# When was the excavation? How many archaeologists were involved?

One of the largest excavations in Scotland took place a team of 80 archaeologists, students and volunteers a year to complete in 2006.

# Why was the chuch excavated?

The Kirk of St Nicholas Uniting in Aberdeen is planning to redevelop the East Kirk as a community facility run by a non-denominational Open Space Trust. The excavation created a new lower level 20 x 20m in size and was dug to a depth of 3.5m.

# What did the excavation find?

Four medieval churches, nearly 900 articulated burials and 3.5 metric tonnes of disarticulated human bones were recovered.

# What was there before the church?

Several areas showed activity prior to the construction of the first church. A scatter of flint flakes in one area indicated that flint tools had been made or repaired on the site perhaps as long as 8000 years ago. Above this was a layer of burnt ash containing a large amount of fish bones through which features relating to the earliest stone church were cut, suggesting that processing of fish had taken place in the area.

# Tell me about the antler tool?

Finds associated with the earliest phases include a fragment of antler. It had been roughly shaped in preparation for adding a handle to make a metalworking or craftworking hammer.

# What was the earliest part of the church?

The earliest structure excavated on this site was a semi-circular apse at the extreme west of the excavation area.

# What was the dimensions of the earliest wall?

The semi-circular section of wallwas 1.2m thick and evidence of one mortar floor was recorded. This wall formed the east end of a church which may have been constructed in the late 11th or early 12th century.

# Where were children buried?

Associated with the apse in the east chuch was a group of 20 burials of babies and children clustered outside the east end of this church*.*

Very few of the burials intercut one another and they must therefore have been marked and interred over a short period of time.

As with nearly every burial found during this excavation, the heads of the individuals were placed in the west end of the grave with the feet at the east end, although several were slightly off the E-W alignment giving the appearance that they were radiating around the apse.

# What were they buried in?

Most of the burials were in stone or wooden coffins. The most sophisticated stone coffin was for the burial of a young child*.*

The neatly worked slabs had been lightly bonded together with mortar and slabs had been placed over the top forming a cover.

The cover stones had been dislodged during the burial of an adolescent next to it, but enough remained in place to be able to determine how the coffin would have looked.

Several other burials took place within stone-lined cists whilst some had pillow stones around the head and in one case the feet. Traces of wooden coffins with iron nails and fittings surviving were also recorded*.*

One of the burials had been disturbed during the construction of the mid 12th-century east end and the bones had been re-interred at the bottom of the wall foundation.

Another series of burials, possibly associated with the apsidal church, was a series of E-W deep burials cut into the natural sands and gravels and through an earlier pebble path.

# Were the bones in good condition or well preserved?

The bones of these skeletons were poorly preserved but several graves contained coarse textile remains under the bodies which may have been the remains of a blanket placed under the bodies or the remains of a shroud which has only survived on the underside of the body.

# **What artefacts were buried with the bodies?**

Several examples had the remains of twigs placed at the side of the body; one possible explanation has been raised following the discovery of two scallop shells next to the head of one of these burials.

# Where were the scallop shells from?

Such shells were sold in the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela, in Galicia in north-west Spain and would have been attached to the hat or other clothing of a pilgrim.

The person who owned this shell may have set off on a pilgrimage from Aberdeen by boat for the 4 day journey to the south of England and then on another 4 day boat journey to the north of Spain or west coast of France.

There the pilgrim would pick up the The Way of St James and walk on to Santiago.

# Were scallop shells normally found in Scotland?

These shells are rarely found in Scotland: one was found in the mouth of the skeleton of a man, buried in the 14th century, during an excavation at the Benedictine monastery on the Isle of May, in the Firth of Forth.

The twigs might be the remnants of, or the representation of, the staff carried by a pilgrim; further analysis of samples of this wood may help with the interpretation of these finds.

# What other types of coffins were there?

At least three other burials in this area had taken place within hollowed out logsand a sample of wood from one example has produced a radiocarbon date from the early 11th century.

Samples from bone will be tested (over the next few months) with the hope of getting more accurate dates.

# Were any of the burial disturbed?

Four of these burials had been disturbed by the construction of the mid 12thcentury church.

# Tell me about the 12th century church at the east end?

The mid 12th-century east end was constructed over and east of the earlier apse; it was 5.6m wide and 12.8m of its length was excavated.  
  
It was built on substantial foundations 1.1-1.3m wide; several courses of ashlar masonry survived as well as one section of plastered wall.  
  
It had two buttresses on the east facing gable end but other such features were lost when the east end of this building was reconstructed in the late 12th to early 13th century.  
  
Evidence for the completion of this phase of the church is slight but several burials align with the walls of this church, which was reused in the later 12th-century.

A stone coffin, possibly associated with this 12th-century east end, had been disturbed and sealed by the later 12th-century building work. Only the foot end survived and there were no human remains *in situ*.

# When we the east end gable wall constructed?

In the late 12th century, the east end gable wall was reconstructed.

# How much of the east end gable wall survived?

This wall survived to a height of 1m internally and three courses of ashlar masonry survived on the exterior.

There is evidence that parts of the north and south walls were also rebuilt at this time: it is possible that structural instability caused damage to much of the east end which had to be rebuilt.

# When were the pilaster buttresses built?

On each of the east corners, pilaster buttresses date this wall to the late 12th century.

# What condition was the east gable wall in?

Two large buttresses on the east gable were badly damaged by 15th-century building operations but traces of ashlar facings survived. One buttress survived on the south wall *(left)* and traces of a parallel one were found on the north wall.

# What is the sacristy?

It is a building 4m wide was added on to the north side of the 12th-century church, not during the initial building phase, although the walls were tied in to the existing walls rather than being butted against them.

# How long is the sacristy?

Evidence for the length of the building was lost when the north wall of the 15thcentury east end or choir demolished part of this building, which may have had two storeys.

On the lower floor, two steps were excavated suggesting that this area was entered from the graveyard.

# Was the sacristy rebuilt from older material?

During the demolition of this building very little material had been reused and there were substantial layers of roofing stone, worked stones, iron fittings and window glass and a small number of floor tiles; no floors were recorded *in situ* however.

# What artefacts were found in the sacristy?

Within the fill were several copper alloy objects including book fittings and chain link as well as sherds of potterydiscarded in the corners of the building.

# Were there pots in the sacristy?

Pots were freshly broken and had probably been in use in the building: it is possible that they were used for a religious purpose, or that the ground floor room was used for domestic or light industrial purposes, possibly for a short while before its demolition in the 15th century.

# What happened in the sacristy?

Sacred vessels such as chalices and vestments used in the mass, service books, and other valuable items such as processional crosses were stored and prepared for use.

# Where is the 12th century graveyard?

The graveyard associated with the late 12th-century east end was excavated around the south, east and in a small portion of the north side adjacent to the sacristy.

# In the 12th century, how were bodies buried?

Of the burials dating to this period, some were in coffins whilst others were placed in shrouds.

# Tell me about the 12th century sarcophagus?

The fragments of the sarcophagus included the shaped section which would have been used to place the head and shoulder of an important or wealthy person.

# What is a sarcophagus?

The word 'sarcophagus' comes from the Greek words for 'flesh' and 'eating' and tends to be used for specially constructed stone containers for burial.

# What were coffins made from?

Early Greek coffins were said to have been made from a special kind of rock that consumed the flesh of the corpse inside a type of limestone.

# Who was buried in the 12th century part of the church?

The burials included the skeleton of a woman with an unborn baby, both presumably having died in childbirth.

# What artefacts were found in the 12th century part of the church?

A skeleton with a scallop shell beside the left legsuggested the individual had been buried with a long bag (or scrip) commonly carried by pilgrims; remains of the bag itself had not survived.

# What were the shells used to decorate?

Pilgrim shells from Compostela usually have two or four holes for attachment to a bag, clothing or hat.

# What other artefacts were found in the 12th century part of the church?

Other finds associated with the 12th century churches include window glass, floor tiles and several hundred fragments of worked stone.

# What other artefacts were found in the 12th century part of the church?

An ear scoopwas found in one of the burials associated with the later 12th century church; it would have formed part of a medieval toiletry set and was one of several examples found on this excavation.

# What other artefacts were found in the 12th century part of the church?

Several bone items were recovered: bone was used to make combs, dice, gaming pieces and other intricately decorated items, because it was an easy material to work.

# Where is the 15th-century part of the church?

This excavation has shown that the building of the early 19th-century East Kirk utilised the walls and foundations of the 15th-century east end, or choir.

# When was the west wall of St Mary’s Chapel built?

The eastern boundary of the excavation was the 1.2m thick west wall of St Mary's Chapel, possibly built in the early 15th century.

# How did people get in to St Mary’s Chapel?

A sloping corridor had been constructed adjacent, and attached to, the south wall of the 15th-century choir to allow access through the west wall of St Mary's Chapel.

# What was the floor of St Mary’s Chapel made of?

The corridor had been constructed of large stones covered with a mortar floor.