

Drama in the privies

Judith Stones describes how education and interpretation combine with drama to bring Aberdeen's archaeology to life.

Aberdeen is famous for granite and castles, but its medieval archaeology is just as special. Several factors make it easy to interpret the past here. Aberdeen possesses the best civic archives of any Scottish burgh, while the City Council Archaeological Unit has been working within the medieval burgh since the 1970s. Medieval organic remains are well-preserved, placing Aberdeen in a small "elite" group of European towns that includes York and Oslo.

The Archaeological Unit is within the City Council's Museums and Galleries Service, which is in the very early stages of working towards a new Museum of Aberdeen. In the meantime, lack of permanent display space for archaeology and local history has stimulated the search for other ways to bring people close to a past with a tangibility second to none in Scotland. The recent Environment of Medieval Aberdeen project was one of the first Scottish archaeology programmes to be supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The central aim was to process 25 years' worth of soil samples which had lain in museum stores owing to lack of money to analyse them. The project also aimed to examine historical records for evidence of Aberdeen's medieval environment. Both were rich seams; and there were some remarkable synchronicities, challenging the accepted view that archaeological and historical evidence fail to meet.

The results will be published in academic reports, but they were made public in a variety of other ways. Some members of the community found themselves integrated into the project in its early stages – sorting samples, preparing displays and even searching Aberdeenshire cowpats for dung beetles to use, suitably decontaminated, in the schools "lab".

The results also fed into our drama work. For some years we have used drama to help young people absorb the past. But it has to be authentic and relevant, and preferably atmospheric too. School visits to "Privies and other filthiness", the public display element of the project (the name was a quotation from a 17th century environmental report) started with an exhibition tour, but moved into a drama set in late 13th century Gallowgate. Here pupils helped a wounded supporter of William Wallace, while experiencing the environment of a medieval backland in a set based on excavated evidence. In another part of the project, pupils excavated a medieval backland pit and determined from its contents whether it had been used for rubbish, tanning or to contain human waste. A CD-ROM for schools, based on the exhibition and schools project, will become available soon.

Our use of dramatic episodes in the context of guided historical walks has also been well received. "Fittie Trails and Tales", in the former fishing community of Footdee near

Aberdeen harbour, became something of an institution over several years. Here we were using architectural and historical evidence to present snatches of local stories – with the emphasis on the less well-known and obvious. Following suggestions from the public we have since run a similar series of walks in Old Aberdeen, featuring topics such as grave-robbing, drunkenness and the departure of the last bishop from his palace (recently discovered by excavation) in the 17th century.

Obviously, we try to base our interpretation on original research and evidence from Aberdeen itself. Drama scripts are based on archive searches, while we have tried to move beyond the “lucky dip” approach to simulated digging, which tends to reinforce the view that archaeology is only about finding objects. Most successful was a reconstruction of an urban medieval site for National Archaeology Days, excavated over the space of a weekend by volunteer diggers ranging in age from 18 months to 80. Working under expert guidance they uncovered the various layers, complete with stone and wattle walls, post-holes and a ceramic pot containing a hoard of replica medieval silver pennies.

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Condense some daily experience into a glowing symbol, and an audience is electrified.

Ralph Waldo Emerson