

Dunbar Parish Church Lift Shaft Report

23 – 24 July 2012

Background

Around 10.30am on Monday 23rd July I received a call from Sandy Ford, Architect at Dunbar Parish Church. Workmen had discovered bones during the excavation of a pit for a lift shaft at the west end of the church. The remains were about half way down (total depth 1.5m) and had been left. The workmen reported at least 2 bodies. I advised that I would come out to site as soon as I could and advised him to call the police.

At around 11am I had a call from Andy Johnson at Haddington Police Station saying they had been informed. He gave me a lift straight away out to the site. The remains were disarticulated in loose soil and were concentrated in the north-west part of the trench, which measured 3m N-S by 2.5m E-W. I confirmed to the police that the bones were old and gave a statement. He gave me a lift back.

I telephoned George Findlater at HS to inform him, although the call-off contract does not apply as it is a development site. As there were no in situ burials and there appeared to be a small number of bones I returned to the site on Tuesday to excavate the bones and record the trench. I discussed this with Sandy Ford on Monday afternoon and also discussed the possibility of reburial of the bones. He said that they could be reburied during the present works.

Description

The bones lay within loose mid brown sandy silt, which contained mortar fragments and sandstone blocks and rubble; also some window glass, an iron nail and an oyster shell. They were found at a depth of 0.8m below the present floor layer, which was laid in 1992 and 0.54m below the old floor of the church.



Initial view of the bones

The loose soil was removed and more bones were revealed. They appeared to lie in an area of looser soil against the foundations of the western wall, in the north-western corner of the trench, although there was no clear cut (drawing 1). Two skulls and four femurs were visible, along with other bones, all disarticulated. The looser soil was removed along with the bones. This revealed

two small depressions within the more compacted soil below, along with a deposit of mortar and stony rubble (drawing 2). The depressions were up to 0.3m in depth but very irregular in shape.



Bones after cleaning

View of trench after excavation of bones

The material beneath the small depressions also contained occasional bone fragments and was similar in composition to the soil containing the bones, but was more compacted. This may represent an old graveyard soil.

In section (drawing 3), the bones appear to have been placed up against the western foundations and a number of other tip lines suggest that they are one of a series of demolition deposits found beneath the original foundation for the floor.



South facing section, after removal of bones in section

The bones were generally very well preserved. A small amount of bones had plaster adhering to them and in some cases this had contributed to crumbling of the bones. Around 15% of the bones recovered were in a poor, crumbly condition and were not identifiable when recovered. Of the well-preserved bones, most of the skeletal elements were represented including complete scapulas, sternum, sacrum; fragmented ribs and occasional vertebrae, as well as mostly complete femurs, tibias, humerus, radius and ulna; pelvis fragments, lower jaw and complete and near complete skulls. There were however very few feet or hand bones and only a small number of phalanges noted, indicative of bones being disturbed and the larger parts being removed for reburial, while the smaller bones were lost. An estimate of at least 12 individuals based on skulls present (12) and number of femurs (24 - not sided).

In addition to the human remains, a small trench against the south wall of the church revealed the vaulted sandstone roof of the crypt below.



The roof of the crypt as revealed beneath the present floor (looking west)

Stratigraphy

The trench was excavated to a depth of 1.5m (drawing 3). At the base of the trench was compacted mid brown sandy silt (8), with occasional bone fragments, mortar and stones. This appeared to be a graveyard soil. On the western side of the trench was a deposit of loose mid brown sandy silt (7) containing frequent human bones, the deposit was up to 0.3m in depth. This material was found within two shallow depressions, although there were no clear cuts due to the presence of human bones within the graveyard soil below. Above this was a layer of stony silt and rubble (6), which was up to 0.1m thick and sloped from west to east, with a smaller band of pinkish sand (5) above.

Above this was a layer of dark brown compact sandy silt (4). No bones were present in this layer, which is interpreted as a levelling layer. Above this was a layer of compact sandstone rubble (3) around 0.08m in depth, thought to be the foundation for the original floor of the present church. The old floor (2) and the new concrete floor (1) lay above this.

Conclusion

Dunbar Parish Church is built on the site of a 14th century collegiate church, which was extensively repaired in the 18th century, including the addition of a new floor and partitions. The church was demolished in 1818 and a new church built in its place, which stands today. The present church was repaired in 1992 and a new floor installed following a fire. It appears likely that the disarticulated remains discovered during the present works were previously disturbed during the demolition and rebuilding of the church in the early 19th century and subsequently reburied against the wall of the church, perhaps in small hastily dug pits. The presence of mortar and rubble amongst the bones and the few finds of window glass, an iron nail and an oyster shell within the soil would support this suggestion. The graveyard soil may have also been reworked during this time.

E Jones

Wednesday 25th July 2012

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