

Building projects bring a bonus for archaeologists - John Lawson

Our heritage lies beneath our feet, and dealing with archaeology has become a significant element in infrastructure projects' timelines. Since the pioneering post-war rescue excavations in London which restored the Roman temple of Mithraes, archaeological work has gradually become a part of development procedures, written since the 1990s into law.

Today the work is standard practice, regulated by Local Authority [Archaeologists](#) but undertaken by commercial archaeological companies working for the developers, who have their enthusiast counterparts undertaking research excavations. In Scotland discoveries are covered by Treasure Trove: for everyone the law is the same, that in essence all chance discoveries belong to the state and it is illegal not to declare them. However, it is often the case that finds are returned to the finders, and when retained a reward is given.

[HS2](#) has made digs at its sites big news, and some years ago ARCH (Archaeology for Communities in Highland) led by Susan Kruse surveyed the archaeology of the Inverness-Kyle railway. Locations in Scotland visited by the BBC2 series Digging for Britain have included our earliest railway, the 1722 Waggonway in its 300th anniversary year at Cockenzie, and in Edinburgh the Trams for Newhaven project.

In Leith human remains were discovered outside St Mary's Kirk, the remains of a substantial hitherto unrecorded section of the kirk's graveyard under the road.

Evidence for the gradual reclamation of Leith's shore from the 16th/17th centuries, originally following the line of Commercial Street, Baltic Street and Salamander Street, have also been unearthed in Constitution Street. This includes an early sea wall, a fine cache of clay pipes, and possibly an 18th-century slipway and the right fin of a sperm whale which, since these times long predated commercial whaling, can only be presumed to have become stranded on the shore. In Leith Walk, near Smith's Place, an 18th-century masonry structure of uncertain purpose with timber uprights and a drain were found overlying a well-preserved section of the medieval Leith Walk.

At the in-town end a spectacular find of much more recent origin at the "Pilrig muddle", where Leith's modern electric trams connected with Edinburgh's antiquated cable system, was the latter's pulley-wheels eight feet across and weighing between two and three tonnes which seem to have been discarded there after an unsuccessful attempt to remove them on conversion to electric operation in 1924. They will now merit preservation, with other wheels already on display at the old Henderson Row depot and a section of cable visible at Waterloo Place.

In the middle of the route the Petworth map showing the siege of Leith in 1559-60 reveals St Mary's Church tucked in a corner of the fortification, and two cannonballs were found during excavation of the South Leith graveyard used between 1300 and 1650. With 380 sets of human remains investigated during the advance works, a further 385 were examined at Constitution Street during 2020/1, when Covid required socially distanced methods of working, prior to laying off the trackbed for the tramline.

Plague, cholera and smallpox may have been the commonest causes of death, with evidence of shroud-pins on some skeletons, Adults were commonly interred alongside children. A woman laid on her side may have been a murder victim. A 15th-century plague pit that predated the church had 27 skeletons buried four or five deep. Artists carried out facial reconstructions to show how people might have appeared in life.

People were welcome to watch the excavations at Constitution Street provided they did not photograph the archaeologists at work. Public engagement included involvement of school pupils studying STEM subjects and blogs on the Trams to Newhaven website. A debt of gratitude is due to many parties, including Morrison Utility Services, Turner & Townsend, the Sacyr Farrans and Neopul joint venture who are building the tramline and the archaeologist of GUARD, who patiently worked away through the pandemic, in all weathers and under the public gaze.

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