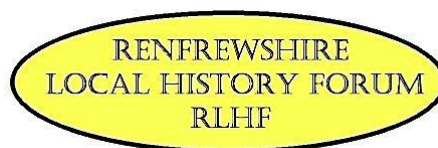


Paisley Abbey Drain
1990-2019

EXCAVATIONS
AND
INVESTIGATIONS



Renfrewshire Local History Forum

The Abbey Drain was known to have existed but its exact location was a mystery. However, it was known that a Mr. John Crawford of Ellis Lane had fallen into a tunnel under his garden in 1829, and that workmen, during preparation for the building Bridge Street Bridge in 1879, fell into a stone tunnel 100 feet long.



Interior of the drain

Good images of the drain are available on the RCAHMS site at
http://canmore.rcahms.gov.uk/en/site/71769/digital_images/paisley+abbey+drain/

The drain was rediscovered in 1990. Since then, Renfrewshire Local History Form has had a keen interest in Paisley Abbey Drain and has participated in investigations and excavations. Andrew Eadie was the Forum's driving force in maintaining our interest and involvement, liaising on our behalf with GUARD (later GUARD Archaeology, Ltd.), Renfrewshire Council, Paisley Abbey, and the University of the West of Scotland. Over the years he also has been a keen volunteer in excavations at the site of the Drain, and also in passing on his knowledge to the public at excavations held on Doors Open Days.

Rediscovery and Archaeological Investigations, 1990-96

In 1990, Renfrewshire Council funded a number of archaeological investigations to determine the exact location of Paisley Abbey Drain, but with no positive results. However, help was at hand. While John Maldon of Paisley Museum was in discussion with a Council official near the Abbey, a member of the public approached them. This man, who worked for Strathclyde Sewerage Department, was Frank Snow. He said he was interested in the Drain and could show them its exact location. He led them over the grassed area to the south of the Place of Paisley and removed some turf to reveal a manhole cover, which Frank had helped to repair when he was a young apprentice. This manhole was an access to the Drain.

Frank's interest in the Drain has never waned. He has been an active and valuable participant in all the excavations since his "rediscovery" of the Drain in 1990. Following its rediscovery, the interior of the Drain was photographed.



Frank Snow overseeing the finds tray, Guard Excavation, 2011

In 1991 Renfrew District Council funded the removal of a 60 centimetre deep layer of compacted mud and silt, from a 90 metre long section of the drain, clearing the drain to reveal its paved stone floor. The resulting enormous spoil heap was stored for future artefact investigation off-site at Strathclyde Sewerage Laigh Park works.

At the time numerous artefacts had been discovered among the silt, including the fragmented remains of a large pottery chamber pot, buckles, coins, a knife handle, a tuning peg, slate fragments and thousands of pottery sherds. During an examination of the artefacts Frank Snow noticed hand writing on a piece of slate. This led to an examination of all the slate fragments and one was found with the earliest example of polyphonic music ever recorded in Scotland.

An investigation of the drain by Guard was carried out in 1992 resulting in a report, *Paisley Abbey Feasibility Study of Archaeological Potential* (GUARD 39.5), detailing possible follow-up work, and in 1996 Gavin Walker & Associates carried out a structural survey, but these reports were not acted upon at the time.

(Further information on the above is available in *The Monastery and Abbey of Paisley*, ed. John Maldon, published by Renfrewshire Local History Forum (2000) pp173-180)

Archaeological Investigations, 1999- 2010

Renfrewshire Local History Forum organised The Abbey and Drain Conference which was held in September 1999 in Paisley Town Hall. This excellent conference revitalised interest in the Abbey resulting in the publication of *The Monastery and Abbey of Paisley* in 2000. The book includes the lectures delivered at the conference with some additional papers, and remains the most recently published book giving a comprehensive account of Paisley Abbey. The conference and publication also revitalised an interest in the Abbey Drain.

However, things did not move forward until 2009 when Renfrewshire Council, with the support of Renfrewshire Local History Forum, organised a new Paisley Abbey Drain Excavation carried out by GUARD, under the project management of Bob Will. Forum members were active volunteers in this twelve day excavation which was a significant part of Renfrewshire's Doors Open Day. Part of the exterior of the mediaeval drain was exposed and the presence of mediaeval deposits associated with the drain and the precinct were recovered. Walls of the nineteenth century tenements built over the site were also exposed. Being in the centre of Paisley, the dig aroused considerable interest among the general public.

In August 2009, volunteers from the Forum assisted at Glasgow University in washing and sorting the pottery recovered from the Drain. These pottery finds had been kept in storage for almost two decades until master student, Sabina Gillman, adopted the topic for her thesis.

Historic Scotland's scheduling team had visited many Renfrewshire sites dating from the prehistoric to the modern period, with a view to updating those which are formally 'Scheduled' as 'Ancient Monuments'. Prior to the fieldwork two Forum members, Derek Alexander and Stuart Nisbet, presented to Historic Scotland in Edinburgh on the background to Renfrewshire's archaeology and gave suggestions for additional sites, including Paisley Abbey Drain, to be considered for scheduling. Paisley Abbey Drain was scheduled in 2010.

In 2009 the Forum also sent a proposal to Time Team suggesting that they could do an investigation around Paisley Abbey. This proposal was unsuccessful, as was a subsequent proposal in 2010.

Following the successful 2009 investigations, a follow-up excavation was carried out by GUARD in 2010. This excavation was again timed to coincide with Doors Open Day in September, and engendered wide public interest. The project was developed by Renfrewshire Council together with the Forum, and numerous of our members volunteered for the ten day excavation. The excavation took place on the line of the mediaeval drain not far from the 2009 dig with three main aims:

- To determine the external width of the drain and the condition of the outer fabric of the drain
- to investigate the survival of archaeological deposits over and adjacent to the drain that may provide information regarding the construction of the drain and the mediaeval monastic precinct
- to investigate the later use of the site in terms of the development of the town of Paisley and the more recent tenements and streets.

The exterior of the drain was uncovered and a trench 6m x 2m revealed masonry structures that might represent the feeder drain identified in a previous interior survey (1991). What appeared to be the top of a culvert was uncovered. However, as the excavation proceeded below the anticipated one metre depth, it became apparent that this latter structure may have been part of early building foundations and therefore could not be positively identified as part of the exterior construction of the drain. The remains of later tenement buildings were uncovered and finds including brick, pieces of roof slate, china, smoking

pipes and pottery (some possibly as early as late mediaeval) were recovered. A report on the excavation was issued by GUARD, in Nov. 2010. As well as many casual visitors during the week before, a total of 400 members of the public visited the dig on a sunny Doors Open Day.

Archaeological Investigations, 2011- 2016

In September of 2011 Forum volunteers assisted in a further excavation by GUARD Archaeology Ltd. Life was made easier for us that year by the use of an excavator to remove nearly 1m of early 20th century in-fill on the site. Two trenches were dug, one extending a previous trench and the other at a spot which was a possible site of old monastic buildings. The results of this excavation surpassed all expectation.

Both trenches were dug to a depth of more than a metre. The first trench revealed a mediaeval wall beside some cobbled paving. This is likely to be the remains of a hitherto unknown ancillary abbey building, perhaps the abbey kitchen or a workplace of some kind.



Trench 1: Mediaeval wall and cobbled paving, 2011

The second trench revealed a circular feature about two metres in diameter with a narrow break or opening at one side. The top edge of the structure was covered by layers of carefully laid slates to a depth of about two inches. As the excavation was terminated at this level it was not possible to determine the depth of the structure or the materials used below the excavated level. Initially this feature appeared to be a well. However, on reflection, it seemed more likely to be the remains of a slate bread oven, a grain storage facility, or kiln used by the monks.



Trench 2: circular feature, 2011

Additional images of this excavation can be viewed on the [Website Gallery](#).

In 2012 a geophysical resistivity survey was undertaken by GUARD Archaeology Ltd. to investigate the possibility of other related archaeological features on the site.



Geophysical resistivity survey, 2012

Also in 2012, some of our members visited Guard Archaeology where Bob Will had a fascinating exhibition of artefacts found in the Drain.



Inscribed slate



Mixed artefacts

On Doors Open Day, Saturday 8th September, 2012 the Forum hosted a stall in the main hall of Paisley Town Hall and an early draft version of the DVD, *Down the Great Drain*, was shown at the event. The DVD was produced by University of West of Scotland and funded by Renfrewshire Local History Forum and the University. The Forum received the final version of the DVD in 2013.

A further Excavation by GUARD Archaeology Ltd. in 2015 was organised by Renfrewshire Council, with assistance and part funding by the Forum. From 31st August to 7th September, 2015, twenty members of the Forum acted as volunteers, assisting this fourth excavation led by Bob Will of GUARD on the grass area opposite Paisley Abbey. The excavation aimed to investigate the survival of other archaeological structures on the site.

Fortunately, the weather was fine. Our members were busy all week - digging, recording the remains of structures and washing finds - and the excavation had an excellent response from an interested public. Visitors on the Saturday of Doors Open Day included more than two hundred children who visited the site with their parents.



Trench 2: volunteers at work, 2015



Trench 3: foundation walls of building in Abbey Close, 2015



Trench 1: recording and drawing, 2015



Alma and June washing finds, 2015

Three trenches were dug on the site and we reached the foundation level of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings in Abbey Close. Unfortunately, time did not allow for further excavation. At the foundation level of the houses, pottery finds from the mediaeval period were found. These included (from left to right) glazed tiles, plain roof tiles, and ridge tiles; a coin possibly dated from the sixteenth century and part of a handle from a Mediaeval pot. These finds confirmed that the Abbey Close houses had been built directly on top of the mediaeval abbey buildings.



Mediaeval pottery roof tiles



Mediaeval pot handle

Archaeological Investigations, 2017- 2019

The Wee Dig, September, 2017

A further investigative dig was held in. 2017. This was The Wee Dig, led by GUARD Archaeology Ltd., and funded by Renfrewshire Council. Forum volunteers again assisted at the dig and pupils from local schools were actively involved. Two trenches were dug.



Ailsa and Ed, in trench



June and Alma washing finds

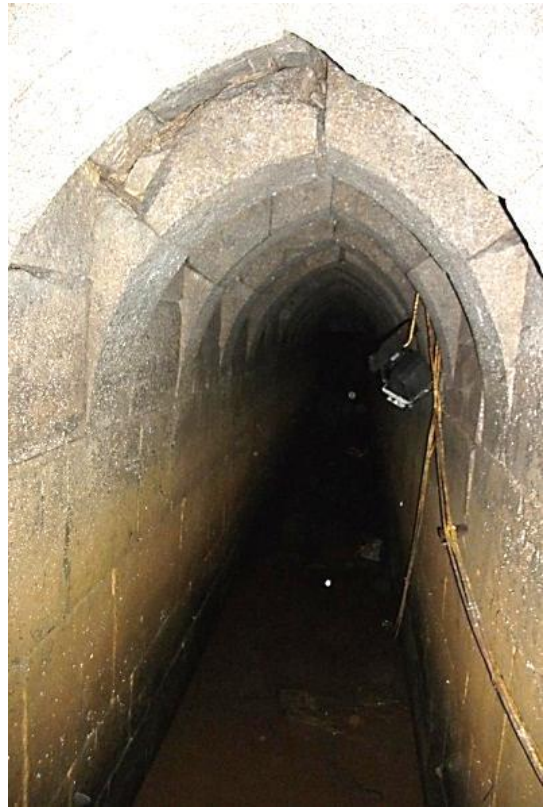
Down the Abbey Drain

September, 2018

In 2018 Renfrewshire Council organised this event. Forty members of the public were chosen by ballot to view the interior of Paisley Abbey Drain. Five of our Renfrewshire Local History Forum members, who have been involved as volunteers in the numerous excavations of the Abbey Drain, were privileged to be included in this exciting experience. Each lucky participant was supplied with a hard hat and fitted with a safety harness before descending by a three metre long ladder down into the drain.

Over a period of two days, Bob Will of Guard Archaeology led the each of nine groups on a tour of the Drain. For reasons of safety the number in each group was limited to five. This was an exciting experience for our group and for the balloted members of the public who were privileged to take part.

After signing up and being fitted with helmet and harness, they carefully descended the long ladder down into the Drain. On entry to the drain they found it was dry and well lit. The interior was amazing – high enough to walk through, and perfectly built stonework. Bob Will of GUARD Archaeology led us through the Drain tunnel, pointing out areas of interest - arches along the tunnel, masons' marks, and points where sub-drains entered the tunnel.



Anne signing up to go down the Drain



Maimie having the safety harness fitted

At the Top of the Ladder !



Maggie



Maimie



Helen



Anne



Keith

Visit to GUARD Archaeology Saturday, 1st December, 2018

GUARD Archaeology, Ltd. hold an extensive collection of artefacts and finds from their many and varied excavations. A group of Forum members were privileged to have the opportunity to visit GUARD in their premises in Glasgow where Bob Will gave us a most interesting tour of artefacts found in Abbey Drain. This was of particular interest to the Forum as many of our members have volunteered as diggers in GUARD's numerous Paisley Abbey Drain excavations. Bob Will showed us round GUARD's collection of artefacts found in the Drain. The finds on display included, among many other finds, a large pot, painstakingly reconstructed from broken pieces of pottery found in the Drain; a collection of inscribed slates, some inscribed with polyphonic music; and a case containing a variety of small artefacts in copper alloy, including a trefoil cast and a buckle.



Large reconstructed pot



Finds from the drain



Display of Inscribed Slates

The visit was well supported by the Forum with twenty-five members attending. We would like to thank Bob for a most interesting and informative visit.

The Big Dig May – July 2019

Keen to move the investigation of the abbey drain forward at a faster rate, Renfrewshire Council proposed a longer, eight week dig. The aims were to discover more about the structure of the drain and to explore the point where the drain had emptied into the River Cart. Funding partners included the National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic Environment Scotland and Renfrewshire Local History Forum.

The dig began in mid-May and continued until mid-July. GUARD Archaeology, led by Bob Will and Dr Anthony Byledbal, managed the whole process. Extending the time allowed many volunteers and some school groups to take part. Renfrewshire Local History Forum provided a steady supply of volunteers throughout the eight weeks of the dig.



Aerial View of Big Dig site, from the Abbey Tower Courtesy of GUARD Archaeology

The image above shows the excavation site with the River Cart and Cart Walk in the immediate background and Bridge Street on the left. Trench 1 is under trees in the centre of the image, and Trench 2 is on the left.

Renfrewshire Council organized a welfare unit (a container with a flushing toilet, electricity, a working kitchen and shelter from the elements should it be necessary). This provided an element of comfort we hadn't experienced before. Peter Crawford managed the welfare unit, ensuring that all were well supplied with refreshments.



The welfare unit has landed.....



Good dining space in all weathers

Two six metre square trenches were dug by hand. Trench 1 was located over the point where the drain had emptied into the River Cart. In this trench we hoped to find and investigate the structure of the drain exit. Trench 2 was located over the point where the drain had been damaged in the past. Here we hoped to find and investigate the outer roof of the drain.

After three weeks of digging and trundling barrowloads of soil and stone to the growing spoil heap, we were down about two metres below the present day ground level in each trench.



Trench 1



Trench 2

Approximately three metres down and after seven weeks of digging through several centuries of rubble and remains, we reached the top of the drain in both trenches. In Trench 1 it was very exciting to see the top of the fine arched exit of the drain with vestiges of the precinct wall on either side. The arched opening was uncovered on Saturday, 29th June, coinciding with the Open Day for the public.



WOW! The top of the arched exit from the drain has appeared!
This photograph also shows the modern concrete remains from the early 20th century.



Arched exit from the drain

In Trench 2 we reached the long stones forming the exterior roof between two of the dressed arches which can be seen inside the drain.



Outer roof of the drain uncovered



Long stones forming the outer roof of the drain

The last push was to finish reading and recording in the trenches.



Cleaning and recording in Trench 1

During the dig, many artefacts and large quantities of animal bone and oyster shell were uncovered. Notable finds included a 14th century coin found by Anthony Byledbal, a late 18th century penny found by Peter Crawford, a slate button, a 17th century glass bottle bearing the seal of the Earl of Dundonald and many lovely examples of mediaeval pottery.



Edward I penny



George III penny



Slate Button

Courtesy of GUARD Archaeology



17th century Glass Bottle as unearthed



Base of bottle and medieval pottery
Courtesy of GUARD Archaeology

All too soon the dig came to an end, and we had to start covering the features with sand bags before (thankfully) a digger filled in the trenches and we could put the turfs back.



Trench 1: Volunteers working to cover the features with sand bags



Relaying the turf

Overall, the Big Dig was a most successful excavation on many levels. Our Forum volunteers learned a lot more about the Abbey Drain, acquired new skills and made many new friends. But most importantly, the Big Dig achieved its aims.

Unless otherwise acknowledged, all images from the Big Dig were contributed by Forum members.

THE ABBEY DRAIN - SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

- 1990 The Drain re-discovered
- 1991 Artefact recovery and survey by RCAHMS
- 1992 GUARD Investigation
- 1992 “Paisley Abbey Feasibility Study of Archaeological Potential” (GUARD 39.5), detailing possible follow-up work
- 1996 Structural survey, by Gavin Walker & Associates
- 1999 Abbey and Drain Conference, organised by Renfrewshire Local History Forum
- 2000 Publication by Renfrewshire Local History Forum of “The Monastery and Abbey of Paisley” edited by John Malden
- 2009 GUARD Dig, organised by Renfrewshire Council with support from RLHF (Paisley’s Mediaeval Past Project)
- 2009 Pottery Study, organised by Renfrewshire Council, with support from RLHF
- 2010 Paisley Abbey & Place Building Survey by Simpson & Brown (Tom Addyman) for Paisley Abbey
- 2010 GUARD Archaeology Ltd. Dig, organised and funded by RLHF
- 2011 GUARD Archaeology Ltd. Dig
- 2012 GPR Survey, GUARD Archaeology Ltd., organised and funded by RLHF
- 2012 Forum Visit to GUARD Archaeology
- 2013 Production of DVD “Down the Great Drain”, by University of West of Scotland (Dr. Tony Grace)
- 2014 Artefact research by GUARD Archaeology Ltd. on behalf of Renfrewshire Council
- 2015 GUARD Archaeology Ltd. Dig, organised by Renfrewshire Council with assistance and part funding by RLHF.
- 2015 Filming of inaccessible part of Drain by Renfrewshire Council
- 2017 The Wee Dig, GUARD Archaeology Ltd., funded by Renfrewshire Council
- 2018 Down the Drain, Access to the Abbey Drain led by GUARD Archaeology, and organised and funded by Renfrewshire Council
- 2018 A second Forum Visit to GUARD Archaeology
- 2019 The Big Dig, led by GUARD Archaeology, organised by Renfrewshire Council and funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic Environment Scotland and Renfrewshire Local History Forum