the site. "Other friaries in Aberdeen had been less well preserved. For example, the Blackfriars, near the Art Gallery, had a lot of its site destroyed by later building. The Carmelite Friary was fairly undisturbed because it had been under a car park for such a long time. When we found part of the church with all the burials inside it virtually intact, we were amazed. The human bone was very well preserved and so were the artefacts." The finds included a copper alloy tap, evidence of running water in the building and an indication that the Friars enjoyed rare comforts for the 13th century.

Finding such a well-preserved site is something every archaeologist

Above: Alison explains the fascination of skeletal remains.



Surveying during excavation at 42 St Paul Street, now under the Bon Accord Centre.

dreams of. In this case, the team knew that the artefacts would reveal much about life in the Middle Ages but before any information could be determined a meticulous process of excavation had to take place.

Alison explains, "To get the skeletons out of the ground in the first place is quite a complex procedure. Some of the bones were very fragile, especially children's. Every skeleton was carefully excavated, cleaned and recorded. We had a human bone specialist working with us all the time so that when somebody uncovered a skeleton she could look at it and make sure we weren't going to lose information by digging it up. Some were excavated by her personally to make sure that we didn't miss or damage pieces."

Once out of the ground, the skeletons were carefully analysed to see what tales they would tell. The variety of bones revealed that men, women and children of all ages had been buried within the church.

Alison points out that there could be any number of reasons why these people had died. "It was dangerous to be a child in the medieval period because there were very few doctors and limited medicine. A lot of things we take for granted as being relatively minor today, like colds, would have tended to kill people then. During the winter when people were not so well fed, they would

have been even more susceptible to these diseases.

"Many women died during their child-bearing years because of the dangers of pregnancy and birth so there were a number of young women buried in that graveyard. There were also quite a lot of older people. It's a fallacy that everyone died very young. Although many did, if you reached 25 you had a very good chance of living into your forties or fifties."

The archaeological team also found evidence that our medieval ancestors suffered illnesses not unheard of today, though thankfully, they are far more treatable in 2003. The skeletal remains showed arthritis and dental disease, including "quite dramatic abscesses which probably weren't fatal but the infections would have made these people feel really miserable," observes Alison.

There was more to come, an ominous discovery that made these afflictions seem relatively minor. Archaeologists examined the skulls of a large number of adult males, and they appeared to show evidence of serious head injuries.

"About a dozen different injuries were observed," states Alison, "including slices off the top of the head, sword and blade wounds and one individual who had a very large blade wound. They'd tried to do an operation on him. There are little cuts around the wound that look as though they've peeled back the scalp and tried to take out a little piece of unattached bone." All to no avail for the poor sufferer.

Alison hypothesises on the fate of these men. "They'd obviously been involved in skirmishes around Aberdeen, warfare or interpersonal violence. It's interesting that not one woman was found with these wounds." Interesting, but perhaps not surprising when we consider the

Alison discovered nearby a small pit full of charcoal. "We assumed this was part of the 12th-century site. There were no other finds in it so we sent off a charcoal sample for radiocarbon dating and the date came back as 1st to 2nd century AD.

"This date was astounding as we'd had very little evidence of activity in the city centre at that time. Unfortunately, because there were no other artefacts found with the site, we don't know if the pit was produced by local people or by Romans."

An excavation of the Tillydrone Motte site (a mound in Seaton close to the Wallace Tower) uncovered further evidence. Alison says, "Everybody thought this mound was an early medieval castle. In 2001 we had dug there and found that the site had been defended. A trench had been made around it to put in a wooden fence but we had no dating evidence for this. Again we sent off a charcoal sample and it came back as 2nd century AD. Further excavations were carried out in November last year and we found a piece of Samian ware, high status Roman pottery dating back to the same time."

This is the first piece of this type of pottery ever found in Aberdeen. It could be evidence of a small Roman fortlet existing within Aberdeen at

that time. There is more work to do on the site and further research needs to be carried out before archaeologists can be sure.

"I really enjoy what I do. Every day is different," Alison says. "Boredom is simply not an option."

This year will provide more excitement with new sites to be excavated, museum exhibitions to organise and findings to be published. The Carmelite Friary investigation will also be published in full, including the online site *Internet Archaeology*. This innovative move allows Alison to publish her findings in a way that can't be done using traditional book form.

A three-dimensional reconstruction of the Carmelite Friary is being created by PinkZeppelin Architects. This will allow anyone to take a virtual tour. We will be able to "walk" through the building and experience the rooms and architecture for ourselves.

Twenty-first-century technology brings back to life the remains of a 13th-century building. Our medieval ancestors could not have even imagined such a concept. Will they be turning in their graves? 📖

Photographs courtesy of  
Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums

Painstakingly reconstructing the Bear Pot which was in hundreds of fragments.



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