

Dig gives glimpse into Dornoch's distant past

A TANTALISING glimpse into Dornoch's distant past has been given by an excavation on a prime town centre site earlier this year.

Experts uncovered the remains of buildings which they believe could very well date back as far as the Middle Ages and have a connection with Dornoch Cathedral, possibly as homes for the clergy.

Archaeologist John Wood said: "We have only found a little piece of the jigsaw, without being able to get at other pieces, but is an intriguing piece all the same."

Mr Wood, who formerly worked for the Highland Council but now runs his own company, Highland Archaeology Services Ltd, spent April and May on a dig at the site of the former filling station in the town's historic square.

The excavation took place prior to building work starting on controversial new town houses which are now nearing completion. It represented a rare opportunity to carry out an archaeological investigation in an urban setting in the Highlands.

Said Mr Wood: "No one has really dug into Dornoch before. I have been working in archaeology in the Highlands for 12 years now and during that time there has been very little excavation done in Dornoch – partly because there has been little development in the town centre."

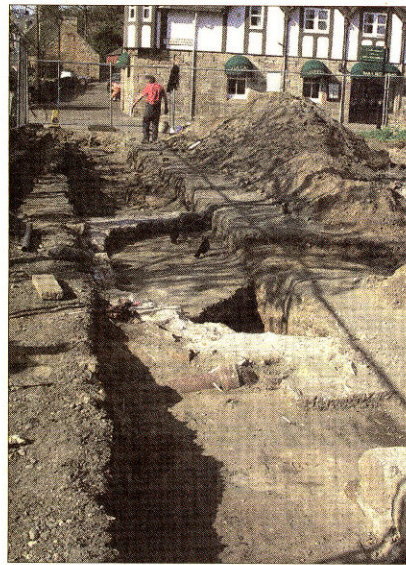
But he also admitted this week: "We weren't really

expecting to find anything very much, for two reasons.

"Firstly we were only able to look at a very small area because we were confined to the foundations of the new building plus some trial trenches.

"Secondly the site had been a filling station, so a lot of it had been destroyed by fuel tanks."

Archaeologists uncovered walls, including the footings of a bay window which they have identified, with the help of archive



Excavation of the footings of the bay window of the hotel, seen on the left of the wedding party picture.

photographs, as belonging to the former Sutherland Arms Hotel.

The large hotel occupied the site in the early years of last century but was burned

by Caroline McMorran

to the ground in 1941. Bottles, cutlery and crockery were also found.

"One of the problems with archaeology in the Highlands is often you do not get nice finds

because on the whole people tended to use materials that rot away," explained Mr Wood. "There was a lot of use of wood, leather, thatch and bone which do not tend to survive in our acidic soil."

Also unearthed were two different types of drain, demonstrating the extensive improvements in sanitation undertaken throughout the 19th century.

But what really caught Mr Wood's attention were other sections of walls that appear to pre-date the hotel.

He said: "Along the back of the site – on the police station side – there are bits

and pieces of wall that seem to be lying below the level of the hotel so do seem to pre-date it.

"They are really intriguing but are very cut about by modern activity. The whole site is criss-crossed by drains and pipes. We're still trying to clarify what we have got. It is a site that has obviously been occupied for a long, long time."

Mr Wood suggested that the masonry remains might go back hundreds of years.

"In the Middle ages we know there must have been quite a thriving little community in the centre of Dornoch. We know the Cathedral was in existence

then so there would have been houses for the dignitaries such as canons and bishops and there would also have to be homes for servants and tradesmen.

"It goes back to this business of trying to build up the jigsaw puzzle. It may take years. It would be nice to find out more about it, but really there are only two ways we can do that. We could set up a research project, and there has been talk about doing something like that, but I don't think it's going to happen at the moment.

"The other way is obviously just to go on working with the local authority and make sure that, as and when people need to dig holes in Dornoch, these are monitored."

Mr Wood said he felt the excavation had been extremely worthwhile and provided a lead to follow in the future. It had also raised a lot of interest



A wedding party outside the Sutherland Arms Hotel in 1918.

SUTHERLAND ARMS HOTEL + DORNOCH	
Tariff APARTMENTS Sitting Rooms, per day from 10/ to 14/ Single Bedrooms, per day " 5/ to 6/6 Double Bedrooms, per day " 10/ to 14/ Double - Bedded Rooms, per day Fires— Sitting Rooms 2/6 Bedrooms 2/ MEALS Breakfast Table d'Hôte from 3/6 to 4/ Luncheon Table d'Hôte " 3/6 to 4/ Afternoon Tea " 1/6 High Tea " 3/ to 3/6 Dinner " 5/ to 6/6 Baths, Hot, in Room " 1/6 Bathrooms " No Charge COFFEE CHARGED EXTRA MEALS in PRIVATE ROOMS EXTRA	
EN PENSION TERMS Per Week JUNE from £4.4s. to £5.5s. JULY from £5.12s. to £6.13s. AUGUST and SEPTEMBER from £6.13s. to £7.7s. OCTOBER to JUNE from £4.4s. to £5.5s. according to location Servants' Board . . . 9/ per day Servants' Room . . . 4/ per day GARAGE Any Cause of Complaint Please communicate direct to the Proprietor, who will give immediate attention. SUTHERLAND ARMS HOTEL Proprietor: H. M. ROSS	

A brochure showing hotel prices and servants' board, from circa 1930.



A bill from 1913 for a car to take hotel guests to the Mound.

Put your alcohol-awareness to the test

DOES YOUR drinking add up? During Alcohol Awareness Week (October 21-27), find out just how alcohol-aware you are with this quiz.

1 What is the Government's daily sensible drinking guideline?

(a) 2-3 units for women, 3-4 for units men
(b) 1 unit for women and

1.0 unit; 6, Vodka/gin and tonic, 0.9 unit; 7, Vermouth and lemonade, 0.8 units.

4 Coffee sobers you up. True or false?

Answer: False. Caffeine does not make you sober faster. Your liver is responsible for eliminating alcohol from your bloodstream over a fixed period of time – there is no way to speed

to excess, although alternating alcohol with water is a good tip as it helps it prevent dehydration. Aspirin interferes with the enzyme that destroys alcohol and will not only make you feel worse but could be dangerous.

9 When drinking the same amount, women become:

(a) Less intoxicated than men

(b) More intoxicated than men

(c) There's no difference

Answer: (b) More intoxicated than men. The alcohol-destroying enzyme ADH is greater and more efficient in men. Also women have more fatty tissue and less body water than men, so

alcohol will become more concentrated in their blood!

10 In Roman times, if husbands caught their wives drinking they could:

(a) Sell them into slavery

(b) Have them sentenced to death

(c) Banish them from the town

Answer: (b) Have them sentenced to death. In early Rome, drinking was treated on a par with adultery and women were severely punished for both!

To discover more about Alcohol Awareness Week, visit www.alcoholawarenessweek.com.



The fateful fire on 11th January, 1941.