

Teesdale u3a's Monthly Meeting

Richard Annis: Durham and Dunbar: Scottish Soldiers at Palace Green

A rapt audience of over 120 members listened to the plight of Scottish soldiers during the war between Oliver Cromwell's English army and the Scots. Why were so many Scottish soldiers buried in Palace Green, Durham?

The ground and surrounds where the Palace Green Library stands today were subjected to an archaeological investigation in preparation for a new café building. Previously used as a stables and possibly for agriculture, the area ran next to Windy Gap, a fortified boundary for the castle and priory, and a downhill pathway to the river. Initially, shallow digging exposed darker soil indicating a rubbish tip, but deeper excavation due to the declining pathway exposed yellow soil with partial human skeletons. After obtaining an Office of Justice Licence, more tightly packed skeletons were discovered resting in unusual positions which indicated that this was a mass burial. There was also no buckles or belts etc. to indicate that there had been clothing. These bodies were buried naked and all at once. A passing builder casually commented that they were Scottish soldiers. It took Richard Annis and his team 2 years to authenticate this statement.

During the Civil War in 1650s, English and Scottish armies were subjected to bad weather and malnutrition. After a strategically lost battle at Dunbar, the retreating Cromwell forces withdrew down the coast to Durham with about 9,000 Scottish prisoners, hoping to put them to good use. Many died on the trek, of wounds, illness, exhaustion, poor sanitation or malnutrition, and only 3,000 remained when arriving at Durham.

Archaeological analysis on 13 bodies found that all were men between 13 and 19 years, often with rickets or sinusitis; their tooth enamel indicated that 5 were Scottish, 5 were north England or Scottish, and 3 were from outside the British Isles. Radio-carbon dating gave a 94.5% indication that they lived from 1625 – 1660.

The team also tracked survivors. Some remained soldiers elsewhere, some coal miners or weavers. Some travelled to freedom to live in Europe and USA, for example at Sangas Ironworks, Massachusetts, and South Berwick, Maine. A Scots Charitable Society was started in 1657 and still exists today.

The soldiers were formally reburied with respect in a cemetery half a mile from where they were found. Soil from Dunbar was brought down and the funeral attendees represented the soldiers' journey. There are commemoration plaques in the walls of the cathedral and the Palace Green café.

Celia Chapple